**Impact of Government Policy on Women Empowerment****: Evidence from the Poverty Alleviation Fund, Nepal**

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**Abstract**

*Traditionally, most of the women in developing countries like Nepal have had to face various forms of inequality and discrimination such as limited access to education, deprivation from property rights and forced early marriage mainly due to the patriarchal structure such society evils as gender disparity, forced marriage and violence against them as a result women have a lower societal status and lower level of literacy education, few access to employment and legal rights compared to male. The main objective is to study the impact of government policy based programme for women empowerment. The study demonstrates the role, responsibility, opportunity, and decision-making issues of women. Taking refence of PAF model for women empowerment members of community organizations (CO) involved were selected as a sample. Both qualitative and quantitative data were used for the analysis. The findings revealed that the women are on the process of their empowerment. They need position help and support from the family, society, and country as well. For this country should develop gender friendly policies. The PAF model takes community demand driven approach and supports the formation of representative community organizations of the poor and helps them identify their own development priorities, needs and solutions.*

Key words: Women Empowerment, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion, Community Organization,

**INTRODUCTION**

Since the inception of Women in Development (WID) in Nepal’s planned development endeavor during 1980s (after the Sixth Five Year Plan), government has initiated many women targeted programmes in sectors like education, health, and micro-credit for women empowerment. Women empowerment is, mainly in developing and underdeveloped country, a significant topic of discussion. It is a process that leads women to realize their full potential, their rights to have access to opportunities, resources, and choices with the freedom of decision making both within and outside home. Women Empowerment means promoting women in their social and economic development, providing them equal opportunities of employment, education, economic development and allowing them to socialize; the freedoms and rights that were denied before.

Increasing women’s empowerment is a major objective. Not only does it have intrinsic value, as everyone’s ability to influence one’s world should be equal, but it has also instrumental value - it leads to economic efficiency and other important development results (The World Bank, 2011). Furthermore, empowering "women as economic, political, and social actors can change policy choices and make institutions more representative of a range of voices" (The World Bank, 2011, p. 6).

Since empowerment is a multidimensional concept, it is visible at different domains - for example, the household or the country level - and in different spheres, such as the political or economic spheres (Maiorano et al., 2016). Consequently, the causes of empowerment are different depending on which domain or sphere you investigate. Specifically, improvement in one dimension or domain does not automatically imply improvement in all dimensions (Pratley, 2016).

National statistics shows that women’s literacy rate is lower than male. The enrollment rate of women in higher education is also low. Women’ involvement in technical and vocational education is also lower than men.  This is due to the social norms and culture of the society Though, women participation is increasing every year in the decision-making sector however, significant participation and contribution is yet to be achieved. According to the Nepal human development report, 2015, 26.6 percent women are head of household and 29.5 percent are sets in parliament. There are 17.7 percent of women in at least secondary education level, 79.9 percent women are labor force participation, 25.9 percent of women are human inequality coefficient and 41.4 percent of women inequality in education and 15.1 percent women are inequality in income (UNDP, 2015).

Nepal is a signatory to various national and international declarations for women’s development such as the first world women’s conference held in Mexico, 1975; second in Copenhagen, 1980; long-term work plan Nairobi, 1985 and the Beijing declaration 1995. The Millennium development goals (MDGs, 2000) and convention of the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW, 1978) also focused on the areas of women empowerment. The Beijing conference in 1995 had identified 12 critical areas of concern for women; Nepal however has condensed it to seven (Bhattarai, 2004). In addition to constitutional changes, since the end of the conflict, the government has passed and amended many laws and policies relevant to the status of women. Those include the Gender Equality Act of 2006, the Human Trafficking and Transportation Control Act in 2007, and the Domestic Violence Control Act in 2008.

Nepal Poverty Alleviation Fund (PAF) is a semi-autonomous government agency, created by the Government of Nepal by an Act of Parliament to function as a targeted program of poverty alleviation for marginalized and poor households. The World Bank provides financial and technical support to this targeted instrument, in particular to improve living conditions, livelihoods and empowerment among the rural poor, with particular attention to groups that have traditionally been excluded by reasons of gender, ethnicity, caste and location. Since its launch in 2004, PAF has covered 40 poorest districts of the country, supporting some 15,000 community organizations, and benefiting more than 500,000 households, over 2.5 million people, roughly 10% of the population. The two main interventions in PAF are: (i) income generating activities (IG); and (ii) small-scale village and community infrastructure (INF).

The Poverty Alleviation Fund Ordinance established Poverty Alleviation Fund in 2003 as a specialized institution targeted to bring the excluded communities (women and Dalits) into the mainstream of development, by involving the poor and disadvantaged groups in the driving seat of development efforts. PAF strives to eliminating extreme poverty in a sustainable manner through the application of these principles in all programs that impact on the livelihood of persons living in poverty. In addition, it has also allowed them to conduct program to uplift their economic and social status for enhancing their capacity. The act allows PAF to deliver programme on income generation, skill development, employment creation and growth, production growth, program related to primary health, literacy, technical education, employment training for youths, small irrigation, small bridge, drinking water, sanitation, rural road, rural energy and environment to render support for poverty alleviation as per community. Women empowerment gained considerable leverage when government of Nepal recognized as a policy issue as one of the important pillars for Poverty Reduction Strategy.

**Material and Methods**

The study used a mixed approach for the data analysis. The key impact results were derived from quasi experimental impact evaluation method. The results were later triangulated with the findings from qualitative information. FGD was conducted with the PAF’s beneficiaries, for this member of community organizations (CO) were selected. Similarly, in depth interview with experts who are informed about PAF was conducted for Key Informant Interview (KII).

**Results**

The researcher has tried to analyze the data and interpret the findings in meaningful way to bring the study at its utmost significance. The objective of the study is to assess the impact of women targeted programmes on women’s economic empowerment through raised income, enhancement of business knowledge and entrepreneurial skills for microenterprises through a multipurpose grant program, and women’s social empowerment through gender equity and equality.

**General changes on the members of community organization**

Various changes reported as intended impacts on members of community organization.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Responses** | **Percent (%)** |
| Individual Empowerment, Awareness and Confident | 47 |
| Better Earning | 34 |
| Better Education | 22 |
| Improved Livelihood Conditions | 20 |
| Better Access to Health | 24 |
| Family Harmony | 19 |

Among different changes reported, individual empowerment, awareness, and confidence (47%) was significant followed by better earning of beneficiary member (34%). Likewise, better education of family members especially of children (22%), improved livelihood conditions (20%) and family harmony (19%) were the major responses of change.

**Education**

There is a close relationship between education and awareness about women empowerment. Education is the most important factor for overall development and empowerment of an individual. Education helps on behavioral change of the people’s knowledge. The level of education and their level of knowledge is also high on the social and other status. In the case of women, it is the brightness of their children and to maintain civilized family. The level of education is closely related to the other factor like awareness, social values, knowledge etc.

Percentage Distribution of Respondents by Educational Status

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Educational Status** | **Number** | **Percent** |
| Illiterate | 1 | 0.8 |
| Literate | 127 | 99.2 |
| Total | 128 | 100 |
| **Education Level** | | |
| Literate (but not schooling) | 17 | 13.4 |
| Primary (1-5 class) | 17 | 13.4 |
| Lower secondary (6-8 class) | 26 | 20.5 |
| Secondary (9-10 class) | 28 | 22.0 |
| +2 Level | 27 | 21.3 |
| Bachelor | 11 | 8.7 |
| Masters and above | 1 | 0.8 |
| Total | 127 | 100 |

Source: Field survey, 2019

The above table explains that higher the education level lowers the attending population. The main cause of not attending higher education level was financial problem, social tradition, family disagree etc. other part of main cause of schooling between male and female was awareness of the education in the research area. Higher percentage of population was literate which was high comparing to national population census 2011.

## Health Service Availability

According to WHO Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of diseases and infirmities in all matters related to reproductive health and its function and system. From this deification health is also important factors in human life. So, health is taken as a quality of life of people of the country.

Percentage Distribution of Respondents by Types of Health Facilities is Available in Locality

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Types of Health Facility** | **Number** | **Percent** |
| Hospital | 2 | 1.6 |
| Health post | 84 | 65.6 |
| Private clinic | 42 | 32.8 |
| Total | 128 | 100 |

Source: Field survey, 2019

Above table shows that the majority of the respondents 65.6 percent women said that health post is available in their locality, 32.8 percent women said that private clinic is available in their locality and only 1.6 percent women said that hospital is available in their locality in the research area.

**Involvement of women in decision making process**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Household Activities** | | | | |
|  |  |  |  |  |

Pie-Chart of Respondents by women opinion is included in HHS Decision Making Process

Source: Field survey, 2019

Out of 128 respondents, 124 respondents were involved in the decision-making issue. But it is important that, their opinion was included or not in the decision-making process. This can further explain by following table.

Distribution Pattern of Respondents by Major Decision on Household Activities

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Decision in HHs** | **Number** | **Percent** |
| Self | 3 | 2.3 |
| Husband | 17 | 13.3 |
| Both | 87 | 68.0 |
| Family member | 21 | 16.4 |
| Total | 128 | 100 |

Source: Field survey, 2019

Above table shows that the majority of the respondents 68.0 percent said that both husband and wife takes the major decision on the household activities and it’s followed by 16.4 percent women said that family members, 13.3 percent women said that husband and only 2.3 percent women takes the major decision on the household activities. From this table the lower level of women participation in the household decision making process. The patriarchal socio-cultural system plays the dominant role in the household decision making issues in the research area.

**Community Activities**

Percentage Distribution of Respondents by Participation in the Communities Activities

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Activities** | **Number** | **Percent** |
| Social | 100 | 94.3 |
| Economic | 6 | 5.7 |
| Total | 106 | 100 |

Source: Field survey, 2019

Above table shows that most of the women ie, 94.3 percent participate in the social activities and only 5.7 percent of women participate in the economic activities in the community. Social participation of the women in the communities is due to improved in the women knowledge and attitude towards the different community issues.

## Women’s Empowerment

Empowerment is multidimensional, social, and political process that people gain control over their own lives. It is process that, the capacity to implement in people, for using their own lives, their communities, in their society and their nation too. Empowerment is a process that is similar to a path or journey, one that develops as a work through it. Other aspects of women empowerment may very specific context and people involved but these remain constant. In addition, empowerment is that the individual and community are fundamentally connected.

Pie-chart of Respondents by Heard about Women Empowerment

Source: Field survey, 2019

Above figure shows that the majority of women 91 percent are heard about women empowerment and only 9 percent are don’t heard about women empowerment in the research area.

Important Factor for Women Empowerment in the Society

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Important factors** | **Number** | **Percent** |
| Education | 77 | 60.2 |
| Employment | 15 | 11.7 |
| Health | 2 | 1.5 |
| All the above | 34 | 26.6 |
| Total | 128 | 100 |

Source: Field survey, 2019

Different initiatives are necessary for women empowerment. Multiple choices were provided to the respondents to mark the important factors for women empowerment. Above table shows that the majority of the respondents said that (60.2 percent) education are most important factor of the women empowerment in the society. Similarly, 26.6 percent women said that education, employment and Health all of the factors are important, 11.7 percent women said that employment are important factor of women empowerment and only 1.5 percent women said health is most important factor in women empowerment in research area.

Column of Respondents by View towards Women's Backward in Rural area

Source: Field survey, 2019

Backwardness of women is a common characteristic of developing countries. There are different causes after it. Above figure shows that the 53.9 percent of women said that lack of education are main reason of rural women are backward. Similarly, 24.2 percentages women said that lack of participation, 21.1 percent women said that lack of awareness and 0.8 percent women said that lack of development activities in research area. This is further explained by their views on the obstacles faced during participation in development activities in the society.

Views of Respondents on Obstacles to Women Participation in Development Activities in the Society

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Obstacles factors** | **Number** | **Percent** |
| Lack of education | 58 | 45.3 |
| Lack of equal participation | 31 | 24.2 |
| Lack of family support/encourage | 39 | 30.5 |
| Total | 128 | 100 |

Source: Field survey, 2019

Participation and inclusiveness have been buzzing words today. But there are several factors that hurdles women from participating in developing activities. Lack of education, male domination, lack of awareness, lack of power, lack of equal participation and unemployment of women are the major reason that deprive women from participation. As the data from the respondents of study area presented in the table 38 show, lack of education is the main obstacles 45.3 percent. Next to lack of family support/encourage and lack of equal participation is another and other obstacles in the research area.

**Discussion**

Women in Nepal have long experienced poverty, social exclusion, and marginalization because of their gender, especially among ethnic minorities and low-caste groups. PAF provides a grant to the community organizations to the establish and operate the revolving fund. The size of the revolving fund at community level is substantial, although it may not be enough for the demands and the needs. Due to this substantial revolving fund, high sense of ownership of the program among the beneficiaries has been noticed.

Female have less access to education, occupation, health care, and political participation in the community activities. The lower access of these activities of women in the society as a result the equality and women condition couldn’t be improved in the country. So that major attention should be given from this access to services of women as a result equality-based society will be established and women condition should improve.

Considering that majority of community organization’s member were women, it is expected that PAF model help empowered women both economically and socially. The impact on education and health can be explained as – the member who engaged in income generating activities were able to spend for children’s education or seek for the health services at health facilities. Similarly, in addition to individual benefits, PAF model also aims to improve the social harmony at community level. There is now better working culture in the group, they interact in the meetings, and have better coordination. The revolving fund appears as a bonding factor among the group members; hence the ‘group dynamics’ creates spillover effects on social cohesion. The women and Dalit respondents also felt that the response towards them by other members of community have also improved and it is more dignified than ever before.

## Conclusions

The study shows that women empowerment plays a vital role to gear up the pace of development of a well-cultured and just society. It is said that men and women are like two wheels of a cart; this aphorism cannot be ignored as it exists in the core of reality. Unless women are as able as men, the existing discriminatory laws and disparity hinder women rights. Aptly balanced and richly harmonious social enhancement attributes to women empowerment in Nepal. That’s why women empowerment, the key factor to social prosperity, proves to be a must to gear up the acceleration of humanity.

Unfortunately, Nepalese women get fewer opportunities to involve in mainstream of development process due to illiteracy, low status of health, low decision, low rate of economic activities as males, low participation in politics and poverty. No doubt, the demand for modern labor is increasing day by day in both urban and rural areas. However, increase demand for women’s labor has been formed doing in agriculture, governmental industries, traditional occupation, and low-price job.

The world is being changed drastically. The women are being succeeded to have the position of president and other higher posts. But, the condition of Nepalese rural women is still not so good. Through, they are aware of their rights, they have not got any freedom and opportunities. They are dominated by their husband, family member and the society as well. The society is not in favor of them for being clever and to participate with male in development activities. The process of women empowerment from the grassroots is difficult but necessary too. In this long process, the traditional concept that has charged for women must be erased and the society should positive towards the empowerment of women.

PAF was established in the context of focused poverty alleviation strategy of the government along with the women empowerment at the time of its inception gives priority on addressing multidimensional poverty among the poor and marginalized population. It has developed, implemented, tested, and professed a special model of poverty alleviation which is inclusive in nature and effective in generating higher level of functionality and ownership of the targeted populations. This model was successful in creating positive impacts at community level.

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