Issues of Women’s Empowerment in Nepal

Nepal is located between India and China, it is home to an estimated 30,327,877 people (CIA world Factbook) and is rich in diversity from its geography of the rugged Himalayas to the plains of the Tarai and from its strong culture and population. The empowerment of women sits at the crux of broader issues of development, such as poverty, as well as unequal accessibility and opportunity of the country. The need for female empowerment initiatives must not only stem from typical development initiatives and solutions, but also need to acknowledge the cultural and historical roots in order to create real change within society. Nepal is a patriarchal society (Asha Nepal), thus women’s empowerment efforts need to include a recentering of women’s value both on a cultural level and an economic one. Empowerment needs to stem purely from a recognition of their general contributions to this world by means of being human and deserving dignity and respect.

Key hindrances to female empowerment in Nepal:

- Patriarchal structures of society which often create unequal and insufficient access to resources, education, opportunity and limits women’s access, participation, and representation within the public sphere.
Geographic location deeply impacts the lives of Nepali people. The region is landlocked with rich diversity within its topography, from rugged and harsh mountainous regions of the Himalayas, to the plains of the Tarai. These physical geographic disparities are further accentuated by the disparities created between urban and rural.

The caste system further stratifies society. The caste system within Nepal has four different varnas. They are ranked by their degrees of ritual purity and social status, which impacts social perception, and opportunities in terms of careers, marriage and overall social standing. The most prestigious are Brahmans and the lowest are Dalits which are often considered untouchable (Dartmouth).

The rates of gender based and sexual violence is prevalent in Nepal, specifically among spouses. This abuse within partnerships especially creates prohibitors to safety, health, and decision making for women both within the home and the public sphere (Tuladhar, Sabita, et al).

Lack of female representation and voice. It is best explained by the quote: “Social, political, and economic values, practices, and norms enforce women's silence” (Dahal). Empowerment by definition is “the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights” (Lexico). A culture of women’s silence is not a nurturing environment for personal or societal empowerment. Furthermore, it is important to note the intersectionality of gender along with ethnicity, caste, geographic location, religion, and age and how this can further affect some women more intensely than others (The Asia Foundation). The Feminist Dalit Organization otherwise known as FEDO is an example of an organization focusing on those
intersectionally affected by caste and gender. They strive to create a “just and equitable society where Dalit enjoy their rights and have opportunities to life, equity, development and participation” (FEDO).

**Patriarchy Within Nepal**

“Nepal is a patriarchal, patrilineal and patrifocal society” (Asha Nepal). This creates a reliance upon men throughout all of women’s lives beginning with early socialization processes. The expectation of women to be homemakers and remain within the private sphere, serving their husbands and children is prioritized above public participation and opportunities such as education and careers. This creates a culture of male decision makers which dominates both the private and public sectors. Moreover, from conception there is a preference towards sons due to religious and cultural beliefs and norms. Within many communities, this leads to a devaluing of female offspring, some even deeply mourn upon birthing a girl (Asha Nepal). Though there have been numerous legal actions and conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) put into place, gender discrimination continues. This gender inequality is also seen in terms of nationality and citizenship rights. Women and their children who were born out of wedlock or who have a foreign father face mass amounts of difficulties with discrimination. Women are unable to pass their citizenship on to their children where Nepali men who have foreign partners are able to obtain citizenship for their offspring. This makes it challenging to gain government support and state issued documents such as a passport (Human Rights Watch). All of the issues mentioned above make it difficult for women and their children of certain scenarios to obtain necessary services and rights, to gain
opportunities such as higher education, and overall it prevents them from being seen as full members of society.

**Social Stigmatization of Menstruation and Female Purity**

The social stigma of menstruation in Nepal creates numerous obstacles to empowerment, this includes:

- Menstruation causes women to be viewed as impure and unclean, thus leading to restrictions on what they can touch, eat, and who they can be around are initiated while menstruating. This can include isolation in a practice called Chhaupadi and an exclusion from family events, celebrations, and temple visits, and school while bleeding.
- Restrictions mentioned above then shift the cooking and home responsibilities to another family member, due to the patriarchal society, another non menstruating woman then takes on the responsibility (Brookings Institute)
- Limited discussion and education of menstruation, lack of feminine hygiene products, clean and accessible water, and proper places of disposal are also prohibitive to empowerment and health (Mahon)

**The Practice Of Chhaupadi**

The banishing of women to cow sheds and makeshift huts during menstruation and after childbirth is a religiously influenced cultural practice called Chhaupadi found in Nepal. The New York Times reiterated data found in a State Department human rights report and Nepali government survey that recorded “19 percent of women age 15 to 49 in the country followed
chhaupadi. In Nepal’s midwestern and far western regions, the proportion climbed to 50 percent (Sharma).” These numbers were from 2010, despite chhaupadi being outlawed by the Nepelese government in 2005, although no penalties were implemented at this time (BBC News). Chhaupadi also includes restrictions on women’s activities and consumption during their natural cycles. “The Role of Social Capital in Shaping Policy Non-Compliance for Chhaupadi Practice in Nepal” by Miyang Jun and Ikhyun Jang outline these other core principles and restrictions. Jun and Jang write: “Women who are menstruating are restricted from touching men, children, cattle, living plants, public taps, and fruit-bearing trees, and to enter temples and their houses. Dairy products, such as butter, milk, and yogurt, are excluded from their diet.” Chhaupadi is conducted due to beliefs that women during these times are impure and can cause bad luck such as crop failure or sickness to their families (NPR). This practice has been deeply harmful to Nepelese women both in terms of overall health and safety but also empowerment and lack of education about their bodies. The practice of Chhaupadi has led to many avoidable deaths and injuries from things such as snake and animal bites, rape, infection, weather, numerous occurrences of suffocation from smoke inhalation, and more (Vaughn). In 2017 the Nepelese parliament revisited the issue and passed a bill to criminalize the practice of chhaupadi which came into effect in August of 2018. The penalty of the bill passed proposed a fine of 3,000 Nepelese rupees or three months in jail (Sedhai, 2017). Despite this important revision and effort to end chhaupadi and make it safer, it still has deep roots and continues today. Moreover, this stigmatization of the natural functions of female bodied individuals affects women’s empowerment and opportunity. Especially since the practice of Chhaupadi limits women from being able to attend school and participate in other events and daily activities (Nepali Sansar).
The practice of chhaupadi is the perfect example of the overarching complications involved in the attempts to pursue women’s empowerment. It demonstrates the intersection of strong cultural beliefs, inequality, underdevelopment, poverty, lack of education, health, and women’s value and status. Moreover it illustrates the need for legal reform and action, however it also shows that accountability is necessary in order for legal action to even have the slightest impact.

**Women And Politics**

Within the Nepal chapter of *Pathways To Power*, Pratyoush Onta and Seira Tamang discuss how general concern over the purity of the female body in Nepal has deeply limited and shaped women’s opportunity to participate in society. This is seen from the personal scale of not receiving an education to the broader lack of participation within the political system and opportunities for upward mobility (Onta 327). *Pathways To Power* states “One 2007 study on the status of women in political parties stated that only 9.1 percent of the central committee members of major political parties were women” (Onta 328). This same chapter addresses that kinship relations may play a deep role in the few women who have made it into these positions (p. 328).

In October of 2015, Bidhya Devi Bhandari became the first woman elected president (BBC News), a leader and advocate for women. This shows great strides and promise for women throughout the region. Nepalese women gained the right to proportional representation in all levels of governance due to Article 38(4) in the 2015 constitution of Nepal (Paswan). *Nepal’s Locally Elected Women Representatives: Exploratory Study of Needs and Capacity* shows radical numbers towards female integration in politics via 2017 through citing the Election Commission reports. According to this report, out of 35,041 elected representatives from the
2017 election, 14,352 or 40.96% were women. This report also states that in 2017 “The Election Commission also mandated that at least 40.4% of total nominees be female, including a rule mandating that the chief and deputy chief nominations put forth by each political party in each local unit be gender-even” (The Asia Foundation). Despite this progress, there is still a perpetual cycle and structure that needs to also be addressed. Nepal has maintained a deeply patriarchal structure that separates women’s lives from the public domain (Byanjankar, Shankar, et al.). This not only prohibits women in governmental positions, but limits them from even getting the education or qualifications needed in order to reach that position or be successful in it in the first place, thus creating a prohibitive and discriminatory cycle.

**Education**

Inadequate and inaccessible education is a key prohibitor to female empowerment in Nepal. UNICEF reports that Nepal has made strides in their educational opportunities over the past twenty years. However, they also write “Key barriers to enrolment and attendance include poverty, social exclusion, disability, migration, child labour, social norms and gender bias.” According to the United Nations Human Index Report (HDI) Nepal ranks 147 out of 189 overall. HDI reports that the number of expected years for schooling is 12.7 for Nepelese girls but the mean of female years of schooling is 4.2. (UN HDI). Geographic circumstance deeply impacts educational opportunity. According to Himalayan Education And Development (HEAD), the extremely remote mountainous district of Humla has a literacy rate of 47 percent, however women and people with disabilities in this region are commonly illiterate. Moreover, HEAD states that approximately 40 percent of children do not attend school in Humla due to poverty.
Education is often focused on the eventual participation in the workforce and better opportunity, though, Brookings Institute states that within Nepal “two-thirds of the 2.64 million currently employed females are in the informal sector, and most of them are girls ages 15-24. Further, more than one in three girls in this age group are neither employed nor receiving education or training, indicating a higher risk of exploitation.” Though education for future opportunities within the workforce and economics is important, education and the physical school environment also can help prevent exploitation and further issues such as child marriage, and high rates of infant morality in the future (Central Asia Institute). Moreover, education allows for a small outlet outside of the private sphere of the home thus allowing for a space where girls can engage with one another.

**Marriage and Gender Based Violence**

UNICEF ranked Nepal third in highest rates of child marriage within Asia despite the legal marriage age in Nepal is 20 years old (Human Rights Watch). Child marriage has also been deemed illigal since 1963 (Human Rights Watch). It is reported that thirty-seven percent of girls in Nepal become married before the age of 18 and 10 percent become married by the age of 15 (Human Rights Watch). Lower caste and indigenous women are further disadvantaged and experience higher rates of child marriage due to the intersectionality of caste, ethnicity, and poverty. This along with the patriarchal structure of Nepal often paints women as “burdens” to be unloaded by means of marriage (Human Rights Watch). Marrying young has shown severe consequences of dropping out of school, lack of knowledge of family planning and female health, often leading to poor circumstances for young mothers and their children. Nepal’s
government had originally pledged to end child marriage by 2020, a goal they set in 2014, however they have extended this pledge to 2030 due to their failure (Human Rights Watch). Moreover, arising circumstances such as the 2015 earthquake caused a rise in child marriage in the aftermath due to the targeting of orphans and families marrying their daughters off out of “protection” (Girls Not Brides). However, according to Human Rights Watch, “poverty, lack of access to education, child labor, social pressures, and dowry practices are among the factors driving child marriage” (Human Rights Watch). Therefore, those factors along with government initiative and enforcement of accountability must occur in order to prevent child brides in the future. Furthermore, gender based violence and domestic violence is a prevalent problem throughout the country, although accurate data is limited. According to Girls Not Brides reporting on a 2014 study, one in three married girls experience sexual violence by their spouse (Girls Not Brides). Gender based violence (GVB) is a global issue and while it can affect individuals of all genders however, women are disproportionately affected compared to men in Nepal. In 2017 there were 149 recorded deaths related to incidents of gender based violence, 140 of said victims were women (World Bank). This same article also reported that 163 documented cases out of 680 reports, the perpetrator was a relative. However when discussing gender based violence specifically against women within a patriarchal society, statistical data is deeply misconstrued because of the lack of incidents reported and recorded with full detail, due to social stigma and a culture of silence (World Bank). Incidents such as the civil war between the Maoists and the government from 1996 to 2006 created numerous new situations of high risk situations for an already vulnerable population (Human Rights Watch).
Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is a booming business throughout the world, however Nepal is a bustling center and one of the most lucrative markets. False promises to rural women of work and opportunity is a common gateway however, they often end up in situations of forced labor and prostitution. It is estimated that in Kathmandu there are 11,000 to 13,000 girls and women working, most of them underage (Moura). Al Jazeera reports that many children and women also end up in India and abroad, it is said that 54 girls and women are trafficked to India every day (Moura). Three main events occurred which spurred greater levels of vulnerability and higher numbers of trafficking within the region. This included the growth of the textile and carpet industry within the Kathmandu Valley in the mid 1980s causing large scale rural to urban migrations mainly of women and children. Due to their limited familiarity with the industry and their lack of skills, many experienced poor working conditions, increasing their vulnerability to further exploitation and trafficking (National Human Rights Commission). Secondly, the civil war that broke out within the country between 1996 and 2006 caused a large spike in human trafficking especially of children. The outbreak of violence and fear led many women and children to flee, caused mass amounts of displacement, and abduction (National Human Rights Commission). Furthermore, in 2015 Nepal experienced a 7.8 earthquake. The aftershock was truly within the country’s infrastructure and the already existing disparities among people became deeper. The natural disaster created another incident for the most vulnerable to be further exploited due to family separation, loss and displacement, and the deterioration of systems and infrastructure. The New York Times emphasized the impact on how school buildings and
educational systems were heavily impacted after the earthquake, changing the lives of children who may never return to school (Harris).

Introducing Women’s Voices to the Public Sphere Through Community Radio

Media plays a large role in cultural imagery, discourse, and power relations, thus it also has the capacity for social change and empowerment. The rise of women’s participation in community radio in Nepal is a growing movement, allowing women’s voices to break into the public sphere using a medium accessible to illiterate people and communities. Nepali women have taken advantage of this medium at a grassroots level in order to have their voice be heard and to discuss issues central to their status and rights. Moreover, the abundance of voices and the pro-people medium of radio has allowed for specific programs and stations for specific groups to emerge, for example Dalit specific, indigenous community focused, etc (Dahal). Radio Purbanchal is both established and run by women, creating a strong female platform and space for their voices to be heard and incite social change especially due to its inclusion of marginalized communities and willingness to include women’s stories. The station is said to be “anchored on the main objective of surfacing issues of women, children and minority groups by prioritising these in the regular content of its programmes” (Kadel). They address an extensive list of topics including health, education, environmental conservation, women's status and rights, inequality, injustice, and more. Through enabling their voices to be heard and creating accessible programs, women can share insight and learn about the external environment that affects their livelihoods daily, thus becoming mobilized and empowered to advocate for themselves and others in an informed way.
A critique of Conventional Development Initiatives Towards Empowerment:

Ishara Mahat’s paper *Women’s Development in Nepal: The Myth of Empowerment* in its opening words eloquently describes the stratification of women within Nepalese society and the issues with growing political and development aid. Mahat writes “The status of Nepalese women—and rural women in particular—lags far behind that of men. The strong bias in favor of sons in the country means that daughters are discriminated against from birth and do not have equal opportunities to achieve development. The situation for women is characterized by low levels of access to education, healthcare, and economic, social, and political opportunities. Despite increasing efforts from the government, non-governmental organizations, and international development agencies to empower women in Nepal, there has been little improvement in the socio-economic status at the grass roots level.” Mahat’s paper poses an important and relevant critique. Mahat discusses how the “concept of empowerment” that is often pursued within agencies mainly promotes “entrepreneurial self reliance.” Though this is not a negative, it also does not mobilize a building of community and a shift of value, rather it promotes “individualistic” values and solutions. In this empowerment through entrepreneurial and economic initiatives, the value that is produced is not a notion of valuing women but an acknowledgement of their economic participation and a fitting within an established capitalist and patriarchal global system. Women become valued for the labor participatory in this system, while their labor within the private sphere still goes unnoticed and unvalued. Nepal’s deeply patriarchal societal structure and lack of female voice within the private and public spheres has been the greatest prohibitor to female empowerment. Empowerment initiatives for Nepal must come from the praxis of both developmental, political, and economic expansion, as well as a
social and cultural shift towards fully valuing women within society. It needs to stem purely as a recognition of their general contributions to this world by means of being human and deserving dignity and respect. I say this because true female empowerment does not purely emerge from making women fit further within patriarchal and capitalist structures. Mobilizing and enabling women to participate in external labor forces such as entrepreneurial roles, is another step of valuing the labor, rather than valuing the woman. Feminized beings have more to offer than the work they do, whether that labor is inside or outside of the home. Furthermore, women’s contribution to the public economic arena is often further valued and recognized than the work they do within the home therefore creating a limited sense of empowerment within an economic framework. I recognize that by having external economic participation, women are able to gain funds and earn more levels of decision making and participation, which is excellent.

Conventional development thoughts and initiatives have a tendency to lean towards economic growth. Though economic gain is beneficial and can be empowering, it can further create levels of disparity and continue to fuel exploitative practices especially for those of intersectional identities. Though, there is a duality to this. Economic and conventional development can also deeply benefit women through providing health and educational resources as well.

Incorporating women into a patriarchal and capitalist system is not empowering them to their full potential. It is rather integrating them into a system that is built on overlooking their full value, contributions, and creativity. Though I highlighted many negative points and hindrances to female empowerment, I want to conclude with emphasising a few key points that I found most relevant during my research.
Female Empowerment needs to come from addressing societal structures and cultural values as well as economic and developmental challenges. This responsibility of cultural values is not purely placed upon men, women also play a role in perpetuating caste discrimination of other women and stigmatization during menstruation as well.

There needs to be societal recognition of the “double burden” women face due to their unpaid domestic labor as well as their external labor in empowerment initiatives which support the economic system.

Female Empowerment can only truly emerge if legal initiatives are passed and signed along with set practices to ensure a greater level of accountability.

Educational environments such as classrooms and community radio shows are vital for women’s empowerment because they allow for the culture of silence to be broken by informed voices.

Women’s empowerment efforts need to include a recentering of women’s value not only on an economic level but a cultural one as well.
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