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# **Integrating and valuing rural womanhood in community development projects: Case study lessons from Nepal**

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## **Abstract**

Rural women and women in remote locations are a critical but overlooked resource in community development projects. Nepalese women have made particularly significant contributions in their own environments, with their local knowledge standing out as an especially decisive intervening variable in the success of project outcomes. Existing descriptions of the dynamics and delivery of Nepal's School and Community Health Project (SCHP) are examined for the project's skillful incorporation of and attention to gender sensitivity in service delivery. Theoretical perspectives in social work, a foundational discipline of community development practice, is used to contextualize and reflect on the effectiveness of SCHP and related projects, while systems theory and chaos theory in particular are useful metaphors to understand projects' causality and organization. A reflection on relevant integration of social work knowledge is also provided.

Rural women are engaged as clients in a range of international community development projects. In Nepal, rural women have participated in many community development projects and community organizing initiatives to improve local conditions. In collaboration with social workers, marked improvements in quality of life have been achieved for many populations of rural women, despite significant historical and ongoing barriers. Following an overview of some experiences of rural womanhood in Nepal, I provide information on rural women's participation and connect relevant social work-inclusive projects to related theoretical concerns. As well, I describe and analyze the skills, knowledge, and ethics used by workers in the concerned development projects, with a particular focus on Nepal's School and Community Health Project (SCHP), a community development project that improved literacy rates and economic outcomes for women in many regions of Nepal. I rely strongly on descriptions of SCHP in the existing literature, such as those from Jimba, Poudel-Tandukar and Poudel (2008), who make a strong case for the decisive role of community health development in rural contexts.

Keywords: women, Nepal, community development, rural, gender

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## **1.0 The State of Rural Womanhood**

Populations of rural women may be uniquely affected by certain systems and subsystems within particular settings. Across different countries and time periods, the social context of rural and remote regions impacts women's community needs and involvement. Rural women often have unique and overlooked health needs,

partially due to stressors related to rural living, such as geographic isolation, economic restructuring, and increased vulnerability to natural disasters (Harvey, 2009). Many rural communities have faced problems such as high unemployment rates or inaccessible, inadequate services, while rural people who leave their communities may face social stigma and discrimination in larger centres (McGuire, Li, & Wang, 2008). Nevertheless, the presence of unique stressors does not mean that rural women necessarily experience higher rates of illness. On the other hand, in many contexts rural women and their communities often have clear disadvantages in health and social outcomes, and rural women may rate their own health as poorer than comparable groups of urban and suburban women (Harvey, 2009). Current literature continues to affirm the importance of gender equality in diverse contexts of community practice, broadly considered, from HIV prevention to children's schooling (Gerritzen, 2016; Luz & Agadjanian, 2015).

In any given country, local circumstances can mediate impacts on rural women, and frequently produce systematic disadvantages. In Nepal, Temang (2009) contends, for example, that state efforts to construct a unified national identity have been achieved by eclipsing and excluding many diverse populations of women.

The location of rural women within community systems has been important for the implementation of the SCHP and related projects. In Nepal, rural men frequently migrate to urban centres for seasonal work, as there are few employment opportunities other than farming, and available small, poorly managed landholdings often limit incomes (Acharya, Yoshino, Jimba, & Wakai, 2005; Pandit & Thapa, 2004). This means that rural women play a central role in the economic development of many parts of Nepal, making rural women's economic empowerment a key concern for the project's self-help groups.

## **2.0 Participation in Projects**

While Nepal lacks an organization with membership in the International Federation of Social Workers, the profession is organized at the national level as Social Workers Group Nepal (SWOG). As well, there is an extensive record of community development and organizing involving rural women in Nepal, where women have recently played a role in the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) that is markedly powerful by regional standards. Recent initiatives spearheaded by Nepalese rural women include efforts to reduce child marriages and polygamy, along with attempts to ban the practice of making women sleep in cowsheds during menstruation. Recently, regulation of alcohol sales in Nepal was achieved in 2001 after lobbying by the All Nepalese Women's Association (Revolutionary), pursued as a means to reduce public drunkenness and domestic violence (Temang, 2009).

An important example of community development among rural women in Nepal that includes social workers is the School and Community Health Project (SCHP), a joint project of the Japan Medical Association, Japan's international development agency, and the Nepalese government. The SCHP's initial emphasis was on the organization of adult literacy programs and women's self-help groups, with the latter focusing on savings and credit resources, as well as skills development in food production and preparation.

It is expected that the different targets of the programs streams could have powerful effects when appropriately combined. Sound and widely attended literacy programs, for instance, may provide greater chances of economic opportunities,

while the esteem and knowledge afforded by increased literacy may impact social development. Rural women themselves, in this intervention, particularly valued post-literacy classes focused on sanitation, immunization and family planning (Acharya, Yoshino, Jimba & Wakai, 2005).

In other contexts, such as Mozambique, some women may face significant barriers to participation in community development initiatives. Important obstacles to participation include the high prevalence of poverty and illiteracy, particularly among rural women (Government of Mozambique, 2000), and a vulnerability to violence and sexual assault, sometimes higher among rural women, especially during armed conflict (Moura, 2009). Certain subgroups of rural women in Mozambique may also be differently disadvantaged, such as women with a particular relationship status. For women in rural Mozambique, employment opportunities may be differently impacted according to whether they are single, partnered, separated, divorced, or widowed (Oya & Sender, 2009).

Nevertheless, rural women have been instrumental in many efforts to increase community assets and community capital within Mozambique. Social networks of rural women have been important in assessing peace and conflict impacts (Bornstein, 2010), in identifying barriers to girls' education (Roby, Lambert & Lambert, 2009), and in understanding how agricultural processes may influence stress (Igreja et al., 2009).

### **3.0 Theoretical Background and Concerns**

Systems theory is a transdisciplinary way of thinking about interactive and interdependent subunits (Homan, 2011). In the context of community development and social work, systems theory emphasizes how conditions and circumstances are tightly connected to their environments, whether in the context of individual clients or global institutions. This perspective emphasizes the holistic, diverse influences of physical, social, economic, and political environments on individual and community life, and international community development projects must inevitably incorporate knowledge of systems to be successfully implemented. Systems thinking, in community health disciplines, can "help projects [reach] a more integral and sustainable approach" that incorporates complexity into every step of planning and delivery (Naaldenberg et al., 2009, p. 39).

Successful community development projects in Nepal have relied on adequate knowledge of relevant systems, the systems themselves often intimately tied to local environments and cultures. I take 'adequate knowledge' to be that which demonstrates strong cultural competence, a construct which has been classically defined in community practice as including caring, cultural sensitivity, cultural knowledge and cultural skills (Kim-Godwin, Clarke & Barton, 2001).

Social workers and other professionals involved in a joint project between NGO water supply agencies, for instance, required knowledge of indigenous management systems in order to successfully develop infrastructure for community water supplies (Lammerink, 1998). In the context of the SCHP, cultural competence included, for example, cultural knowledge of the market economics of kitchen gardens and of the local products that were targeted for group investment (e.g., poultry, baskets, rope).

Rural women's community development in Mozambique has also likely required knowledge of systems which may frequently be overlooked. The potential for

urban bias may be applicable to the social context of women in Mozambique: while formal economic planning may adequately target urban women, development efforts by international NGOs and state social workers may easily neglect the hidden system of informal, underground markets and work that may more closely affect women in rural and remote areas (Pellizzoli, 2010).

To the extent that hidden (that is, unknown to practitioners) economic and indigenous management systems may exhibit sensitivity to any change in conditions, the related conceptual framework of chaos theory offers a unique vantage point from which to compare contexts. To reframe a previous example, the impact of SCHP's literacy initiatives on economic development (e.g. incomes, debts, savings, and investment) can be viewed as a kind of butterfly effect; a large and beneficial result from a small manipulation. Most applications of chaos theory to social systems view these systems as dissipative (giving off and decreasing in energy as they move), and most applications of chaos theory within the social work literature has been limited to metaphorical or conceptual descriptions (e.g. involving client systems) (Hudson, 1999).

However, there are applications originally developed outside the profession that are highly applicable to social work. For instance, some psychologists have described the therapeutic processes within psychotherapy as chaotic, highlighting how it is inherently nonlinear, interactive, and constantly moving. Importantly, what Hudson describes as an important sociological application could be meaningfully connected to community development.

A classic example is the urbanologist Jane Jacobs' application of how Birmingham's ostensible disorganization made it more adaptive to changing circumstances, while orderly Manchester's symmetric, regimented planning, she suggests, partially explains its comparatively lower quality of life (Hudson, 1999). In essence, such metaphors can help practitioners think in innovative ways about the complex effect and potential of even the smallest intervention.

Equally, one could examine, for instance, whether the orderly comprehensiveness of community capacity building approaches renders them similarly inflexible. The critique that community capacity building is tepidly apolitical, for example, could be extended just as much to show that it is just hampered by adherence to bureaucratic, scientific approaches (Smyth, 2009). A similar view could be taken on the potential benefit of a 'chaotic' (unstructured, fluid) unfolding of processes in therapeutic relationships. More generally, the approach of systems and chaos theories highlight how dynamically different rural womanhood varies within and between Nepal and Mozambique.

#### **4.0 Integrating Social Work Knowledge in Community Practice With Rural Women**

The social work skills of valuing and engaging with diversity and difference, as well as engaging in culturally sensitive communication, are found throughout practice but tend to be particularly important in international development contexts (Cournoyer, 2007). Cultural competence, the closely related ability to understand, respect, and effectively interact with different cultures (Homan, 2011), has been an important consideration in successful community development projects involving rural women. An important means of appropriately applying cultural competence in the SCHP has been taking steps to avoid urban bias; previous data show that

urban bias often limits the success of community development initiatives in developing countries (Lipton, 1988).

Urban bias and insufficient cultural competence on the part of development programs has been implicated in previous planning problems in Nepal, where development has often been focused solely on Kathmandu (Wildavsky, 1972), while other examples of successful community development in Nepal have found culturally competent practice necessarily ubiquitous. The implementation of SCHP, for instance, has likely had to include collaboration and knowledge of Nepal's ethnic groups.

At a practical level, Nepal's linguistic and cultural diversity imposes new requirements on the resources social workers have been required to mobilize. Language and dialect differences add a new layer of complexity when composing grant applications, form letters, and fundraising materials. During community consultations, carefully organized to be congruent with Nepalese norms for meeting and gathering, accents of the various speakers may require the active participation of an interpreter. Apart from the challenges in locating interpreters, the participation of an outsider in a mediating role as a critical communicator has sometimes raised issues of trust.

Social workers involved in successful Nepalese community development initiatives have had to take steps to be inclusive of minority ethnic groups. For instance, in a SCHP target area, Kavrepalanchok District in Nepal's hilly central interior, the Tamang have been traditionally been socially dominant, while the Newar, Brahmin, and Chhetri have been subordinate. Ongoing preparatory review and awareness of information has therefore probably been important for SCHP's staff, especially as the social status of different groups may vary between geographically close regions.

While exclusion of women is invariably viewed as incongruent with social work values (Harvey, 2009), disregard for important community norms can easily impair a social worker's ability to do effective work. Temang (2009) cautions against imposing Western meanings on such practices, and emphasizes that menstrual taboos are found in many cultures, and may not necessarily be perceived as disempowering. Nevertheless, this custom highlights how identifying and navigating towards ethical practice outcomes can be challenging in cultures that are unfamiliar to any given practitioner. At the same time, workers in community development projects must equally realize that cultural navigation and cultural competence are not only meaningful skills in the context of 'unfamiliar' cultures, subcultures and populations, even if such examples make such skills appear more salient.

## **5.0 Reflective and Concluding Comments**

The characteristics and needs of rural women vary, while many groups of rural women face broadly similar challenges. Frequently, physical and social isolation may produce challenges that can co-occur with and compound the challenges of rural womanhood, such as poverty, racialization, and disadvantage due to regional or social origin. Women of less recognized sexualities or abilities may also face unique challenges within the context of rural environments. Within Nepal, rural women continue to face significant barriers to participation in community development, although the work of Acharya et al (2005) and Jimba et al (2008)

show the clear benefit of their participation. The skillful application of cultural and local knowledge in health interventions remains central to community development practice.

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