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MEASUREMENT OF VULNERABILITY OF SINGLE WOMEN IN NEPALESE HOUSEHOLDS: QUERY ABOUT INCLUSION OR EXCLUSION

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Abstract

Concept of single women is not issue of *trauma* psychologically and socio-economically in modern household and society like as in patriarchal society. However, still it is a big issue in Nepalese society as well as academic discourse and development practices, although Nepalese polity is post modernism and western character and development approach is a proactive gender balanced from top to bottom. This paper examines the relationship between single women, vulnerability level and household structure in rural society of Nepal based on primary data sets collected from household survey by using descriptive statistics. It finds the growth of single women due to the conflict of Nepal (1996-2006), the growth of foreign employment led divorces and deaths (1999-2019) and natural deaths of male and multifaceted vulnerability level of single women in nuclear and joint family. Despite the growth of financial and political independency of single women, still vulnerability is acute in Nepal. It is a barrier to single women's happiness and empowerment.

Key words: single women, vulnerability, happiness, empowerment, Nepal etc.

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1.1. Introduction

The growth of single women in developing countries has been a big issue. In Nepal, the growth of single women unnaturally increased in the conflict period from 1996 to 2006, despite the existence of natural growth of single women. Then after, the growth of male death in foreign employment has contributed significantly, along with the growth of extramarital affairs and divorce from 1999 to till date. Population Census 2011 and Demographic Statistics 2019 shows 6.7 percent (2 million) single women as widow out of total population (29.9 million) and 44 percent single women as household head (2.3 million) out of 5,423,297 households (CBS, 2019). Despite its decision-making role and contribution, the remaining single women are socio economic vulnerable in terms of education, health, livelihood, mobility, participation, decision making etc.(Bista, 2001, Bista, 2008, Bista, 2011, Bista, 2016, Bista, 2018 & Bista, 2019). Therefore, vulnerability of single women is undesired threat in the course of development policy and practices and also poverty and inequality responses and reduction.

Its reflection can be found in development policy and practices in developing countries like in Nepal with the assumption that women are socio economically weak and backward within household and family(Bista, 2001, Bista, 2016, Bista, 2018 & Bista 2019), although Nepal Republic Constitution 2015 endorses equal right to women under Fundamental Right and Human Rights based on International Human Rights Principles and Democracy norms, values and system. In the political structure and system, inclusive to exclusion approach can be found to empower women's political activism, representation, participation and decision making. In the parliament election, quota approach is used to include women based on two simultaneous modules: constitutional and legal provisions to make guarantee women's rights on resources, property, opportunity, decision making process etc. and empowerment programs including advocacy, skill training, informal literacy, information about women's right, institutional development etc. (UNDP, 1997, Bista, 2001, Bista, 2011, Bista, 2018 & Bista 2019,). Its level is 33 percent from local government level to national level. In local government election, deputy mayor and

member are mandatory to women. In 753 local government units (rural and urban municipality), women representations are 40 percent and *dalit* (marginal) women are 47 percent. It is an example of miracle women's inclusion as representation, participation and voices in decision making process from local government to the parliament in Nepalese political history. Therefore, the country has a huge expectation on gender balanced development approach, policy and practices.

This natural expectation and aspiration can be seen as the growth of socio-economic empowerment of women, *dalit* women. Its beautiful result is transforming family dynamics, functions, structures and equations on resource accumulation, allocation, distribution and production. For example, the growth of women representation and women empowerment. Human Development Index 2019 has captured its statistical and case facts of fast and vast progress of women's socio-economic status in Nepal. It is verified the indicators of women empowerment: access to knowledge, economic resource and political power as well as their personal autonomy in the process of decision making (UNDP, 1997)

Despite accumulation of gender literatures and studies relating to women issues and empowerment in developing countries, particularly in Nepal, *single women* within household is identified as a hidden, sensitive and serious issue. There are different literatures conceptualize single women as a widow, divorce, separated or an unmarried woman over 35 years (WHR, 2009). It was looked as just human right issues related to young aged single women as harassment issue (WHR, 2003). Parajuli (2008) have similar note but consider currently divorced, widowed or have always been single, as well as unmarried cohabiters. Thus, single women are the status of women before and after.

Despite existed single women, it was fully covered as non-issue in the closed Nepalese family and society. Over long decades, such issue existed as non-issue. Therefore, it was not much more talked and not considered as a big issue because of its hidden domain, social codes and practices and misunderstanding on its multidimensional factors. If we

observe status of single women, they are blamed as husband eaters and stigmatized as inauspicious and witches (Thapa, 2010). There was a perspective of family happiness, except women empowerment because overall women's status was also closed within the house. Besides it, second argument was the least list of such cases. Third argument was poor communication and network. Fourth argument was not much more theoretical development on single women's empowerment.

Recent growing literatures on women in developing countries have extended their serious attention on socio economic status of single woman and her vulnerability level within the family within the house and then in the traditional society of developing countries like of Nepal. Its reflection can be found development plan and policy formulated by the government level at local level activities of local government and of Non-Government for their empowerment and capacity building in rural areas. In different approaches, there are different dimensions and arguments. Development approach argues the need of women empowerment for household prosperity and welfare. Such approach has been followed in each and every activities of development conducted by the government and the non-government agency. Its major concern is to reduce the vulnerability level of single women because the vulnerability of single woman is the byproduct of discriminatory and avoided behavior to woman. Therefore, it receives top priority on the government activities and budget allocation for their economic empowerment. Similarly, the gender approach argues it as the result of gender discrimination created by social codes, norms and values of traditional society. It explains her state as psychological and socio-economic trauma to woman's livelihood and prosperous happy life. In many countries where patriarchal values prevail, a woman is considered worthless and inauspicious once she becomes a widow. For many women, widowhood brings with it not just the shock and trauma of losing one's husband but also losing their home, being abandoned by family members and increased sexual vulnerability if she is young and bleak future for her children as well (KC, 2009).

In Nepal, single woman has different circumstances in which early marriage is considered as a good cause behind it in many literatures in which early marriage reduces life time for

education and other ability earning. Bernstein (2006) notes that most single woman has early marriage by dropping her schooling. Further, he argues that single woman has obstacles of ability including employment, access to the market, skill trainings break out the cycle of poverty. Furthermore, her inability and independence make herself marginal and silent against any exploitation. Giri(2000) explains her problems such as sexual harassment. She cannot react publicly and privately due to fear of losing job, of livelihood source and of social status and feelings of shame. Fact and figures indicate 66 percent verbal abuse and 33 percent emotional abuse (UNICEF, 2001). In addition, out of 57 percent women, 11 percent of single women in Nepal are literate (CBS, 2011). Lohani(2010), Bista (2018) & Bista (2019) mentions that single women are usually deprived of their husband's property left to face discrimination, stigma, forcing them into poverty. Thus, single woman issue is considered a complicated issue to be needed urgently addressed.

In this regard, the right of single women has been recognized and prioritized. Still, massive single woman in rural areas has been suffering from marginality, sexual violence and vulnerability. However, only numerous literatures have focused on the single woman and its vulnerability.

This paper is organized into sections. Section 1 introduces the context of single woman in Nepal. Similarly, section 2 explains objectives of the study; section 3 explains data and method of this study containing primary data (household survey and Focused Group Discussion (FGD)) and source of data. Section 4 presents results of the case of single woman in Nepal.

1.2. Objectives

This paper has a broad objective to assess the vulnerability of single woman within household in the society in Nepal. Specific objectives are as follows: to assess social codes, norms and values and its practices of single woman within the family within household in the society, to examine the vulnerability level of single woman and its socio-economic factorial contribution and find out policy issues.

1.3. Data and Method

This study is case study method based on explorative and descriptive research design to assess the vulnerability level of single woman and its capacity building and micro finance impacts in rural village in Nepal by studying case of *Ramkot* and *Bhimdhunga* VDC. Its data sets of this study used primary and secondary. In case of Primary Data of Individual's perspective and responses, household survey and focused group discussion, the interview method and observation method were applied in the selected VDCs.

The sample selection method followed the principle of random sampling method in which out of total single woman population (*261 as recorded in two VDCs*), about 15 percent sample (*that is 40 single women*) was selected. In case of household selection, there was used lottery method after numbering households in above VDCs. The sample was interviewed with structured questionnaire.

The secondary data was collected from CBS (2001), District Profiles (2013), VDC profiles (2013) and other relevant sources: women's profile of CBS (2011).

1.4. Study Area

Nepal is the landlocked country emerging new republican country between two giants: China in North and India in East, South and West in South Asia. Demographically, women population (51%) leads to male population (49%) in accordance with Population Census. However, there are identified various different socio economic and gender issues related to women in which single woman issue is considered as major issue in Nepal from all perspectives.

In Kathmandu, the study areas: *Ramkot* and *Bhindhunga* VDCs are two VDCs of Kathmandu Districts which are located 10 km far at the western side of Kathmandu Metropolitan City.

Figure 1: Location and Map of the study areas



Source: CBS 2011 VDC/Municipality profile

- Ramkot VDC is the areas of 5.8 square kilometer in which 1937 households with 8759 population (CBS, 2011) occupy. Family size is 4.52 that are lower than national family size of 5. By sex, there is 50.2 percent male and 49.8 percent female. It is little bit reverse with national sex ratio. There is a single woman of 2 percent at VDC level.
- Similarly, Bhindhunga VDC is the area of 6.1 square kilometer in which 619 households with 2915 population (CBS, 2011) occupy. Family size is 4.71 that is lower than national family size of 5 and greater than Ramkot VDC. By sex, there is 50.9 percent male and 49.1 percent female. It is little bit reverse with national sex ratio. There is a single woman of 2.8 percent at VDC level.

1.5. Results and Discussions

1.5.1. Socio economic characters

HH size and structure: Single women are understood as vulnerable section socio economically. In other words, they are the poor households. In general, nuclear households have

Table 1: Socio economic character of single women

Socio-economic character of single woman	min	max	mean	standard deviation
Age (years)	39	71	53.48	10.04
Female Head in Household/family	0	1	0.38	0.49
Age Group(years)				
Below 60	39	59	44.4	
60-70	60	67	59	
Above 70	70	71	70.5	

Source: Field Survey, 2017

smaller family size than the joint family. There are family sizes of 3.75 less than national average family size of 5.4(CBS, 2010). In case of the joint family and the poor family of single women, there is outlier of 8 person's family size in maximum. It may be a good source of labor endowments. In minima, there is outlier of 1-person family size (*Table 2*).

Similarly, sex factor is another character of single women's HH in which female in mean (2.37) dominates highly to male in mean (1.37). In minima, there is found zero male. In maxima, female's representation of 5 in HH is greater than male's (4)(*Table-2*).

Table 2: Household size and structure

Household size and structure	min	max	mean	standard deviation
Sex				
Male	0	4	1.37	1.08
Female	1	5	2.37	1.18
Family Size	1	8	3.75	2.01
No of Children	0	4	1.12	0.91

Source: *Field Survey, 2017*

Age distribution of single women

is found in minima of 39 years and in maxima of 71 years. Its mean age is 53.48 years. When its age distribution is categorized into below 60, 60 to 70 and above 70, there is found 62.5 percent HH, 32.5 percent HH and 5 percent HH respectively (*Table-1*).

Female Head in HH has decisive factor in decision making process within family and Household. There is found 38 percent household having female head (*Table-1*). It reflects size of nuclear family also.

Resources Endowments: there are two major resources endowments: landholding and livestock presented in table-3. In land, there are two characters: irrigational and non-irrigational. Each household holds 1.72 ropani in average in irrigational land and 1.92 ropani in average in non-irrigational land. In sum, each household holds 3.62 ropani in average. In case of non-irrigational land, each household has challenges. Similarly, there are two livestock including cow and goats. Each

Table-3: Landholding and Livestock endowments

Landholding and livestock	min	max	mean	standard deviation
Landholding(Ropani)				
Irrigational land	0	3	1.72	1.08
No irrigational land	0	4	1.92	1.18
Livestock(No)				
Cows	0	2	0.3	0.52
Goats	0	4	2.15	1.09

Source: *Field Survey, 2017*

household traditionally farms two cows in maxima only for milk and composite fertilizers and four goats in maxima only for milk and meat production. In practice, livestock is attaché of traditional Nepalese households, like as single women's household (Table-3).

Socio economic character of single women: A single woman is vulnerable section

within the family in the society of Nepal. To understand their socio-economic status, there is used food sufficiency, economic and social indicators. Education is social indicator indicating capacity of single women. There are just two categories: just literate (who can read, sign and write her name) and illiterate (who cannot read, sign

Table -4: HH categories in socioeconomic characters

HH categories	HH No	min	max	mean	standard deviation
Food Sufficiency	40	2	12	8.75	3.84
< 3 months	9				
<6 months	4				
<9 months	4				
<12 months	23				
Economic					
Poor	13				
Ultra poor	9				
Rich	18				
Literacy	40	0	1	0.5	0.506
Education					
Literate	20				
Illiterate	20				
Sex					
Male		0	4	1.37	1.08
Female		1	5	2.37	1.18

Source: Field Survey, 2017

and write her name, except understanding Nepali language). There are found 50-50 percent distribution between just literate and illiterate. In case of economic condition, there are three categorizations: rich, relatively poor and poor. There are 45 percent well off rich group. Then, there are 55 percent of the poor (32.5 percent) and the ultra-poor (22.5 percent) in sum (Table-4).

Similarly, food sufficiency categorizes poverty level by dividing four groups of food sufficiency-based months: less than 3 months, less than 6 months, less than 9 months and less than 12 months and equivalent. There are 22.5 percent less than 3 months, 10 percent less than 6 months, 10 percent less than 9 months and 57.5 percent less than 12 months and equivalent (Table-4)

1.5.2. Poverty and Vulnerability level of Single women

Vulnerability is a state of inability to self-protection and recovery from social, economic and natural shocks. Literatures (Aysen(1993) and Philip and Rayhan(2004)) identify its causes: *illiteracy, hunger, fragile and hazardous location, gender discrimination, no access to resources and decision making process.*

With Poverty, Philip and Rayhan(2004) argues that despite different implications of poverty and vulnerability, poverty is generally associated with deprivation of health, education, food, knowledge, influence over one’s environment etc. It creates vulnerability. The poor are more vulnerable than any other group to health hazards, economic downturns, natural catastrophes and even man-made violence, along with shocks (illness, injury and loss of livelihood). Abuka et. al. (2007) notes that High incidence of poverty contributes significant amounts of insecurity in the people. Thus, poverty and vulnerability level are correlated each other.

Measure of poverty level: There are different reference lines of poverty level based on different approaches at household level. One of well used and popular approach is the reference of 12 months of food sufficiency. If household meets 12 months food sufficiency, such household is categorized no poverty. However, less than 12 months food sufficiency measures extremity of poverty

level. There are three extreme reference points: less than 12 months, less than 9 months, less than 6 months and less than 3 months. Table 4 shows distribution of households and single women. Out of 100

percent single women HH, there is 57.5 percent single woman having less than 12 months food sufficiency in which 22.5 percent less than 3 months is more highly vulnerable, 10 percent less than 6 months is highly vulnerable, 10 percent less than 9 months is

Table-5: Food Sufficiency

HH categories	HH No	Mean HH size	< 12 months	12 months
Economic				
Poor	13		13	
Relatively poor	9		9	
Rich	18			18
Literacy	40	3.75	20	20

Source: Field Survey, 2017

vulnerable and 14 percent less than 12 months is less vulnerable than of less than 9 months, less than 6 months and less than 3 months food sufficiency.

Measure of vulnerability level: There are different approaches and factors measuring level of vulnerability. Above poverty level shows us the vulnerability level of single women. In addition, there are applied the following factors as supplementary factors to poverty: *social factors (discrimination and exclusion), sexual harassment, and emotional torture, no access to resources (land, money, information, organization etc), no participation in household*

Table 6: Vulnerability level of Single Women

Vulnerability Indicator	Nuclear Family		Joint Family		Total
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Social					
Discrimination	0	15	25	0	40
Exclusion	0	15	25	0	40
Sexual Harassment	15	0	10	15	40
Emotional Torture	0	15	20	5	40
No Access to Resources	0	15	20	5	40
No Participation in Household Decision Making	0	15	22	3	40
No Participation in Community Decision Making		15	19	6	40
Total	15	90	141	34	280

6). There are Source: Field Survey, 2017

presented two cases: nuclear family and joint family. In nuclear family where female is head, there are not social discrimination and exclusion found in 38 percent in nuclear family within household because single woman has a right to take decisions in which single woman is free to access to resources and participation in decision making process within household and in the community. In this case, a single woman is less vulnerable from social factors. However, in case of sexual harassment, there is found because single woman has not only internal activities but also external activities like as male.

In case of joint family, male is a head following social codes, norms and values as practiced in the society for social prestige of the family. Therefore, single woman is not free like as female head nuclear family. Single woman is not considered as good fortune. Therefore, she is excluded from every socio-religious activity. In case of food, dress up etc., she is

discriminated. In this case, 62.5 percent single women in the joint family perceives socially discriminated and excluded. Except few cases, out of 62.5 percent, about 50 percent single women think in emotional torture, no access to resources, no participation in household decision making process and community level decision making process. In case of sexual harassment, except 25 percent single women, 38 percent single women feel no sexual harassment because single women don't need to work outside and they have male protection. However, if we observe the level of vulnerability, the vulnerability of single women in the joint family headed by male is higher than in the nuclear family headed by female. From poverty, majority of single women are extremely vulnerable.

1.6. Conclusion

Based on above results, the vulnerability level of single women in different structure of family in the society is still extreme not only in joint family but also in nuclear family, whatever its reasons, although the government has reformed constitutional and legal entity and also development approach, policy and practices from local government level to the central government level. Unless and until, women and male's attitudes, behaviors and school of thoughts to understand single women and their vulnerability will not be based on equity and humanitarian approach within house in the society, it will be a big issue and challenge to achieve police and welfare state goal along with SDG 2030 and higher economic growth.

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