

CHAPTER X FEMALE STATUS

Introduction

The status of women is an important factor affecting the socio-economic development of a country. The long term socio-economic development of a country cannot be fully realized if women, who usually constitute 50 percent¹ of the population, enjoy a subordinate position to men; and their talents remain unutilized or underutilized. In a society where women are mainly concerned with the domestic affairs and raising children not only the economic development of that society would be retarded but its fertility would also be high. Subordination of women to men, lack of communication between husband and wife, limited female access to education and employment opportunities have been suggested as obstacles to the diffusion of family planning and reduction in fertility. In this study, we will try to assess the socio-economic status of women in Nepal.

Before a description of the status of women is given in detail, the term "status" as used here needs explanation. Status has been defined in different ways. However, the definition of "status" employed here is consistent with that used by the United Nations. The United Nations has defined the status of women as the "conjunction of position a women occupies as a worker, student, wife, mother..., of the power and prestige attached to these positions, and of the rights and duties she is expected to exercise"². The UN

further attempts to provide a "culture-free" definition of status, "to what extent do women; compared with men, have access to knowledge, to economic resources and to political power, and what degree of personal autonomy do these resources permit in the process of decision making and choice at crucial points in the life-cycle?"³ This definition is based on the assumption that low status derives from a lack of control over material or social resources and from a lack of choice in the unfolding of one's destiny.

This study examines the latter definition given by the UN and describes the status of women compared with men in the fields of law, education, employment, marriage, fertility and mortality. However, there are some difficulties that need to be recognized when measuring the status of women which include among others:

1. A single measure cannot be used to assess the status of women; rather "multi-dimensional cluster of variables" is required to indicate the status of women,
2. Status is not a fixed, rigid concept, it changes over time-women occupy different positions in the social structure as they pass through the life cycle, and the very basis upon which the community ascribes power, privilege and prestige also change.

However, some ideas of the differences in status between men women, can be ob-

¹ In Nepal women constituted 49 per cent of the total population in 1981.

²United Nations. 1975. Department of Economic and social Affairs, *status of Women and Family*

Planning, New York : E/CN.6/575/Rev.,Sales No. E. 75. IV.5, 1975.

³ *ibid*,p.5.

tained from an examination of the measurements given by social indicators like the proportions receiving formal education, enrolment and dropping out from schools, and employment in services. Also by a comparative examination of the rights given by law, the status of women of the society could be measured even though the legal status given to them may not coincide with the actual status enjoyed.

The organization of the chapter is as follows:

Section II presents the educational achievement of men and women. Section III treats the demographic characteristics of women, such as sex ratio, age distribution, nuptiality, fertility and mortality, and also attempts to explain these sex differences in soci-cultural terms. Section IV describes the position of women within the employment sector of the country.

II. Women and Education

This section describes the position of women as compared with men in respect to education and literacy. While the constitution gives women an equal opportunity to education, social, economic and cultural factors contribute to make this opportunity less equal resulting in lower enrolment of girls and a higher drop out rate for girls than for boys.

Illiteracy “remains the greatest barrier to any improvement in the position of women in employment health, the exercise of legal and constitutional rights, and in generally attaining equality of status...”⁴

The majority of the population of Nepal are illiterate and of those, most are women.

Census statistic of 1981 indicate higher literacy rates for males than for females (see Table 6.1). According to the 1981 census, only 11.5 per cent of females as against 35 per cent of

males were literate.⁵ However, there has been a considerable increase in literacy rates for both males and females over the years. The percentage of female literate increased from 0.7 percent in 1952/54 to 11.5 per cent in 1981. The corresponding per cent for males were 10 in 1952/54 and 35 per cent in 1981.

The improvement in the level of male and female education is marked in almost every age-group, particularly in the younger age groups (Table 6.2) in both rural and urban areas (Table 6.3). For example, between, 1961 and 1981, female literacy rates has increased over eightfold, from 3 per cent to 25 per cent in the age- group 10-14. The corresponding increase was over threefold for males.

Literacy rates both over among men and women at all ages were higher in urban than in rural areas in each census year. Between 1961 and 1981 female literacy rate almost doubled in urban areas, while this increased nearly by nine times in rural areas. The corresponding increase for males in urban and rural areas were 8 per cent and more than one hundred per cent respectively (Table 6.3). The improvement in the level of male and female education was not only observed in rural and urban areas but also in every zone (Table 6.4), region (Table 6.5) and district of the country (Table 6.7).

Although there has been a substantial increase in female literacy over the year, yet this level falls far short of the level of male and moreover, the disparity between the sexes in literacy level is further widened during the intercensal period 1952/54 to 1981. For example, in 1952/54, male literacy rates was only 9 percentage points higher than that of the female rate. But in 1981, male literacy

⁴. Government of India. 1974. *Towards Equality : Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* : Department of Social Welfare, New Delhi.

⁵.The censuses undertaken from 1952/54 to 1971 defined a literate person as one who has the ability to both read and write in any language. However, this definition is slightly changed in the 1981 census when a literate person was defined as one who has had the ability to both read and write in any language with understanding

rate exceeded that of female rate by 23 percentage points.

Educational Attainment

It will be observed from Table 6.8 that there has been considerable improvement in regard to the attainment of a particular education level in each age-group over the years, for both males and females. For example, the proportion of females who had completed primary level education increased from less than one third of one per cent (.29%) in 1961 to over six per cent (6.80%) in 1981. The corresponding increase for the males was from 1.64 per cent in 1961 to 15.65 per cent in 1981. Similarly, only 1.46 per cent of males and 0.21 per cent of females completed secondary level education (6-10 grade) in 1961, the corresponding percentage in 1981 were 7.55 and 1.92 for males and females respectively. Only 0.51 per cent of males and .05 per cent of females completed higher secondary level education (11-12 grade) in 1961, the corresponding proportions in 1981 were 1.98 and .45 for males and females respectively. These figures show on the one hand, advancement in educational attainment for both males and females but on the other, it also shows widening disparity between sexes in regard to educational attainment over the years. For example, at the primary level education, the male rate was only one percentage point higher than that of the female rate in 1961, the corresponding disparity between sexes has widened to 9 percentage points in 1981 in favour of the males. A similar trend of widening disparity between sexes can be found in other levels of educational attainment. However, this disparity is more prominent at younger ages and lower levels of educational attainment. For example, in 1961, 5 per cent of males and 1.25 per cent of females aged 10-14 years had attained primary level education, the corresponding percentage in 1981

were 39 and 18 for males and females respectively. In the "35 years and above" age-group, only 0.52 per cent of males and 0.03 per cent of females had completed primary level education in 1981 were 5.61 and 2.36 for males and females respectively.

The disparity between sexes is relatively less pronounced at higher level than at lower level of educational attainment. For example, in the age-group 20-24, 14.02 per cent of males had attained secondary level education, compared with 2.94 per cent of females, while 5.97 per cent of males as against 1.38 per cent of females completed higher secondary level (11-12 grade) education in 1981. And this trend persists in almost all age-groups.

It may be further observed from Tables 6.9 and 6.10 that attainment of particular educational level in each age-group is higher in urban than in rural areas for both males and females. However, the male-female difference in regard to the educational attainment, is more glaring in rural than in urban area (Tables 6.9 and 6.10). For example, the proportions of males exceeded the proportions of females at primary, secondary, higher secondary and graduate levels by 2.46, 5.10, 7.40 and 11.66 times respectively in rural areas in 1981, while in urban areas, the proportions of males exceeded the proportions of females by 1.28, 1.61, 2.02 and 3.11 times at primary, secondary, higher secondary and graduate level respectively. These findings show that sex differences in favour of males every level of educational attainment are not only higher in rural than in urban areas but also this disparity between sexes rise with level of educational attainment particularly in rural areas.

Male-female difference in regard to the educational attainment between rural and urban areas is more pronounced in the younger

than in the higher age-groups. For example, in rural area, the proportion of males completing primary level education exceeded that of the proportion of females by 21 and 3.23 percentage points in the 10-14 and 35 years and above age-groups in 1981. The corresponding sex imbalance in urban areas went down to only 9 percentage points in the 35 years and above age-group. This trend persists in almost every level of educational attainment (Tables 6.9 and 6.10).

Enrolment

Table 6.13 present the changes in gross enrolment ratios⁶ for boys and girls at different level of education during the last decade 1973/74-1983/84. At every level of education, female enrolment ratio falls far short of male. For example, in 1984 male enrolment ratio was more than 100 percent⁷ at primary level while this was only 50 percent among the females. At lower secondary and secondary level, female enrolment ratios are only 35 percent and 30 percent respectively of male ratios. And this sex disparity in enrolment ratio in favour of males not only holds for the country as a whole but for every development region and ecological zone (Table 6.15). It is to be also noted that the regional differences in respect of male enrolment ratio is less marked compared to female enrolment ratio. In order words, regional variations in enrolment ratios is mostly due to variation in the female rather than the male ratio. Among the development regions, Mid-western and Far-western Develop-

⁶ Refers to total number of children enrollment in a particular grade, divided by the number of children in the age group corresponding to the grade, multiplied by 100.

⁷ Enrolment ratio of over one hundred percent is due to the inclusion of under/ over aged and repeaters among the reported male students at primary level in 1984.

ment regions have relatively lower female enrolment ratio at every level of education compared to other regions (Table 6.15). Among the zones, Mountain has the lowest female enrolment ratio at every level of education. Even though, the female enrolment ratios fall far short of male ratios, the percentage increase in female enrolment ratios has been higher than that of males at every level of education. For example, the female enrolment ratio at the primary level has increased steadily from 7.1 percent in 1972 to 50 percent in 1984, a more than sevenfold increase during the period of only 12 years. The corresponding increase in enrolment ratio is only threefolds among the males (Table 6.13). A similar trend in the enrolment ratio by sex holds in every zone and region of the country (Table 6.15).

Enrolment at Higher Level Education

An important factor of the higher level (collage and above) enrolment is that the female enrolment is not only very low, but also remained almost unchanged at 20-21 per cent of the total enrolment during the last four year 1980-84. However, the percentage increase in female enrolment has been higher than that of males. During the period 1980-84 the percentage increase in higher level enrolment has been 59 percent and 78 per cent for males and females respectively (Table 6.17).

Retention Rate: The over all retention rate, i.e. number in successive grades related to the number when they first entered the school system, is very low and this is further lower for females (Table 6.19). Retention rates for males at each grade is higher than those for females. For example, on an average only 28 per cent of boys as against 24 per cent of girls reached grade 5 out of 100 students enrolled in grade 1 during the period 1977-79. The rate of dropout between grades 1 and 11 was about 51 per cent and 55 per cent for boys and girls respectively during the period 1977-83.

III. Demographic Characteristics

In this section, demographic indicators like the sex ratio; nuptiality and fertility levels will be presented and discussed. Data on age at marriage, infant mortality, and the sex differentials in these measurement will also be presented. An evaluation of these demographic characteristic will indicate, to a certain extent, the status and role of women in the society.

Sex Ratio

Given the inferior position of women to men in almost every walk of life in Nepal, female mortality is expected to be higher than male in Nepal as in other neighboring countries⁸, particularly Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. As a result the overall sex ratio⁹ of the population of Nepal is expected to be more than 100. The sex ratio observed in 1952/54 and 1961 was less than 100 implying more females than males in the total population of Nepal (Table 3.3). This finding is not only unexpected but also inconsistent with the pattern observed in other SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation) countries (Table 3.2). This unexpected finding could coverage in the early censuses. However, with the passage of time as census coverage improved due to increased experience in undertaking census, the expected finding has been recorded. Between 1961 and 1981 there was a steady

increase in the sex ratio of the population of Nepal from 97 males per 100 females in 1961 to 105 in 1981. This has also been reflected in the masculinity proportion in the total population. The masculinity ratio increased from 49 per cent in 1952/54 to 51 per cent in 1981. This increase in the sex ratio and masculinity proportion in the total population confirm the hypothesized male-female ratio to be observed in the Nepalese society.

Sex Ratio by Age

Women in Nepal do not have equal status as men in every walk of life. Given this situation one would expect higher mortality for females than males at all ages in Nepal as in other countries of the sub-continent particularly in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. One would, therefore, expect to find males out number females at every age. And this has also been largely supported by data.

There are more men than women in all age groups in Nepal, except for those in ages between 20-34 (Table 3.3). Nepal had a long history of emigration of men particularly at the young adult ages between 20-34 years. And this was possibly the reasons for finding more females than males in these age groups in all the censuses of Nepal conducted since 1952/54.

Age at Marriage

The values of the singulate mean age at marriage for the country as a whole, estimated from the census data have been provided in Table 5.6. Examination of data reveals that the singulate mean age at marriage has increased from 19.4 years in 1961 to 21.8 years in 1981 for males, and from 15.1 years in 1961 to 17.1

⁸ Factors like marked preference for sons and consequent neglect for daughters, the adverse effect of frequent and excessive child bearing on the health of women have often been cited as contributing factors to the higher mortality of females in the Indian subcontinent.

⁹ The number of males per 100 females, a sex ratio over 100 denotes the excess of males over females and a sex below 100 denotes the excess of females over males.

years in 1981 for females.¹⁰ According to the census there has been a steady increase in the singulate mean age at marriage by at least 2 years, for both sexes since 1961. However, 4-5 years difference in singulate mean age at marriage for males and females still remain unchanged during the last two decades. This wide age difference between husband and wife once again demonstrate the inferior position of women to men. The husband's influence in family decision-making is further ensured in a situation where he marries a girl much junior to him by age.

Even though there has been some increase in age at marriage during recent years, the age at marriage particularly for females is still very low-only 17 years. The overall lower age at marriage, particularly high fertility values and concern of guardians to give away a girl in marriage the moment she attains puberty and moral reasons.

Age at Marriage by Background Variable

The mean age at marriage is found to vary by residential status. Utilizing census data the singulate mean age at marriage for females was estimated to be 17.1 and 18.5 for rural and urban areas respectively in 1981. The corresponding figures for men were 20.6 and 22.5 for rural and urban areas respectively (Table 5.10). Using the census data of 1981, education particularly females education is found to have greater impact than male education is more pronounced beyond the

¹⁰ The estimated mean age at marriage in 1981 is slightly higher than the legal age at marriage which is fixed at 16 years for a girl and 18 years for a boy with guardian's consent. However, a girl of 18 years of old and boy of 21 years old can enter into a marriage contract without guardian's consent [Legal code (sixth amendment) Ordinance, 1975. Nepal Press Digest Ltd.(mimeo)].

primary level. For men the age at marriage rises from 20 for those primary education to 21 and 22 for those who completed lower secondary and secondary and higher secondary level of education respectively. The female age at marriage rises sharply by two years from 17.85 at primary level to 19.88 at the lower secondary level and thereafter it tapers off slightly. The moderate decline in female age at marriage from lower secondary level to secondary and higher level may be attributed to the chance factor only resulting from the small number of case in the highest education category for females. An attempt was also made to examine the net effect of some socio-economic variables on female age at marriage by using district level data of the 1981 census. Among the five variables (% literate male, % literate females, % agricultural participation, female labour force participation rates and sex ratio) examined participation in the female labour force is found to be the only variable positively affecting the female mean age at marriage in a district. And this relationship is also found to be statistically significant. The implication of this finding is to increase the greater female participation in labour force in order to boost the female age at marriage.

Marital Status

This sex age distribution of the population by marital status reflects the history of the prevailing marriage formation and dissolution pattern. If such patterns are reasonably stable one may draw conclusions as to the typical features and characteristics of marriage as a social institution. A comparison, therefore, of the sex-age distribution of the population by marital status for 1971 and 1981 would give some idea of the changes in marriage trends.

Pattern of Marriage

An examination of the census figures clearly reveal that marriage is universal in

Nepal and there is no change in this pattern over the time. All but the physically and mentally disabled men and women in Nepal marry. According to the 1981 census, about 3 per cent of women had never married by the age of 30-34 years. However, by the age of 50-54 years only 7 per cent of men had never married. Although there is no change in the overall proportion married, due to the rise in age at marriage, there is proportionately more never married persons at the younger ages in 1981 than those in the earlier census of 1961 (Table 5.5).

In 1961, 26 per cent of women aged 15-19 years and 26 per cent of men aged 20-24 years never get married. Whereas in 1981, 49 percent women in the group 15-19 and 41 per cent men in the age 20-24, were never married (Table 5.5).

There are some other changes over time particularly with respect to widowhood and divorce.

Widowhood

The proportion of men and women who are widowed is lower in 1981 than in 1961. In the age group "60 years and over", 66 per cent women and 25 per cent men were reported to be widowed in the 1961 census. The corresponding figures in 1981 were 32 percent women and 11 per cent men. This could either mean that more men. This could either mean that more men and women are re-marrying over time, or that mortality rates are improving (Table 5.7).

Divorce

The incidence of divorce, particularly with respect to women has increased during the period 1961-81, while for men this figure shows a decline. The proportion of women aged 10 years and above divorced/separated increased by 24 per cent from 34 per cent in 1961 to 42 in 1981, the corresponding proportion among males declined by 8 per cent from

.40 per cent to 33 per cent during the same period. This decline was marked at almost every age group. However, it is not clear whether the increased divorce rate among women is due to their increasing exercise of the right to divorce or that they disowned by their husbands under economic duress (Table 5.8).

Mortality

There is hardly any reliable data available on birth and deaths for the country as a whole. In the absence of reliable direct data, estimates of mortality were derived through indirect techniques. These estimates show higher females than males mortality as reflected in the indices of life expectancy at birth, infant mortality rates, crude death rates and age-specific mortality rates, etc. The rates which are based on rare direct data also show higher mortality for females than males in most indices.

Life Expectancy at Birth

The mortality situation of a country is best depicted by the index of expectation of life at birth. It is defined as the average number of year a new born baby is expected to live if he/she is exposed throughout its to the prevailing pattern of age specific death rates. The expectation of life at birth ever calculated on the basis of direct data on age specific mortality rates are from the Demographic sample survey of 1974-75 and 1976. According to those calculations, the expectation of life at birth was 46.0 for males and 42.5 for female for the period 1974-75 and 53.4 for males and 41.1 for females for 1976 (Table 13.10). The expectation of life at birth estimated by using cohort survival method was 46.3 for males and 44.2 for females during the intercensal period 1971-81. The life expectancies at birth based on the average of age-sex-specific death rates from the Demographic Sample Surveys of 1974-75 and 1976 were 45 for males and 42 for females (US

Bureau of Census, 1979)¹¹

There has been substantial improvement in the expectation of life at birth for both males and females over the years. However, this increase was more marked for males than for females. During the last 27 years (1954-81), male life expectancy has increased by about 24 years and that of female by about 20 years (Table 13.10). The estimated life expectancy for females increased by nearly 8 years from 1966 to 1976 and 4 years between 1976 and 1981. In other words, the life expectancy for females increased by 31 per cent during the last 15 years (1966-81). The corresponding increase was 37 per cent for the males (Table 13.10).

The finding of lower expectation of life at birth for female although not consistent with the pattern observed in the low birth rate developed countries but closely corresponds with the pattern obtained in the neighboring countries particularly India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The lower expectation of life at birth for females is largely due to higher maternal mortality, i.e. deaths related to pregnancy and child birth or its prevention through induced mortality of females, particularly in the age-group 1-4 years. And this differential probability of survival is reflected in actual death rates (Table 13.5).

Age-specific Death Rate

The only large scale recent data on age specific death rates are those collected by the Demographic sample serves of 1974-75, 1976 and 1977-78 and these are presented in Table 13.5. It may be observed that in 1974/75, the death rates were higher for women than for men, in most instance expect for infants. And this sex disparity is more glaring

in the reproductive particularly at ages 35-44 implying greater risks of death due to complications in child birth, especially at older ages of child bearing. A similar pattern of mortality by sex pattern in mortality observed in 1977-78 is not in conformity with the pattern observed in 1974-75 and 1976 and also contrary to ones expectation. This may be considered more of an exception rather than the rule. Moreover, the mortality pattern observed during the 1977-78 was suspect. For example, the infant mortality rate of 104 for 1977/78 is too low in comparison to the infant mortality rates of 152 obtained from Nepal Fertility survey, 1976¹² and 144 estimated for 1978 by using 1981 census data on the proportion dead among children ever born by age of the mother. The low infant mortality reported in the 1977-78 Demographic sample survey may be attributed to under counting of death particularly females deaths.

Maternal Mortality

One of the major factors of adult female death between the age of 10 to 49 years is due to child bearing and child birth. There is very little information on meternal mortality other than that provided by Fertility, Mortality and Morbidity survey of 1977-78. This survey carried out in selected districts of Nepal- the rural area of Katmandu, Kavre and Rupendehi- provided an estimate of maternal mortality rate of 8.5 per 1000 live births¹³

Adult mortality with reference to male and female survival probabilities from birth

¹¹. US Bureau of Commerce, department of Commerce, 1979. Country Demographic Profiles: NEPAL, Washington D.C.

¹² This was calculated by adding all the reported infant death over a period of these years preceding the survey and dividing by the total number of births during the same period.

¹³ Nepal FP/MCH project, Nepal FP/MCH Data Analysis: Final Report. The Population Council, n.d.

to age 25, 30,...55 estimated by using data on the proportion not widowed from the 1981 census also showed higher female mortality in the prime reproductive ages 25-29 to 35-39 (Table 13.4).

From these findings, one may tend to hypothesize that freeing women from excessive births will allow them to live longer.

Infant/Childhood Mortality

The infant mortality rates corresponding to the life expectancies estimated for the intercensal period 1971-81 were 144.5 for males and 150.38 for females (Table 11.8). However, some other estimates show higher infant mortality rate for males than females (Table 13.2). Although the evidence regarding higher female than male infant mortality is inconclusive, child mortality (between the ages one and five) is found to be higher for females than for males. Child mortality rates¹⁴ using data from the Nepal Fertility Survey 1976, were found to be 108 and 113 per 1000 male and female children.¹⁵

Crude Death Rate

The crude death rates estimated for the various period between 1954 and 1984 clearly show higher rates for females than males expect for the period 1953-61 and 1977-78 (Table 13.1).

IV Women and Employment

Section 3 of Article 10 of the Constitution on "Right to Equality" states that "there shall be no discrimination against any citizen in respect of appointment to the government service or any other public service only on the grounds of religion, race, sex... (H.M.G.

1976)¹⁶. An equal opportunity for economic participation is or should be the right of all men and women, because discrimination against women is incompatible with human dignity and the welfare of the family and of society¹⁷.

Employment is a difficult topic to discuss. There are ambiguities, regarding the definition of employment such as confusions over the minimum age at which employment rates should be calculated, the type of activities (agricultural, unpaid family help, work in the house), which should be included when calculating unemployment rates, and the reference period upon which to base these rates. As a result, the tools for measuring employment or unemployment are not very satisfactory. If these tools are not adequate for men, they are even less adequate for women. While recognizing these deficiencies, this section on the status of women in employment considers employment in the same terms as are used in the censuses and surveys carried out in the country.

The disparity in employment rates and labour force participation rates in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, by sex will be discussed.

Labour Force Participation Rate

There exists a glaring disparity between men and women in economic activity rates. In Nepal only 46.2 percent of women aged 10 years and over were economically active as opposed to 83.2 percent of men in 1981. However, this disparity is narrowing over the years. In 1971, the male activity rate¹⁸

¹⁴ Child mortality (1-4 years) is measured on the probability of dying before age five for those of the cohort of births survived to age one (see Gubhaju, B.B. 1984. "Sex Differentials in Infant and Child Mortality in Rural Nepal", Contribution to [Nepalese Studies, Vol. 12, No. 1, Kathmandu.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ HMG. Ministry of Law and Justice. *Constitution of Nepal*, 1976. Law Books Management Committee, Trans. Kathmandu, p. 6.

¹⁷ Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. United Nations 1967.

¹⁸ The activity rate represents the number of economically active persons aged 10 years and above as percentage of the population of corresponding age i.e. 10 years and above.

exceeded that of female activity rate by 48 percentage points. But this is reduced to 37 percentage points in 1981 (Table 9.4).

The male participation rate at every age far exceed that of the corresponding rate for female. And this is found not only for the country (Table 9.8, Table 9.24 and Table 9.25). The finding of lower female participation rate can be attributed to the prevailing social and cultural barriers to the employment of women.

An examination of Table 9.1 and Table 9.2 also shows that while there has been a steady increase in the number of economically active males over the years, there was a conspicuous decline in the number of economically active females between 1961 and 1971. This has resulted in a sharp decline in the overall activity rate and growth rate of labour force particularly for females between 1961 and 1971. This decline in economically active females between 1961 and 1971 is more spurious than real. This was mostly due to over estimation of the number of economically active women in 1961. In 1961 several females were classified as economically active when their primary occupation was, in fact, as "housewives". The scope of misclassification is reduced since 1971 when elaborate guidelines were adopted, to delineate the labour force status of a person and in coding this information. However, the number of economically active females and female participation rate increased between 1971 and 1981 considerably. Between 1971 and 1981 the economically active female population grew (linear) at the rate of 5 per cent per annum compared with 2.60 per cent for men (Table 9.6). For the same period, the economically active female population grew at the rate of 4.74 per cent in rural and 13.66 per cent in urban areas.

The corresponding growth rates of men were 2.37 and 7.61 per cent only (Table 9.7).

During the last intercensal period, the female activity rate increased by 11 percentage points, while the male rate remained almost constant (Table 9.4). this increase in female activity rate is marked in every age group (Table 9.8) and for each development region (Table 9.24). Even though there has been considerable improvement in female participation rate between 1971 and 1981, the rate in 1981 still lags behind the rates noted in 1952/54 and 1961. this was mostly due to problems of definition and/or increase of female students over time. The number of female students has risen sharply from a mere 3,550 in 1961 to 93,871 in 1981, registering an annual growth rate of 127 per cent during the intercensal period 1961-81. Also there are some ambiguities regarding the classification of women whether within the labour force or within the housewife category. Several females were probably classified as agricultural labourers in 1952/54 and 1961 when their primary occupation was, in fact, housewives. These factors probably account, in part, for the decrease in the female labour force in 1971 and 1981 censuses compared with the 1952/54 and 1961 censuses.

It is to be also noted here that the female participation in labour force in Nepal is one of the highest in the SAARC region (Table 10.1).

Table 10.1-Economic activity rate of Nepal and few other neighbouring countries

Country	Reference Period	Activity rate*
Bangladesh	6.8.81	12.6
India	1.3.81	19.8
Pakistan	1.3.81	7.2
Nepal	22.6.81	26.77

*Economically active population aged 10 years and above as percentage of the total population

Source: ILO, *Year book of Labour Statistics*, 1984

Agricultural/Non-agricultural Sector

Another breakdown of the civilian labour force into the agricultural and non-agricultural sector is given in Table 10.2.

Table 10.2- Percentage distribution of agricultural and non-agricultural labour force by sex, 1981

	(figures in million)			
	Males		Females	
	Number	%	Number	%
Agricultural				
Labour force	3.98	58.27	2.27	33.24
Non-agricultural				
Labour force	0.36	5.27	0.07	1.02
Unspecified	0.13	1.90	0.02	0.30

It appears from the Table that of the 6.83 million people in the civilian labour force in 1981, 58.27 per cent males and 33.24 per cent females were in agricultural sector, while 5.27 per cent males and 1.02 per cent females were in the non-agricultural sector. In other words, for every woman employed in the agricultural sector there are about 1.75 man and for every woman in the non-agricultural sector, there are about 5 men. It shows that men more often than women tend to participate in non-agricultural activities. This is for women to find employment in the non-agricultural sector. However, female participation in non-agricultural activities has been increasing over the years. During the last intercensal period (1971-81), female participation in non-agricultural activities grew at the rate of 9 per cent per annum. The corresponding growth rate for male was only 4 per cent per annum (Table 9.6).

Table 9.14 provides the percentage distribution of the employed, i.e. economically active population by two major occupational groups, sex and residence, for 1971 and 1981.

I will be noted that for the country as a whole and for the rural areas, an absolute majority (89% and above) of male and female workers are engaged in agricultural occupations, although there has been a slight decline in this proportion during the last intercensal period. The proportion of females engaged in agricultural occupations is higher than that of males, but in the non-agricultural sector a higher proportion of males were employed. And this pattern of occupational distribution by sex exists in both rural and urban areas. The finding of a higher proportion of females in agricultural occupations may be attributed to the heavy concentration of female unpaid family workers in traditional agricultural sector.

Agricultural Sector

Census data for 1981 shows that of 6.25 million people in the agricultural labour force, the vast majority, 3.98 million or 64 per cent are men, while the remaining 2.27 million or 36 per cent are women. Out of 2.27 million 2.19 are in rural area which accounts for nearly 46 per cent of the rural females aged 10 years and above. This does not mean that the remaining 54 per cent are idle; village girls and women work very hard. However, agriculture is a subsistence family operation, and women's contribution to it is not recognized in economic terms. Women nevertheless are essential to the rural economy. Field studies based on time allocation and decision-making data show that women play major roles in Nepalese agriculture, both as labourers on the family farm and in the wage labour and also in farm management decision-making (CEDA

1981; Jones and Jones, 1976; Joshi, 1980; Pradhan, 1983)¹⁹.

In a recent time allocation study the amount of time rural women spent on various aspects of production activities has been found to be on an average of 10.81 hours a day; as a result, the study noted that men, on an average about 3 hours per day (CEDA 1981). The above study also confirms women are primarily responsible for the farm enterprise, particularly in terms of labour contribution. They contribute nearly 9.91 hours per day compared to 5.86 hours by men.

In spite of this heavy pre-occupation of women with various kinds of farm activities, their contribution to rural economy is not duly recognized because their activities are mostly confined to non-market subsistence production which are not features in the conventional measure of national income.

Women are involved in cleaning and husking rice, preparing fuel from cow dung, making molasses, and tending the kitchen garden where vegetables and fruits are grown. They are responsible for grain processing and storage, food processing and preservation, seed storage and preservation, and taking care of poultry and livestock. In weaving communities, they contribute substantially to

¹⁹ Acharya, M. 1981. "The Maithili Women of sirsia". *The Status of Women in Nepal*, Vol. II, Part I, CEDA, Kathmandu; Jones, R.L. and Jones, 1976. *The Himalayan Women*. Mayfield publishing Company, USA; Joshi, C. 1980. "Country Review and Analysis on the Role and Participation of Women in Agricultural and Rural Development in Nepal", Women Development Section. Ministry of Panchayat and Local Development; Pradhan, B. 1983. "The Role of Women in Household Production Systems and Rice Farming". Paper presented at conference on Women in Rice Farming, 26-30 September 1983, IRRI, Los Banos, Laguna; Centre for Development Administration. 1981. *The Status of Women in Nepal*, Vol. II, Part 9, Kathmandu

the work load by spinning thread for the handloom used in weaving. They also repair their homes—collecting mud from ponds/rivers to repair and replaster the plinth of the homes.

Since most of these activities are carried out in the privacy of home, they are not considered economic activities and therefore, excluded from the purview of calculation of GDP²⁰.

Non-agricultural Sector

Table 10.3 presents the numerical and percentage distribution of the economically active population by major occupation groups and sex for 1971 and 1981. Here, too, the great disparity between men and women in the various major occupational groups, can be seen. A look at the percentage distribution of the female labour force shows that 96 percent of all economically active women are engaged in agriculture. The proportion of women engaged in any occupation other than agriculture accounts for less than 1 percent of the employed population except production and related occupations. The proportion of women engaged in production and related occupations barely accounted for about 2 percent of the employed population in 1981. It shows that other than agriculture there is very little room for women workforce to be gainfully employed. There were few women employed in the white collar occupations. In 1981 only 11 thousand women as against 53 thousand men were engaged in the professional, technical and related occupations. For the same year, only 4 hundred women as against 6 thousand men were in the administrative and related services (Table 10.3). Although the female participation in white collar occupations were very significant, it showed

²⁰ Chaudhary, R.H. and Ahmed, N.R. 1980. *Female Status in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.

Table 10.3-Percentage distribution of the employed population by major occupation groups

Major occupations	Sex	1971		1981	
		Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Professional & Technical	Both Sexes	25,317	0.52	64,132	0.93
	Male	23,309	0.68	53,465	1.19
	Female	2,008	0.14	10,667	0.45
Administrative & related	Both Sexes	1,095	0.02	6,232	0.09
	Male	1,049	0.03	5,820	0.13
	Female	46	0.00	412	0.02
Clerical	Both Sexes	46,740	0.97	49,161	0.71
	Male	44,909	1.31	46,307	1.03
	Female	1,831	0.13	2,854	0.12
Sales	Both Sexes	60,157	1.24	85,341	1.25
	Male	52,908	1.54	72,863	1.62
	Female	7,249	0.51	12,478	0.53
Services	Both Sexes	34,231	0.70	16,430	0.24
	Male	28,866	0.84	14,053	0.31
	Female	5,365	0.38	2,377	0.10
Agriculture	Both Sexes	4,579,335	94.37	6,259,613	91.37
	Male	3,187,064	92.80	3,982,139	88.89
	Female	1,392,271	98.17	2,277,474	96.06
Production & related	Both Sexes	105,649	2.18	213,851	3.12
	Male	96,183	2.80	172,782	3.86
	Female	9,466	0.67	41,069	1.73
Not stated	Both Sexes	-	-	156,126	2.28
	Male	-	-	132,515	2.96
	Female	-	-	23,611	0.99
Total	Both Sexes	4,852,524	100.00	6,850,886	100.00
	Male	3,434,288	100.00	4,479,944	100.00
	Female	1,418,236	100.00	2,370,942	100.00

Source: Same as are those in Table 9.16

an impressive increase during the last intercensal period. For example, between 1971 and 1981, the proportion of working women employed in the professional, technical and related occupations almost trebled, while this was doubled for their men counterparts. Similarly, the proportion of men engaged in the administrative and related works quadrupled, while this proportion was increased by sevenfold for women (Table 10.3).

The percentage distribution of the employed population by major industries for 1971

and 1981 is shown in Table 10.4. It will be observed that 96 percent of the all economically active women are engaged in agricultural and allied industries both in 1971 and 1981 and this proportion roughly corresponds to the proportion of women workers engaged in farming and related occupations (Table 10.3). Again, a comparison of the major divisions in industry (excluding agriculture) shows the great disparity between men and women. Thus, according to the 1981 census figures given in Table 10.4 there were very few,

Table 10.4- Numerical and percentage distribution of economically active population 10 years and over by major industry division and sex for 1971 and 1981

Major Industry	Sex	1971		1981	
		Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Agriculture/Forestry/Fishing	Both Sexes	4,579,552	94.37	6,244,289	91.15
	Male	3,187,307	92.80	3,974,119	88.71
	Female	1,392,245	98.17	2,270,170	95.75
Mining & Quarrying	Both Sexes	36	-	971	0.014
	Male	31	-	712	0.016
	Female	5	-	259	0.011
Manufacturing	Both Sexes	51,902	1.07	33,029	0.48
	Male	45,391	1.32	28,115	0.63
	Female	6,511	0.46	4,914	0.21
Electricity, Gas & Water	Both Sexes	1,596	0.03	3,013	0.044
	Male	1,570	0.04	2,867	0.064
	Female	26	-	146	0.006
Construction	Both Sexes	5,016	0.10	2,022	0.03
	Male	4,876	0.14	1,903	0.0425
	Female	140	0.01	119	0.005
Commerce	Both Sexes	63,560	1.31	109,446	1.6
	Male	55,708	1.62	93,020	2.07
	Female	7,852	0.55	16,426	0.69
Transport and Communication	Both Sexes	9,637	0.20	7,424	0.11
	Male	9,322	0.27	7,080	0.16
	Female	315	0.02	344	0.01
Finance/Business	Both Sexes	3,466	0.07	9,850	0.14
	Male	3,331	0.10	8,846	0.2
	Female	135	0.01	1,004	0.04
Personal and Community Services	Both Sexes	137,759	2.84	313,570	4.57
	Male	126,752	3.69	268,062	5.98
	Female	11,007	0.78	45,508	1.92
Industry not stated	Both Sexes	-	-	127,272	1.86
	Male	-	-	95,220	2.12
	Female	-	-	32,052	1.35
Total	Both Sexes	4,852,524	100.00	6,850,886	100.00
	Male	3,434,288	100.00	4,479,944	100.00
	Female	1,418,236	100.00	2,370,942	100.00

Source: Same as are those in Table 9.13

If any, women employed in the industries of mining, electricity, gas and water, construction, transport and communication. Only a thousand women as compared with 9 thousand men were in the finance industry, and a mere

4,000 or so women in the manufacturing industry as compared with 28 thousand men. Only in the personal and community services, i.e. social services did women have a sizeable number. But this sector also accounts for a mere 2 per

cent of the economically active female population and there has been very little change from this pattern during the last intercensal period. We, therefore, find that very few women are engaged in any industry other than agriculture and allied industries and those fortunate few who ventured out of the agriculture sector are mostly engaged in tertiary sector of the economy.

From the preceding discussions, it is clearly evident that although disparity between sexes with respect to some aspects of socioeconomic life widened during the last three decades, there has been considerable improvement in the socio-economic status of women during the same period. However, further efforts are needed to bridge the socio-economic gap between sexes.