Abstract

The central problem of the women, poverty studies in Nepal is the failure of recognising adequately the core vectors of oppressions simultaneously, namely, class, gender and caste of Nepalese society. Further, since the early 1990s, Nepal has adopted a strategy for the alleviation of poverty and empowerment of women through social mobilisation and micro-credit. While this strategy seems to be important on addressing gender specific causes of poverty, it largely reduces poverty alleviation/women’s empowerment programmes to merely social mobilisation and micro-credit schemes, and fails to combine it with redistribution of resources. Failures of these interventions have raised a debate in development communities and academia whether such programmes can alone be capable of empowering women. In this context, my thesis aims to provide a critical account of women’s poverty in rural Nepal and examines the role of poverty alleviation/women’s empowerment programmes in addressing the gender specific dimensions and causes of poverty.

Utilising a case study methodology that draws on both quantitative and qualitative data and generating data from the two villages in Nepal, the study proposes that a gender analysis of poverty cannot be coherent and complete without understanding household poverty, for women are the sub-set of the family/household. Thus, women constitute a diverse group and the core elements of this diversity are the caste and class including the extent of patriarchal values/norms/beliefs and behaviour embedded in the organisation of the family.

Findings of the study reintegrate that rural areas of Nepal can be characterised as having poor access to public utility services, lower levels of infrastructure development and absence of or poor women’s friendly development institutions. Diversity in access to these services in the hills and Tarai of Nepal and across the social groups widely persists. Land or agricultural income is the single most important income source for Nepalese rural households given the low magnitude of income diversification opportunities, particularly in non-agriculture sectors.
For women, lack of both sets of material and non-material needs means their poverty. Women are far behind in satisfaction of basic needs, and entitlements to land and employment vis-à-vis men. Women are largely concentrated in agricultural and domestic work. Gender inequality in both basic needs and entitlements to property vary according to women's location of class and caste. The gender specific processes of poverty are largely shaped by socio-cultural norms, and also show a variation according to women's life-cycle and their class location. Women's seclusion, gender division of labour and decision-making agency is relatively relaxed among the Tamangs compared to Brahmans/Chhetris in the hills and it is so among the Tharus compared to Hindu caste groups and Muslims in the Tarai. Yet feminisation of agriculture is much pronounced among the lower economic strata of women irrespective of their social groups. It is the Dalit women face with triple burdens: i) chronic poverty in the family, ii) gender discrimination in the family and iii) social exclusion in the community.

The case study shows the mix result of poverty alleviation/women's empowerment programmes. Some of the visible achievements are: i) targeting of women in the programmes, ii) access to women's exclusive credit facilities, iii) mobilisation and organisation of women and thereby collectivisation of their voices and iv) intervention in the domestic violence. While the weaknesses of the programmes are the following: i) failure to reach out to the chronically poor, Dalits, widows, daughters-in-law from a joint family and elderly women, ii) low levels of the poverty impact of the programmes in terms of increasing households' and women's material well-being, iii) low level of the empowerment impact, iv) failure to effectively intervene in labour, commodity and financial markets which are directly linked to women's lives.

Drawing on the empirical findings, my thesis contributes the following: i) a combination of micro-credit and struggle for the entitlements for land and labour is a must for effectively arresting gendered poverty and empowering women in rural Nepal; ii) a gender analysis of poverty should recognise the caste-class and regional diversity; and iii) a fuller understanding dynamic and structural gender specific processes and patterns of poverty can only be possible by combining both quantitative and qualitative data.