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Radha Adhikari and Jeevan R Sharma

Introduction

- 1 We often encounter a contrasting representation of the position of women in Nepali society, in media, in development and government policy discourses. On the one hand, Nepali women are represented as uneducated or less educated and economically vulnerable, who lack agency and are dependent on their male kin, which serves to reinforce their identity as 'vulnerable women.' On the other hand, we have access to impressive statistics on notable improvements in Nepali women's education, health, and in their participation in political and civic activities. The demand for women's rights and justice is pervasive. How do we make sense of this apparent contradiction? This paper calls for attention to the complex changing gender dynamics in a more holistic way, by taking a more grounded and intersectional approach. It calls for an up-to-date and critical analysis of gender relations that neither romanticises nor pathologises women's social position in Nepal.
- 2 The context in which Nepali men and women live their lives and secure their livelihoods is not their own making. This must be situated within the context of broader political-economic changes. Based on our observations and ongoing engagement in the field of gender and development in contemporary Nepal,¹ we reflect on how gender dynamics have changed in tandem with the broader political-economic shifts in the country.

Unequal changes in Nepal

- 3 Nepal has experienced a profound and impressive change, from a deeply hierarchical social order, where gender differences were social norms supported by a combination

of religious ritual, legal provision, political economy and state bureaucracy, to one where the call for gender equality and social inclusion is widespread. All of this has happened over a single generation. There is a general sense that incidents of gender-based violence, and in particular violence against women and marginalised groups, are no longer hidden or normalised in society but are increasingly reported and widely discussed by gender rights activists and the wider public, and in the popular media. Similarly, perceived gender-based discrimination in everyday life, including with regards women's citizenship and property inheritance rights, is frequently reported by the media, widely researched and largely debated in popular forums.

- 4 Available evidence clearly suggests that there is now in Nepal greater access to education and health services, a significant expansion of road networks, an opening of rural areas along with widespread out-migration, and increased availability and use of the media and of communication technology (Sharma 2021). In addition, there have been greater opportunities for women in politics, following the second multiparty democracy of 1990 (Lotter 2017, Yadav 2016, Manandhar et al 2001, Liechty 1996, Macfarlane 1994). Women are increasingly mobile, both within Nepal and abroad, and nurture educational, professional and economic aspirations (Adhikari 2019, Grossman-Thompson et al 2017).
- 5 These changes, together with forces such as ideas of the modernity and materiality of development, and combined with shifts in the political economy, with the commodification of land, labour and social relations, have profoundly shaped the gender dynamics, with a significant concomitant impact on the lives of women and men (Sharma 2021, Campbell 2018, Sharma 2018, Pigg 1993). However, these social and political changes have been unevenly distributed and have not occurred at the same pace in all communities. Not everybody has benefitted from these changes in the same way across the country. Given the ample evidence of how caste, class, ethnicity, religion and political patronage shape gender relations in Nepali society (Rai 2019, Lotter 2017, Tamang 2009, Tamang 2011), it is essential to pay attention to the heterogeneity in women's and men's experiences, and the layers of intersectional inequalities that prevail within that society.

Essentialisation of Nepali women

- 6 Yet, as described above, Nepali women have been stereotypically represented in development discourses as uneducated and helpless women who lack awareness, have no agency and voice, and are subjugated by the dominant Hindu patriarchal social order at home, in the community and nationally (Rai 2019, Grossman-Thompson et al 2017, Fujikura 2001). Very often but in a subtle manner, the issue of gender inequality is seen as a residual problem of 'Hindu religion' and 'Nepali culture' to be dealt with both by protecting women and through remedial provisions, rather than as a dynamic relational and structural problem requiring that the inequalities in economic and market structures be addressed. There is no denying that Nepali women and men, like women and men in the other parts of the world, are subjugated to patriarchy and how gender, as a structure of differentiation and inequality, particularly disadvantages some women more than others, as well as marginalised men. Yet, circulating in the national and international media and in development discourses a homogenised narrative of Nepali women's oppression, of sexual and domestic violence, *chhaupadi*,²

dowry, accusations of witchcraft, trafficking of women and girls, and other practices, such as preference for a son, obscures the broader view of changing gender dynamics in Nepal.

- 7 We argue that these stereotypical views are deeply engrained not only within the social and political fabric of society but, more importantly, within the broader Western imagination and in representations of Nepal, and of Nepali women and men. Nepali society is seen as static and sedentary, untouched by forces of modernity (Sharma 2021). On the one hand, Nepal is seen as a romantic mystical land, still pristine and unspoiled today by modernity and capitalism, as compared to the West (Liechty 2018, Lindell 1997). On the other hand, development discourses, heavily influenced by colonial ideas, present Nepal as a Third-World country, riddled by disease and deprivation, where women are oppressed by the prevailing Hindu patriarchal social order (Maxwell et al 2003). The Western imagination of Nepali society as exclusively agrarian and immobile (Sharma 2008), distinctly rooted in unchanging cultural and religious traditions of Hindu norms, as well as the colonial discourse of Third-World, hinterland people unaffected by the forces of globalisation and Western style modernity,³ clearly overshadows the current changing dynamic of the gendered lives of Nepali women and men. And this despite significant statistical and ethnographic evidence of the diversity, for there are notable sociocultural shifts that are transforming women's and men's subjectivities and roles in the context of current dynamic social changes in Nepal.⁴
- 8 In line with the prevailing idea of women's position in society, the findings of a study on gender relations and women accessing antenatal services in Nepal (Gurung et al 2015: 102) suggest:⁵

... In Nepal, women are considered as second-class citizens in this patriarchal society. Thus, most of the families are headed by men and the women are treated as commodities or child-producing machines. Women are affected disproportionately in different ways than men...
- 9 Similarly, the section of the ILO report (ILO 2017: 4) on women's international migration echoes this stereotypical view, as it suggests:

... For women, gender-based violence and fleeing patriarchal norms are a key motive to migrate...
- 10 Here, Nepali women's lives are portrayed as being so grim that they want to run away to foreign countries to find freedom. In this version, women are trying to escape these patriarchal and sociocultural traps. This narrative ignores the fact that women migrate because more opportunities are emerging for them on the wider global labour market and that they actively seek these opportunities (Adhikari 2019).
- 11 Further, Bennett's highly influential ethnography (Bennett 1983) represents high-caste women in Nepal as having a culturally prescribed role that does not allow them to rise above their social order. She observed women in her study who were deeply absorbed in performing and maintaining various symbolic roles as daughters, sisters, mothers and wives in their everyday lives. Stepping outside these socioculturally prescribed roles seemed almost impossible for them.
- 12 In a similar fashion, Nepali women in general are represented as having limited choices or as not being allowed to make choices in many important aspects of their lives, such as schooling, marriage, career opportunities or healthcare access. Patriarchal social values, based on the Hindu religion and its caste system, have been viewed as the main

reason for all forms of discrimination against women. The latter appear in many forms: from women not having equal citizenship rights and property inheritance rights to women's reproductive rights (Yami 2007, Laczó 2003, Thapaliya 2001).

Women's mobility under intense scrutiny by the state

- 13 Women's mobility is a frequently discussed issue in Nepal. Women are viewed as a vulnerable group, unable to speak and to defend themselves from potential exploiters and abusers, while travelling solo at home or abroad, whether en-route or at their destinations. Another common justification is that vulnerable women end up being lured by people traffickers and migration brokers. Hence, their protection is a key responsibility for the family, as well as for the state.
- 14 In response to this, the Government of Nepal has made policy adjustments to protect women from being trafficked to exploitative international labour markets (Khadka 2021, Kaufman et al 2011, UNIFEM et al 2006, Pun-Magar 2004). As a result, in recent decades the state has been patrolling women's mobility outside Nepal, particularly for those women going to the Gulf countries for domestic work. Scholars suggest that this constitutes transference of patriarchy from the family to the community and state (Lotter 2017, Tamang 2000).
- 15 Women's rights activists argue that the current government emigration policy is gender-biased and paternalistic, and therefore discriminatory, and is enforced at emigration control checkpoints at Kathmandu international airport and Nepal-India border crossings. For example, when women cross the Nepal-India border, they are rigorously scrutinised and quite often harassed by border security officers, which can be justified by their protecting women from being trafficked to India's sex market (Hausner et al 2013, Kaufman et al 2011). Social activists argue that, by virtue of being women, the latter's basic human rights are compromised.
- 16 For many years now, Nepali women's migration to the Gulf countries has become a controversial issue. This is not because of the exploitation of the migrant workforce in destination countries, but because of the general perception of Nepali women being more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, therefore in need of more state protection than Nepali men. Like many other aspects of everyday life in Nepal, women's increased mobility has been overly pathologised. The most recent parliamentary discussion on women under 40 wanting to go abroad to work and therefore needing to obtain permission from their family members and local government authority, proves this point. This again has sparked human rights debates in the country (Khadka 2021). However, as indicated above, these policy moves can no longer be silenced or go unnoticed, and indeed are heavily contested by women's rights activists (Budhathoki 2021).

Fabrication and maintenance of the notion of women being a vulnerable group

- 17 How do such stereotypical ideas about women and gender relations continue to be sustained and indeed to thrive in Nepal? In the post-colonial world, these colonial ideas of 'Third-World women' are sustained development discourses, fuelled and fostered by the popular media and social activism. Women and children, particularly in a resource-

poor country like Nepal, are categorised as a vulnerable group (Green 2013). International development and humanitarianism thrive on this idea. Nepal's national development agendas are targeted to empower women 'economically', by mainstreaming them to the national economy or by inviting them to participate in the labour market. This reflects the prevailing mindset of those engaged in advocacy work for gender equality and women's rights. A major goal of some international development projects, particularly in the case of agencies working towards women's empowerment, is to come to the rescue of so-called 'vulnerable women' in Third-World countries (Hertzog 2011, Tamang 2000).

- 18 Interventions targeted to help uneducated, voiceless and dependent women range from improving female literacy and education and health service provisions, to creating economic opportunities for them (Hertzog 2011, Shah 2004, Fujikura 2001). This idea is carefully crafted and appears in academic and development writings, national policy strategies and also in development practices. Tamang (2000) has argued that making women the target of development policy interventions 'essentialises' women. Critiques have also argued that, over the past few decades, the discourse on gender issues in general and on women's issues in particular has been mobilised and manipulated by various actors, quite often for political gain (Hertzog 2011, Lohani-Chase 2008). In order to sustain the idea of women needing protection, the latter are considered *cheli-beti* (literally meaning daughters and sisters), which means they are kin and much-loved family members but lack agency, and therefore need protection by men, usually their natal kin if and when problems arise in their husband's family (Joshi 2001).
- 19 In a broader context, these ideas emerge from the colonial discourse; when privileged white males have better access to resources, they hold more power to influence national and international development policy. Poor people, living in 'poor countries', are considered not only to be disadvantaged in accessing resources, but also as having no agency, or as being unable to articulate their own needs. Therefore, people in stronger positions will speak on their behalf. Spivak (1994: 95) refers to this trend 'as white men saving brown women from brown men', one which she implies is common in South Asian and other low-income country contexts.⁶
- 20 Influenced primarily by colonial ideas, any government policy and programmes on women's issues and development practices – particularly economic empowerment and female literacy programmes – to promote income-generating activities are based on the notion of uneducated, vulnerable and voiceless women needing economic protection.
- 21 However, beyond these stereotypical representations lies Nepal's dynamic political-economic process, which has had such a significant impact on the subjectivities and lives of women and men in contemporary Nepal.

Gendered consequences of Nepal's recent sociopolitical changes

- 22 The profound socio-economic and political changes taking place in Nepali society have significantly impacted on gender relations in ways that have yet to be fully investigated and understood. The gender roles and subjectivities of Nepali men and women are increasingly transformed by broader socio-economic processes such as the

incorporation of the economy and society into the commodification and global flow of labour and land, changes in the nature of the state, and the expansion of the public sphere.

- 23 In recent decades, there has been a diversification of rural livelihoods, with a shift from agriculture-based to non-agriculture-based subsistence, with sources of employment significantly impacting on the gendered division of labour at household levels, as well as in the formal sector. Together with a gradual weakening of traditional forms of bonded and caste-based occupation, and of gendered roles within the household, the mobility of labour both within and outside the country and of both women and men has become widespread. This has significant gendered consequences for those who migrate and for those who are left behind (Adhikari et al 2015, Sharma 2018).
- 24 If we take the example of women's mobility to examine social changes in Nepal, a woman's mobility outside her community was not common practice until the mid-1980s. Indeed, it was not customary for community nurses to travel to rural areas or for any woman to travel to a foreign country for work (Adhikari 2019, Justice 1986). The situation has gradually changed since then and mobility is now widespread, with many young women working for NGOs, regularly travelling for work purposes both nationally and internationally. Women's increased mobility in society has become the new norm and women's mobility abroad is also a recent socially accepted phenomenon, and has become a steadily growing trend since the early 1990s (Adhikari 2019, Grossman-Thompson et al 2017, Adhikari 2011, Bruslé 2010). A new generation of Nepali women, some with professional and technical training and others without, now migrate to foreign countries for work.⁷ When men (or women) move away from their traditional gendered roles and family responsibilities, this of course has a profound impact on the family members left behind (Adhikari et al 2015, Kaspar 2005).
- 25 Another realm that has changed profoundly and has consequences on gender is that of historically marginalised groups, who used to see themselves as subjects with no rights. They have begun to assert themselves more and more as conscious political and economic agents and are regarded as such by others. This shifting consciousness has been largely driven by the discourses of 'rights', 'empowerment' and 'inclusion,' as advocated by many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as during the Maoist insurgency (Lohani-Chase 2008, Leve 2007). With these new politicised identities, historically marginalised groups have also been demanding rights and entitlements from the state and other organisations.
- 26 Similarly, increasing numbers of women are formally involved in politics (Lotter 2017, Lohani-Chase 2008, Shah 2004, Pettigrew et al 2004). The provision of a 33% quota for women candidates in the electoral system was introduced in the 2008 interim constitution, with 32.8% of the elected members of the Constituent Assembly consequently being women that year (Lotter 2017, Renaissance Society Nepal 2009). More recently, the constitution of Nepal, as well as the provisions of the Local Governance Act Article 24(5), makes it mandatory to ensure the participation of women in the planning and implementation of development programmes, and in process and outcome governance generally. There is now a significant proportion of elected women representatives from marginalised and disadvantaged communities in local government units. In national elections in 2017, a total of 6,567 Dalit women were elected as ward members. The total number of women elected to local bodies is 14,353,

which accounts for almost 41% of women's representation in local politics (Lotter 2017, Rai 2019).

- 27 There has clearly been a significant increase in women's participation in politics and community development activities (Yadav 2016, Shan 2004). The country has its first female president, Bidya Devi Bhandari, elected in October 2015 and women have recently occupied other key positions in Nepali politics, such as Onsari Gharti Magar who was the first woman Speaker in Parliament (16 October 2015–19 January 2018) and Sushila Karki who was the first woman Chief Justice (11 July 2016–6 June 2017).
- 28 Young women and men's sociocultural worlds have been transformed, and people's lives have been profoundly fashioned by the ideological and material impact of *bikas* (development), and the proliferation of modern goods and new consumerism. Ahearn's ethnography (2004) suggests that women's literacy and education have had a significant impact not only on marriage practices but also on gender ideology and social power in village communities in Nepal. Similarly, Shah's ethnography (2004) clearly illustrates that women in the communities are actively involved in local development, are trying to make a lasting and positive impact on society and are fighting for rights and justice.
- 29 Increased access to basic healthcare and other services has also transformed the lives of women and men. Women's reproductive health services have generally improved and been reinforced, and a range of healthcare technologies has become more readily accessible in both state and private sectors, with marked improvements in health service coverage. Evidence suggests that the demand for contraceptive services and for institutional childbirth is on the increase. Official figures indicate that significant achievements have been made in reducing the maternal mortality rate in Nepal: from 770 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 170 in 2011 (Dixit-Devkota et al 2013, Pandey et al 2013, KC et al 2012; Hussein et al 2011). Overall life expectancy has risen from 38.7 years in 1960 to 70.2 years in 2016 (Health Profile Nepal 2018).
- 30 National census data suggests that in the past six to seven decades, female literacy rates have increased from 0.7% (in 1952/53) to 57.5% in 2011 (Literacy Mapping Study Team 2013). Girls' primary school enrolments have increased, and each year has seen a growing number of girls complete secondary education, which consequently delays the age of marriage (MoHP et al 2017). Improved female literacy is considered to be a sign of major progress and a positive change in Nepal.
- 31 Another important fact to consider is that Nepal has experienced very rapid demographic changes over the last few decades as a result of its transition from a high-mortality, high-fertility society to a lower-mortality, lower-fertility society, within a relatively short span of time. The fertility rate went down from 6.68 in 1977 to 2.3 in 2016 (MoHP et al 2017). Very recent data puts the neonatal mortality rate at 21 deaths per 1,000 live births and the under-five mortality rate at 39 deaths per 1,000 live births (MoHP et al 2017: 141). According to a USAID report, the infant mortality rate was 255 per 1,000 live births in 1952 (Skerry 1991: 370). In an ideal world, this rapid decline in fertility can boost a country's economic growth according to a process known as the 'demographic dividend'. However, Nepal has a limited number of jobs and economic opportunities to take advantage of this potential (Sharma 2021). Again, changes in the population's structure, with limited employment opportunities, will have a significant impact on the gendered roles and subjectivities of women and men in Nepal.

Women's contributions to household economies and livelihoods continue to be undervalued

- 32 Women in Nepal (and globally) are generally perceived as an economically unproductive group in society. In addition to the much-debated issue of their lack of property inheritance rights in Nepal, women are placed – and are represented to be – in economically weaker positions than the men in their families.
- 33 However, a clearly more realistic and credible scenario is that women have always been economically productive, in addition to undertaking household responsibilities. There is substantive evidence to show that women in rural and urban Nepal often work long hours in farms and factories, and more and more in the formal sector, while at the same time managing households and taking care of children, the sick and the elderly (Maharjan et al 2017, Shah 2004). Furthermore, many oversee community affairs and engage in diverse economic and social enterprises. Partly due to the overwhelming image of Nepali women attending religious and ritual practices, which relegates their position to be within the domestic and reproductive sphere, there has been very little acknowledgement of women's actual contribution to household and local and national economies. It is not because they are economically unproductive, but because stereotypical representations do not adequately consider household work as economically important work. This has created a mindset that obscures more realistic representations of women in the household and, to an increasing extent, in the national economy. It is as if we cannot see beyond what has already been said and firmly set in our minds. Unfortunately, this mindset has neither been challenged nor questioned by research studies, nor critically and adequately analysed to understand the real economic, social, political and other contributions women make to society.

Women's actual contribution to Nepali society

- 34 We argue that, as well as managing the household and bringing up the family, women are increasingly running the majority of cottage industries and carpet factories, as suggested by numerous research findings and reports (Tamang et al 2005). For there is evidence that Nepali women are contributing significantly to these modern economies. On visiting the vegetable market or any market environment in any small town across the country, where staple products are bought and sold, there is an overwhelming presence of women. They manage most small businesses in their local communities. There are at least 50,000 female community health volunteers and over 100,000 nurses and midwives serving local communities and playing a vital role in public health throughout Nepal.
- 35 Furthermore, women currently occupy various positions in the Nepal Army, the Nepali Police Force and increasingly in Nepal Government positions. Women have become female trekking guides in the tourist industry and can be seen driving passenger vehicles in Kathmandu and other industrial towns in the Tarai. Women are now making a phenomenal contribution to Nepal's economy and to politics, and are slowly influencing national policy (Yadav 2016, Lohani-Chase 2008). Studies have shown that Nepali women are not just economic dependents on their male kin, as suggested by dominant discourses, but also 'heads of their households' (Chapagain 2015, Kaspar 2005), and are becoming their 'families' breadwinners' (UNIFEM et al 2006).

- 36 In addition, a growing number of Nepali women has been engaged in the national and global economy over recent decades because many women out-migrate to cities in search of work, and indeed to different parts of the world. Women sending remittances from international sources make contributions to their household economy: yet another example of their active participation in the global labour market. A survey, conducted by UNIFEM et al (2006) sixteen years ago, practically a generation ago, revealed that most migrant women returnees in the study sample had no professional qualifications, were in their 30s with a secondary education, married with children and had mostly been abroad for between two and six years. They regularly sent money home while they were away. Some women started small businesses after they returned home, while others made multiple trips to multiple destinations to support their household economy. This trend continues today. Women's increased standard of education, involvement in the formal labour market and their mobility are key markers of their upward economic and social mobility and are indicative of women's changing social position.
- 37 Since some of the household activities women perform are not calculated in straightforward monetary terms, they are often perceived as economically unproductive in the public policy sphere. So much so that there are various misguided and patronising initiatives led by powerful institutions which are designed to bring women into the so-called 'mainstream economy'. Though the overall aim of earning money and becoming wealthy is to improve living standards, one can argue that the contribution women and men make in the domestic sphere is more valuable than anything money could ever buy. Thus, the problem does not lie in the lack of women's participation in the formal economy but, more importantly, in the failure by development economists to value women's work.
- 38 The 'Women in Development' perspective, which continues to produce dominant gender narratives, assumes that when women enter the formal labour market and have access to money, this automatically changes their social position.⁸ The assumption is that this economic engagement improves women's purchasing power. They will no longer need to be dependent on their male kin.
- 39 While women's economic independence and autonomy remain essential, there are counter arguments suggesting that women's involvement in a neo-liberal labour market not only affects the care they provide for their children, sick and elderly family members but that their work burden increases as they continue their conventional domestic roles, as well as working outside the households. Hence, there is a double burden for women (Ehrenreich et al 2002). Besides, with regard to women's increased involvement in the labour market, there is also the key issue of the wage difference between men and women in Nepal as well as globally (Acharya 2001).
- 40 From an economic development perspective, there have been policies to bring women into the formal labour market, to improve women's economic position for the country's overall economic development and to initiate positive social change. Campaigns to mobilise women for their positive roles in children's education, nutrition, health, forestry, and water and sanitation have also emerged. In short, improving the status of women is often seen as a way of remedying all sociocultural and healthcare challenges in Nepal.
- 41 Furthermore, to counterbalance the additional workload for women when they enter the formal economy, men need to share household responsibilities, an issue that has

hardly been tackled by any state policy or development initiative. In order to obtain gender equality in a more meaningful and sustainable manner, we need to understand men's views and work with them.

Men's perceptions and their changing gender roles in society have not been adequately understood

- 42 We maintain that it is crucial to consider both men and women's perceptions and their social and familial roles in any gender debate. As discussed above, the extensive social changes taking place in Nepal have also affected the lives of Nepali men both in terms of their role as the man of the family and their ideas regarding gender, which in turn impact on gender relations, gender identity and the gendered lives of all.
- 43 Learning the views and perceptions of Nepali men and finding out how their lives and ideas of gender are changing as a result of the phenomenal political and economic developments taking place in the country are all-important. However, Nepali men and their gendered roles, experiences, perceptions and views have rarely been an explicit focus of analysis or policy debate. Only a handful of studies focus on how Nepali men articulate their male roles and masculinities (Sharma 2018, Maycock 2017, Uprety 2011). For that reason, we ask the question: how do Nepali men articulate and appropriate ideas of gender hierarchies, masculinities, and of women in subordinate positions?
- 44 Nepal has undergone a major political economic transformation, from the relatively stable reproduction of social and economic relations based on feudal and caste-based systems to more fluid, open conditions where the old socio-economic order is changing, if not collapsing and giving way to a new order (Sharma 2018, Sharma 2021). Not only has there been a diversification of livelihoods, from land- and agriculture-based to non-agricultural and non-land-based sources of employment, but labour mobility within and outside the country has become a widespread phenomenon. The gradual weakening of traditional forms of caste- and gender-based division of labour, as well as the profound ideological impact of *bikas* and modernity, has a direct impact on Nepali men's gendered lives and thus also on Nepali women's lives. Women's increased involvement in non-traditional occupations, such as occupying political and administrative positions as discussed above, and motivating international migration (for example, Nepali nurses prompting their family's migration to affluent countries, with their husbands becoming dependent family members) can certainly threaten men's position in the family and in society (Bagilhole 2002, Adhikari 2013).
- 45 Changes in the political economy have had an impact on household and caring responsibilities and on the intergenerational contract within the family. With the increased mobility of men and women, both jointly and separately, for work and education purposes, men are also taking responsibility for the types of work that were historically reserved for women (Adhikari 2019). Moreover, given women's growing involvement in the formal labour market, both nationally and internationally, many highly educated professional men are compelled to take on so-called 'women's work', providing care for their children and undertaking more domestic roles, such as cooking and cleaning (Adhikari 2013).
- 46 Men in Nepal are under intense pressure and face social and economic insecurity. They cannot find jobs and no doubt feel pressured by the images of educated, modern,

empowered girls and women increasingly taking up paid employment, which historically would have been reserved for them; and by the increased empowerment of women both at home and in the world at large. In addition to men's perception of women's improved socio-economic position as a threat, gender inequality has an added caste and ethnic dimension in Nepal, comparable to what Jaffrelot (2003) describes as a 'silent revolution' in the context of the rise of the Other Backward Castes in North India. It is possible that traditionally upper-class, high-caste and locally dominant social groups are deeply concerned about the economic, political and social assertiveness of women, lower castes, working classes and marginalised groups, and the threat this poses to their historical privileges.

Acknowledging diversity

- 47 Nepali women are not a monolithic group of Third-World women with no agency and voice, who are subjugated by their male family members. We argue that any discussion on gender and power relationships would be incomplete without examining the intersections of caste, culture, religion, economy, social class, language and family structure, all of which shape social inequalities (Rai 2019, Lotter 2017, Tamang 2009).
- 48 For example, the 2011 Nepal Family Health Survey suggests that there is significant variation in the uptake of reproductive health services by women from different castes and from educational and economic backgrounds (Pandey et al 2013). When we carefully examine the improvements in maternal health services in Nepal, there are profound problems of inequity in health care provisions. There is still unequal access to women's reproductive health services, including emergency obstetric care and caesarean section facilities. As such, health outcomes are not wholly determined by healthcare itself. Indeed, inequities need to be examined along lines of caste, class and rural vs urban residence. This commentary directs our attention to social and economic processes.
- 49 What's more, new social orders have been increasingly reshaped by the changing political economy and by exposure to the outside world, with increased mobility within and outside the country, and wider access to communication technologies. Yet, not all women and men have experienced these changes in a uniform manner. These differences are complex and people living for generations in such diverse social systems have become interdependent and integrated in many ways – producing a elaborate social mosaic. However, there has been plenty of evidence in recent years that these differences are changing at a different pace and in different ways. Differences are merging in some instances, and others are further widening, shifting, and adapting to emerging social norms and values.⁹

Concluding remarks

- 50 In this commentary, we have outlined various premises about the changing gender dynamics along with the shifting sociocultural and economic processes in contemporary Nepal, and these can be summarised in four main points.
- 51 Firstly, what is commonly described as 'Hindu patriarchy' represents gender disparities as a residual issue of culture and religion in Nepal. Patriarchy is a global phenomenon,

deeply rooted in society and found in most sociocultural and religious practices. However, the purpose of this commentary is not to defend specific notions of patriarchy found in Hindu societies or state but to stress that gender inequality is deeply engrained in the political-economic system that is sustained by economic policies, development discourses, and colonial mindsets. In the context of Nepal, it is easier to blame Hindu patriarchy than to understand the other more complex, structural issues surrounding relational aspects of gender dynamics. Of course, there are specificities of gender-based ideologies, rooted in Hindu and caste-based societies in Nepal and South Asia. Focusing exclusively on the Hindu patriarchal social system can divert our attention away from broader structural and relational issues that perpetuate gender inequalities.

- 52 Moreover, we contest the general assumption that replacing the traditional cultural and ritual practices with modern ones will automatically solve the problem. In order to address the real causes of gender inequality and social injustice, we need to address broader structural issues, including discourses that maintain certain stereotypes.
- 53 Secondly, there has been a major political-economic shift and consequent sociocultural transformations in Nepal, with gendered implications for both women's and men's social roles and positions. Women's (and men's) standard of health and education has improved and rural livelihood strategies are undergoing change. As mobility increases, new meanings are attributed to it. There is a widespread call for gender equality and social inclusion. Therefore, we argue that recycled stereotypical discourses of Third-World women who lack agency and have no voice, and are confined to a dominant Hindu patriarchal social order, not only fail to capture the changing gender dynamics in contemporary Nepali society but also work against a more liberating political space. A grounded, up-to-date critical understanding of gender relations in Nepal that neither romanticises nor pathologises Nepali women's social position is needed. Recent changes in Nepal's political economy have significantly altered gender dynamics, often at the expense of marginal groups of women and men.
- 54 Thirdly, a new-liberal ideology that assigns monetary value to most activities undermines women's (and men's) contributions in the domestic sphere and, more broadly, in society at large. Attributing monetary value to invaluable work, such as everyday family care, is simply not possible. However, neo-liberal approaches consider such important responsibilities to be unproductive, with those taking on a domestic role – usually women – being perceived as an economically unproductive group. If the overall aim of women and men entering the formal labour market, earning money and becoming economically self-reliant and wealthy is to improve their family's standard of living, women's or men's contribution to the overall welfare of the family is worth more than anything money can buy. If a woman or a man looks after her/his children or takes care of elderly relatives, she/he not only directly saves money that could have been used for nursery services or care home costs, but also provides a psychologically solid foundation for her/his children or elders. This is not sufficiently valued and comprehensively discussed in the current literature on gender and policy documents, either in Nepal or internationally.
- 55 Fourthly, men's changing roles and their perceptions of gender equality have been the missing link and a missed opportunity for too long. With current transformations to Nepal's political economy, the lives of men, including their perceptions of gender roles and practices, are also undergoing major changes. A new generation of men are taking

on more household responsibilities and these men are aware of the call for gender equality. They too are adapting to extensive social change. Any discussion on the position of women must therefore address how men's gendered roles and perceptions are also undergoing change, with direct implications for women's lives and in family dynamics. The pace of change has been unevenly set by the intersection of caste, class, ethnicity and religion. Yet all these changes have still not been closely examined.

- 56 In the context of Nepal's significant political and economic changes, are men's ideas of gender relations evolving? Is the new generation of Nepali men aware of its privilege in relation to the historical disadvantages and suffering of women? How can we fully understand and present modern Nepali men's views on this issue? Scholars and activists working on gender politics in Nepal should also be asking these questions.
- 57 Let us stress that these positive developments in gender issues are encouraging but not adequate. Gender issues and gender politics need to be discussed continuously, acknowledging positive shifts and areas where improvement is required. International development, advocacy and gender policy actors can play vital roles in reshaping or changing a certain type of discourse and mindset. It is also essential that we value the all-important role men and women play in raising a family and the contribution they make to society. The role of men has to be understood in order to promote a gender-equal and fair society. We need to work towards fully documenting changes in gendered roles and men's perceptions.
- 58 We find it appropriate to conclude this commentary by quoting a famous Malawian proverb: 'if you want to go fast go alone, and if you want to go further go together.' By studying an entire family as a unit in order to fully grasp the gender dynamics within a household, we would gain a more realistic insight, which in turn would take us further towards gender equality or provide a basis for promoting gender equality not only in Nepal, but also globally.

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NOTES

1. We use available secondary sources: research monographs, published papers and doctoral theses, national and international media headlines, and public policy debates that are relevant to this paper.
2. A practice that is rooted in the belief that women and girls are polluted and impure during their menstruation period, and are therefore forced to stay in a menstruation hut for a number of days. Although the practice is now legally banned and has been criminalised, various reports suggest that the practice continues in various forms.

3. Personal comments, such as Nepal remaining hundred(s) of years behind in its material development and available physical comfort, compared to the developed West, can be heard very often in Nepal and also internationally. For example, see Bhandari (2019).
 4. For example, Ahearn's (2004) ethnography on literacy and social change, Shah's (2004) ethnography on women development programmes and social change, Lohani – Chase's (2008) ethnography on women's involvement in the Maoist War and Yadav's (2016) ethnography on women in politics provide significant evidence of changing gender dynamics in Nepal.
 5. This information has been cited widely.
 6. By 'white men' she means those involved in international development projects and suggests that 'brown women' are being neglected by 'brown men' in low-income countries, for only foreign men from affluent countries pay attention to women's issues in low-income countries.
 7. With regards women's mobility, it is necessary to carry out an in-depth socio-economic class analysis, rather than simply blaming any negative incident on being yet again fuelled by the so-called 'Hindu patriarchal social order,' which is just another barrier to gender equality.
 8. Women in Development (WID) perspective: introduced in the 1970s, the WID approach was to ensure the integration of women into the workforce and to increase their level of productivity in order to improve their lives.
 9. The mass celebration of Teej, and of other Hindu cultural rituals by an increasing number of Janajati women, not only in Nepal, but also among those living abroad, is a case in point. During the Teej festival in summer, for example, women fast and worship Lord Shiva to ensure their husbands' good health and long life. This used to be a Hindu festival but in recent years it has increasingly become a Nepali women's festival. We have encountered Nepali men taking part in the festival celebration, some even fasting to show gender solidarity.
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ABSTRACTS

In this commentary, we reflect on changing gender dynamics within a broader political-economic shift currently taking place in Nepal. We critique how Nepali women are stereotypically represented as vulnerable, uneducated or less educated Third-World women, who lack agency and are dependent on their male kin, in development and popular media discourses. Our key proposition is that the major political and economic changes over recent decades, beyond the obvious political changes witnessed in Nepal in 1950, 1990 or 2005, are having a significant impact on the lives of both women and men, across different social classes, castes, regions, religions and ethnic backgrounds. After outlining some of the stereotypical representations of Nepali women, followed by a brief discussion on the broader political-economic shifts, we conclude this paper by making four key propositions. These are: 1) current political-economic shifts have profound gender consequences, which need to be examined and

understood in scholarship; 2) discussion on the position of Nepali women has been limited exclusively to sociocultural and religious domains, and particularly within Hindu patriarchy, which has overlooked the diversity of Nepali women; 3) the caring economy remains invisible; and, finally 4) with regards Nepali men, their changing roles and ideas of masculinities have been largely overlooked in any gender development policy debate. Overall, we argue that a more grounded, up-to-date, intersectional and critical understanding of dynamic gender relations within the shifting political economy is warranted, which neither romanticises nor pathologises Nepali women's and men's social positions.

Nous réfléchissons ici à l'évolution des dynamiques de genre dans le cadre du changement politique et économique au Népal. Nous critiquons la manière dont les discours sur le développement et les médias populaires représentent les femmes népalaises de manière stéréotypée comme des femmes vulnérables, du tiers-monde, non ou moins éduquées, dénuées d'autonomie et dépendantes de leurs parents masculins. Notre thèse est que les changements politiques et économiques majeurs de ces dernières décennies, au-delà des changements politiques évidents observés au Népal en 1950, 1990 ou 2005, ont un impact significatif sur la vie des femmes et des hommes, à travers différentes classes sociales, castes, régions, religions et origines ethniques. Après avoir souligné certaines des représentations stéréotypées des femmes népalaises, et brièvement discuté des changements politico-économiques népalais, nous concluons ce document en faisant quatre propositions clés : 1) les changements politico-économiques actuels ont des conséquences profondes sur le genre qui doivent être examinées et comprises par les chercheurs ; 2) la discussion sur la position des femmes népalaises s'est limitée exclusivement aux domaines socioculturels et religieux, et en particulier au patriarcat hindou, ce qui a négligé la diversité des femmes népalaises ; 3) l'économie de l'entraide reste invisible ; et enfin 4) en ce qui concerne les hommes népalais, leurs rôles changeants et leurs idées sur la masculinité ont été largement négligés dans les débats sur les politiques de développement en faveur des femmes. Dans l'ensemble, nous soutenons qu'une compréhension plus conséquente, actualisée, intersectionnelle et critique des relations dynamiques entre les sexes au sein d'une économie politique en mutation est nécessaire, ce qui ne romantise ni ne pathologise les positions sociales des femmes et des hommes népalais.

INDEX

Keywords: gender, social change, Nepal, representation, Hindu patriarchy

Mots-clés: genre, changement social, Népal, représentation, patriarcat hindou

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