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Original scientific paper
UDC: 37.014.521
DOI: 10.17810/2015.105

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TO WHAT EXTENT DOES RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT DEFORM GENDERED ATTITUDES BETWEEN WIVES AND HUSBANDS?²

Abstract: Marriage is a practice, which changes the position of a daughter into a daughter in law, who then becomes encircled by the instructions and norms of her husband and her in-laws. Cultural and religious beliefs as well as norms are the outcomes of gendered attitudes prevailing within the society, which constructs inequalities between wives and husbands. There has been an observable difference between the ways in which wives and husbands act in a family and in a society. This research presents the implications of education and religious orientations to change gendered attitudes between wives and husbands. It is based on a qualitative assessment conducted through behavior observation of four couples, Key Informants Interview (KIIs) with 26 participants and two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in the Dhanusha and Sindhuli districts of Nepal. Literature related to gender, society, culture and religion were reviewed to assess the prevailing gendered attitudes between wives and husbands. The major outcome of the study is that the misinterpretations of religious texts disempower the educational knowledge of wives and husbands. Religious education from traditional priests forms rituals, which further deform the confidence of wives. Rituals formed through religious teachings, disempower the educational knowledge for changing gendered attitudes through instructions that result in wives feeling that men are superior. Access to opportunities of income for wives potentially works towards satisfying the family's expectations by supplying the necessary items, which further contribute to change gendered attitudes between wives and husbands. Similarly, participation of people in the outdoor activities such as meetings and seminar also contribute to deforming the gendered attitudes prevailing between a wife and husband.

Key Words: Attitude, Education, Gender, Implications and Marriage.

Introduction

Marriage is a practice, which changes the position of a woman, from a daughter to a daughter in law, who comes to join the family of her husband for her entire future life. In the context of Nepal, marriage unites two clans, two communities and two families before introducing a wife and husband. Every relative of the husband becomes an in-law to the wife and vice versa.

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²**Disclosure:** Some data in this article have been partially adopted from the unpublished Master of Philosophy thesis entitled 'Examining the Socially Constituted Behavior of a Wife and Husband: an Implication on Education' submitted to Tribhuvan University, Nepal by the author in 2017.

Ideally, marriage establishes a conjugal life between a wife and husband. However, against this idealistic belief, the wife is encircled by the cultural and religious beliefs and norms, which underpin gender roles in a society. There are differences in the ways a husband and wife act within their family and within society. This thought is different from the egalitarian society, which values equality and where ranking and stratification among adults are absent or muted (Bohem, 1993). However, in gendered society, the family reinforces sociocultural norms over daughter in law, which perpetuates ideologies surrounding gender roles. Gender refers to the social characteristics, which are learned or acquired during socialization, as a member of a community (Christodoulou, 2005, p. 1). It is relational and refers not simply to women or men, but to the relationship between them (Christodoulou, 2005, P.26). The gendered attitude is prevailing in every community, regardless of caste, geography and educational attainment. This research is presenting the implications of education and religious orientation for changing the gendered attitude between a wife and husband. The overarching question of this study is, what are the implications of education and religious orientation to deform the gendered attitude prevailing between a wife and husband?

Literature survey

The literature from a variety of sources compiled together including: gender, society, culture, secondary research reports and media sources. They are discussed in relation to the themes and contents of the present study.

Religious position of women

The religious position of women in Nepal, which is mainly influenced by Hinduism, has different interpretations. Some interpretations regard them as goddesses and some do not acknowledge their existence. Manu Smriti (line 9.3), a famous Hindu religious book, states that women are never fit for independence; which is enforced through the statements such as, a father protects her in childhood, a husband protects her in youth and her son protects her in old age (Saxena, 2015). This interpretation has assumed women as the weaker sexes who are not fit for independence and should be protected by a male member. But the same book (Manu Smriti, line 3.56) also states, wherever women are given proper respect, even the deities like to reside, and where they are not respected, all actions could be futile (Saxena, 2015). Now the question is, who should protect and respect whom? If a wife is not respected, she may not protect her husband, or the result can be fruitless. Another interpretation of protecting women, according to Bhandari (2010), is the care for her womb and the purity of the genes.

The greatest scripture of Hindu religion is Rig Veda. Line 10.7.2 of Rig Veda mentions the name of 40 goddesses, including Saraswati, goddess of wisdom and Aditi, who is depicted as birthless (Luitel, 2008). In Nepal, a girl before marriage is regarded as goddess; so, this interpretation regards girl as a wise and birthless. According to the history book of Hindu religion, when the devil won the battle against god, god requested help from a powerful goddess (Dutt, 1996). In the following battle, the goddess killed the devil. This interpretation has regarded women as a form of energy and assumes them to be powerful deity, who can protect the life of men. Therefore, this interpretation contradicts the interpretation of Manu Smriti (9.3).

Social position of women

The social situation of Nepali women is complex, and cannot be explained with a single paradigm (Luitel, 2010). Women have a dual status in society (Bennet, 2005), as their status changes from a daughter to a daughter in law. The same girl is worshipped as a goddess before marriage. Marriage itself is regarded as the holy ceremony for establishing a conjugal life between wife and husband because in marriage ceremony they are regarded as god and goddess (Subedi, 2015). But the same sacred ceremony changes a girl into a wife, where man takes control over her body and life (Morgan & Niraula, 1995). However, according to the study conducted by ADB (1999), the situation of married women is better than those who are divorced, abandoned or widowed.

A daughter becomes daughter in law after marrying with her husband or in other words, after becoming a wife. Now she has to play a double role in the same house: one as a wife and another as a daughter in law. In both of her roles, she is never praised, but is always criticized for not behaving according to the expectations of society and instructions of in-laws. After marriage, a daughter's relationship changes with her parents as she is no longer considered their daughter. Instead, they see her only as the wife of their son in law. At all stages' women perform their roles associated with a particular relation to each individual. Thus, a woman will perform multiple roles according to her relationship with the particular individual she is interacting with (Luitel, 2010). There might be individual differences but in general it is learnt or is taught by the system through the process of socialization under the social norms and instructions.

Education as a force for attitudinal change

Ideally, education empowers people; if people are educated, their living standard also improves (Karna, 2008). When a newly married woman arrives at the house of her husband, her in-laws keep eyes over her performances. They all examine how she behaves with other family members while performing her roles. In the name of social norms, the family enforces instructions over their daughter in law, which disempowers her to perform daily duties. Her academic knowledge is reformed by instructions as she is required to act as instructed. Even the educational attainment of her husband seems ineffective in changing family attitudes towards gender roles. Then she starts to internalize the gendered attitudes within herself. Luitel (2010) states, 'she [the daughter in law] begins and ends her life blaming her fate in being a woman as her predecessors did.' The internalization of gendered attitudes is not uncommon among married women who then carry out the same attitude and behaviors towards other, younger women. She then becomes an oppressor in her turn, in this way the cycle is completed and rotated which makes up the system of a gendered and patriarchal society (ibid).

Gender inequalities between a wife and husband have been established as a cultural factor, which disempowers the educational knowledge of both men and women. In this regard, gender inequalities between wives and husbands persist within the educated family as well. Education can hardly change the persisting gendered attitudes and the thinking of the individual, as educational attainment seems ineffective to change family attitude towards gender roles. Because of this, educated women are also facing the same problem of oppression (Bista, 1991). Joshi (2017) says, for attitudinal change two forces are equally

important: the push force to support the socially considered weaker section of the people [women] and the pull force to encourage them [women] for change. Opportunities and educational attainment are not sufficient in bringing equality against social norms and values alone (ibid). So, pull, push and other forces for attitudinal changes should accompany education; this is also highly applicable for deconstructing gendered attitudes between wives and husbands.

Methodology

This research was conducted using qualitative methods, adopting constructivism as an epistemological stance. As a constructionist researcher, the value of research is given in generating contextual understanding of a defined topic. Based on the philosophy that reality is constructed within the human mind, relativism is applied as an ontological stance. Human behavior and interpretations are the base to form, reform and deform realities. So the reality is relative according to the individual experience.

The research applied qualitative research design for this study and selected the study location and study population. After selecting location and population, research tools and samples were established. The data was produced through observation, Key Informants Interview (KII) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Using the purposive sampling, four couples (wife and husband) for overt observation, 26 participants for KII and 20 participants (parents) for conducting two FG Ds were selected. Distinct open-ended questionnaires for conducting KII with a husband and wife, their parents, neighbors of each husband, teachers and religious leaders were prepared. The researcher also prepared a separate checklist for FGD and observation. The researcher selected Sindhuli (hilly area) and Dhanusha (plain area) district in Nepal as a research location, the place where the researcher could make easy entry (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p.54). The researcher met wives, husbands and other research participants for briefing them about the purpose of the study and discussed their privacy surrounding the use of data on a particular basis. The researcher role in the setting remained as an overt observer [observer as participant] (Gold, 1958). The data was analyzed using the qualitative content analysis.

Presentation of data and findings

In the following sections, researcher has presented the empirical results of the research. The researcher organized the content by specific themes that emerged from the data. Those themes were evaluated against the available literature to generate findings, conclusions and recommendations.

Forces for forming gendered attitudes between wives and husbands

Based on the research data, the researcher found that attitudes are formed, reformed, and deformed. Factors such as education and religious orientation, forms, reforms and deforms gendered attitude. Education and religious orientation also act as a force to empower and disempower the confidence of a wife and husband. Generally, education empowers people. However, the same education that the research participants received from priests and religious stories have disempowered wives and empowered husbands. The researcher found the religious education that the priests provide is the force that deforms the confidence of wives.

Rituals were the second force found to be associated with the disempowerment of women and the reinforcement of gender inequalities. Rituals value the power of women without which a husband becomes powerless and expect husband and wife together. But the social practice doesn't follow the religious norms. Rituals, formed through social practice, empower husbands and disempower wives. As the religious orientation delivered by traditional priests and religious stories deform the confidence of wives, rituals further consolidate it. Rituals, traditionally formed through social practices and religious orientations, also disempower the educational attainment of a wife and husband. There are ritual inequalities between a wife and husband that are forming attitudes on gender role between wives and husband. The religious orientation, according to the research participants, changes the knowledge that they have gained through their educational attainment.

Different responses were received from educated and uneducated wives and husbands in regard to their understandings on the gender inequalities within the family. The educated participants response was related to their work, education and their public relation. The uneducated participants talked more about the household chores, relatives and family relations. The former [educated participant] thought one day they would get a job and would not need to stay permanently in the house. The participants hoped to be free in their job place; and although they have hope, they continue behaving in a way that has been instructed by their family and society. Where a daughter in law has a job and is supplying daily materials in the house of her husband, the gendered attitude of family members is found to be slightly positive. The uneducated and unemployed wife and husband responded that they do not have any place to go where they can avoid the gender related instructions. With this in mind, they continue to follow the instructions reinforced within their family structures so that they can secure their stay in the house. For them, to follow the instructions is also a way to make their family happy. However, in the case of this research, it was found that the gender inequalities between a wife and husband continue, regardless of their educational attainment.

The misinterpretation of religious texts by some traditional religious leaders has also created gender inequalities between a wife and husband. This misinterpretation has often led to the interpretation that the husband is superior to the wife. The participants have a stronger faith on misinterpreted religious stories by traditional religious leaders that forces them to value prevailing social norms which basically sets instructions for wives. Participants stated that people construct knowledge through interactions within society and the same knowledge contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality between wives and husbands.

Roles of education for changing gendered attitudes

According to the participants, educated people have better understandings on the meaning of religious texts and stories. However, they consider traditional religious practices as a practice that they should follow which always reinforces the idea that the husband is a god for a wife. 'The religious misinterpretation has made us impure in the eyes of a family and society', female participants responded. In this regard, unless education enables a deformation of the traditional religious mindsets of people, gendered attitudes that have been established by religious misinterpretations cannot be changed.

In the experience of female participants, family members are reluctant on any discourse against the ongoing religious practice. They [female participants] believe that, unless family

members are educated and are able to judge right or wrong religious interpretations, the wife or daughter in law could not envision any changed attitude in the family. The education to a mother in law is equally important to change the gender inequalities between a wife and husband. She instructs her daughter in law according to her past performances. The participants have the belief that education of a mother in law could potentially discourage the role of their son and reform the role of their daughter in law. Then the attitudinal change between a wife and husbands' behavior can be seen to some extent.

Research participants believe that earning an income is a vehicle for changing gendered attitude in the family. For both educated and uneducated wives and husbands, formal educational qualifications are essential to attain a good job. The formal education of a wife and a husband, accompanied by earning is a means to change gendered attitudes between them. Marriage also increases the expectations of family members. Unless those expectations are fulfilled, changed gender behaviors of husbands are not accepted in his family. However, educated wives and husbands have hope that one day they would get a job and supply the family needs to satisfy the expectations of family. The job market is more competitive for the uneducated wives and husbands, which is a pressuring issue for managing the family needs as well as changing the gendered attitudes between them.

The participants were familiar with the existing biased nature of religious orientation around a daughter in law that always reinforces the idea that the son is superior to the daughter in law. The educational attainment of a wife cannot counter the biased nature of religious orientation. The educated and uneducated daughters in law equally receive gendered instructions within the family. Educational attainment contradicts religious orientation as formal education forms inner confidence for attitudinal change. On the other hand, religious orientation that educated people receive from priests disempowers their confidence. Religious education delivered by traditional priests always emphasizes the role of woman, female behavior, performance, purity and her feminine role as a woman. This is an example of how school education and religious education are contradictory in terms of promoting gender equality between wives and husbands. The participants further suggested the idea of promoting female priests because presently, all religious priests in the rural area of Nepal are male.

Relation between religious knowledge and education for changing gendered attitudes

Participants had similar opinions on changing of gendered attitudes between a wife and husband. Though they want to change current attitudes, which reinforce gender inequalities, they are not ready to raise the issue. They [participants] have the realization that some practices in society, including the performance of a wife and husband are unequal. However their realization does not allow them for discontinuing such practices. The research participants' speaking against the prevailing social norms is regarded an irreligious act.

Religious leaders emphasize Sanskrit education at schools and universities. Sanskrit is the original religious text, which helps people to realize the actual meaning of being as a wife and husband. Religious leaders have the opinion that people are not following the original religious instructions correctly. People are blending non-religious teachings with religious instructions, which are creating misconception on the religious roles of a wife and husband. Religious leaders also acknowledge the equal position of women in the society. However the strong influence of non – religious teachings enforce women to think that they are inferior to

men. If the blending of non – religious teachings with religious instructions does not stop, the gender inequalities between a wife and husband will never end.

School teachers questioned some of the behaviors of women that promote gendered attitudes between a wife and a husband. In some local festivals in Nepal, women perform unbreakable fasting for the long and prosperous life of their husband. Teachers questioned why the women do not fast for themselves? Educated women are not willing to change the design of such festivals, and rather follow them although they know about the harmful medical consequences of such hard fasting. This further raises another question, why education has not deformed the practice of such festivals? It is because, festivals have the religious significance, and women are instructed to follow accordingly? Hence the religious aspects of festivals discourage the educational knowledge of wives.

On the other hand, the belief that woman who attains education become witch was made widely popular in Nepali society (Luitel, 2010). The witch here refers to those wives who express their concerns on gender inequality prevailing between a wife and husband. However, when the educated daughter in law starts earning, the expression of family members changes. The society is highly competitive. Due to the feeling of competition among families, if one daughter in law earns, the next family also expects their daughter in law to do the same. In this regard, daughters in law earning an income after educational attainment is one way to deform the existing gendered attitudes.

Other forces for gendered attitudinal change

Participants also discussed about other forces for attitudinal change in regards to the gender inequalities between a wife and husband. They stated that the participation of people in the outdoor activities, such as meetings, seminars and exposer visits would contribute to change the situation of gender inequalities. The outdoor activities enable people to learn as well as express their concerns and confusions. Outdoor events are a means of empowerment that is contributing to change the gendered attitudes prevailing between a wife and husband. According to the male participants, the growing rate of foreign employment, easy access to communication technologies for information sharing, mass media and development of transportation services are some of the major forces which empower people in bringing about changes to gendered attitudes between a wife and husband. For daughter in law, earning is the only source that leads to feelings of confidence and satisfaction. It is the force by which they earn respect within the family and earn some control over their lives. Teachers emphasized the participation of people in public meetings. The more public meetings they attend, the more sensitized they become on different social issues. The sensitization on gender inequality certainly contributes to change attitudes on the gender inequality between a wife and husband.

According to religious leaders, people believe their religious teachings, listen to them and follow their teachings. In their experience, there are some people in the community who ask for their [religious leaders] suggestions before starting any business. This power of religious leaders could be utilized to change the gendered attitudes between a wife and husband. Based on this, religious leaders could potentially act as an instrument to change gendered attitudes prevailing within Nepali society. The problem lies in the misinterpretations of religious texts by some traditional priests, which has inculcated the deep misunderstanding in the mindset of people. The powerful positions in which religious leaders hold means that

people follow their instructions without question, which disempowers the educational knowledge of people.

Mothers in law have also realized the importance of educating their daughters in law. They also have a positive attitude around their daughters in law attending the outdoor meetings. Still they want to instruct their daughters in law in her every movement. However, these indications of mothers in law are positive towards changing the gendered attitudes between a wife and husband.

Conclusion

The above findings led to the conclusion that the misinterpretation of religious texts is a force that disempowers the educational knowledge of a wife and a husband. Rituals, traditionally formed through religious orientation, further deform the confidence and independence of wives. Rituals disempower academic knowledge that could potentially change gendered attitudes between a wife and husband. However, it is only the critical and dialogical education between religious leaders, husband, wife, mother in law and father in law, which empowers people to identify good and harmful aspects of religion and also contributes to changing gender inequalities between a wife and husband.

The second conclusion of the study is that income is a way of forming changed behaviors for a wife and husband in the family. Educational knowledge accompanied by income is a means to change gendered attitudes between a wife and husband. It is also the method for increasing respect for the daughter in law within the family structure. The education of a wife and husband leads to the possibility of attaining a position in the economy to satisfy the family's expectations, which further change gendered attitudes between them. The uneducated, do not have the same access to economic opportunities, and therefore, have little hope of deforming gender inequalities through economic empowerment.

Finally, unless people participate in outdoor activities, education and religious orientation, attitudes surrounding gender inequality are unlikely to change. Educational knowledge underpinned by outdoor activities can change the prevailing gender inequalities between a wife and husband. The exposure enables people to express their educational knowledge against the prevailing gendered attitudes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions presented in this paper, the first recommendation is that education is required for traditional religious leaders to ensure that religious texts are interpreted without personal biases. Counseling is also required for them [religious leaders] on the impacts of gender inequalities in the life of a wife and husband. Parents need to be engaged in providing educational opportunity for daughters in law. Job opportunities for daughters in law are required to enable them to increase some control over their lives. Local organizations, government units, local leaders, entrepreneurs, schools along with parents should be engaged in creating job opportunities for a wives and husbands. Advocacy to the relevant government agencies is also needed to increase job opportunities for wives and husbands. Parents, daughters in law, youths, local as well as religious leaders should be encouraged to have regular participation in the local level meetings and interactions. The civil society organizations, schools and government units can organize such events to ensure their

regular and active participation. Their participation in the meeting enables them to deform the gendered attitudes prevailing between a wife and husband.

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