

Chapter 19

Overcoming Intersectional Barriers: Lessons From “Inspirational” Women in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the complexity and challenges of exploring the impact of gender on women’s ability to realise their potential in Nepal. It demonstrates the limitations of using binary divisions to exploring ‘gender’ as a key factor that impacts upon women’s lives. By analysing interviews with ‘inspirational’ women in Nepal conducted between 2009 and 2012 the chapter highlights the importance of exploring intersectional factors that also influenced women’s life experiences. Based on interviews with 34 ‘inspirational’ women in Nepal the chapter explores how the term ‘inspirational’ is defines and discusses the range of work being done by so many women in Nepal that is truly inspiring. Through a discourse analysis of their stories of childhood and education we can see what key factors have played a role in enabling these women to realise their potential and to overcome intersectional barriers to work in a range of diverse positions, from the first female District Development Officer to the first women to gain her doctorate from overseas, to women who have set up NGOS working towards a more equitable and just society to others who have set up their own businesses or becoming leading academics. The conclusion draws together some key recommendations for future research and policy makers as well as those seeking to promote more equitable sustainable development that truly includes women in the process as autonomous, heterogeneous actors in the development process

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter is based on interactions with a number of gender experts, academics, practitioners and policy makers, as part of a British Council Funded Higher Education Link programme. A gap in feminist literature around Nepali based female activists was identified in the Women's Studies programme at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu. This led to a small project to develop teaching resources based on local 'inspirational women'. This chapter is based on interviews with 34 women in Nepal, who were identified by a range of key informants as being 'inspirational', who succeeded in their education and have gone on to become influential in their field. A number of themes emerged from the data; within this chapter, we will focus on the key insights gained into the importance of exploring intersectional barriers and the need to challenge oversimplified representations of women as being a homogenous group when in reality a variety of factors impact on gendered experiences of exclusion. In addition to this we also reflect on the impact of the conflict in Nepal on the emergence of new identities and challenging of gendered norms.

The women's life histories are complex and as unique as each of the participants, but some common themes emerged; the importance of education and support of their families, challenges they had faced due to their gender and other factors such as caste, marital status age and educational level.

Whilst some differences amongst women are well known, for example, those based on class, ethnicity, caste, and religion, there is also a range of other differences which arise from marital status, age and position within the family, the sex of a woman's children, whether she has a disability which cross cut gender (Murthy, 2004)

In particular, the data highlights the importance of the support of parents and the extended family in enabling girls to overcome intersectional barriers to both enter, and proceed, in education at all levels and challenge stereotypical gender norms. The findings discussed here have implications for policymakers and social development practitioners. The research emphasises in particular the need for NGOs and the wider development community to receive gender-awareness training which takes into account the diversity of women's lived experiences that acknowledges 'women' are not a homogenous group, rather than focus on one aspect of identity.

THE CONTEXT: GENDER RELATIONS AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN NEPAL

Overview of Nepal

Nepal is a country characterized by persistent poverty, slow economic growth and wide differences in school attainment between girls and boys (Stash & Hannum, 2009). It has a population of over 27.47m with 125 caste/ethnic groups recorded at the last census, 123 languages and ten religions with the Hindu caste being the dominant caste. Nepal, whilst socially, culturally and environmentally diverse, is one of the poorest countries in South Asia with a per capita income estimates ranging from \$700 per head to \$1260 per head by different organizations (World Bank 2013). It is ranked as 157th on the Human Development Index and despite economic growth absolute inequalities persist in Nepal with two out of three Nepalese people living in poverty (HDR 2013).

Nepal remains a patriarchal society, with a social culture that shapes gendered opportunities for women and girls. Gender inequalities are highlighted by the fact it was only as recently as 2008 that

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