## Struggles of Women Teachers: A Narrative Inquiry

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### Abstract

*Women teachers struggle to fit into their family responsibilities and the workplace; often, they cannot perform well while trying to balance both. Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore the experiences of women teachers to understand their professional struggles in their workplace. It is a qualitative study, where I purposively selected four women teachers from Far-West (Kailali) as my research participants. They teach in private and public schools. I interviewed them to collect the information required for this study. Simultaneously, I recorded and transcribed the data, then coded, categorized, and thematized them as patterns emerged. The study indicates the gender discrimination in the workplace and home of women teachers and the difficulty for them to balance their work life and responsibilities at home. The findings reveal that most women teachers have left their jobs to look after their families and children, and after a few years of gap, they struggle to find a job. A flexible policy can help women teachers sustain themselves in teaching jobs.*

**Keywords**: *Far-west, women teachers, professional struggle, motherhood, inequality*

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### Introduction

Even though women teachers seem to be hardworking, they struggle for their professional growth, unlike their male counterparts. They have different kinds of struggles in their professional lives. Most women teachers face common problems in sustaining themselves in the profession. In my personal experience, I felt the same and found many women teachers sacrificing their professional careers for their children and in the name of the responsibilities of the family. Comparatively, male teachers have fewer responsibilities at home as we have defined gender roles in our society. Hence, the study about the women English language teachers' profession and their struggles in getting into the career and eventually balancing their work lives and other household responsibilities seem highly significant. Demarse (2005) argues that the narratives of women about balancing their home

and work responsibilities are often challenging, and their home responsibilities hinder their professional development. However, Bhatta (2023, 2024) explores the stories of women English language teachers, narrates the struggles of women teachers in learning English, and even explains how English language proficiency helped them be empowered.

Similarly, according to Ruohotie-Lyhty (2013), in the first year of the teachers' life, a career is a comprehensively advised area; the aspects which assist in accepting a struggle instead of satisfaction so that a particular person engages in teaching create his/her career distinctiveness are yet less considered. Women teachers have their professional work as an additional job. Very few institutions have a record of their professions. However, even the well-established institutions working for the well-being of the teachers do not record women teachers' work at the school and university levels (Khadka, 2020). In the Nepali context, women teachers have a family and working life to be taken care of together, which educational institutions often ignore. These institutions should keep a record of each working woman so they can have some plans to sustain the women teacher's profession.

Employed women face challenges like assimilating and establishing stability. However, several complications arise while acting in their different roles, which coincidently puts them under a tremendous burden. This study discovers the experiences of female teachers in their professional struggles in the context of Far-west (Kailali) Nepal. Bista (2004) highlights that several women are eligible for teaching. However, family members are unwilling to allow them to join schools and communities as their career choices, and school principals also prefer male teachers, following the notion that males should run schools. These tell us that women struggle to advance in this traditional, male-dominated society. Women teachers in the male-dominated community lack support from families despite their academic qualifications. They suffer due to this orthodox view of the family and society. In this regard, Dunifon and Gill (2013) argue that women teachers are burdened with the heavy dual responsibilities of home and work. Teaching and homemaking are both works of great responsibility, and women are expected to work flawlessly in both areas, such as superhumans.

In the context of Nepal, many studies are conducted on the struggle of teachers for their development and identity construction (Neupane, 2023, 2024; Neupane & Bhatt, 2023; Neupane et al., 2022), teachers' wellbeing (Bhatt, 2022, 2023), and role of school culture on teachers' professional development (Bhatt & Kapar, 2024) among others; however, paucity of studies exclusively highlighting the struggles of women is evident. Even policy research indicates the least investment in teacher professional development in Nepal (Neupane & Joshi, 2022). However, teachers have developed professionally through self-directed efforts (Bhatt, 2021). At this pretext, this study aims to explore the experiences of women teachers concerning their struggle for their growth in the context of Far-west (Kailali), Nepal. The issue has its roots in my experiences of witnessing the Far-west as, often notoriously known for gender discrimination in society; for example, the *chaupadi* system and prioritizing men in the general scenario. The *chaupadi* is a practice of isolating women during their menstruation cycle because the menstruation blood is considered impure. This practice is strictly observed in the Far-west region of Nepal.   In this research, I explore women teachers' experiences to understand social inequality in terms of gender biasedness.

## Methodology

I worked under the interpretivism paradigm for this qualitative research. I purposively selected the research participants who have worked in public and private institutions for over five years. I interviewed four women teachers working in the Far-west of the Kailali district for the information for this study. I adopted the empowerment theory as it gives power to the

powerless and helps to gain social, economic, and political power. I interviewed my research participants face to face and via Zoom to collect the data. I recorded the interviews with the participants with their consent. However, I promised them that I would not reveal their identity or the institution's name to maintain the ethics of my study. The research site was the Kailali district of the Far-west province.

### Balancing Professional/Personal Life Challenges to Sustain in the Profession

Most married women face difficulties in their day-to-day life in the Nepali context. Men are 'breadwinners' and women 'homemakers,' creating more trouble for working women than men in Nepal (Subedi, 2010). A woman is supposed to look after the household chores, family, and children. Working women are supposed to be in a better position. However, 'nurturing' or 'caregiving' roles are still measured as womanly, which becomes a challenging task for women to accomplish household and workplace responsibilities. Women cannot abandon their domestic duties due to the customary social perceptions toward them. As a consequence, women's professional lives get shorter. Fenstermarker and West (2002) state that gender emerges not as an individual quality but as something that is accomplished in interaction with others. Clark argues that workers' struggles for their professional and personal lives reflect their struggle for survival in professional competition. (cited in Raya & Delina, 2013). Women need to dedicate extra time and effort to their personal and societal roles and deficiencies to provide more involvement in their professional roles. Women with children work at lower-level positions, and educational organizations demand advanced modes of instruction, leading to youngsters being the institutions' preferences (Fox, 1991; Perna, 2001).

Women teachers face difficulties in sustaining their profession due to the dual responsibilities of home and workplace. In the Far-west context, the struggles of women teachers in the Kailali district suppress them in their commitments. Women are supposed to work more hours at home based on the gender roles directed by the socio-cultural practices of our society. If women wish to be job holders, they also do not enjoy any help at home. They have to manage time to complete dual responsibilities, forcing the females to leave their jobs and care for their family responsibilities and kids. The same is true for women teachers in the private and public sectors.

Jyotika's anecdote describes her experiences of balancing her professional and family responsibilities, mainly when she was pregnant and had children.

> *... she was strong before marriage and could also make a solid professional presence. The family trusted her. However, things began to change after the wedding. She felt pressured to get home on time, and her family members began to question if she was late. She described it as threatening her professional life because she could not balance her professional and family responsibilities.*

Ultimately, she resigned from the school principal position because she had to prioritize her family's well-being, particularly her children. She returned to the same school after her second child. I connected the struggle of Jyotika with the theory of professional and personal conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This notion recommends that balancing professional and family responsibilities is challenging for women with children. In the case of Jyotika, she prioritized her family responsibilities over her professional ones, as evidenced by her resignation during her second pregnancy and rather join a nearby school to be able to manage her family responsibilities. Similarly, Binu narrates the story of her professional career struggle before and after marriage. She succeeded in gaining professional stability in a government school before marriage. However, she had to leave the job after marriage for a

few years. She had to sacrifice her career for her family. Now, she has struggled for her professional stability in the new place. She is hopeless about starting to teach at the grassroots level. English will provide her with new opportunities, as Sen (2002a, pp. 583–658; 2004a, pp. 336–337) addresses the capability approach that has been noted to address the opportunity dimension of freedom and justice but not the procedural dimension.

Furthermore, Binu states that she gradually did well in teaching but could not manage her family responsibilities and professional duties together. In this context, Moscovitch and Drover (1981) take empowerment as a process to access power. Being empowered means being powerful. Binu was able to struggle in a new place, as she was confident that English would not let her down. The scuffle of professional and personal stability is demarcated as a worker's view that several fields of individual time, household maintenance, and effort are sustained and combined by a least of role struggle (Clark, 2000; Anderson & Yeandle, 2005).

The story of Binu also represents the hardships women faced in managing their personal and professional lives. She narrated that *she had to leave a secure job for her family and children.* Women in Nepal have shared instances of facing gender discrimination through disparities such as insecure employment, lower wages compared to men, lack of respect, and inadequate or absent benefits (Kunwar et al., 2014).

Another participant, Basanti's narrative, describes her experiences of shifting to a new place and starting from the beginning for a professional career. She narrates:

> *...she was teaching at a lower-secondary level before marriage, and after marriage, she shifted to a new place; starting grade teaching was challenging. She felt she was good at multitasking as she could do all the household chores on time and go to a job. She has to wake up early for her household responsibilities. She said that she would already be tired before going to school with her mind full of household affairs.*

I felt that Basanti's work pressure aligns with the study by Rout, Lewis, and Kagan (1999). They found that females in India experienced significant stress at sunrise to go for work and, when they return after work, to do all the critical work aimed at the household.

From the story of Basanti, I assumed that women teachers have to struggle alone for their professional careers while devoting their time to family and children, too. Dual duties always cause trouble in the working environment. Freedom of mind in the workplace makes the work best done. Nevertheless, despite her struggles, she was an independent lady with the courage to establish herself professionally. Here, the characteristics of the capability approach match with the reality of Basanti as the capability approach emphasizes what individuals are successfully capable of doing and being: that is, on their proficiencies (Robeyns, 2005). The welfare of the individual, integrity and progress are theorized about the public's competencies to purpose: their actual prospects to start the events they want to be involved in and be who they need to be. These actualities and activities, for example, working systematically, make life appreciative. As Wallerstein (1992) states, empowerment is a primary element of society that encourages people to liberate and create social justice.

Likewise, Basu, currently working in a public school, shares her story of having all her responsibilities at home as well as at work. Her husband went to his duties and did not share their child's responsibilities. Moreover, walking a long distance up the hills carrying the child on her back was very painful. She did not get leave for 45 days during her second pregnancy, and the school deducted her salary during her maternity leave.

> *...she continued teaching with the tiny baby on her back and the other baby in her hand, and all the necessities in one bag sometimes; while going to school, she used to*

*feel like a tourist. There was no proper room to breastfeed her child in the school either.*

I connect Basu's struggle with critical theory (Tyson, 2006). The experiences of Basu provoke traditional gender roles prevalent in our society. The traditional gender roles make men perform as rational, substantial, defending, and significant. They cast women as sensitive (unreasonable), weak, nurturing, and passive (Tyson, 2006). These traditional roles have created a considerable gap between male and female workers. As Basu's husband concentrated more on his work, Basu worked harder, taking care of the house, rearing the child, and working as a professional at the same time.

In common, both men and women, as professionals, need to have a stable professional and personal life. The challenges for females are more significant than for males. Women get pregnant and go through childbirth. They have to meet the family expectations and struggle to overcome continuous family and social inequality, unlike men, the "second shift" over the care of children and the household (Drago & Williams, 2000 as cited in Ward & Wolf-Wellll, 2004). The stories above reflect the women teachers' struggle with dual roles. With these stories, it seems that women teachers prioritize their families over their profession. In the work of Sen and Nussbaum, both consider communal customs and conducts that form female preferences and affect their aims and active selections (Sen, 1990a; Nussbaum, 2000). Sen further argued that the policies should focus on the ability of the person to maintain the excellence of their life, even eliminating the difficulties so they can value freedom.

### Impact of Gender Inequality at the Workplace and Home

There is discrimination between men and women in our society. The patriarchal social system and values create discrimination among men and women regarding their roles. Nepali culture has defined roles for boys and girls differently. Males are apparently the providers and have a special place in the family, while women are the caretakers and homemakers. Nepali society prioritizes masculine values that empower men and make women inferior.

Primarily through family and recognized institutional structures, in most cases, gender inequality jerks. Most women are dominated in the labour market as women lack stability between professional and personal life, which seems to be the obligation of women in most nations (Örtenblad et al., 2017). Women sometimes work with minimum pay to provide for the family. In Nepal, more than half of the population are women. However, they face discrimination directly or indirectly in different stages of life at home and in the workplace. As stated in the Nepal labour force survey, the ratio of working women is 45.7 per cent, amongst which only 10 per cent get paid for their work, and the rest of the women are unpaid family workers engaged in farming with little knowledge of technology and basic farming training (NLFS, 2017). Some women work at home, while others who work professionally get no payment for their work. Due to the socio-cultural tradition, most women suffer. The following anecdote from Jyotika illustrates:

> *During the sports outing, the administrator focuses more on the male teachers, as this is also part of educational activities. She felt she was not asked about participating in some training sessions. The senior teachers would say that she would have difficulty travelling, so they appointed a male. Even when she was appointed, the school principal and some teachers said they could not work under her, probably due to her gender.*

These gender roles discriminate against women, effectively explaining the variations occurring nowadays. Despite all these variations, Jyotika knows her potential, as Whitmore

(1988) discusses on the common assumption of empowerment: understanding one's needs better than others. I understood empowerment is an ongoing process where individual awareness and knowledge play a vital role in understanding distinct requirements well than anyone else; consequently, one becomes powerful, realizing self.

Basu shared that her husband went to work, and she had to look after the house and children and do her job. She remembered once she was selected to go for scout training. However, male teachers were preferred while sending to the same". Here, empowerment theory talks about providing economic, social, and political power to the powerless so they can decide for themselves. Basu also decided about herself.

Binu narrated her story: *"Women teachers get fewer opportunities than men teachers. In the name of being women, opportunities are not given".* There should be justice in society to empower women. According to the United Nations (2014), strong economies, justice in communities, achieving the goal of development, and improving quality of life are central principles of empowerment.

Basanti shared her experiences of facing issues in decision-making; the school committee members ignored listening to female teachers and decided to consider the opinions of the male teachers only. The school coordinator was also only men. She worked harder comparatively than the male teachers, but she was not trusted. They overlooked her. Here, Basanti may have found some differences. To get empowered, one needs to experience some struggle to tackle the situation. The Cornell Empowerment Group (1989) states power as the capability of some individuals and administrations to produce unpredictable and predictable effects on others. Gender discrimination and biased behaviour happen in such a way as to bind, change, and repeatedly prohibit females' right to labour, travel, tie a not, dissociate, and involve in socio-cultural, financial, and administrative actions (Gupta et al., 2021).

Similarly, Sen (1995, p. 268; 2004a, p. 337) states that the competency methodology agrees on an evaluative universe which does not amount to a concept of integrity. Furthermore, Sen is concerned that integrity should encompass aggregate and distributive considerations, a feature lacking in the capability approach. Additionally, a theory of justice necessitates practical elements like the principle of non-discrimination, which the capability approach does not encompass.

All the participants have encountered some inequality in their workplaces and homes. Male teachers, whoever was there, got selected in their place. The prevalent trend cannot achieve the targeted goal if they do not feel equality in the workplace. According to a report in the UN's Human Development Report, the Gender Inequality Index (GII) measures the loss in human development within a nation caused by gender inequality. It assesses potential losses using three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and labour market participation. Nepal is positioned at 118th place with a GII value of 0.480 (UNDP, 2017).

The study found that women teachers have always sacrificed their work-life for their families. My research participants have left their jobs for the sake of their children and their family responsibilities. Men seem to be silent and do not react to family responsibilities. The socio-cultural tradition has also influenced female teachers to engage more in family life. The women are found to be struggling from the root level in their second-time enrollment in teaching. I find this painful for female teachers. Once they are enrolled, they are qualified enough for the job to apply for the same position they were working in earlier. This shows that most of the institutions do not trust female teachers. A few female teachers cannot concentrate on the teaching-learning process as they are disturbed by the chores and children at home. Female teachers work harder than male teachers but are not trusted. They are not

given the freedom or opportunity to participate in training or sports activities. The male teachers pretend to make the female teachers participate in other school activities, saying it will be difficult for them as they are women with full household responsibilities. The workload at home also hampers the women's work lives as they are mentally disturbed by dual burdens. The most important thing is that women are supposed to look after the family, children, and other responsibilities at home; what are the responsibilities of males? A breadwinner is the earning member of the family; what about the women working as well as looking for all the duties at home? Gender inequality has made women feel inferior. Men grab the opportunity and leave the burden of household responsibilities on women.

Nonetheless, these female teachers have been empowered through their struggles. Sometimes, the difficult way also leads to beautiful destinations. Similarly, female teachers have empowered themselves to struggle with difficult circumstances.

## Conclusion

The study suggests that women teachers need freedom in their workplace and home to enjoy all the responsibilities. The socio-cultural tradition needs transformation through the change in the perception towards women. Society is for our well-being, not for discrimination. Women seem to suffer a lot when enrolling in teaching after their babies; educational institutions should make some policies for working women and help them sustain themselves in their profession for a long time by providing proper time. Women teachers are found to leave their jobs primarily because of the children. To solve this problem, the school can make a small nursery for the children and may keep a caretaker so that the females can concentrate properly during their working hours. Taking care of the family is not only a womanish job. The male should also contribute and help the women and help them be strong in every field. Man earns bread for the family, so they are superior; women also make the family. Therefore, women have equal social status.

Gender discrimination shows inferiority and superiority; every human must learn about equal contribution. Women and men should divide the workload to maintain a good environment of equality at home and in the workplace. The government policy on providing maternity leave needs to be revisited and built equally for teachers working in public and private schools. For proper involvement and professional sustainability, female teachers need an equal environment and practice of equality in the workplace and at home. Female teachers need rewards to get motivated toward their work.

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