

2019

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Women as Agents and Beneficiaries of Autonomy: Case Study of a Brick-kiln Community in
Bhaktapur, Nepal

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May 08, 2018
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Abstract

A majority of Nepal's labor force works in the unorganized sector, many of which are non-agro based. Brick production in brick-kilns, one of such non-agro sectors, depends almost entirely on migrant workers, half the population of which are women. While looking after their family and actively participating in daily household chores tends to be their principal concern, these women are inescapably involved in economic activities for survival, thus, playing prominent roles in decision-making from a social or communitarian perspective. Their autonomy eventually affects the competency of their families and the communities that they live in. Therefore, gender responsive policies are important in order to uplift these women, reinforce their autonomy and, minimize gender disparity.

I. Introduction

Just two months after her marriage, Samjhana Karna, an eighteen-year-old bride from Parsa, packed her new household to follow her husband to a brick-kiln, hundreds of kilometers away to a place where she was promised a living.

Karna's labor in the brick-kiln involves unskilled and non-agricultural traits, like many labor sectors in Nepal. Due to the lack of economic prospects and opportunities in places where she lives, she migrates every year with her family across the country in search of employment. Brick production in brick-kilns depends almost entirely on domestic migrant workers like Karna, half of whom are women. In Bhaktapur, these migrations to brick-kilns are characterized as collective family movements, where women accompany the men in their lives along with their children and thus, are also tied to the community where they live. While birthing and nurturing her children and looking after her family tend to be Karna's principal concern, she is consistently and inescapably involved in the economic activities for her and her family's survival, thus, playing roles in both reproduction and ultimately, decision-making (Bajracharya, 1994). Economic necessity forces women like Karna to participate in the market economy. However, in a developing country like Nepal, men have a greater decision-making authority both inside and outside the household (Eswaran, 2014).

The main aim of this project is to study the roles of women living Karna's experience in a brick-kiln in Bhaktapur, Nepal (see Appendix I). This project argues that the participation of women in the market economy, along with increasing hierarchy based on age and relationship status in the household structure, affect their decision-making status positively. Inversely, the confinement to non-market involvements like domestic work and lack of seniority within a family structure reduces their decision-making status. Thus, although Karna is self-sufficient in

her traditional role as a mother and a homemaker, her autonomy is circumscribed by her earning-capacity and involvement in the market economy. Additionally, her autonomy is also supported by her position in the matriarchal hierarchy within her family structure. As her family matures, her seniority directly and positively impacts her authority over her family decisions. The dynamics between market-involvement, seniority, and household authority, is therefore important, particularly when considering policy changes to promote economic and social independence for women in Nepal. In this project, these dynamics of market participation, family hierarchy, and autonomy will be examined using survey data and anecdotal evidence collected in January 2018, specifically from two women's experience (Poonam Devi and Archana Paswar) to reconsider ideas necessary for the formulation of proper policies for such women's economic and social improvement.

Over the course of the past few decades, Nepal has experienced the most economically dynamic period in its history. Such economic change, including unprecedented growth in income per capita and reduction of absolute poverty, while aiding gender equality, has not really helped drastically change gender roles or the autonomy of men and women.

Autonomy is the ability to evaluate information and make decisions in a self-governing manner (Acharya et al., 2010). Women's autonomy in household decisions is important for self-sufficiency, elimination of biased gender roles and is a valuable litmus test of women's empowerment in a community (Cornwall, 2007).

II. Motivation

Gender-based hierarchies and biased decision-making can often inhibit open communication between partners, from conversations about the allocation of resources to consumption and saving habits, contributing to hindrances in the functioning of a family as a

unit. It can, thus, disturb the essentially cohesive nature of a community (ADB Country Briefing Paper- Women in Nepal, 1999). Women's autonomy, apart from offsetting gender biases, helps in other sectors of social and national well-being as well, from promoting social welfare and awareness to improving health and educational conditions of a family (Khan, 2014). Therefore, learning about causative agents of women's autonomy is collectively important, not only in maintaining a level of socio-economic development in the nation, but also for policymakers, social organizations, and academics (Rowlands, 1999: 103-107).

III. Women - A Nepali Predicament

Issues about the status of Nepalese women are heightened by the fact that Nepal is one of the least-developed countries in the world, and the majority of the population depends on low productivity agriculture and manual work for survival. The legal status of women in Nepal is ambiguous. Although the constitution guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens without discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, caste, religion, or sex, including property inheritance, there have been no specific laws in Nepal to reinforce this for Nepali women. On the contrary, the primary family laws in Nepal that govern marriage, divorce, property rights, and inheritance, reinforce the patriarchy and put severe limits on women's command over economic resources (ADB Country Briefing Paper- Women in Nepal, 1999).

Women in Nepal still struggle with making important life choices with regards to marriage, divorces or even child rearing, thus, their decision-making is invariably tied to the fear of defying prejudiced social standards. Consequently, the decision-making role of women in Nepal is a predicament of sorts—not fully reflected even in the country's constitution. In theory, it is moderately protected by the constitution, but in reality, it is never measured without reservations while considering a woman's decisions for herself or her family.

IV. Methodology

IV. A. The Radius Model

We develop below a new model, known as ‘the Radius Model’, that represents the different levels of women’s autonomy—it is made up of five concentric circles of radius 1 to 5 units, stacked on top of each other and takes into consideration, involvement in market economy, matriarchal position, distribution of resources and consumption/saving habits as primary factors in deciding the degree of autonomy among the women in the brick-kiln. Considering the outer circle with 5-units as the full potency of women’s autonomy in the brick-kiln, the inner circle grows outward by

I. One concentric circle when a woman confirms participation, via survey, in her family’s monetary allocations;

II. Two concentric circles when a woman confirms, via survey, her involvement outside domestic work, in the market economy and;

III. One concentric circle when a woman confirms, via survey, her matriarchal hierarchy in her family structure as being primary/dominant.

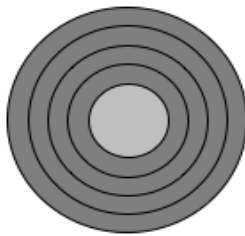


Figure I. 1 unit of autonomy

(PREDEFINED)

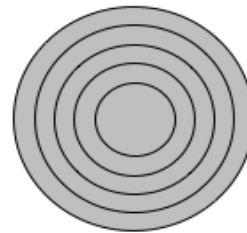


Figure II. 5 units of autonomy

(MAXIMUM AUTONOMY)

If all the five concentric circles fill in (light-grey), a woman is considered fully autonomous and an important decision-maker in the family. Therefore, because this model

revolves around the geometric concept of circles and radius, it is called ‘the radius model’ in determining a woman’s autonomy in the brick-kiln community for the sake of this paper. Each woman in the model is given one unit of autonomy beforehand with the innermost circle filled in as reflected by *example I* to represent a ‘minimum’ level of autonomy that every woman may be assumed to have. *Example II*. reflects a case where the all the circles are filled in and so, she exhibits the practice of maximum autonomy.

IV. B. Case Studies of Strength, Autonomy, and Learning

A trip to the rural landscape in Bhaktapur during the dry winters reveals men and women, mostly of *Madhesi*¹ origin, either balancing mounds of soft clay in carts and baskets, or molding and framing bricks from the clay and stacking them on long and high walls (see Appendix I). The brick manufacturing season in Bhaktapur normally stretched over six months of fall and dry winter and is completely shut down during the remaining six months of Nepal’s rainy summer. The workers in the brick-kilns in Bhaktapur are entirely from the southernmost districts of Madhes where families follow a bidirectional migratory pattern, working in the kilns for six months while returning back to their homes with their saved wages for the remaining six months, only to return back to work for the dry seasons.

Poonam Devi, a thirty-year-old resident of Malghata, Sarlahi, and mother of three, recalled migrating from her village with her husband and children for the first time two years ago in the winter of 2015 (see Appendix II). She considered her fate a consequence of poverty and landlessness, but when asked if she was dissatisfied, she answered with a great sense of pride that migrating and working in a brick kiln was the only way she has ever directly influenced her family’s earnings and claimed that she was fully content with her life. When talking about

¹ *Madhesi*: Originating from Madhes, the southern part of Nepal, that is in close proximity with India, both geographically and culturally. Marginalized ethnic community in Nepal.

decision-making for the family, she was concerned about her husband's absentmindedness as well as his drinking and spending habits. She claimed that she went to collect their family wages every fortnight and bought supplies for their temporary home within the brick-kiln area while saving for the workless six months herself, helping establish her as a primary decision-maker for her family.

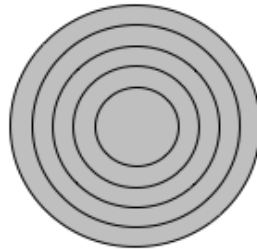


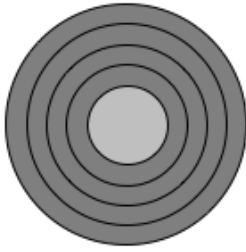
Figure III. The Radius Model of Autonomy for Poonam Devi: 5 units

Poonam Devi's model (*Figure III*) demonstrates maximum autonomy since she is involved and employed in the market economy, has a voice over her family's consumption and saving habits, and is the primary matriarch of her nuclear family.

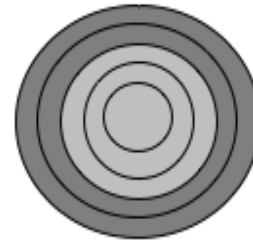
Archana Paswar, a newly married sixteen-year-old from Barathwa, Sarlahi came to the brick-kiln for the first time with her husband, mother-in-law and two brothers-in-law only about a month ago for the winter of 2017. As a new member and the second woman of the family, Paswar admitted that her 61-year-old mother-in-law, Saldevi Paswar, is the primary patron and decision-maker of her family. Both the women, unemployed in the kiln, worked mostly to finish their household chores while the three men worked in the kiln (see Appendix III).

However, Archana revealed that Saldevi went to collect their family wages, and that earned money was spent and saved under Saldevi's jurisdiction. She also negotiated her sons' work hours, explaining her bargaining authority both inside and outside the family. Archana also

explained that her mother-in-law's refusal to fund her three sons' alcohol binge has helped them save additionally, and she appreciated her mother-in-law's leadership and authority presiding over monetary and decisive matters for the family. Archana is sixteen but she has a female role model to look up to within her household. Despite the fact that sometimes Archana and young brides like her face the dilemma of choosing between putting their thoughts forward in important family decisions and remaining silent with a fear of being called meddling, a role model like her mother-in-law is important in shaping her as a future female head of the household.



*Figure IV. The Radius Model of Autonomy
for Archana Paswar- 1 unit*



*Figure V. The Radius Model of Autonomy
for Saldevi Paswar- 3 units*

Archana Paswar's model (*Figure IV*) demonstrates minimum decision-making authority with only predefined one unit of autonomy present as reflected by the innermost circle. This explains her lack of involvement in market economy or monetary decisions for her family as well as her secondary position in the matriarchal hierarchy of her family. Her mother-in-law, Saldevi Paswar, as expected, demonstrates more autonomy (*Figure V*) with concentric circles of three units because of her primary hierarchical position and her involvement in her family's consumption and saving habits.

The women in the above two case studies, although living in inversely set up family structures, mirror an important reality. Poonam Devi, coming from a nuclear family structure,

experiences better autonomy than Archana Paswar who represents a multi-generational family structure. Moreover, Poonam Devi’s access to employment outside the home increases her domestic decision-making power and control over resources than Archana Paswar, whose responsibilities are limited within domestic chores.

IV. C. Field Survey Data

My research aimed at evaluating whether or not the two chosen endogenous research parameters – market involvement and matriarchal hierarchy – are achieving their desired goals of inducing better female autonomy in the households of families working in the brick-kilns. For this, I also conducted extensive field interviews with women in January 2018. These women, due to lack of any formal education, were unable to read and answer the survey themselves and hence required someone to read and explain the questions to them and take down their responses. The data was collected through questionnaires distributed to 37 women within the brick-kiln community. Reproduced below is a sample questionnaire:

1. Whose decision was it to migrate to Bhaktapur in order to work?

Husband	Self	Collective Family Decision	Community Decision ²
3	2	3	29

2. What is your primary responsibility during your seasonal stay in the brick-kiln?

Employment	Family Chores
29	8

2.a. Employment

2.a.i. If employment is your primary responsibility, are you satisfied with the wages and the manual nature of the job?

Yes	No
27	2

² Mostly because everyone in the residential community decided on it.

2.a. ii. If employment is your primary responsibility, who receives and uses or saves the wages for your share of brick-making?

Husband	Self	Other ³
7	18	4

2.a. iii. Are you the primary/ most senior woman in your family?

Yes	No
23	6

2.b. Family Chores

2.b.i. If domestic work is your primary responsibility, are you satisfied with your responsibilities?

Yes	No
4	4

2.b. ii. If domestic work is your primary responsibility, who uses or saves the wages received by the family?

Husband	Self	Other ⁴
3	2	3

2.b.iii. Are you the primary/ most senior woman in your family?

Yes	No
2	6

3. Do you send (or, have you sent) your children to school?

Yes	No
4	33

4. Do you expect your children to work in brick-kilns in the future?

Yes	No
29	8

One important highlight of the above-collected survey data is the difference in opinion between women who are employed in the brick-kiln and the women that are only involved in

³ Head of the family, here, usually, father/mother-in-law.

⁴ *ibid*, 9.

domestic work. Employed women labor show more shared satisfaction and more economic involvement in consumption and saving for the family than their exclusively homemaking counterparts.

V. Conclusion and Policy Implication

Although autonomy and decision-making are abstract concepts amalgamated from several factors, women's participation in the market economy positively affects their satisfaction and decision-making powers while their limitation to subsistence domestic work negatively affects it (Acharya and Bennett, 1983). The overall interpretation of the case studies, as well as the survey data with the use of the proposed model, shows that women involved in market economy who act as partial wage earners for their families display higher levels of autonomy than women who are involved only in domestic household works.

Another significant inference is the role of family structure in decision-making capacity of women. Women coming from nuclear families practice better autonomy than women coming from extended multi-generational families where they are hierarchically secondary to an older woman (or, women) in the family. In rural Nepal, the multi-generational household system dominates the family structure in several communities. Parents, children, grandchildren, and relatives representing different age cohorts and gender live together in the same household. Household attributes such as family size and age dependency ratios influence household decision-making (Bagchi and Raju, 1993: 121-136). In larger households, the head is required to play a greater role in most decisions, and often other members are less involved compared to households with fewer members. Similarly, a household with a high dependency ratio (more children and old people) is likely to have a greater involvement of women in activities related to family well-being decisions, but less involvement in production and marketing activities than a

household with a lower dependency ratio. Poonam Devi, in a household with 3 children, was more autonomous in decisions involving herself and her family than Archana Paswar, as explained by the higher dependency rate in Devi's family than Paswar's.

Another interesting reflection from the field data shows the lack of enthusiasm from a majority of women working and/or living in the brick-kiln community in sending their children to school. Women like Poonam Devi, despite earning wages for their families and getting out of their homes every day to get involved in the market economy, still hesitate in sending their children to school given prevalent assumptions that their children's fate is eventually going to be the same as theirs- bound inside a brick-kiln. This predisposition on their children's future and their lack of motivation only go to ratify the lack of policies and programs that initiate awareness on different realms like education and family/community empowerment for these women. Policies that not only initiate better conversations on achievement of economic empowerment of women, but also help stimulate their social responsibility and public empowerment, are of immediate importance and hence, need to be formulated with thorough attentiveness.

Remarkably, I observed that the endogenous factor of ethnicity has a substantial role on the decision-making power of Nepali women. Ethnic communities that have a historic notion of being superior like *Brahmins and Chhetris*⁵ have a certain pre-defined role structure for the women in their family, with limitations on how they should act and behave. This ironically limits these women's decision-making status in the family even when they are considered to be a part of a superior ethnic caste. Women from ethnic castes conceived to be inferior, mostly of

⁵ The most predominant ethnic groups whose moral, social and political strength continue to play a commanding role in contemporary Nepali communities.

*Madhesi*⁶ origin, as seen in the brick-kiln in Bhaktapur, often have more freedom in household decisions and practice more authority within this structure. However, despite these women's ethnicity and economically struggling status that pushes them out of their homes to get involved in the market economy, women in the brick-kiln in Bhaktapur, Nepal still do not demonstrate full autonomy.

The majority of these women, bound by traditional norms and lack of any formal education, still have prejudiced perspectives on gender roles despite being independent wage-earners, turning to their husbands and elders in the family while making important life decisions. Even today, several women like Poonam Devi, although theoretically demonstrate maximum autonomy as reflected by the Radius Model, still struggle to make important choices for themselves- they cannot autonomously decide on the number of children they wish to conceive or aspire for a life outside the dusty realms of brick-kilns. Such existing disparities and lack of confidence put such women in disadvantage to withstand adversaries independently, hence, their empowerment, as well as the community's development, require gender responsive policies. Therefore, policies revolving around women's autonomy in rural communities shouldn't be a goal for policy-makers but actually a starting point and a trigger factor to map better routes for gender equality. These brick-making women who work day and night to produce blocks that build people's homes, therefore, need better policies and building blocks to build a stronger autonomic foundation for themselves and their families.

⁶(repeat)*Madhesi*: Originating from Madhes, the southern part of Nepal, that is in close proximity with India, both geographically and culturally. Marginalized ethnic community in Nepal.

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VII. Appendix

Appendix I



Bhaktapur on the map on Nepal.



Stacked bricks on the researched brick-kiln, Bhaktapur, Nepal.



Man molding and framing brick(s) from clay in the brick-kiln.



Hand cart used to transfer clay within the kiln.

Appendix II



Poonam Devi, 30, with her three sons.



Devi's second child, in front of their temporary house built for the brick-making season.

Appendix III



Saldevi Paswar in her sons' laboring area.



Mother Paswar with her eldest son (Archana Paswar's husband).



Archana Paswar posing for the camera as her husband stacks bricks in the background.



The young bride shies away when asked if she wants a picture with her husband.