

The Role of Nepalese Proverbs in Perpetuating Gendered Cultural Values

Ghanshyam Bishwakarma

Department of Social Sciences, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland

Email: bishwaka@student.uef.fi, ghanshyam.bishwakarma@gmail.com

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Abstract

Gender inequality is one of the central topics and the most challenging social problems in human development. This paper explores the issues of existing gender inequality in Nepalese society through the eyes of traditional Nepalese proverbs. The central research question of this article is “In what way do Nepalese proverbs interact with gender roles, and do they play a role in its perpetuation?” Nepal has been depicted as a nation with the highest degree of gender-based discrimination (Luitel, 2001), and the life of women is horrible, especially in rural regions due to existing gender-based discrimination. This study analyses some of the best-known Nepalese proverbs and assesses their implications for the position of Nepalese women. The outcomes show that many Nepalese proverbs reflect a belief in the favorable position of men over women. This directs the researcher to conclude that the Nepalese proverbs are some of the main instruments employed to spread negative views towards Nepali women.

Keywords

Power, Proverb, Nepal, Gender, Inequality

1. Introduction and Background of Study

It is common knowledge that wisdom and spirit of cultures are often manifested in its proverbs and sayings which ultimately lead to a better understanding of the language and an understanding of the people’s way of thinking (Syzdykov, 2014). A proverb is defined as a classical saying frequently used that expresses generally bitter truth, morals, norms, values, and practical issues within society. It is a “precised and condensed saying” (Rasul, 2015: p. 53) which is popularly known and repeated throughout a culture from generation to generation. Almost every society and culture in the world uses proverbs to express different

social truths and cultural norms. The Oxford English Dictionary (2010) defined the term as “A short, well-known pithy saying, stating a general truth or piece of advice”. Proverbs have been in existence since there has been spoken the language. They were not penned down at first, but, instead, passed down from one generation to the next through word of mouth (Mpungose, 2010). In Nepal, proverbs are still widely spoken and occupy a unique space in oral and written literature that plays a significant part in everyday lives. Besides, it is also found in textbooks, magazines, newspapers, and academic pieces of literature. Nowadays, radio, television and other media programs also broadcast the use of proverbs quite frequently in daily conversation. Proverbs, by just a few words or sentences, can spread both wrong and sound messages in society. This article attempts to explore the existing negative stereotypical message of gender inequality within Nepalese proverbs and analyzes it carefully to investigate further Nepalese proverbs’ interaction with gender roles and their role in its perpetuation. Although the practice of gender inequality is a universal phenomenon and exists in almost everywhere part of the world. However, the degree and practice of it vary with a different culture, society, family, and other social aspects. Within Nepal, too, is a culturally, ethnically, socially, and geographically diverse country, where the practice of gender inequality varies.

Nepal is a small landlocked country situated between India and China in South Asia. Besides its small size, spectacular landscape, and the dramatic topography, it has the most striking features of cultural diversity, including linguistic plurality. According to the census of Nepal (2011), there are 123 different languages spoken as the mother tongue by different caste and ethnic groups in Nepal. However, besides this linguistic plurality, Nepali is the most widely spoken language in Nepal. It “is an Indo-European language that is closely related to the other major languages of northern India, such as Hindi and Bengali” (Hutt, 1991: p. 5). The majority of Nepali speaking people live in Nepal. However, it is also the dominant language of some part of India, where Nepalese and Nepalese Indian natives reside either temporarily or permanently, for example, Darjeeling, Sikkim, Assam and some parts of Southern Bhutan (Hutt, 1991). Equally, the Nepali diaspora living worldwide speak within it both in written text and spoken languages. One of the main characteristics of this language is full of proverbs in perpetuating normative attitudes or societal values in Nepal. Proverbs are integral to maintaining Nepalese cultural norms, values, and other social duties. Therefore, it is considered words of wise people in the Nepalese society.

There has been much debate in recent years surrounding the significance of proverbs in society, with a special focus on traditional Nepalese society in particular. Several studies have been published highlighting the importance of proverbs in other contexts, but as of the time of writing, Nepalese proverbs been mentioned only peripherally in international academia. To this end, there is a dearth of knowledge on Nepalese proverbs and how it integrates to guide societal norms. Therefore, to understand the importance of proverbs in Nepal, and the

rationale for the present study, it is necessary to briefly review both the history of Nepalese proverbs and the scholarly attempts that have been made to define and describe them.

Proverbs have been around for millennia. Initially, they were not written down but spoken, and in this form, they passed from one generation to next with very little change. Various authors have attempted to define the term “Proverbs” and identify the functions that proverb serves in society (Mathonsi, 2004; Magwaza, 2004; Nyembezi, 1990). Their work highlights the fact that proverbs form an essential part of any cultural group’s literature and that “poetic-structural techniques such as alliterations, parallelism, vowel elision and rhythm” (Canonici, 1994: p. 39) are used in their composition.

Globally, there has been a significant attempt done from both academic and civil society in various forms to progress towards a society with gender equity. Still, the existence of gender inequality can be seen not only in developing countries but also in highly developed countries in the world. The “gender, like race, is a categorical form of inequality” (Ridgeway, 2011: p. 4). In general, gender inequality refers to discrimination and inequalities between men and women on the base of their gender identity. Gender inequality spans across human rights, education, labor market and economic empowerment and has become a pervasive feature of societies around the world through most of recorded history (Klasen, 2020). Nepali society is one of the highly patriarchal societies where gender inequality deeply rooted in its culture. Therefore, “traditional social values strongly favor males over females” (Timsina, 2011: p. 52) that valued the women less keeping them in subordinated position in both society and family. With some exceptions, most Nepali lives in the same house as a joint family. Therefore, family socialization mechanism plays a role in perpetuating gender inequality. For example, -women are taught to be very loyal in the family, do all the household work and follow every rules and regulation within the house and society. In this way, when moving from generation to generation, in the name of cultures, society and prestige, women are obeying the rules and regulations, even though it is against their human rights.

Furthermore, this type of hidden message has been transmitted from generation to generation through different media. For example, TV programs, family, texts, and others have in some form or another embedded this societal idea. In the case of Nepal, Proverbs are also seen as one of the mediators of transmitting gender norms from generation to generation. This paper examines the intergenerational transmission of gendered norms through proverbs in Nepalese society, both on textual and verbal message.

Interpreting proverbs is a complex task, particularly in sociological studies, and critical fields have established that proverb can reveal critical information about a culture and need to be considered carefully in their specific setting. Because of their complicated function within a particular culture, interpreting proverbs from other cultures is a good deal more complicated than interpreting

proverbs from one's own. The primary reason behind this is that the researcher will not be mindful of the specific contexts that brought out and surround the proverbs. In cultural studies, there can be a significant conflict of opinion on how to interpret particular proverbs, given their complexity.

Proverbs continue to act as an integral part in regular everyday conversations across Nepal, especially in rural regions. Most of Nepalese society regards proverbs as linguistic tools to both create and uphold social and moral values. In Nepal, specifically, proverbs are seen as an integral tool that upholds social norms. They are thought to contain cultural wisdom, and the Nepalese people have been known to strictly absorb, adapt and live with these expressions without questioning or challenging it.

There has been much debate in recent years surrounding the significance of proverbs in society, and in traditional Nepalese society in particular. Several studies have been published highlighting the importance of proverbs in other contexts, but to date, Nepalese proverbs have been mentioned only peripherally in international academia. To fully understand the importance of proverbs in Nepal, and the rationale for the present study, it is necessary to briefly review both the history of Nepalese proverbs and the scholarly attempts that have been made to define and describe them. Proverbs are sophisticated, with poetic structure and deeply felt meaning. Therefore, only native speakers can use and understand it easily compare to a non-native speaker of any language (Kohistani, 2011). Being a native of Nepalese language, I am here trying to explore these proverbs that degraded the Nepalese women in their social status in the society.

Proverbs have been around for close to a millennium. Initially, they were not written down but spoken, and in this course, they went from one generation to the next with very trivial modification. Several sources have tried to determine the term "proverb and identify the function that proverbs serve in society" (Mathonsi, 2004; Magwaza, 2004; Nyembezi, 1990). These authors highlighted the fact that proverbs form an indispensable component of any cultural groups' discourse community and that puts-structural techniques such as alliteration, parallelism, vowel elision and rhythm are used in their composition (Canonici, 1994: p. 34).

Gender discrimination is one of the significant adverse attributes of Nepali society. Gender discrimination refers to the presence of the hidden, or in some instances pronounced, disparities among individuals in the society based on their gender. In Nepal, discrimination is traditionally taken over, along with the belief that women are inferior to their male counterpart. Although the land is diverse in many ways, with more than 100 castes and ethnicities, and with locals speaking over 90 languages, gender disparities are widespread. On the other hand, Subedi (2010) explains that more than 80% of Nepal's citizens live in rural regions. In such communities, women constitute a significant contribution, taking on more than 66% of agricultural labor and giving more than 40% of the country's entire gross domestic product. Despite this, Nepali women continue to

suffer from widespread discrimination and even fury. One survey, for instance, found that the prevalence of sexual violence against married women in Nepal is as high as 58% (Adhikari & Tamang, 2010).

This study argues that Nepalese proverbs contribute to its problems with gender discrimination. Several proverbs suggest that women are inferior, secondary to humans and even disposable. Although some are elusive, most it can be argued, dehumanize women from birth to destruction. According to Subedi (2010: p. 7), the position of women in Nepalese society is subordinate at every stage in their existence: “from the very early age; females are treated as if they are not equally safe as humans. Young girls are fed after their brother; young married women are looking after husbands, elderly women face after their sons, and so the round continues.” Proverbs are just one of the mechanisms that aid in reinforcing an idea that a woman’s purpose in society is solely for sex and bearing children, but they can be a substantial one, particularly in a society like Nepal that values them highly as traditional sources of wisdom. In this regard, there is a significant disparity between these two where a disconnection exists from the worth of a female according to culture compared to their contribution to society.

Gender is achieved status, that is socially constructed through family socialization, cultural and psychological means within a society (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Rothchild, 2006). This is a universal phenomenon that applies to almost all countries around the world. Nepal is not pure of these characteristics. In Nepal, the total population of women are slightly more than men. However, the bitter truth is that—there are still practices of patriarchy in society, which keep the women’s status less than men in society. Bhusal (2011) revealed that more than half of girls’ experience gender inequality both at home and school in their lives because of being female. Nepal is most diverse in its culture. However, across Nepalese cultural groups, females are expected to do domestic duties from every morning to till the bed at night.

Consequently, they do not have time to work or spend their time outside the home (Adhikari, 2013). In this way, most of the women are excluded from outside activities, including education and technical skills that needed for human development, leading them in the corner. This plays a pivotal role in hindering females’ progress in developing critical skills outside the home (Borgonovi & Greiff, 2020).

2. Theoretical Framework

Several theories and studies explain the significant gender inequalities found in society. The present study’s theoretical framework is founded on the social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) because this theory identifies the mechanisms which build up and maintain hierarchies within society. Granting to the social dominance theory, many social institutions distribute goods and services to the dominant groups. This control is enforced through each one’s psychological orientation. The psychology of an individual develops about the

groups he/she is a part of and is based on their averages. As a result of this powerful mechanism, dominant groups have power and prestige while other groups are allocated undesirable and sometimes dangerous roles as subordinates.

Nepal has a severe problem with gender discrimination. This issue has been a significant theme of conversation in the world media for some years, mainly as a consequence of the relentless violence against adult females. As a male-dominated country, Nepal is not an exclusion when women are discriminated against; merely it is noteworthy for how widespread and intense it is. As this study argues, discrimination against women in Nepal is concerned with the traditional culture of its masses and is deeply settled. In Nepal, discrimination is a traditional norm that has been accepted by Nepali women and put on by human beings in the pretext of social-cultural values. Discrimination based on gender begins at birth and goes on throughout the lifetime of an individual. Equally, in all cultures, proverbs in Nepal have been a significant factor in the transfer of tradition from one generation to the next, and this tradition includes gender discrimination.

In such a society, discrimination against women has become an accepted pattern. Inquiry on the genes contributing to an increased degree of violence against women has pointed to numerous contributing factors, including alcoholism in men and high illiteracy rates among women (Ahmad & Jaleel, 2015). Nevertheless, researchers have ignored the correlation between the ethnic orientation of Nepalese people and discrimination against women, including the widespread function of proverbs, which describes women as inferior to humans. Popular proverbs such as “Chhorapayekhasi, Chhoripayefarsi (A party of mutton goes on a son’s birth, but a pumpkin on that of daughters)” clearly demarcate the differences between sons and daughters in society. This proverb symbolically illustrates the contrast between the celebration of son’s birth, with expensive mutton (in the context of Nepalese Market), as opposed to the marking of daughters’ birth, with commonplace pumpkin, such a proverb correlates with actual current practices in which sons’ births are widely celebrated while daughters’ births are not. As will be discussed later, this is only one of several proverbs that reflects, and perhaps reinforce, gender discrimination in Nepal.

3. Methodology

This is a complex subject, one that delves deep into the policies and practices of the Nepalese people. Acquiring information on the relationship and illustrating a correlation between societal practices and their cultural values is complex. For this reason, I used two principal approaches to completing this study. The first approach was analyzing the many proverbs related to gender issues in Nepalese culture. For this operation, I had collected different books (mostly in Nepalese language) related to proverbs (Parajuli, 2012; Lal, 2019; Bhattarai & Morris, 2016). From those books, I only sorted out those proverbs whose meaning and intensions were gender discrimination. Furthermore, I used some of my own

experiences and knowledge of Nepali proverbs and its culture. After collecting all those proverbs, I analyzed them thoroughly by evaluating the meaning and intentions of each proverb in Nepali literature.

The second approach involved online research on the status of women in Nepal, particularly their social position by evaluating available works of literature. The second approach used here was complementary to the first and involved thorough online research. The evaluation of the documentation sought out to assess that link existing between the meanings behind the proverbs and the experiences of Nepalese women.

In most works of research, literature reviews are regarded as a method of establishing a background on detailed research (Hart, 1998). Nevertheless, Polit & Beck (2006) indicate that literature reviews may also be conducted independently towards establishing answers to particular research questions at hand. That's what was done here. The motivation was the researcher's assumptions that 1) the questions at hand could not be addressed directly without significant field research and that 2) the literature in questions did include reliable, pertinent information.

In the search for informative data, the researcher assessed the not only most recent research work on proverbs but also ancient proverbs that have been taking massive space in Nepalese society. Equally, those proverbs whose publications have demonstrated the connection between the practice of proverbs and the generation of gendered culture that prevails in Nepal. Although very few authors have addressed proverbs, the researchers reviewed these works, primarily the most recent works, and the researcher reviewed all the studies that have contributed to the gendered culture in Nepal.

4. Results

In order to analyze some of the central proverbs in Nepalese culture, the researcher identified a specific set of proverbs which correlates to the behavior of the Nepalese people. Most of the identified proverbs demonstrate a negative perception towards women, while others show a direct taste of adult males and boys over women and misses. The survey established a clear and substantial gap between women and humans in that society with the women being viewed as fit but for home chores and nursing, while the adult males are seen as accepting the power and ability to perform whatever activity they wish to. The discussion that follows provides an assessment of the various Nepalese proverbs and dominant saying that have perpetuated the culturally accepted norm of discrimination against women.

Negative attitudes towards young women in Nepal begin at birth, or even earlier. For instance, there is a dominant Nepalese proverb that state "*Chhora-payekhasi, Chhoripayefarsi* (A party of mutton goes on a sons' birth, but a pumpkin on that of daughters)". In Nepal, mutton is considered expensive, and it symbolizes food which only rich people could afford while the pumpkin is

considered inexpensive and food for poor masses. This reflects that cultural norm that gives sons priority over daughters from the very start of life. The mere indication that a son's birth should be celebrated over a daughter's birth is a direct correlation with this societal norm.

Nepalese society is structured by a different culture, distinct roles for each gender. The men are seen as breadwinners, protectors, and providers. They have a superior position within the family hierarchy and control the overall distribution of goods and resources within the family (Subedi, 2010: pp. 3-7). This leads to a substantial preference for a male child over a female one (Martin (2008). According to one of many proverbs in Nepal praising a male child, "*Chhora-payesworga Jaane* (The birth of a son in the family paves the way to heaven)." This proverb means that households with no sons have a doomed fate and are damned. Sonless families are seen as damaged for all the time. Such an attitude is written into law and practice: according to Subedi (2010), Nepalese society gives full rights only two sons to bear the household name and perform death rites.

As an additional issue of these attitudes, the female body is seen as a child-bearing machine whose central purpose is giving birth to sons. Many women are bound to keep having children until they get at least one male kid. This attitude is reflected in the proverb "*Dhilo hos, choro hos* (Let it be late, but let it be a son)". No matter how long it takes or what danger it may entail to childbearing women, having a son is imagined as the end of a woman's lifetime. In retrospect, the irony that only a woman (who is less valued) can give birth to a male (who is highly valued) is less likely understood by society.

Another perspective of the place of women in Nepal that is thought over both in proverbs and social life is the belief that women should lead lives entirely in private, not the public sector. This attitude restricts the form of labor; women can do successfully and exclude them from leadership roles in their residential districts and the nation at large. The proverbs, "*Chhorapayesansarujayalo, chhoribhayebhanchha Ujyalo* (Son brightens the entire world, while a daughter can only brighten the kitchen)" quite aptly reflects these beliefs. Men can work in any field and have an impact on the world; women, however, are restricted to housework "the kitchen". Even though Nepalese women are engaged in public jobs, they are typically in the lowest positions in the workplace, and even though women's work produces around 40% of Nepal's GNP, the income that women bring to the household is considered a supplement to what the man brings in. Regardless of their professional position and their financial contribution, their role in the household is automatically lowered from a man's perspective.

There are strong proverbs that indicate that women in leadership positions are flawed and dangerous. This is not just within families, but in the general society as well. As the proverb "*Pothi base gharmaasanti*" (Households run by women are sure to be destroyed). This proverb suggests that mostly in Nepalese culture, houses are headed by a man. Still, if women run some houses, it is seen as unf-

avourable. A related proverb suggests why this might be “*Swasnimanchhekobud-dipachhadihunchha*” (Women are always short-sighted). This proverb demonstrates that Nepali culture does not trust women with public decisions and affairs of state. Only men are seen as culturally acceptable to hold such leadership positions.

Lastly, there are Nepalese proverbs which seem to justify the mistreatment of women, even implying violence in some instances. Agreeing to a well-known Nepalese proverb, the wife is considered dust of her husband’s feet. That is why there is still one more proverbs—*Srimatibhanekopaitalakodhulo ho* (Wife is the dust of feet). The metaphor of dust here suggests that wives are like the dust picked up as one walks down the road. They are dirty, lowly, inconsequential, and to be brushed off the husband, almost without thought. In fact, the husband would be derelict if he did not brush the dust or wife away. So, just as a man might clean his feet/shoes or practice whatever he wishes with them, humans have the right to practice whatever they wish with their wives, whether or not it negatively affects them. These proverbs specifically lower the value and worth of a woman.

This proverbial attitude correlates closely with real-life conditions in Nepal. The data demonstrate clearly that many Nepalese men do not observe or care for the wellbeing of their wives. For years now, Nepal has faced a wave of domestic violence. Research on violence against women in Nepal has suggested that the prevalence of sexual violence against married women in Nepal is as high as 58% (Adhikari & Tamang, 2010). Another study by Puri et al. (2012) estimated that the rate of sexual violence against women between the age of 15 and 24 is as high as 52%. Also, according to Dhakal (2008), there were a total of 1100 reported case of domestic violence against women in 2007.

One of the most extreme cases of violence against women in Nepal is bride burning. When a bride’s family does not fork over her dowry or her dowry does not the expectations of the family, she can be set on fire and shot down. For example—in one month in 2008, four women were killed in a zone that had been considered free of violence against women because of the dowry-related issue (Dhakal, 2008). Another highly documented case involved a woman named Reeta (fake name), because her dowry was considered insufficient, her husband poured kerosene on her and set her on fire and locked her in the bath. Luckily, she survived the hostile attack following the assistance of her neighbors when they heard her cries and worked rapidly to rescue her.

Some Nepalese proverbs suggest that the country should have domestic violence without looking at the complications of such actions or the women themselves. This is clearly demonstrated by the proverb—*Logneswasnikojhagadaparalkoaago* (Domestic violence between a husband and a wife is like a fire in the hay). In this case, domestic violence is named, only regarded as innate, perhaps inevitable. As Dhakal (2008) comments, “It flares quickly and then passes away just as tight as it had germinated. As such, interference in the matters between married man

and wife is profoundly condemned and not advisable, yet in the event of more serious violence”.

5. Discussions

Nepal holds a population of about 29 million people, 51% of whom are women (CBS, 2011). Despite their increased participation in Nepalese society, they possess very little equality when compared to men. Complete 70% of poor masses in Nepal are women who are typically thought to be second-class citizens (Dhungana, 2007). Historically, Nepalese society is patriarchal mostly governed by Hindu ideology. Therefore, gender inequality is the most pervasive social inequality in Nepal. Despite constitutional and legal protection against it, but the practice of gender inequality is still surviving within society.

Intergenerational perpetuation of gender inequality has been a great concern in most of the developing nations with large populations of the minority. Nepal is not pure from these perspectives.

The study demonstrated that the tradition and culture of Nepalese people, as clearly observed through proverbs, correlate with its negative stereotypes of women and young girls. This unequal relationship suggests that proverbs contribute to discrimination against them, both past and nowadays. Proverbs outline negative perceptions of women throughout their lifetimes. They are born into a culture that devalues them when compared to their male counterparts. In this way, these famous traditional proverbs, which are considered to contain a people’s wisdom, are used by Nepalese men and women alike, and, this study suggests, correlate significantly with the position of Nepali women and the problems they face, which include discrimination against them in the labor market and political organization.

6. Conclusion

The topic Nepalese proverbs as bearers of gendered cultural values are unique and most important topic in Nepalese scholarship, particularly in the field of sociology of gender. It has demonstrated the power of proverbs in perpetuating normative attitudes like societal values or gender norms within Nepalese culture. In the process of intergenerational reproduction of gender inequality in Nepal, almost daily used proverbs (both on oral and written literature) have been playing a crucial role.

Despite a lot of positive message-oriented proverbs in Nepali culture, there are still few genders that stereotypically message proverbs existing. This research paper explored it thoroughly and demonstrated the hidden mechanism intergenerational perpetuating the gender inequality in Nepalese culture. Contrary to the negative message, these proverbs are probably most used in our verbal communication daily.

This study is significant as it is potentially one of the first to attempt to study and analyze Nepalese proverbs with a gender perspective in their natural con-

text, as of writing this article. Nepalese proverbs have a remarkable role in transferring a message from generation to generation, whether it is a negative or positive message. To sum up, since the proverbs are considered to be the wise words of the people in Nepalese society the Nepalese people absorb, adapt and live with them. These cultural orientations establish a kind of hierarchical relationship between human races and women, and it shapes rigid gender norms that restrict the opportunities of women and stifle their progress in both secret and public areas. Grounded on this research work, future research will directly be able to look into the links between proverbs and Nepalese women's social condition more directly. In this 21st century, gender equality is a hallmark of almost every country on earth and Nepal should, therefore, embark on a concerted effort to re-examine these proverbs and determine if they contribute to a healthy society.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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