

**Considering linguistic and cultural aspects in
strategies to promote
gender equality and empower
women in Nepalese context**

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1: Introduction

- The purpose of the paper: to analyze the linguistic and cultural complexities and their bearing on the gender disparity and disempowerment in Nepal
- The main focus of the paper: to answer these two questions:
 - (a) To what extent is the complex linguistic situation accountable for gender disparities and women's disempowerment in Nepal?
 - (b) How can we promote gender equality and empower women through multilingual education in which teaching materials are based on the cultural aspects?

- In Nepal, the issues of women empowerment and eliminating caste and discrimination have been raised by a number of organizations and the government has also launched programs to promote gender equality and empowerment of women.
- However, deep-rooted and long-held beliefs in Nepal are unhurried to change.
- Caste and gender discrimination have affected access to education. Children from lower castes and girls are falling behind in enrollment numbers and also in class performance.

- “Promote gender equality and empower women” is one of the major Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) developed and signed in September 2000. The major target to realize this goal was to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015.
- In spite of reducing poverty, Nepal is still lagging behind in providing universal primary education, empowering women and in providing gainful employment to its citizens .

- Only 26.4 % of the total population of female has basic literacy skills. There has been ethnic, caste and gender disparity which has trapped many people into a vicious cycle of poverty in Nepal. Girls, no matter whether they belong to caste system or indigenous groups in comparison to boys are still deprived of better education
- Numerous programs were/ are being launched by various organizations and the government to maintain the gender equality and empower the women, the prevailing complex linguistic and cultural setting of Nepal has prevented these marginalized groups from making progress.

2. Linguistic and cultural complexity

2.1 Linguistic complexity

- Nepal presents a complex linguistic situation
- 2001 census, at least 92 different living languages are spoken in Nepal
- Some language families have large numbers of languages and some have only a small number of languages
- In terms of number of speakers, the Indo-Aryan language family is the largest, but in terms of the number of distinct languages, the Tibeto-Burman language family is the largest.

- The major languages of Nepal (percent spoken as mother tongue) are Nepali (49%), Maithili (12%), Bhojpuri (8%), Tharu (6%), Tamang (5%), Newar (4%), Magar (3%), Awadhi (2%), Bantawa (2%), Limbu (1%), and Bajjika (1%).
- The remaining languages are each spoken as mother tongue by less than one percent of the population.
- Nepali, written in Devanagari script, is the official, national language and serves as lingua franca among Nepalese of different ethno-linguistic groups.

2.2 Cultural complexity

- According to the Census of Nepal, 2001, there are 103 social caste/ethnic groups, some of them comprising less than 0.1 per cent of the population.
- Nepal has a rich cultural heritage which has evolved over centuries. This multi-dimensional cultural heritage encompasses within itself the cultural diversities of various ethnic, tribal, and social groups inhabiting different altitudes.

- The 2001 census:
 - Hinduism: 80.6%
 - Buddhism: 11%
 - Muslim : 3.2%
 - indigenous religion:3.6%
 - Christianity: less than 0.5%
- With a multiplicity of groups, Nepal has several cults, and gods and goddesses, which co-exist with the major religions.
- There exist deep-rooted cultural norms such as dowry, early marriage, *kumari*, *deuki*, *jhuma*, *chaubadi*, etc, in Nepal.

Table 1: Major deep rooted social norms in Nepalese society

1	Badi	A traditional mobile community of professional entertainers
2	Deuki	a girl traditionally offered to a god /goddess
3	Jhuma	a girl traditionally offered to a god/goddess
4	Kumari	A girl from a Shakya family appointed as a living goddess till menstruation
5	Dalit	a traditionally so-called untouchable community under Hindu religion
6	Kamaiya	the children for landlords as bonded labour
7	Chaubadi	Keeping the women in a secluded hut for period of menstruation

3. Gender inequality in Nepal

3.1 Household level inequality

- In Nepalese society, the male exercises authoritative power on the female members of the family
- The daughters are taken as liabilities in Hindu society and culture. Parents and other family members have a preference to sons over daughters
- However, in indigenous nationalities like Gurung, Magar, Rai, Limbu and Tamang, there is no discrimination between sons and daughters

- The daughters of the Terai community in common with the daughters in the neighboring country India have been tortured from dowry system locally referred to as Daijoo/Tilak.
- In Hindu society, a woman is treated as untouchable for four or five days during menstruation. In this period the girls are not encouraged to go to attend classes especially in remote villages

- Child marriage is still prevalent in most areas of Nepal. Young married girls experience the deprivation of education
- Polygamy is widely practiced, whereas polyandry is still followed by mountain communities such as the Dolpali, Lhopa, Baragaunle and Manange.
- In such communities, there is no discrimination in the use of language in terms of gender. The husbands and wives can use the same level of honorificity to one another

3.2 Community level inequality

- In the Western Terai region, *kamaiya* 'bonded labor' is still prevalent though it was abolished by the law
- There are also practices of *Deuki*, *Jhuma* and *Kumari* in particular society in Nepal
- a Nepali woman does not have any right to her own body
- There are some very popular sayings in Nepalese society. They have a direct bearing on gender discrimination

Table 2: Some very popular sayings having direct bearing on gender discrimination

1	dhilo paye, chhora paye	Let it be late, but let it be a son
2	chhora paye swarga jaane	The birth of a son paves the way to heaven
3	chhori ko janma hare ko karma	A daughter is born with a doomed fate
4	chhora paye khasi, chhori paye pharsi	If a son is born, the event is celebrated by sacrificing a goat, if it is daughter, a pumpkin is enough
5	mare paap, pale punya	It's a sin if the groom kills the bride, charity, if nurtured
6	swasni machecko buddhi pachhadi	Women are always shortsighted

- Basically, three factors are accountable for gender disparity in Nepal: patriarchy, hegemony or dominance of Hindu cultural values, and cultural diversity.
- Since Nepal is a patriarchal society, husbands exercise their control over their wives' labor, production, sexuality, mobility and economic resources including property.
- Due to Hegemony of Hindu cultural values, especially, the women belonging to “low caste” or Dalits and indigenous ethnic groups have been doubly victimized as one as women in general and the other as Dalit or indigenous women

- Nepalese society is socially and culturally diverse. A significant impact is realized not only on the attitudes towards women and gender relations but also is manifested in caste and ethnicity, language, and religion.
- In Nepal, non-Hindu ethnic groups are discriminated. The women belonging to other nationalities like the Madhesis and Muslims are discriminated by the state because they speak their own mother tongue.
- Hindu women are more privileged than non-Hindus such as Animists, Buddhists, Lamaists, Islam and Christians.

4. Some ways to promote gender equality and empower women

- The complex linguistic and cultural setting of Nepal have a profound bearing on the gender disparity and disempowerment of women in Nepal
- Anthropological survey has not yet been conducted in Nepal. Thus it is not easy to state which speech community is living in which cultural setting.
- Many speech communities share the same types of cultural settings

The primary education is not practicable and suitable in the complex linguistic and cultural situation of Nepal:

- the medium of instruction in the school is compulsorily Nepali, language of wider communication in Nepal
- The children from non-Nepali speech community cannot understand what the teachers explain in Nepali in the class on the one hand, the Nepali language used in writing the textbooks is not understandable to the average students from non Nepali speech communities.

- The use of sanskritized vocabulary may hinder the comprehension of the texts even to Nepali speaking students.
- The subject matters of the subjects like social studies are unfamiliar to the children. They are compelled to study the cultural aspects of the dominant language speech community.
- Due to the lack of understanding of the subject matter the students do not become interested in the study and drop the school.
- Especially, the girls from non-Nepali speaking communities have been disadvantaged from such types of education system in Nepal

Specific recommendations for Multilingual Education for non -Nepali speaking communities:

- If primary education is imparted in the respective languages of the speech communities especially the girls would be highly encouraged.
- The curriculum should be framed in such a way that it includes the information of the local cultures: good and bad aspects, local technology and local knowledge.
- The curriculum should be devoted to imparting the knowledge directly related to the life of the women. Such knowledge may include rearing babies, farming and other skills which can generate income in the family.
- Such curriculum may include the knowledge of maintaining the community forest managed by women. This will create awareness in women which will promote gender equality and empower women in Nepal.

- This situation cannot be improved unless girls are educated based on the curriculum equipped by the analysis of cultural aspects in the respective mother tongues.
- Thus, it is recommended that at least primary education be imparted in mother tongue by preparing teaching materials containing the subject matters suited for the local needs and socio cultural setting.

5. Summary

- linguistic and cultural complexities have been accountable for the gender disparity and disempowerment of women in Nepal
- deep-rooted and long-held beliefs in Nepal have hindered women's progress. Nepal is still lagging behind in providing universal primary education, empowering women and in providing gainful employment to its citizens
- In Nepal, the primary education is not practicable and suitable in the complex linguistic and cultural situation of Nepal. The medium of instruction, Nepali, is not accessible to all the children.

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