CHAPTER VI
STATUS OF WOMEN IN LADAKH

Indian society as a whole is characterized by the sharp gender disparities, although status of women varies considerably from region to region. It is believed that there are socio-cultural factors that construct gender roles and validate for the gender differences. One of them is the family structure which is patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal in India that denotes a culture of power relationship which promotes a man’s supremacy and a woman’s subjugation. Therefore, a boy is seen as the perpetuator of the family line, while a girl as ‘a bird of passage’ and they develop their personalities from the traits of acquired by these from their fathers’, husbands’, brothers’ and sons.

Unlike other parts of India, Ladakh is known for its speculating attribute, where women enjoy moderately better status (Rizvi, 1984). Ladakhi women are generally hard-working members of society, confident and capable, good at running businesses, not the least self-conscious, capable of holding on their own. This was in marked contrast to the shy, repressed ways of women in the rest of India, and speaks for Ladakhi society's openness, its free and easy going social network. They have a better degree of mobility, economic autonomy and control over their labour. Women’s participation in the economic activity has given them great freedom and better status in the society. The economic role has undoubtedly affected the social position of women, which is quite remarkable in its scope but at the same time there are domains where a woman’s role is undeniably minimal. Although they do not suffer from social evils such as dowry deaths and female foeticide and infanticides unlike their counterparts in India, yet there are still gender differences regarding their role in the decision making process. There is kind of duality observable here in case of Ladakh. Men dominate in public, in political and religious affairs, and continue to play the role of the head of the family and breadwinner, whereas women enjoy a greater say in their family life, and they enjoy a greater deal of social freedom and economic autonomy. This chapter is an effort to map out the status of women on four basic factors, such as their economic status, educational status, political participation and role in the decision making process.
Authors like Gompertz (p.62) described Ladakhi women as freely moving individuals, unlike their “veil-cursed” eastern sisters. Captain Edward Frederic knight (1893; p.46) wrote “these uncomely creatures wander about openly and unveiled, look at the Englishmen fearlessly in the face, and greet him with a cheerful smile”. Similarly, Theodore and Kermit Roosevelt (1926:22) declared, “This is a land of woman’s emancipation. No longer was the adult feminine population kept in the background. Women working in the fields straightened up and greeted us as we passed by, and once I saw a man and woman laughing and jostling each other as if they were good friends and comrades—something unimaginable in India and Kashmir”. In the same vein, Frederic Drew (1875-250), wrote that liberty of Ladakhi women “is as great as that of workmen’s wives of England; not only do Ladakhi women go about unveiled, but also they mix where men frequent and enter with them into their pursuits of business or pleasure, and partake too their toil”. (as cited in Aggrawal, 2004:111). Sridhar and H.N. Kaul, (1992:158) noted that young Ladakhi girls travelled on pilgrimage with men who were not related to them and danced in mixed gathering with the “least sex consciousness”, although they do warn the reader that this should not be construed as sexual license. Correspondingly, Kak (1978:2) maintains that “the women of the Buddhist tablelands enjoy complete social liberty; they go about unveiled and know no social taboo”. (cited in Aggrawal, 2004:111). Norberg reveals about the status of women in the following line:

One of the first things that struck me on my arrival in Ladakh was the wide, uninhibited smiles of the women, who moved about freely, joking and speaking with men in an open and unselfconscious way. Though young girls may sometimes appear shy, women generally exhibit great self-confidence, strength of character, and dignity. Almost all early travellers to Ladakh commented on the exceptionally strong position of women” (Hodge.1991: 68).

But contrary to the emancipation of women, there are some authors who alleged that it was custom of polyandry in the ancient times that was liable for the women’s confined status. The status of women was not so high, for being a lone survivor among the male members or the husbands as she had to abide by their pronouncement. Their uneven arrangement of genders can be seen in the films selected by Aggarwal in her book Beyond Lines of Control which show that the characters in these films are searching for
their individuality. Regardless of their attempt at recognizing with the margins, they reinforce structures in which the centre is masculinized and the borders become female. But our focus here remains with the status of women which is generally measured using indicators: role in economic pursuits, success in education, their political participation and say in decision making.

**Women’s Role in Economic Sphere**

In the traditional societies which lack market system, the business of everyday living is usually followed on gender division of labour (Illich, 1982). Societies where women have traditionally been excluded from the cash economy have found that women’s access to credit led to a number of positive changes in women’s own perception of themselves, and their role in household decision making (Kabeer, 2001).

Women’s participation in the economic and non-economic pursuits is equally important for their personal enrichment and their standing in the society. In the study area, the division of labour is chiefly between agriculture and herding. However, the boundaries are not so visibly marked, as there is overlapping as well as deviations. A major segment of agricultural work is done by women who do weeding, planting, harvesting and thrashing except ploughing which is men’s domain. In addition to the domestic activities, they also collect goods like fuel, fodder and water while men are out on assorted duties as shepherds, tourist guides or serving in the army etc.

Adding together their informal work at the household and fields, they have several avenues of wealth to rely upon, like selling vegetable and local handicrafts. Greenhouse has fostered the cultivation of vegetables in early spring and late autumn, bestowing woman with supplementary income and additional source of livelihood. Over a period of decade, Ladakhi women have vigorously taken up vegetable growing as a means of earning their livelihood. Vegetables are sold at village co-operatives to various customers such as the army. Other than selling at this level, women are often seen bearing loads of vegetables to the town market for sale and it’s not that woman from only average income households who are seen vending those vegetables in the marketplace but even women from those households who holds a higher income and respectable status in the society. For Ladakhi women, it really does not matter, whether they belong to wealthy household
or are employed, you will get to see them selling vegetables on the streets in the morning and evening. They are free to go irrespective of their background. This scenario stands opposite to what exists in the plains of India, where it is not considered reputable for women of decent income households to sell vegetables on the streets. A woman by selling vegetables thereby achieves direct economic benefit. This has strengthened their motivation to strive for greater self-reliance and economic independence. In addition to vegetable selling, they are running guest houses and other tourist activities and handling them magnificently. There is even a travel agency that is being run by the women which provides its services exclusive to women trekkers and visitors in Ladakh.

In rural Ladakh, women run shops and guest houses for the tourists, in those villages that fall en route to tourist destination. Running tourist related business leaves women authorized to a great extent. It’s not always that young educated women are coming out of their household chores but even aged women in their late 50s and early 60 are also indulging in this sector. A very good example of this is seen in Markha valley, a famous trek route, where both Youth Association for Conservation and Development in Hemis High Altitude National Park (YAFCADHNP) and Snow Leopard Conservancy (SLC) have trained villagers especially women to receive trekkers in their houses. For instance, there is an illiterate woman in her late 70s in Markha valley, who not only handles the various demands of tourist staying at her home but she also prepares food for them and converse with them in few words of English which she had learnt over the years, asking them “how is the food?”, “do you need anything”, “how are you”, “Do come back” etc ? The above example reflects that the earning from tourism is not only in the hands of educated folks but even old women can do their best.

The women have been fascinated in producing handicrafts for extra income and Self Help Groups (SHG) in the villages has helped taking these women a step forward. Women are now able to develop a range of local products with the support of the training given to them by Self help Groups. These products are then sold by the women in the parachutes cafés – a small tent, which runs along trekking route during summer, where trekkers can halt for a little rest. Women have widened the traditional exchanges between the villages in implementing a network between the parachutes cafés. This way, in each parachute café, trekkers can acquire products from the entire valley.
Some of them contribute the cash income earned from these sources into a household’s income while others use it for their personal purposes. Working outside their household and with tourism industry within their households has given them relevant exposure, and it has been a source of increased power in decision making. Firstly, it has led to a higher money contribution by them in enhancing household’s economic status. Secondly, employment has worked as a core for women’s economic independence from men. Additional benefits of the woman working outside her home, are increased social contact, exposure to knowledge and new norms of behavior, enhanced potential and a clearer perception of individuality and well-being. All of these have enhanced a woman’s power relative to her husband’s. Finally for the urgradation of status of women, there are organizations like Women Alliance of Ladakh and various others NGO’s like LEDeG’s, (Ladakh Ecological Development Group) Self Help Groups, Government run handicraft schemes, Snow Leopard Conservancy, etc which work to build up more independent women so that they could face the difficulties of the new modern world.

**Economic limits faced by women to improve their status**

Economic empowerment of women in Ladakh also highlights the exploitative conditions they face at work and house. With changing roles, women are now also exposed to the struggle for livelihood. To fulfill their traditional role of household chores they are dependent on natural resources such as water, firewood and fodder etc. India’s forest cover has been completely absent in the Himalayan region of Ladakh. As a result, Ladakhi women have borne the brunt of the modern assault on their natural resources and livelihoods. They take longer time to collect water, fuel wood and fodder. As such, they have to face enormous hardships in their lives. Women, particularly married women, continue to bear the main burden of domestic work. This has been gradually posing challenge of maintaining their health due to overburden of work. The division of labour in domestic chores and child care is rarely renegotiated between the sexes. By and large, gender inequalities in the work burden appear to be intensified.

Despite various development programmes, they have failed to bring about significant changes in the quality of life of women in the remote areas of the region. There is a very
little understanding about the essential needs of Ladakhi women and there are no step taken towards an unbiased share in the fruits of development.

**Education**

Education is widely used as an indicator and mediator to empower women by widening their knowledge and ability. In spite of certain outstanding examples of individual achievements, and a definite improvement in their general condition over the years, women are still lagging behind. The Backward Classes Commission set up by the Government of India in 1953 categorized women of India as a backward group needing special attention. The Ministry of Education clubs girls with Scheduled Castes and Tribes as the three most backward groups in area of education. Society cannot take any significant form of development as a major liability of upbringing of the future generation lies with a 'backward group' that it is at the stage of underdevelopment.

Though the growth of female literacy in Ladakh’s history has been encouraging yet it still lags behind. Female literates as compared to a percentage of male literates in Ladakh have gone up steadily from 2001 Census in which the literacy rate of Leh was 65.34% where male literacy rate counts to be 75.60% and that of female as 52.74%. According to 2011 Census report, male literacy rate accounted to be 88.84 and female as 67.86 %. This consistent trend has been observer for both rural and urban areas also where the rural female literacy counts to be 60.39% and urban is 75.26% female literacy rate. Amongst the rural women this rate has always been lower than that of urban females. The reasons associated with not educating girl child are financial constraints, early marriages, submissiveness etc. The resources of the rural poor are so limited that they do not have anything to spare for children’s education. If resources are available, it is the boy who is sent to school first and girls are required to help in household work.

In order to get insight about the educational level to which they would like their daughters to be educated as compared to their sons, the respondents were asked to specifically respond the level of education to which they want their children to be educated.
Table 6.01: Aspiration of respondents regarding the educational level to which their
daughter and sons should be educated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No.</th>
<th>Education Qualification</th>
<th>Leh (urban)</th>
<th>Sku-Markha(rural)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Daughters</td>
<td>Sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Upto primary</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>61(62.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Upto 10</td>
<td></td>
<td>10(10.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Upto 12</td>
<td></td>
<td>55(55.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Graduation</td>
<td>12 (12.50)</td>
<td>10(10.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Post Graduation</td>
<td>44(45.83)</td>
<td>42(43.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Professional course</td>
<td>40(41.67)</td>
<td>40(41.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96(100.00)</td>
<td>96(100.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures in brackets represent percentages

From the above table, it is clear that a large number of respondents aspired to give a higher education to their daughters. Out of the 96 respondents of Leh, a higher proportion of respondents, 45.83% aspired that their daughter should attain an education up to post-graduation level. Besides, 41.67% believed that they their daughter should pursue some professional course which includes, B.Ed, M.Ed, MBBS, Engineering, Management etc. While there were only 12.50% respondents who believed that graduating their girl child was sufficient.

There is not much difference regarding the attitude of the respondents towards the educational level of sons and daughters. As large number of the respondents 43.75% followed by 41.67% preferred post-graduation and professional level of educational qualification respectively for their sons. Finally, there were 14.58% respondents who stated that graduation was apt qualification for their sons.

However, in the case of rural Ladakh (Sku Markha), the majority of respondents (62.24%) wanted their daughter to acquire a professional degree followed by 24.50% who wanted their daughters to be educated up to 10th level. There are 10.20% respondents who wants their daughters to study up to graduation level and 2.04% and 1.02% respondents wanted their girls to acquire professional and post graduation degrees respectively. In case of education of their sons, a large number of respondents (55.10%) believed in educating their sons up to 12th standard followed by 32.66% who stated their sons should attain at least 10th standard of education. There were 10.20% respondents who...
wanted their sons to be graduated and 1.02% each revealed that they want their sons to get education up to post graduation and professional level.

In an overall comparative analysis there is not much of difference found among boys and girls education level but there were difference found in general educational level in the urban and rural areas of Ladakh. The figures illustrate that people of urban (Leh) prefer post-graduation and professional degrees for their children (both sons and daughters). There were none in Leh who considered educating their children up to 12th standard but in case of Sku-Markha, there were quite a number of respondents who wanted their children (both sons or daughters) to be educated up to higher school or to 12th standard only.

Education level at Sku-Markha irrespective of sex is otherwise also very low. It may be due to the geographical location of Sku-Markha which has led to a lower literacy in the area. The present running school in Markha was middle school till 2008 but due to low enrollment of the students it has been converted to primary school from then onwards. Reason given by respondents for educating their children only to 10th standard, is mainly due to difficulty to cover daily distance of 13km to reach the school. It is important to note that there are total in all 9 students in the school and four teachers are handling them. It reflects that irrespective of sex, education in Markha valley is very poor. Another reason for low enrollment rate in Markha School is that a large number of households have sent their children to Leh city for studying in private schools. While parents are enthusiastic about educating their daughters in rural parts of Ladakh and they enroll their daughters in schools but there are cases where girls study up to middle level or higher school and then drop out. There are few respondents from Markha who believed that, in the absence of hired labour, the girls had to work at home and in the fields as well which is of utmost importance and considering the fact that eventually the girls have to get married and start their families this becomes significant. Other than geographical location, poor economic conditions and lack of awareness about education among the people of Sku-Markha are believed as important factors for low level of literacy.

Since in most of the villages women are illiterate, adult education is of the utmost importance in order to make atleast these women capable of writing their own name and mastering the basic reading and writing skills necessary in modern life. Women
organizations have taken an active part in educating village women. The women welfare society has carried out an adult education programme. Such programmes have been effective in making women more confident in their general social and economic spheres and especially in their daily affairs of the market. (Angmo, 385:1999). The women of Ladakh are achieving a far wider economic and social independence in the course of time.

DECISION MAKING:

Blood and Wolfe’s (1960) classic work on marital power, conceptualized power as the potential ability of one partner to influence the other’s behaviour...manifested through the ability to make decisions. However, Fox and Murray (2000), in their overview on family research from a feminist perspective, concluded that although couples view their marriages as equal and their family roles as egalitarian, husbands are more likely to maintain an upper hand in decision-making processes. Scanzoni’s (1982) application of social exchange theory provided the perspective that men have held greater power (i.e., decision making) in the marital relationship based on their greater economic resources, educational advantages and occupational prestige.

However, decision-making in contemporary marriages has been divided along traditional gender lines, with wives making decisions concerning day-to-day details of family life and husbands making the major decisions, such as those concerning career choices and resource allocation (Steil & Weltman, 1991).

“Decision-making” described as the process by which families make choices, judgments, and ultimately come to conclusions that guide behaviour. A person’s control over resources, including economic resources, human resources (such as education) and social resources (such as membership in groups), enhances her or his ability to exercise choice (Quisumbing and Maluccio 2003; Kabeer 1999; Sen and Batliwala 2000). Women of Ladakh exhibit ingenuity, creativity and initiative in solving their daily problems of sustenance and survival and often demonstrate organizational skills as revealed during labour exchange (mutual aid groups) and communal service ventures. These social networks are important for the local economies. This cultural acceptance of the fact of their raised status gives them a voice in the household affairs which is almost equal that of their husbands. For the status of women in Ladakh the most significant fact that is the
women play a significant role in the informal sector, whose role counts to be much larger than the formal one. From deciding about the budgeting of household to managing the guest house, almost all important decisions of basic needs are settled by women. Thus women are never forced to choose between their work and home. With the growing job opportunities and spread of education, the modern Ladakhi women are definitely more aware today of their decision-making rights. This power of the women in the household is however, not translated into a corresponding community authority. The male head, who is a custodian of property, usually manages the family finance, political discussion, and family disputes, as also acquisition or disposal of property. These are all domains of the male members or eldest male of the family.

Despite the fact that Ladakhi women live their lives as dependents throughout their life cycle: as daughters, sisters, and wives, mothers of sons, they have far more power and independence than modern urban housewives. Women have great social mobility. Her economic ability and consequent social position has resulted in special institutional privileges that are bestowed on her. Women are like invisible hands shaping and maintaining the structure of the society. A woman always has it in her power to leave her husband if she is angry, dissatisfied or unhappy. In Ladakhi society, woman has the right to select a man, and marry him with her own choice. Not only she has choice to chose her life partner but she has right to get separated if she wants to. The women are rarely abandoned, even in case of infertility; they are not deserted though another wife can be brought into the family. Widow has an option to marry any other person. The divorcee or widow women among these communities have similar rights and duties as other married women have. The other norm accompanying matriliny is that of matrilocal post-marital residence which is rare in any other societies.

At the religious front, the religious organizations of Buddhist society give an idea about gender inequality that denies the status and independence to Buddhist nuns as compared to Buddhists monks as they are perpetually subordinate to them. The subjugation of women in religious activities and their denial of access to position of religious leadership has been a powerful tool in most of religions of the world which supports the patriarchal order and the exclusion of women from the public form (Franzmen, 2000). Buddhist nuns can never hold the same status as monks in Buddhism hold.
Let us analysis the role of women in decision making process in the family affairs, they were asked to rate the following statements related to decision making as important according to their preference;

Table No.6.02 : Views of respondents regarding Decision making in family affairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Decision making</th>
<th>Leh (Urban) (Means Score Value)</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Decision making</th>
<th>Sku-Markha (Rural) (Means Score Value)</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Consulting wife while taking decision about the marriage of children</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Consulting wife while taking decision about the marriage of children</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Consulting wife while taking decision regarding education of children</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Wife consultation while taking decision about the occupation of children</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Participation of wife in family budgeting</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Participation of wife in family budgeting</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Wife consultation while taking decision about the occupation of children</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Consulting wife while taking decision education of children</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Consulting wife while taking decision about family disputes</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Consulting wife while taking decision about family disputes</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Consulting wife in political participation</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Consulting wife in political participation</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A set of six different factors was provided to the respondents and asked to rate these according to their preference on the decision making process in the family affairs. A factor rated ‘always’ was given value 3 and parameter rated ‘never’ was given 1 value. ‘Sometimes’ was given a score value of 2. A mean score value was worked out for each of these factors separately for Leh and Sku-Markha. The higher the mean score value, the higher was the rank assigned to that factor. According to respondents of Leh (urban), ‘wife consultation while taking decision about the marriage of children’ (3.00) tops the priority list. ‘Decision regarding education of children’ (2.93) was ranked second, ‘decision regarding education of their children’ includes their school selection, to what level they will study. ‘Participation of wife in family budgeting’ (2.83) was ranked at the third place. ‘wife consultation while taking decision about the occupation of children’ (2.81) was ranked fourth followed by ‘consulting their wife while taking decision about
family disputes’ (2.63) was assigned fifth rank. ‘Consulting wife in political participation’ (1.52) lies at the bottom of their priority charts. Decisions regarding politics were given least preference and even these issues were least discussed with the females of the household. This scenario is similar to what is observed all over India.

In case of people of rural Ladakh (Sku-Markha), ‘wife consultation while taking decision about the marriage of children’ (2.82) topped in the list of respondents. ‘Participation of wife in family budgeting’ (2.81) was given second priority. ‘Wife consultation while taking decision about the occupation of children’ (2.45) at third place followed by ‘wife consultation while taking decision regarding education of children’ (2.39) was ranked fourth. ‘Consulting their wife while taking decision about family disputes’ (2.05) and ‘consulting wife in political participation’ (1.42) lies at the bottom of their priority charts.

So in an overall comparative analysis of the attitude of the respondents to rank the above given dimensions of the family decision making process, it is quite evident that there are not many variations seen in both the urban and rural areas. ‘Consulting their wife in selecting a marriage partner for their children’ tops the priority list in both the areas while making a ‘decision regarding the political participation’ lies at the bottom of the list.

It was observed that there is certainly a male social supremacy on specific matters, like decisions related to political participation (voting behavior of the females, decision regarding contesting elections etc.) and family disputes. It reflects that in the public domain, woman as an individual is largely marginalized in the community performance. Although there are instances where women are coming out of their household chores and their desires are considered in administrative and political outcome yet to large affairs, it entails to be a man’s domain. One of the respondents’ opined that:

Men ascertain their stature and notability on non-agrarian engagements outside the village. Men are undertaking roles that draw them away from the household, while we are tangled by the day to day monotonous life, from child care to the irrigation and hoeing of our fields.

But processes like Militarization have acted like a motor that has driven the employment to Ladakhi men and helped them to grow economically. Militarization of men has left women living alone in the villages and has both positive and negative effect on women’s
status. Her power to take decision on various matters has increased and she became aware of her rights. Now, the women have power in their own a sphere, and generally do not men tell them as what to do. They are responsible for their own share of work and share the benefits of their own work. Their own perception and that of their men, is that women now share a major part of socio-economic activities and consequently they are respected and well thought of. Gender role has withstood humungous makeover, and a distinct division of labour now reigns in Markha. Given men’s supremacy upon women in the selection of labour, in the past, women were not allowed to touch the Dzo throughout the ploughing spell. Now, scarcity of men in some parts of rural Ladakh has commanded women to work on all facets of agricultural operations. Women now, not only toil in the household and countryside, but also are actively engaged in commercial tourist business and intermingle spontaneously with outsiders other than their own kith and kin.

Women’s Political status

One of the indicators for measuring advancement on gender equality and women’s empowerment speak about the participation in the governance and policy making irrespective of sex, religion, caste, economic status etc. (Menon, 2004). It moves the spotlight of empowerment into the arena of politics, and the struggle for participation and representation in the decision making structures. Women in Ladakh can sing, dance, drink together with their male counterpart but their participation in the governance is minimal. Marginalization of women participation in the democratic execution of the government means that women have no say in deciding the destiny of Ladakhi education, health, infrastructure, economy, culture and politics. Ladakhi women should be therefore, encouraged to be an active contributor in the local political democracy.

It is interesting to note that although by agreement every village in Ladakh had a tradition of Goba system, as mentioned earlier chapter whereby all the village decisions are taken by the Goba. But women are not allowed to become Goba. This shows that women are generally bypassed and marginalized in public affairs and community decision-making. However, traditional institutions have witnessed a significant change with the coming of
Panchayat system (local government) and there are women who are now taking part in this system. Panchayat institution in effect began in Ladakh 2001. In the first ever Panchayat election, 37 women became Panches through consensus nomination of their respective villages and five of them however, contested the election.

A key feature in Ladakh’s politics has been the establishment of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) in 1995, to address the distinctive subject of governance in the context of Ladakhi society and polity. The step implied a growth in political opportunities for the Ladakhis and a mechanism to meet the needs of the region. However, this has not reflected, in any tangible form of the Council to women’s development or empowerment in Leh district. Presently, amongst the 30 members of General Council of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), there are two nominated women councilors (Spalzes Angmo nominated for all the three terms on the principle of minority and Tashi Angmo, on the reservation of weaker section). In more than half a century’s political account of Ladakh after India’s independence, it had only one woman candidate as a Member of Parliament in the Indian parliament who was the Queen of Ladakh. This may be due to the significance royal family has in Ladakh. Lack of women participation in the local governance makes them more vulnerable to the violation of their rights and those women who can make a difference, being part of the Hill Council, their performance and track-record also remains lack-lustre. There is a low level of contribution to the processes of planning and setting agendas is negligible. For women in the Halqua Panchayat it is the same story and at both these levels (LAHDC and Panchayati Raj) it is practically an opportunity lost. Within the Executive Council which is the think-tank and the body which defines policy and sets development agenda, the Women’s Development or Empowerment is conspicuously missing from this.

G M Sheikh, who works on women’s leadership points out, “Ladakhi society is patriarchal and is the main barrier to the participation of women in governance and decision making in the society. The general perception still persists that these jobs (leadership) are the responsibility of men”. While Tsering Dolker, General Secretary of Women’s Alliance of Ladakh says this mind-set itself discourages women’s participation in governance. The myth of the Ladakhi women being at par with the males in society
stops short of their participation in governance and the political process which in some ways a yardstick of women’s empowerment in any region. Unless women participate fully and are part of not only public discourse on any issue but of the process of governance, they will remain in the shadows, more as a decorative value, as emblems of a rich and fascinating culture, no doubt, but without a role in development. Advocate Thinley Angmo notes, "The level of education in women is increasing and will soon start a new era in women society. The government job opportunities which are most preferred by women, along with exploring other opportunities will take them way forward”.

It is generally observed that women, who take active part in voting process, are the ones who are aware of their rights, while the majority depends upon the male folks for the political awareness. Ladakhi women take pleasure in their voting rights and about 85 per cent of women of Leh and 81 percent of Sku-Markha exercised their right. Data were collected in order to map out the decisions regarding the voting behavior of females in the households.

Table 6.03: Distribution of respondent on the basis of voting behaviour of their wife/females of Households

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Decision taken while voting</th>
<th>Leh (Urban)</th>
<th>Sku-Markha (Rural)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>34 (35.42)</td>
<td>32 (32.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Wife (herself)</td>
<td>20 (20.83)</td>
<td>6 (6.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Family members</td>
<td>13 (13.54)</td>
<td>30 (30.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Religious Leaders</td>
<td>29 (30.21)</td>
<td>30 (30.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96 (100.00)</td>
<td>98 (100.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures in brackets represent percentages

The above data shows that it is the male members of the family who dominate the voting behavior of the females. It is clearly visible in the Table 6.03 that, out of total 96 respondents of Leh, a large number of respondents revealed that it was their husbands 34(35.42%) who decided their voting behavior followed by 29(30.21%) respondents who stated that it was religious leaders who have greater influence on their voting behavior, and there were 20(20.83%) respondents (females) who themselves decided whom to vote.
Finally, 13(13.54%) revealed that the family members play an important role in deciding the voting behavior of the females.

However, taking account of rural Ladakh (Sku-Markha), we again got mixed results. A large number of respondents 32(32.66%) revealed that it was husbands who decided the voting behavior of the wives, followed by 30(30.61%) each religious leader and their family members. Lastly, there were 6(6.12%) respondents who stated that it was their own choice and had full authority to decide the voting behavior for themselves. In a comparative analysis it can be said that, Ladakhi women are still struggling in public domain. It is their husband or family member, mostly male members of the family and religious leaders who decide their voting behavior. Thus, data indicate that men are still dominating the political representation inspite of the economic prosperity, spreading of education and exposure to outside world. Women of Ladakh still have long way to gain their political status. It is important to note here that the religious leader plays a significant role in the political process such as deciding the voting behavior not only for the female members of the family but for males as well. This confirms that the religion plays an important role in the political setup in case of Ladakh.

Seen from the point of view of women, their enhanced role in governance and political processes, it seems a Herculean task to cut through the lines of region, religion, gender for women to aspire and sustain a significant, if not forceful presence in governance. The dynamics of women in governance in Ladakh has many facets which are reflective of a region which is churning and seeking change from its traditional mould. Nothing captures this more than the document ‘Vision Document’ brought out for the first time by LAHDC on the comprehensive strategies and action for the next twenty five years. The process did not include one woman nor does it have a substantive section devoted to Women’s Development. Later on this document, fundamentally flawed because of the absence of inputs from women was released by the Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and Leh became perhaps the first district to own a Vision Document sans a women’s perspective. It seems that those who are the leading lights in the Panchayti Raj movement and those who are involved in creating a responsive, locally tuned governance need to put their heads together and address the issues of Ladakhi women.
CHANGES OBSERVED

Status of women has been very significant aspect of any social life in Ladakh. They are hard-working members of society, confident and capable, good at running businesses. In watching Ladakh get developed, it is difficult to say which is the more fundamental agent of change: education, employment, tourism or technology but it is obvious that they are closely interlinked and form the cornerstone of a systematic transformation of society. Recently, the exposure to outside world and factors like economic growth as well as spread of education, there have changes brought in the status of women in Ladakh. One of the reasons given by the respondents for the increased role of women decision making is the formation of families.

Tourism, with its promise of foreign exchange, is an integral part of the development package. The impact of tourism on the material culture has been wide ranging and disturbing. However, its impact on people’s mind and especially on women has been still more significant. It is because of development of tourism that there are opening of various avenues, which has led to the major transformation in the living standard of the Ladakhis aided strongly by their women. Women now run guest houses, homestays and restaurants. There are now travel agencies that are run by women and there is one complete travel agency that provides women trekking and monastery guides.

However, modernization is undermining Ladakh's traditional economy and women are being marginalized as a result of this. Women are left behind in the villages, where they have to do all the agricultural work that they once shared with men. Despite the doubling of their workload, the respect accorded to women has declined. The psychological impacts of development have also been hard on women. Traditionally outspoken and confident, women in Ladakh's modern sector are far less secured. This is particularly a pattern of women with a Western-style education, who have much less self-confidence than the traditional ones.

For the last three years, I have been observing and asking women participants from different regions of Ladakh to discuss the impact of development, their feelings about current trends, and their ideas about Ladakh's future. They mentioned how greed and envy are now creating rifts among people. They talk about how communities and families
are being broken down by the psychological pressures of tourism, advertising, and television. Women have become more fashion conscious and have started following trends visible in the Indian plains. Occasions like marriage, birth celebrations etc have become important to brag about one’s clothes, jewelry and latest fashion. This new anxiety about their bodily appearance, has started substituting the strong and outgoing women of Ladakh.

In the following question we are trying to find out the factors responsible for change in women’s status.

Table 6.04: Views of respondents regarding factors responsible for change in status of women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Factors for change in status of women</th>
<th>Leh (Urban)</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Sku-Markha (Rural)</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Mean Score Value)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Mean Score Value)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Role of education</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Employment of women</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Employment of women</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Role of education</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Impact of urbanization</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Impact of urbanization</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mass Media</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mass Media</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Enactment of social legislation</td>
<td>5.44</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Enactment of social legislation</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To understand the views of respondents regarding the factors responsible for change in the status of women a set of six factors were provided to the respondents and they were asked to rank these in order of their preference. A factor ranked first, was given a score of one while that ranked second was assigned a score of two. In the same way, the other factors were ranked and the scores were assigned according to there ranking position till the last factor, which was assigned the score of six. A mean score value was worked out.
for each of these factors separately for Leh and Sku-Markha. The lower the mean score value, the higher was the rank assigned to that factor.

Respondents of Leh(urban) assured that it is ‘role of education’ (1.77) that tops the chart in their priority list as a responsible factor for the change of the status of woman, followed by it is ‘increased employment of women’ (2.29) in public or private sector. Thirdly, they held as ‘impact of tourism’ (2.78) responsible for the change in their status. ‘Impact of urbanization’ (3.75) at fourth place followed by ‘influence of mass media’ (4.97) at the fifth. (Mass media, through various means like western and Indian film and television to large extend has bought changes among Ladakhi. (Norberg, 1991). Lastly, it was ‘enactment of social legislation’ (5.44) at the bottom of the list. Respondents revealed enactment of Legislation as the last factor responsible for the change in the status of women because they believed that they had heard of some kind of laws but those are not that effective.

In case of rural part (Sku – Markha), respondents stated that it is ‘impact of tourism’ (1.55) which has changed the status of woman to the highest level, followed by ‘increased employment of women’ (2.38) and then thirdly the ‘role of education’ (2.53). Other factors like ‘impact of urbanization’ (3.90) at fourth position, ‘mass media’ (5.58) and ‘enactment of legislation’ (5.74) are the ones which have been placed at the low levels. These are the factors which people of Markha considered at the bottom of the priority chart.

In an overall comparative analysis, it is quite clear that factors responsible for change in status of woman are different in Leh and Sku-Markha. ‘Education of woman’ is the main factor held for the change in Leh whereas it is ‘tourism’ which was considered as the main factor responsible for the change in the status of woman. Spread of education and accessibility to education is very easy in Leh while in the case of Markha, it is very difficult to have access to education after primary level due to distance and difficult geographical conditions. Another important issue to mention here is that the Sku-Markha is listed as an important trek route of this Trans Himalayan region, known for its scenic beauty and snow leopard area. Tourism industry has flourished in Sku-Markha and women involved have explored themselves in the various tourism related business like running tea shops, guest houses and Amma Chokspa etc. and through these businesses they cater to the demands of tourists by coming in direct contact with them and tourism is
the sole means to many of them to get an outside exposure. Tourism as such has been considered as a top factor responsible for change in the status of woman.

Respondents of Leh stated enactment of Legislation as the last factor responsible for the change of the status of women whereas in case of Sku-Markha it is both enactment of legislation and mass media which are at the bottom of their priority list. These two factors are considered the least affecting factors because there is no provision to avail any kind of media there in Sku-Markha. There is no electricity or any kind of communication, or medium to contact the outside world through various communication channels. So change in the status of woman through mass media does not make sense to them. Same is the case with the enactment of legislation; they revealed that they haven’t heard of any kind of laws concerning women’s rights. The above analysis confirms that through tourism as an induced economy has helped rural women to enhance their status, yet it education and employment of women that appears significant in improving the status of women. This supports our hypothesis that there is improvement of women improvement in the region.

EMPLOYMENT SCHEMES

The government runs a number of employment generation schemes all over Ladakh, unfortunately, however in the remote and backward areas; there is insufficient awareness of these programmes. In brief these schemes include

- National old age pension scheme, which provides financial assistance for the age group of 65 and above.
- National maternity benefit scheme, which provides cash assistance of Rs.300 per pregnancy up to the first two live births.

In addition to all this there are other welfare schemes offering financial assistance and employment generation like training centres in tailoring, knitting and handicraft. Schemes such as Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) and training for rural youth in self-employment (TRYSEM) have benefitted women. Along with these, the women’s welfare society was formed in 1994 with the objective of reaching out to women in the remote areas of Ladakh. Charitable work was undertaken for the poor and aged extensively.
In short, one may observe that women’s access to economic activities and paid work has given them a better sense of independence and greater purchasing ability, but in cases where women are left behind due to urban—rural migration or job prospects for males, this has overburdened their role at both within the household as well as outside the household. If it is undertaken in conditions that wear down their health status and abuse their labour, their independence may overshadow its rewards. In general it is believed that women with higher education tend to have a better position (WHO, 1989). Women’s access to education has improved their chances of a good marriage and better decision making prospects. But unless it also provides them with the analytical capacity and courage to question unjust practices, and participate in political and administrative setup, its potential for change will be limited. Women’s presence in the governance structures of society clearly carries the potential to change unjust practices, and women presence in government in Ladakh is only minimal. They are in fact drawn in from a narrow elite class, and they have often been nominated rather than elected. Their presence is only a token one as they have no grassroots constituency to represent and answer to. The issue, consequently, is to what extent the state policies are equipped to provide assistance to women at the grassroots level.

We can conclude that unless provision is made to ensure policy changes which are implemented in ways that allow women themselves to participate, and to monitor, there are hardly any possibilities of realizing the improvement of the status of women. We need to accomplish the role of the female that should indeed be re-evaluated. (The constitutional protection of one third representation to women in the Panchayati Raj institutions under the 73rd and 74th amendment to the Indian Constitution was a landmark steps taken by the Indian parliament to make the representative democracy a participatory one. Drude Dehlerup of the University of Stockholm in his extensive findings regarding women reservation in politics shows that quotas are required to fire up the process of equality for women). Bearing in mind the crucial need requisite of women participation in the local government in Ladakh, I keenly suggest for similar representation in the council’s body by introducing an amendment in the existing constitution of the council. The civil societies, women’s groups, local political parties and concerned individuals should try to sway opinions for bringing such an amendment in the existing constitution of the council in order to build our democracy, in the real sense.
Although there are some cases of women coming forward to make their presence felt as potential workers in Panchayati-Raj system, yet women have to go a long way in achieving a dignified and acceptable identity for themselves. The lesson for policy makers and development practitioners is that women-specific programmes can generate an empowering window for women and perform as a significant incubator for ideas and approaches than can be relocated to mainstream interventions. Reducing gender discrimination would not only expand equity, it would promote the regions’ overall social and economic development in many ways.