

Original Article

Men, Masculinity and Power in Nepal

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Abstract - This paper critically examines the socio-cultural construction of masculinity and its implications for gender roles and relations in South Asia, with a particular focus on Nepal. It argues that masculinity is not merely a biological trait but a socially constructed identity associated with power, control, and dominance, typically reserved for men. The paper explores how patriarchal ideologies, gender stereotypes, and traditional practices shape perceptions of masculinity and femininity from early childhood, reinforcing unequal power dynamics between men and women. Media representations, religious rituals, and family structures further institutionalize these gendered expectations. While masculine traits in men are praised, similar traits in women are often stigmatized, leading to their marginalization in both public and private spheres. Moreover, masculinity imposes restrictive norms on men themselves, discouraging emotional expression and promoting toxic behaviors that can result in psychological distress. The paper also highlights the intersectional impact of caste and class in exacerbating gender inequalities. Despite some progress in education and economic participation for women in Nepal, the persistence of traditional gender roles continues to limit their autonomy. Ultimately, this study underscores the urgent need to challenge hegemonic masculinity and promote more inclusive, equitable gender norms for both men and women.

Keywords - Masculinity, Power, Stereotypes, Gender disposition.

1. Introduction

Masculine ideas stem from the very moment of the birth of a baby in Nepal. "Right from the moment we are born, our society voluntarily takes responsibility for teaching us about gender. We receive a "sex" at birth, either "male" or "female," disregarding other sexual orientations, such as LGBTQ+ (Sherma, p. 96). Newborn babies are labelled, and social, emotional, and physical traits are immediately imposed on them. "Nepali society imposes different gender roles. What is good for boys and what is bad for girls? Growing children have to follow fixed social norms and expectations" (Lama, p. 9). Masculinity consists of the set of behaviours, attributes, roles and practices which are related to a particular organisational location. It is an abstract concept whereby the practices are commonly associated with males and culturally defined as non-feminine. It is distinct from the definition of the biological disposition, as both males and females can manifest masculine traits. Some of the traits include strength, power, bravery, boldness, etc. For instance, an extrovert, strong, brave and energetic man is considered a masculine male. There are different factors contributing to masculinity, like patriarchal society, caste, class, gender, ethnicity, rituals and beliefs and many more. The concept of masculinity is misunderstood in South Asian countries, including Nepal. In most societies, masculinity is considered only with males, not with females. Though this consideration is absolutely incorrect, it is assumed as such in most cultures. Besides, masculinity can be considered as a performance that is rooted since childhood in both boys and girls. As they grow up, they enter a cultural space or institution and inhabit masculinity and all the behavioural practices that come with it. Boys are told from early childhood that they should act like men, and so they should hide emotions. For girls, they are said to be calm, disciplined, and able to do kitchen work and so on.

The adverse impact of patriarchal ideology, traditional practices and beliefs on the masculinity of women as compared to men cannot be overlooked. A masculine male is thought to be brave, healthy, strong, and compassionate and should constitute all the qualities that are described as manly by the social construct. For instance, if a man is healthy, has strong muscles, protects other female counterparts, and is upfront, then he is termed masculine. Amidst all these attributes, men feel powerful and authoritative. On the other hand, if a woman incorporates the same qualities, she is described as a masculine woman for all the wrong reasons, such that she is thought to be arrogant, shameless or ill-mannered. Even in today's time, masculinity is associated solely with men. "Patriarchal ideology has triggered the domination of men and the subordination of women constitute a historical process, not a self-reproducing system" (Connell & James, p. 844).

South Asia, including Nepal, depicts a constant male control over females, rooted in patriarchy. The South Asian belief of rights over the sexuality, masculinity and productive capacity of a woman is closely tied to patrilineal family solidarity. "On the one hand, girls and women are termed impure and a source of pollution because of menstruation and childbirth and are designated lower social worth under the control of men. On the other, they are presented as pure and their condition reflects on the honour and status of their menfolk" (Chanana, p. 41). Whatever the case may be, women are led to loss of autonomy, and their lives revolve around authority of men. Indeed, even today, men's "societies women are not conceptualized as holding power, wielding power, being powerful, unless it is in relationship to aspects of the domestic or private domain which is seen as the 'natural' location for women" (Barriteau, p. 29). Besides, the responsibility for protecting an unmarried girl lies particularly with her fathers and brothers. All these lead to social practices, such as segregation, early marriage, denial of public spaces, etc., to control women.

In Nepal's context, most scholarship emphasizes patriarchy as the main actor for gender gaps. However, despite the extensive discourse on masculinity and patriarchy in Nepal, there remains a significant research gap concerning how alternative expressions of masculinity—particularly among women and gender-nonconforming individuals—are understood, negotiated, and resisted within such rigid social frameworks. Much of the existing literature focuses either on dominant male constructions of masculinity or on women's subordination, but rarely explores the intersectional experiences of those who embody non-normative masculinities. Addressing this gap is critical to understanding how gender roles are both reproduced and contested in contemporary Nepali society.

2. Gender Stereotypes

Backed by patriarchal ideology, gender stereotypes also shape the way youths communicate. Girls are often motivated to be shy, passive and reserved, while boys are expected to be in control, dominant and use foul language. "While girls are allowed to show their feelings and emotions, boys are often teased for revealing their emotions. Boys learn early that manifesting power and authority over others brings them praise and recognition. Besides, boys are also often socialized into manhood that emphasizes aggression, oppression and competitiveness that sometimes involves an implied acceptance of control and violence" (Lundgren et al., p. 129). The role of dissociation and separation of boys and girls begins at home and is fortified at school in South Asia. There comes another practice of separation between superiority, power, and dominance. These are the main institutions from which the sexuality and masculinity of girls and boys are shaped. At this time, when children are not fully aware of the gender attitudes that are still being defined and the sense of entitlement to power that has not yet been fully formed, they are taught the difference in attitude and behaviour based on masculinity.

Furthermore, while growing up, children come across lots of information, especially through the media. Almost every stage in a child's life is full of confusion and questions. The television programs, cartoons and films have a greater impact on their attributes and behaviour at this crucial time. These shows seek to answer their queries in such a way that, most of the time, attitudes and beliefs are portrayed violently towards girls and women. Moreover, girls are presented as innocent and beautiful. On the contrary, males are treated as role models of dominant

paradigms. They are shown as protectors and heroes of women. In a subtle manner, the media portrays men as providers and women as receivers. All these are followed by the gender stereotypical beliefs that masculinity is associated only with men, while women follow them or stay under their control.

Female models are commonly portrayed as mothers in advertising. Women are stereotypically shown as taking care of both the children and the home rather than their work. "Portraying them as housewives, sisters and mothers, they are either in the kitchen or in the bathroom, limiting their role to cooking and cleaning. Also, they are shown in relationship roles, not as individuals" (Ahmadli, p. 5). The voiceovers in advertising also differ according to the products. Female voices are considered for household, cosmetics and beauty products while male voiceovers are considered for automobiles and electronic products.

The media represent the relationships of men and women such that women are subject to men's sexual desires. "The irony here is that the very qualities women are encouraged to develop (beauty, sexiness, passivity, and powerlessness) in order to meet cultural ideals of femininity contribute to their victimisation" (Wood, p. 36). These media representations are engraved in people's subconscious minds, and they begin to normalize male domination.

The differences in masculinity roles have been connected with gender from the earliest times. Starting from the ancient Vedic era, people have inhibited their faith in supernatural power and regarded men as superior to women. However, there has been a quiet shift in practices in relation to gender norms. Previously, men used to go out for work and hunt for food while women stayed back at home doing household work and nurturing the children. Women were often excluded from the public space. Therefore, attributes like good physique, bravery, strength, energy, etc, have been related to men since then, and women are considered housekeepers and followers of men. Because of this, women, since the very beginning, have been ruled and controlled by men. They often have to face violence for raising their voices against brutality and cruelty.

Women and girls in South Asia are largely disadvantaged by traditional practices like doing the household chores, being silent in male matters, preferring sons over daughters, tolerating violence and having very few male friends. "On the other hand, men mostly believe hegemonic masculinity as their way of exhibiting power and thinking of themselves as 'Men'. The participation of women is often limited due to these cultural expectations in the formal workplace, limiting them to informal, low-paid work within the household or community. Women have to face economic marginalization as their labor in the informal sector is observed as supplementary to that of their male counterparts, discouraging women from pursuing careers in entrepreneurship" (Chanu & Tiwari, p. 192).

Moreover, families and communities in South Asia, including Nepal, reflect strict and stable inequality between men and women as these institutions are constituted upon cultural and religious beliefs that have been reinforced as social order. Likewise, the festivals and rituals are not an exception, as they are often considered a public domain. As per Hindu belief, Lord Brahma represents the infinity of masculinity as he created the infinite universe. So, men, as being masculine, are observed as controllers and protectors of their family.

Based on this, boys, since their early childhood, are taught that they should be brave. They should never cry or feel shy, should work to run their homes and protect their sisters and mothers. Girls, however, are taught to stay quiet and follow all the rules assigned to them. Also, the financial contribution of girls and women at home is considerable but highly ignored because of their traditional role and belief as caretakers.

3. Women's Value

One of the most popular rural cultural beliefs in India among males maintains that a woman is no better than a man's shoe and she is inferior to a man in morality, knowledge, control and wisdom. Men are frequently advised that a woman should not be given any importance and her advice should not be regarded. "Women are considered

inferior and unfit to offer advice to men. The giving of advice is identified with superiority as well as the display of control, power and authority, all of which reside with the man" (Chowdhry, p. 7).

In addition, being largely populated by Hindus, Dashain is the main celebrated festival in Nepal, followed by Tihar, Holi, Shivaratri, and other religious festivals like Buddha Jayanti, Christmas, and so on. All Nepalis celebrate these festivals with lots of joy and excitement. During these festivals, men enjoy drinks, play cards and have fun with family and friends, while all the household work, like cooking, serving guests, cleaning, etc, is done by women. These roles have been carried out from the traditional behaviour. If these roles are interchanged, boys feel inferior as they do not prefer to work under women.

The inclusiveness of girls and women in political affairs and workplaces is also less than that of men. A few women who are in high positions are also not allowed to wield as much power as men. The male counterparts do not prefer their boss or a senior to be a woman. Men think that they are more masculine than women, and working under them is an insult to their masculinity. For instance, a lady bank manager's orders are not taken as seriously as those of a male manager. Even during meetings, the opinions of males are accepted more than those of females.

Though it is often claimed that men and women should get equal opportunities based on their intellect and qualifications, it seems false in the case of politics, especially in Nepal. Even if women are elected as candidates and have the required skills, commitment and experience to carry leadership roles as mayors of local governments, it is frequently seen that many of them do not put their names forward during the elections for leadership positions. "The reasons behind their hesitation are that women have different family obligations to fulfil and the mother party. Especially in Nepal, women are not given enough space in influential leadership positions by political parties and their mainstream leadership, which is unfortunate" (Mahendra, p. 14).

The interconnectedness between gender, caste and class also influences the dominance of patriarchy in countries like Nepal and India. "To maintain the purity of caste, so-called upper-caste patriarchy usually demonstrates this through stringent control over women's mobility, sexual identity, and employment. On the other hand, disadvantaged lower-caste patriarchy, while still suppressive, might take various forms due to the economic and social circumstances of marginalized communities" ("Intersectionality in India"). Women belonging to the Dalit community often face hindrance in getting job opportunities or being involved in politics. "The dominance of traditionally proclaimed upper-caste, male-centred perspectives in decision-making procedures further fosters the exclusion of women" ("Intersectionality in India").

The adverse effects of this hegemony fall not only upon women but also upon men. The toxic traits of masculinity confine men from showing any emotions, which can often lead to mental and psychological distress. Men are pressured to behave in a certain way. Men are considered to remain stoic and be a provider, which can often lead men to develop chronic stress, hypertension, depression and anxiety. "This can cause risk of substance abuse, suicide, and psychological damage, as discussing emotions freely goes against traditional masculine standards. Additionally, in the fear of appearing weak, men do not consider seeking any professional help" (Feminism in India). Men who do not conventionally fall under the category defined by 'masculinity' are often mocked and abandoned. These men find themselves weak and incomplete. Even if they are socially rejected and harassed, that might result in loneliness and trauma.

Nowadays, both the son and daughter are treated equally. They are provided with all the facilities, including nice clothes, good education, equal opportunities and many more. In Nepal, in primary and secondary education, there has been a substantial increase in the enrolment rates of girls. "Awareness campaigns have been playing a significant role in encouraging families, mostly in rural areas, to send their daughters to school. Also, the economic

participation of women in Nepal has taken a slight shift these days. Women are rapidly participating in the workforce, politics and business" ("Women Empowerment in Nepal").

4. Conclusion

Even so, girls are expected to have the additional responsibility of helping their mothers and mothers-in-law with housework, while men and boys are generally not expected to assist with domestic work. These roles have been passed through generations. In addition, men relate their superiority to all the masculine attributes defined by the social construct. The proportion of women involved independently in social and public activities is less than that of men. Socio-cultural, political, economic and educational factors have forced women to live suppressed by not only men but also society itself.

Therefore, due to all these practices, stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies, men consider their masculinity to be their manhood while they prefer women under their authority and control. Besides, women face a complex set of challenges related to their identity and gender roles. Apparently, "hegemonic masculinity must be expanded to understand the role of entrapment, which is the function of conformity to gender expectations related to the pressure to follow hegemonic masculinity" (Johnson & Schulman, p. 1). This entrapment perpetuates gender violence and widens the gap. Men tend to exercise more power, and women tend to be more submissive due to what is ingrained in their minds. Education and media have attempted to bring many positive changes, but social, economic, political, and psychological factors must be addressed.

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