

## Labour Participation and Fertility of Rural Women in Nepal

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### I. Introduction

Nepal, as being a patrilineal society, is generally characterized by the domination of women by men. As such, it is widely believed that productive activities are mainly carried out by men. Women are generally seen as being confined to household activities only, such as looking after the house, child rearing, food processing and collecting firewood. Women are not thought to be directed by economic and social networks of the nation. However, as will be shown in this paper this is a false image. As pointed out by Judith Bruce (1976: 291) "... for many women in the developing world their role as mothers is only one among many political, professional, religious, commercial and community interests that engage their energies."

Still, the belief persists, generally the desirable sex for the first child in Nepal is son. Even handicaped male children are considered as a sign of pride and prestige, because of their role of continuity of lineality. In rural Nepal, education is generally not initiated by the parents for the female child. According to a census of primary student enrollment in 1977, "out of the 0.77 million primary students of 77.9 percent were boys and 22.1 percent were girls. The reason for this is the negative attitude of the parents toward the education of their daughter as being unproductive." (Child Welfare Coordination Committee/ UNICEF, 1979/80: 18). The role of the females and their contribution in maintaining the domestic income is given little attention. However, this is not exactly the case when we go through actual labour contribution of women in rural Nepal. Beside their labour participation in household activities their labour contribution for domestic income such as in agriculture and agriculturally based activities is high compared to that of male. (Dhungel, 1975, Vaidya et. al. 1978, Shroeder and Schroeder 1979, Joshi 1980). Clearly, women's involvement in household, social, and economic activities and their relationship to the social structure as a whole cannot be neglected any more.

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The mode of lives that women are experiencing is directly related to their fertility behaviour. This, in turn, directly or indirectly affects the economic development of the nation. As noted by (Acharya 1979: 16) "with the recent emphasis on population control as a means to accelerate the economic development, the study of fertility behaviour and its impact on other aspects of life has become very important." However, no work has yet been done on this issue in Nepal.

It is very apparent in rural Nepal that the labour contribution of female is high, and similarly the labour contribution of children, especially female children, is also high. Labour force requirement in rural agricultural areas is high. Thus according to Malthus, the fertility pattern in this such social and economic situation, is most probably high. According to him, "an increase in the demand for labour increased the proportion of person marrying and reduced the average age at marriage. Furthermore, this change in marriage pattern led in turn to an increase in fertility" (quoted in Heer, 1966: 425).

## II. Labour Contributions of Females: Evidences

The rural women of Nepal are directly or indirectly involved in economic work, i.e. agriculture and other productive work, which contribute to family income. Women's participation in preparing grain for consumption in rural area is high. Women's role in trading and in preparing the food items like golphoki,<sup>1</sup> shyabazi,<sup>2</sup> and bazi (flatten rice) is well established. Women's skill in weaving sukul (hay mattresses), cloth, bamboo baskets and the colourfully designed domestic grass baskets etc. cannot be considered unproductive either. A consideration of the economic pattern of Gamcha (a Newar settlement situated south west of Kathmandu Valley at the foot hill of Champadevi Hills shows that women are the prominent generators of family incomes<sup>3</sup> (Dhungel 1975). The households possesses little land and the male members of the household are involved in agriculture for only a few weeks in the year. Male members are mostly involved in assisting women in preparing golphoki and shyabazi, getting fuel-wood and transporting prepared golphoki and shyabazi to the market. Compared to the national per capita income of Rs. 1,428.00 (\$ 120.00), the per capita income of this village is two times higher, and this mainly is due to female labour.

Another study undertaken in a Newar settlement Sanogaun situated in south-east Kathmandu Valley shows that women are intensively involved in economic activities like weaving of sukul during the slack agricultural period (Dhungel 1980).<sup>4</sup> Women of different age groups, some of whom are more than 70 years old, as well as girls of 7-14, were engaged in this activity. Although some sukuls are used in the household most are sold in cities of Patan, Kirtipur, Kathmandu and Banepa.

Another study undertaken with a large sample of 1417 female from the three rural areas of Kathmandu, Kavrepalanchok and Rupandehi district shows that women are involved in various economic activities besides domestic work (Vaidya, Dhungel and Carlaw, 1978).

Similarly, the study done by Joshi (1980:19) shows that women work hand in hand with their menfolk in income generating activities, besides carrying out household tasks. According to this study, "In an average, a women spends 3 to 6 hours a day in such activities." In the same way, HMG, Ministry of Health, Nepal FP/MCH Data analysis: (205) shows that "women contribute almost 35 hours a week towards direct and indirect economic support of the family."

In the same way, the study made by Schroeder and Schroeder (1979: 181) suggests that "women are responsible for the greater share of the agricultural work as well as for care of children, upkeep of the family home and the preparation, cooking and serving of meals."

Nepali women work hard, usually leave bed early and go to bed early. "Eighty percent of women claim to begin their day by 6 A.M. and almost 90 percent are retired for the day by 9 P.M., thus suggesting a sleep period of between 8 and 9 hours." (HMG, Ministry of Health, Nepal FP/MCH Data analysis: 198).

The direct and indirect contribution of labour in economically productive activity is agriculture, animal care, activities in community work e.g. participation in parma<sup>5</sup> and mela,<sup>6</sup> activity in agriculturally-based trading and weaving and sewing of hay mattresses and clothes. Beside these, the work they are engaged in is grinding and husking of rice in a traditional pounding machine called dhiki. In peak agricultural season the dhiki remains out of operation. During this period rice, wheat, millet and maize are taken to the nearby water mills. This is also usually the work of women.

Besides labour contribution to their own land for cultivation of various seasonal crops, women also contribute their labour on wage basis, on kut<sup>7</sup> basis and on parma basis. There is a well defined sex role in paddy cropping. Females are considered Ropars and are responsible for transplanting of the paddy seedlings. Men are consider Lathes and are responsible for tilling, digging, and ploughing the lands and Dai Bita (threshing and compiling the threshed straw of rice plant). Except for tilling and ploughing the land women contribute their labours in almost all other agricultural activities.

Sex discrimination is clearly observed in the wage rate. The data obtained from Sindhupalchok district shows that the average daily wage is 5 rupees for a Lathe and 3 rupees for a Ropar. Similarly under the kut basis the average daily wage is one pathi of grain (usually rice or millet) for a Lathe and four mana for a Ropar and others.

Today the world is becoming more conscious about women's role, what they do and how they allocate their activities, the actual contribution of women in society can thus be estimated. Some such studies have been done by Mrs. Chandani Joshi "A Glimse of Nepalese Rural Women" (1980) and by Vaidya and et al. (1978). The finding of Vaidya, et al. (1978: 67) shows that the mean time allocation to various duties for total sample of 1417 women per day are as follows:

Domestic and child care	8 hours 30 minutes
Gothering food, water and firewood	1 hour 30 minutes
Animal care and agriculture	3 hours 10 minutes
Community services	35 minutes
Religions observances	5 minutes
Social, ceremonial and leisure	25 minutes
Marketing	<u>20 minutes</u>

Average length of working day 14 hours 35 minutes.

### III. Labour Contribution and Fertility Behaviour

Human labour contribution in rural agricultural area is high. The only source of power in agricultures which is based on traditional technology is human labour. Hence in agricultural societies, manpower requirement is comparatively high. The study made in India by Prabhu (1974) shows that agriculturism is positively correlated to fertility. His review of literature shows that 10 studies out of 13 verify that agriculturism is positively correlated to fertility. His review of literature turism not be related to fertility. One study shows that agriculturism is negatively correlated with fertility. In Nepal no such work has been conducted so far. However in rural Nepal labour participation of female adults as well as children, is high. Because "high female labour force participation can be quite compatible with high fertility if the economy is such that households are the primary units of productivity." (Kasarda, 1971: 309). One can also expect high fertility and high labour

participation to be correlated also in Nepal. Similarly labour participation of children is also directly related with fertility in India according to (Prabhu, 1974) the economic value of children is directly related with fertility.

In rural Nepal the desired number of children is high. Distribution of child population in rural sector is higher than in urban sector (Status of Children in Nepal 1980). The type of labour contribution of children which initiates females to have many children are as follows:

Since the very young age of four children start taking some household responsibilities the first duty is to take care of the younger children. This is supported by a study carried out among four different communities of Nepal. According to Paneru (1978: 29) "Thakuri girls in rural Nepal even at the age of 4 look after their little brothers and sisters." Similarly "Newar girls usually between 4 to 11 years old take care of young children" (Paneru, 1978: 48) and "Sherpa children over four years old take some responsibilities at home, at least in looking after the younger child (Paneru, 1978: 68). Similarly "Tharu child around seven or eight usually baby sits, feeds the chicken or pigs and gathers dried cow dungs (Paneru, 1978: 91). Similarly, "Children of Nepal village spend a considerable amount of times in household maintenance and directly production work although not necessarily more than adults. Child care is one such activity. In Nepalese villages, girls as young as 6-8 years spend on the average 1.7 hours per day in child care", (Nag, White and Peet 1977: 256). Children of both sexes at the age of 6-9 years were involved in activities such as household maintenance and other directly productive work. Household maintenance work as defined by Nag, White and Peet (1977) are childcare, household food preparation, firewood collection and other household maintenance work. The directly productive work are animal care, wage labour (agricultural and non-agricultural) handicrafts, reciprocal labour or exchange community labour, agricultural work (own land) and production of articles for sale. Contribution of female children labour in both household maintenance and in directly productive work is higher than that of male children. The result of Nag, White and Peet shows that in household maintenance work the female children as early as 6-8 years spent 2.4 hours a day compared to male children of same age group who spend 0.7 hours a day. Similarly, in directly productive work, except for age group 6-8, the contribution of labour by female children is high. In the same way, female children start contributing their labour in wage agricultural work from 9 years while male children start only after 12 years of age. The findings of Nag, White and Peet for male and female children labour are as follows:

Activity	Female			Male				
	Age group			Age group				
	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-19	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-19
1. Childcare	1.7	0.9	0.6	0.2	0.2	0.6	0.2	0.1
2. Household food preparation	0.2	0.9	0.5	2.0	0.3	0.5	0.9	0.9
3. Firewood collection	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.2
4. Other household maintenance work	0.4	0.7	1.0	0.8	0.2	0.5	0.5	0.8
5. Animal care	2.2	4.7	3.5	3.4	2.6	4.1	3.7	2.8
6. Wage labour (agricultural)	0.0	0.1	1.2	2.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.9
7. Wage labour (non- , , )	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.7
8. Handicraft	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.3
9. Reciprocal labour exchange community labour	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
10. Agricultural work (own land)	0.3	1.0	1.5	2.3	0.4	0.6	1.3	2.2
11. Production of article for sale (a, in the male section)	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.5
Total household maintenance	(1-4)	2.4	3.3	3.2	0.7	1.7	0.3	2.0
Total directly production	(5-11)	2.5	6.6	8.1	3.0	4.8	5.5	7.5
Total all work	(1-11)	4.9	9.9	11.3	3.7	6.5	7.3	9.5

(a) Includes collection of forest products, blacksmithing and tailoring excludes portion of agricultural products and animal products which are sold.

Conclusion

The labour force contribution of rural Nepali women is generally considered as confined to household activities only. However the several studies done on rural women on their daily time allocation in different activities suggest that besides household activities women also contribute labour to directly productive economic activities. Given the agro-economic pattern of rural Nepal, where households are the primary unit of productivity, the labour requirement is high. It is of no surprise therefore that the labour force participation of females and children is high. Literature on population in India and elsewhere suggests that the type of labour that female and children contribute is directly related to fertility. Though no such work has yet been carried out in the Nepalese context, the cumulative fertility rate of 6.1 children per female suggests a correlation between high fertility and labour force participation of children in Nepal.

## NOTES

1. A type of pop rice made out of rice generally taken as for snack, also called muri in Nepal terai and in India.
2. A type of pop rice, little different from golphoki in preparation and in shape. Very essential material for Newar's custom in preparing different artifacts.
3. An economic pattern of a village Gamcha in Machhegaun Chhophkhola panchayat is studied in 1974 while collecting data for "Saving and Investment in Nepal" project sponsored by Planning Commission to Institute of Humanities and Social Science, Central Campus.
4. Women in economic activity "Weaving Sukul" is studied in Sanogaun while studying "Toaditional and Prevailing Child Rearing Practices", among Newar community in Nepal in 1979 as a part of "Status of Children in Nepal."
5. Reciprocal labour exchange of the community.
6. Gathering together for wage labour contribution (Mela Jane) during transplanting paddy seedling. Have lots of fund with liquor, snack and exchange of happy rice planting song among male and female.
7. Labour contribution (either agriculture or non-agricultural) in terms of grain either with rice or millet.

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