

Considering Linguistic and Cultural Aspects in Strategies to Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women in the Nepalese Context

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SUMMARY:

Language and culture have a profound influence on gender disparity and the disempowerment of women in a male-dominated society such as Nepal: “as inequality against women occurs from birth to death”.

A popular saying in Nepal is: “If a son is born, the event is celebrated by sacrificing a goat, if it is a daughter, a pumpkin is enough.”

Gender equality is also more than an MDG goal, it is crucial to the economic, social and human development of the country.

Therefore, multilingual education is seen as an important tool in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women in Nepal by using teaching materials that are based on the particular cultural considerations of the country.

The government has initiated programmes to address this imbalance. However, NGOs claim one important issue that needs to be addressed is the caste system. Many organizations argue that this structure is detrimental to social and human development, deprives entire communities of access to education and throws caste members into a “vicious cycle of poverty”.

Children from lower castes, especially girls, are falling behind in enrolment and performance and research indicates that only 26.4 per cent of the total population of females possess basic literacy skills.

Tackling these issues in a conservative society, resistant to change, that is marred by “deep-rooted and long held beliefs” is a major challenge.

Although the government has managed to reduce poverty levels, exacerbated by a decade-long civil war with Maoist insurgents, Nepal is still lagging behind in providing universal primary education, the empowerment of women, and providing gainful employment to its people.

A crucially important factor in Nepal’s development is its linguistic and cultural complexity. A 2001 census revealed that 92 living languages are spoken in the country, although other studies list a further 123 living languages.

Another deep-rooted cultural norm that hinders development is the dowry system. A bride incapable of bringing a sufficient dowry is not only harassed in her own home, she is also physically tortured. The caste system is also a barrier to development. Groups such as the *Dalit* caste are socially excluded, culturally mistreated and deprived of an education.

Another hindrance is the widespread practice of child marriage which deprives young girls of an education.

Community attitudes also affect the status of women in society. This includes bonded labour and traditional religious practices that rob them of their freedom.

Some poor girls are purchased by high caste people and offered to the gods as *Deuki*. These girls often become prostitutes. Similarly, women of the Dalit caste groups called *Badi* are forced by society to become sex workers.

Religion can also play a part in disempowering women. Buddhist families in the mountainous regions traditionally offer their second daughter to monasteries for a life of religious solitude where they must practice celibacy for life.

Activists have claimed that a Nepali woman does not have any right to her own body. Decisions about pregnancy, the number of children that a woman will produce and whether or not to terminate a pregnancy are made exclusively by men. In the patriarchal society, the husband's influence extends to control over his wife's occupation, mobility and economic resources.

Conclusions:

To promote gender equality in Nepal, the forum identified the following solutions. It was recommended that anthropological surveys of the socio-linguistic situation in Nepal be carried out so that researchers can identify which speech community is living in a particular cultural setting. Regarding legislation that has made Nepali the compulsory language of instruction in schools, virtually ends any hope of non-Nepali speakers from receiving an education, must be changed. The use of *sanskritized* vocabulary that hinders the comprehension of the texts of even Nepali speaking students is a major issue for further debate. Subjects such as social studies are also unfamiliar to many children and they are forced to study the cultural aspects of the dominant language speech community. This unfamiliarity can lead to disinterest and heighten school drop-out rates. Social customs that hinder women's progress, such as detrimental religious practices, must also be tackled. Women must be made aware that there are negative aspects to their religion which are holding back development. Curriculum change is also needed to include local technology and local knowledge; an understanding of child birth, farming and other skills will empower women through increased awareness and income-generating potential.

Discussion:

Q. How important was language in this situation?

A. Education in general and especially of the mother tongue is most critical – unless they understand how women are discriminated against by men they will not be able to reverse the situation.

Q. Have there been cases when the education is in the mother tongue, there have been less incidences of gender discrimination?

A. Yes. This has been noted many times.

Q. How are cultural aspects affecting women's empowerment?

A. Women are aware of the cultural norms and have difficulties in moving away from them. Education is crucially important in uplifting women to move away from some cultural norms and practices that are not good for them.

Q. I am interested in the issue of cultural aspects such arranged marriage and the dowry system. How is this significant?

A. Some people do not see the point of sending their girls to school, if one day she will get married. They think that one day she will become someone else's property so they do not invest in their daughter's education.