

# **Feminist Movements from Global to Local: Has it helped Women Empowerment Process? Patriarchy and Status of Nepali Women.**

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## **Introduction:**

In the global perspective, ever since feminist movements heightened since 1970s there are many discussions and counter discussion on women's liberty on sexuality and gender equality undergoing till the date. Mass immigration and globalization process have not only sought financial freedom of women but also emancipation of knowledge and resistance against male domination in each social domain. The ongoing discourses have demanded more studies in gender and gender equalities both in West and the third world. Besides these, women's active participation in economy and enlightenment through media and technology in reproduction, the underdeveloped country such like Nepal stands for social transformation through gender equality practice in culture and legislations. Compare to last a few decades, it can be experienced that women have been much more empowered not only in West but also in underdeveloped countries. Homosexuality, lesbianism, transgendered sexuality have taken wider public discourses which were socially stigmatized in past. As soon as women are empowered through education and economy, new gender roles and sexuality are accepted through legislation, that have helped to create new social reconstructions on feminism. This paper deals with interpretation of patriarchy in relation to women's oppressed position and how they are lagged behind due to the deprivation of mobility and economic freedom. Finally it deals with world feminist movements and its impact on local level gender equality practice.

## **Understanding Feminist Movement**

The struggles for the women's emancipation have three major waves in the mid twentieth century; those movements carried the discourses of women's situation as subordinate, oppressed and discriminated on the basis of sex category. In the advancement of feminism discourse, further deconstruction of feminism through intersectionality such as class, race, and sexuality added new gender studies encounters. Meanwhile, post colonial perspective of feminism added a new contour in feminist discourse. Feminism became a part of world politics where new power relation was defined by French feminism theorist after western female scholars identified their status of oppression or male domination. New sexuality, gender roles and hetero normativity became new social encounter especially after Michel Foucault introduced the history of sexuality. On the other hand, women's reproductive characteristic became a discourse in power politics. Davis (1997 p. 116) mentions, 'women are not just the biological reproducers of the nation but also its cultural

reproduces ... transmitting it to the children and constructing the home in a specific cultural style'. In context to divided feminist world by class, race, and social structures, a continue search for transversal politics is underway to reunite world women together. In the regime of power in global to local institutions, feminism has become a search of power equation. Through the world summits such as CEDAW and BEIJING Conference feminist have successfully tried shed lights on power discourse for gender equality. Addressing the situation of women as subordinate to men, much has been discussed on different forms of dominating factors excluding masculinity, most criticised factor is the patriarchy system. There after a wide discussion took on social construction of sex and work division under the sex category. To fight against the discrimination, oppression it has been proposed of an idea as gender equality. This idea was the first effort to dismantle the configuration of patriarchal structure which was supposed to be a significant hazard. While discussion, this paper will also throw the light on those attempts to examine interrelation of feminist movement in the form of global politics and its impact on local. A Nepali case is an example to bring more understanding the context.

### **Patriarchy, Oppression and Subordination**

Connell (2002) in her introductory book 'Gender' mentions that gender is a key dimension of personal life, social relations and culture. She further emphasizes the factors that influence our everyday life because there are amazing amount of prejudice, ideology, myth, misinformation and outright falsehood. Gender is the term coined as social construction of notion where differences are made and practiced on the ground of biological differences. These different practices have been categorized under the division of work based on gender relations. Escobar (1995) portraits women's role was unproductive before the wave of 1970s feminist movement. In the power politics through economic contests, the feminist movement was able to visualize women as productive force. Until this idea was debated or, essentialized women's equal part in the gender equality struggle, they were viewed as mothers engaged in feeding babies, pregnant or lactating, procuring water for cooking and cleaning, dealing with children's diseases, or in the best of cases growing some food in the home garden to supplement the family diet (p.172). This view has been based on historically constructed idea that advocated men's superiority under patriarchy. In fact, women being oppressed can be defined when the world order is defined under the patriarchy. In the patriarchal society, these practices are well defined in everyday life that what men should do and what women shouldn't do and they are culturally legitimated. These gender practices which obviously reflect women as subordinate to men exist where the patriarchal structure and culture are. Acker (2006) well anchors gender in patriarchy by mentioning that a basic structural relation between women and men roots in male dominance which is found primarily in family (p.22). Broadening to male

domination out of family geography, Lloyd (2005) deferred from other radical feminists points that in order to understand feminism from local, national and global scale, it is essential to capture the structural institution of patriarchy in which all pervasiveness of women's oppression at the hands of men. She quotes Kate Millett- 'The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance – in short every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police is entirely in male hands' (P. 74). She concludes that patriarchy is a system of male power that permeates all aspects of life at all times and in all places. Although, dismantling the patriarchy could be the uniting agenda for all women, there are still problems of identification of various forms of domination and subordination. Lloyd (2005) contrasts within feminist movement on men's power as liberal feminists keen to acquire equality with men sharing power where as radical feminists argue male power is domination that require repudiation and overthrow (p. 73). However feminists agree that different sectionalities such as class, ethnicity and sexuality vary from geographical locations and cultural constructions. Beside the idea of being subordination and subjugation of men, new feminists brought new theories in gender where race and colonial power have made women as subject to regulate organic crisis. Gail (2000) well mentions, 'at a time of organic crisis...arena of local state is identified as a key institution in the mediation of this contestation' (p. 204). In this respect, NGOs and INGOs are similar form of regulating institutions to mediate women empowerment. Besides other ideas on feminism it would be better to discuss Mohanty's post colonial feminism. Mohanty (1984:5) highlights the post colonial perspective of feminism and its theoretical framework from new sociological, anthropological cultural and economical perspective. She indicates that all the feminist scholars from West demarcated employing theories of feminism in terms of racism, immigration, Euro-centrism, critical white studies, heterosexism and imperialism. These feminist studies mostly see the new developments of feminist movement from Eurocentric perspective and advocate liberalization, women's right on body and sexuality and normativity of heterosexuality. Loomba (1998, 2005) argues, 'when we discuss feminism in the light of colonial discourses, the cultural/racial differences form a different ideological standpoint, we are fingering, these are tricky questions and we will approach them by examining various discourses about racial differences and how they work in relation to class, gender, sexuality and other social hierarchies (P. 92). Although these in differences in feminism coexisted, there were perpetual searches for common ground to reunite the women from all over the world. Transversal politics in feminism provoked the idea of identity as women through the collective narratives of women as oppressed group in capitalist world order (Davis 1997). Now in present, the biology of women is the positivist discourse to achieve gender equality. Not only other study of feminist geography, globalization has also contributed new empiricism in feminist movement from global to local. In the globalization

process, the state lost the grip on locals because northern NGOs directly approached the local NGOs which are the actors for empowerment of women. World summit on women agendas is appropriate to discuss here shortly.

### **World Conference on Women's right:**

Moghadham (2005) argues that self identified feminists have various priority concerns, but the wider goals are women's empowerment, as well as legal changes and societal transformation (P.79). In this respect, it is required to see how global institutions including states effort to highlight women's rights through world summit and conferences. In 1979 UN general assembly drafted women's right (CEDAW) to set up international norms to avoid all types of dominations against women. This bill constituted 30 points descriptions of various forms of discriminations in view of male domination in the background of patriarchy. After UN convention the responsibility came to the state however there were fewer achievements<sup>1</sup>. In September 1995 the fourth world conference held in Beijing China ratifying 38 strategic points to bring gender equality practice. In fact Beijing Conference further enhanced the guideline and generated a space for the wider discourse. Following world summits on peace and environment, children and millennium development goals: all the conferences equally gave much importance to women's indispensable participation in the arena of all social development fields. 'Women's right is human right'<sup>2</sup> agenda played essentializing power politics through feminism. Ever since, feminism strongly appeared in the global, national and local power politics, various measures were sought for women's emancipation such as legislative, reproductive, resource access, power sharing and responsibility.

### **Empowerment as goal:**

In search of gender equality, it has been much debated and sought instrument is women empowerment. Within the frame of women's oppression, subordination and domination, there are several aspects in everyday life to experience inequalities. Many feminists advocate about sharing power equality whereas some of the feminists look male domination is power which has to be overthrown. Though there are many states and development actors working on mainstreaming gender, the outcome is not satisfactory. According to SIDA's report no 3 it says – 'In June 2000, a follow-up of the Beijing conference was held in New York (Beijing+5). Five thousand delegates from one hundred and eighty eight countries participated. The outcome document established that, although recognition of the gender dimension of poverty is increasing, the economic gap between women and men is widening. At the same time as globalisation is bringing opportunities and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/> retrieved 24 Oct. 2008

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/beijingdeclaration.html> retrieved 24 Oct.2008

autonomy to some women, it has marginalised others' (P.13). In this context, gender awareness is preceding factors until the knowledge is produced and disseminated. Developing countries are suffering both economic opportunity and knowledge gain. Those, who have access to bigger network with power, knowledge and economy, (a very fewer) in another words, a type of so called women elites are much benefitting from globalization and gender knowledge. Davis (1997) interestingly mentions the third world women want their men free from western oppression to come up equality with their counterpart (p.117). Meanwhile, talking about impact of globalization, Perrons (2004:320) argues that there are big gap within superstar cities where some good skilled and with acknowledged women are incredibly paid high where as informal female workers receive nominal pay. This phenomenon indicates that a perpetual dialogue between economic class and race required sharing the experience of male dominance and create a platform to voice jointly.

### **Globalization, women's right and Nepali Context:**

There are several NGOs and INGOs working in Nepal for women's empowerment however I would like to pickup and discuss a few good examples. Among many, one of the leading NGO Sancharika Samuha is a strongest feminist NGO which is working in the field of knowledge distribution through the media. This NGO has published a book 'Mother, Sister Daughter: Nepal's Press on Women' consisting several collective memories of women's situation in Nepal. Rana, B. and Navin Singh (eds. 2005) in the preface of the book accept that the Nepali society largely influenced by patriarchal norms and values. These patriarchal norms and values have extensively limited Nepali women for the mobility and economic participation to make self identity in their periphery. After all, the first way out to make women self confident is to expand the knowledge and experience of outer world. Let them know their situation and compare to all other aspects. Let them know their fundamental right to search an identity through financial independence. For it, the state and policy have to be favourable. But it needs cooperative social networks. Especially in Nepal the family and social networks are very fluctuating when one is very poor. The basic fact is that economically strong women can tackle several other problems. In connection with economic stands, Ramila Thapa in the book *Mother ,Sister Daughter* shares her experience as:

*People are only close when you have money. If a person is self-sufficient and has good income, people automatically come closer (P. 235)*

This excerpt is one of the aspects of Nepali women which show their weak position in patriarchy. This also advocates that working in foreign land and collecting money and experience is individual right whatever the individual's sex identity is. Compared to past, Nepali Society is greatly

influenced by Globalization which has at least encouraged many migrant workers especially women in terms of making efforts to economic sustainability. Perrons (2004) mentions the impact of globalization as - 'space has been compressed by fast modes of communication making it possible for money, ideas, goods and people to flow around the world ever more quickly with significant implications for the organization of economic activities and the security and stability of employment' (P. 1). It is true that empowerment could be achieved by expanding women's mobility and participation in the economic activities. In context to Nepal, the larger part of economy depends on remittance however; women are discouraged to go to foreign land to earn money for their livelihood. Beside this the government policy is discriminating to the women on their participation for foreign employment. If sufficient legal procedures, training, orientations and security are provided to women, they can easily handle the problems working in foreign lands however, instead of enhancing capacity to women, Nepal government is hiding its weaknesses. This is the one fact of women being discriminated in practice within the country. General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GFONT) reports that according to nation population Census 2001 has reflected that 95% of the female workforce is in informal employment. Similarly, the report mentions that in the wage employment, their participation as permanent workers is in a very small proportion having daily wage worker to be 61% of the total female workforce. The report further mentions that the gender discrimination in general starts from the birth in the socio economic structure of the Nepali society. According to report major features to the status of Nepali women are very pity as low paid wage, long working hours, no fringe benefits, no incentives and fast increasing home based character. Theoretically Perrons' (2004) analysis of globalization and its impact has largely implicated to Nepali women. Perrons appropriately make a big question.

*Why is it that all the statistics...widening inequalities between rich and poor countries, between rich and poor people within countries and between men and women, even though there are so many conferences, policies, strategies, resolutions and accords for tackling development, challenging inequality, empowering the poor, mainstreaming gender issues and empowering women? (P. 320).*

Mass immigration and globalization process have added more theories in gender. New encounters on inclusion of marginalized and ethnic minorities such as black, Asian, Caribbean women in the racialized subjects are debated in the British Parliament (Lewis. 2000). Normalization of life in the inner cities has become objective of the centre government and local governments are instrumentals. Despite these efforts to encounter new challenges, a question still persists how these process are controlled in the power hierarchies where men invisibly dominant figure in modern world.

In general, women's active participation in economy and enlightenment through media and technology in reproduction largely enhanced the status of women. In Nepal, women have become very active group compared to last few decades. Obviously, girl trafficking for sex market has incredibly declined and domestic violence is a matter of public debate as criminalization. Additionally the feminist movement has brought awareness of reproductive rights and legal rights but the question still rises for whom? Is that only for women in the urban? Or is that for few women elites acknowledged of women's right? It has been observed that within feminist institutions, there is fierce contestation among women and keep knowledge gap. The situation questions whether men are oppressive or women themselves are hazards to unity. Has feminist movement lost its way in gender equality struggle? In fact, there is still a big gap between women from different geographical regions in terms of women empowerment. According to Nepal Human Development Report 2001, the ratio of gender related development compared to national average (0.466) is dispersed within different geographical and development regions. Despite this fact, Nepali socio economic structure is transforming significantly. Recently women occupies one third of total seats in Constitution Assembly however, those who are in the policy making level themselves are weak because they are selected by party high command where gender inequality exists. Women empowerment through knowledge is utmost requisite however, in this respect, we can thankful to NGOs and INGOs and civil society which are working hard and well trying to influence the state's power hierarchies. In consequence, in new economy order, new gender roles and sexuality are accepted through legislation, however insufficient in practice. The Nepal Human Development report 2001 well recommends that Nepal needs to stress the education and training of women at higher levels. The government should also consider taking appropriate measures to increase women's participation in the political process and the recruitment of more women into professional and administration.

### **Conclusion:**

I have largely discussed about power, contestations of gender and patriarchy in terms of challenges to feminist movement. The world has no geographical boundaries due to rapid globalization process. And this process has influenced the feminist's movement through world conferences however, when there are social norms and values obstacle to women's empowerment, there is no way except to find a common ground to challenge the power politics especially male domination in sex category. Although there are differences within feminism, Davis (1997:132) meticulously suggests the transversal politics and empowerment process of 'shifting' and 'rooting' which

according to her can help to distinguish between differences of context and terminology and differences of values and goals to find a common ground to unite and revive stronger feminist movement. All the way, third world like Nepal needs massive empowerment process through knowledge production of gender and strict implementation of gender mainstreaming projects in the field level. Alternatively, feminist institutions need strong and open coordination to identify the forms of oppression and effort to eliminate them.

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**Abbreviations:**

CEDAW	Convention for Elimination of all Kinds of Discrimination against Women
GFONT	General Federation of Nepali Trade Unions
INGO	international Developmental Organization
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations' Development Program