

*Assessing Female Ownership of Fixed Assets in Nepal:
A new Feature of the Population Census 2001*

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Background:

Population Census in Nepal has a history of almost one century. The first census of the country was conducted in 1911. The Census of 2001 is the tenth in a series of the population enumeration in Nepal. The Census was done in two phases – the Household Listing operation followed by the Census Enumeration.

In absence of the regular household survey program and vital registration system the population Census is the main data source that provides an internationally comparable population database at all levels. Population composition, distribution, growth and change at various points of time are only provided by the census. The census data are used as benchmark, for fixing the target as well as for evaluation of the Government Plans and Programs.

Population census being a regular decennial event with standard international practice for comparability, there can not be major departure from one census to another. However, compared to the earlier censuses conducted in the country, there were noticeable differences in the questionnaire as well as the methodology of data collection in the 2001 census. In the 2001 census, special attention was given to the issues related to gender, women, children and the disabled. Similarly, on economic aspects, the household work and the extended economic activity were redefined and emphasized to overcome the under reporting and under coverage of especially female participation in the national economy.

The Population Census of Nepal 2001 (2001 census) was taken as the most appropriate source of sensitive data to “evaluate” women’s status in the society, their contribution to the economy and help the policymakers identify and formulate appropriate policies for the empowerment of Nepali women. So it was decided to engender the whole process of the 2001 census “to provide sex disaggregated data for the gender sensitive policies and programs”.

The earlier censuses too collected most of the data at a sex disaggregated level. But in case of the ownership of property by the household the data was collected without disaggregating the ownership of the property on the basis of gender (or no question was asked on whose name the property was registered provided it was in the name of one of the members of the household). The census questionnaire of 2001 for the first time, especially asked the question on whose name (male or female member of the household) the property ownership was. The main reason of collecting the property ownership data at sex disaggregated level was the logic that property ownership is very closely related with empowerment.

In Nepal like in most of the Patriarchal societies, the property especially the land and building are generally inherited by the sons from the fathers. Although the women ownership of property is allowed, but till recently the right to parental property was exclusively for sons. The daughters could acquire the right to parental property only if there were no sons or the daughters were unmarried till a certain age and after the marriage the right was lost. Even with the recent changes in the law which gives daughters the right to inherit parental property, the tradition is to divide it among sons. Even if there is a property in the name of mother, that too is transferred to sons provided the mother has not herself transferred the property to a person of her choice. The ownership of property especially land and house is crucial in determining the status of the person. The ownership of such assets decides the economic dependence or independence of the person concerned and provides the means to be engaged in productive economic activity. The person without ownership of assets is severely restricted in pursuit of activity of his /her choice.

The female members of the society who own property seem to command much more respect. The person who has no ownership can not get loan from the banks can not engage himself or herself in self employment. Without credit worthiness the ownership of business becomes very difficult if not altogether impossible. Ownership of business gives independence and ensures empowerment

The involvement of UNIFEM through a special project “Interventions to engender the Nepal 2001 census operations” and inclusion of gender specialists in various consultation processes and technical committee entrusted with the planning and execution of the census also helped the process. In order to accomplish the 2001 census with effective gender sensitization, the recommendations of the "Mainstreaming Gender Equity Programme (MGEP)" a UNDP supported project on "Mainstreaming Gender Considerations into National Development" were also considered.

Actions Undertaken:

The main actions undertaken in order to come to a reliable dataset on female ownership of assets are described below:

Gender sensitization workshop:

A two-day gender sensitization workshop was organized separately for senior and mid level officers of CBS. The training focused on creating awareness on gender issues. The workshop was found to be quite useful for beginners who had no idea about gender aspects, and it was a good refresher for those with some prior exposures in this field.

Brainstorming sessions for media campaigning:

A brainstorming seminar was organized for different stakeholders from the government, NGO, INGO and media. Besides evaluating the past experiences of media campaigns in the country, this one-day long seminar identified and outlined an effective media campaign for the 2001 census.

National workshop on Media:

A national workshop on media was organized. The gender sensitization issue was one of the issues discussed in the workshop. The workshop also provided practical guidelines for the development of appropriate census publicity materials concerning gender issues.

Material Development & Publicity:

Material development and publicity groups were formed to develop an effective publicity programmes for the census. A media group was also formed at CBS under the chair of the Director General. This group was especially asked to especially give attention on the gender issues.

Formation of technical committee and inclusion of the Gender Specialist in the committee:

A census technical committee consisting of different distinguished, experienced, knowledgeable persons in various aspects of census operations was formed under the chair of the CBS Director General. The census committees helped implement the gender sensitization programmes. A Gender specialist was part and parcel of the technical committee.

Occupation & Industry Classification:

This single exercise can be regarded as a milestone in recording women’s productive work more correctly. Previously, the work generally performed by women would not possibly be recorded in the first place; even if recorded, it was likely to be classified incorrectly.

Questionnaire & Manual Preparation:

The 2001 Census questionnaire included items related to women’s empowerment and manual tried to incorporate clear instruction and examples of female-headed households and importance of identifying house, land and livestock under female ownership.

Inclusion of visuals:

To explain female ownership of fixed assets, sketches were included in the enumerator's manual for the first time in the 2001 census. This helped the process of recording the female ownership properly.

Women Supervisors & Interviewers:

One strategy for engendering the 2001 census was to hire and recruit women supervisors and interviewers to the largest extent possible; women were given priority in recruiting census field staff. The idea behind it was that the women enumerators would likely record the women's story better. Besides, the women respondents would likely provide information to women enumerators than to their male counterparts.

Training of census personnel:

In the 2001 census, training was organized at different levels, ranging from master trainers to enumerators. The training sessions followed a gender specific approach.

Gender specific approach in data collection:

For the first time in history, the 2001 census followed a gender specific approach to data collection. To accomplish, this, several interactions were organized with data users and stakeholders, by the gender sensitizing workshops of CBS staff. Such efforts aimed to improve gender specific data quality.

Gender Specific Tabulation of Results:

CBS has processed and published gender specific tabulations of the census results. With the support of UNIFEM, a gender specific report has been published in three volumes, each volume being divided into two chapters with analytical descriptions.

Some Summary Results:

According to the 2001 census, the country had 4.25 million households with 23.15 million persons. The number of males was 11.56 million and that of females was 11.59 million. Predominantly the households are headed by men. According to the census results only 14.9 percent of the households reported that they were headed by a female. It was just marginally over from 13.2 percent of the previous census.

About 17 percent of households reported that one or more female member(s) either on land, or on house or on livestock. 5.3 percent of the households reported the female members having ownership in land only, 0.8 percent on house only and 5.4 percent on livestock only. Overall, only 0.8 percent of the households had all three types of assets house, land and livestock in women's names.

The census results also reveal that the likelihood of female ownership of property is higher among female headed households compared to male headed household. About 22 percent of the female headed household had land or house in the name of a female member of the household where as the corresponding figure for the male headed household was only 10 percent.

As the household headship implies greater autonomy and decision making control, it is natural that the women heads or women living in women headed households should have better access to female owned assets as compared to those living in male headed households.

Nepal has seen some important changes in the empowerment issue during the last few years. The newly elected constituent assembly has a much higher proportion of the women within it as a one

third of the proportional representation seats were reserved for women. The law has been passed that allows citizenship to be obtained on the basis of the citizenship of mother. New law provides inheritance right to daughters. Although these are significant positive developments, but much more needs to be done. The census activities helped in a small way to the ongoing process of empowerment. The issue is not merely to count but to change the way people think and behave.