

**Gendered Inequalities in the Domestic Sphere: A Study of Nepalese  
Women's Situation During COVID-19 Lockdown**

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2021

**ÅBO AKADEMI UNIVERSITY – FACULTY OF ARTS, PSYCHOLOGY AND THEOLOGY Abstract for Master’s thesis**

Subject: Master’s programme in Social Exclusion/Gender Studies	
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Title of thesis: Gendered Inequalities in the Domestic Sphere: A Study of Nepalese Women’s Situation During COVID-19 Lockdown	
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<b>Abstract</b> <p>Gendered inequality occurs in a household when there are hierarchal distributions of roles in task performance, with most of the workload falling on one gender category. While gendered disparities origins from long-standing societal and cultural norms, the domestic sphere is a social environment where such differences situate and persist. In Nepal, the patriarchal system establishes systemic barriers to gender equality and distributes disproportionate decision-making authority in the domestic realm between men and women. Since patriarchal traditions regulate women’s workforce, they play submissive positions under male dominance, which establishes separate spaces for men and women, with men in the public domain and women in the private household realm. When women are gendered to perform in the domestic area, they shoulder a significant household and care work that exacerbates during pandemic outbreaks and lockdown, when all family members are stuck at home.</p> <p>This study examines the origins of patriarchy and unequal gendered roles in Nepalese homes and how women as a gendered group are affected when dealing with social emergencies like pandemic outbreaks.</p> <p>This thesis’s essence comprises the primary data collected through an online video interview of five Nepalese respondents from different family backgrounds and cities in Nepal and Finland. The Snowball sampling method is applied to choose the respondents for this study. In this research, the employed method is qualitative research through online interviews and open-ended questions, and the interpretative paradigm’s narrative analytical method analyzes the achieved materials. Previous research supports all narrative interpretations in the form of theoretical background.</p> <p>The findings of this study revealed that Nepalese women perceive themselves as the inferior gender among men and women. This result is from the influence of familial and</p>	

kinship norms that governed women's behavior during the Panchayat era. This idea aimed to improve Nepalese women to align their development with that of the women worldwide, resulted in several interferences restricted women's activities. Thus, these standards articulated patriarchy, which values men rather than women and divides the public and private domestic environments for the former and latter groups, respectively. Women still relegate more to the domestic realm due to the strong continuity of gendered inequalities in the work division. During the pandemic lockdown, this had a detrimental effect on all facets of their life, including a rise in unpaid care and domestic chores and deterioration in health, education, employment, and mental well-being.

This study finds that most women remain relegated to domestic rules, furthering gendered stereotypes in domestic spheres, demonstrating the persistence of historical standards. In addition, the prevalence of gendered household work burden and minor assistance from males in the domestic sphere has affected women's well-being. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, this situation increased women's economic dependency on men and education discontinuity, job instability, and the strain of unpaid domestic and child care duties.

Keywords: Panchayat period, Nepali women, development, COVID-19, unpaid care work

Date: 03.04.2021

Number of pages: 49

The abstract passed as maturity examination:

## **Acknowledgments**

I feel immense pleasure to express my deep sense of gratitude to my supervisors Kattis Honkanen and Ann-Charlotte Palmgren, for their encouraging and constructive guidance during this master's degree. I highly appreciate their logical discussions and decent feedbacks. This journey would not have been possible without both of your supportive mentorship.

I am very grateful to the Department of Social Exclusion/Gender studies, Åbo Akademi University for accepting me into their master's program.

I wish to thank my University teachers and administrative staffs who guided me directly or indirectly in my journey. I owe my sincere thanks to all my friends from the gender studies programme for their help in my studies. Many thanks to my friend Erina who provided a helping hand whenever needed.

Candidly thanks to all my respondents, whom I interviewed for generating data on my research. It would not have been possible without your help, so I would like to dedicate this thesis to all of you people.

I heartily bestow my sincere gratitude to my parents, Mr. Keshab Bastola and Mrs. Hima Bastola, for their sacrifices, blessings, and unconditional love. I am grateful to my gorgeous, lovely sisters.

Lastly, many thanks to loving and supportive husband, Bikash who assisted me continuously in the stressful time during my writing.

**Rina Bastola**

3<sup>rd</sup> May 2021

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## **Gendered Inequalities in the Domestic Sphere: A Study of Nepalese Women's Situation During COVID-19 Lockdown**

### **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Gendered disparity in a household arises when there is an unequal division of roles in task performances where maximum workload befalls upon one gender category. Reddy et al. (2020) state that gendered inequalities are rooted mainly in long-lasting cultural, societal, and human traditions. While an understanding of the division of labor is vital to understanding societal differences, such as gender inequalities (VanEvery, 1997: 411), the domestic sphere is a space of people within which the gendered inequalities locates and positions (Reddy et al., 2020). In Nepal, a South Asian country, the patriarchal values create systematic obstacles to gender equality and distribute unequal decision-making power between women and men in the domestic sphere (Aguirre & Pietropaoli, 2008; Bennett, 1983). Tamang (2000) also opines that patriarchy is the struggle between women and men to control women's labor power, and the use of gender is to stress the socially produced structures, meanings, and relations that the biological sex differences failed to describe correctly. Consequently, women perform the submissive roles agreeing to the authority of male members regarding housework because there are gendered roles of the household for the feminine and public or outdoor tasks for the masculine (Tamang, 2000: 127).

When women's roles are more confined to the household arena, a handful of tasks and care work falls on their shoulders, especially during health emergencies. A novel coronavirus named severe acute respiratory coronavirus 2 (SARS-Co-V-2) and COVID-19, in short, was first acknowledged in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China, at a market selling seafood in December 2019 (Zhu et al., 2020). The virus was characterized as a pandemic on 11 March by the World Health Organization (WHO), which led to an approximately six-month-long lockdown and curfew in Nepal (Gyanwali, 2020), deteriorating the industrial, tourism, entertainment, and transport sectors, slamming the economic growth and pushing three out of five people from their jobs and enterprises. Thus, the lockdown confined many Nepalese with their homes. However, one category of the population substantially affected by the pandemic and lockdown was 'women at home'. These are the people who had to work most of the time during lockdown doing domestic and care work. Women at home as domestic workers had to work between 18-22 hours each day, instead of standard 6-10 hours. A report by Nepal

Research Institute & CARE Nepal (2020) also states that Nepal's stratified and traditional society has assigned household duties to women, including care work for children and the elderly, and family members rarely shared their household and care jobs. However, these tasks are overlooked and regarded as unproductive and unpaid care work ascribed by the social mindset and male-controlled division of labor (Rana, 2021). In another news report, K.C. (2020) mentions that Nepalese women endured the additional pressure of taking domestic work burden, unpaid care works for the children and elderly, and the bulk of domestic household chores during COVID-19 lockdown. As a consequence, during lockdown, when the household work burden was already there, women also bore unpaid care work upon their shoulders due to the gendered roles for men and women.

My study attempts to trace how the disparities in the domestic domain are gendered in Nepalese households and seeks answers to the effect of global health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic on Nepalese women and their welfare. More precisely, I aim to examine the roots of patriarchy and unequal gendered roles in Nepalese households and see how 'women' as a gendered category are affected when the time comes to handle social emergencies, such as pandemic outbreaks, in this study.

## **Chapter 2. Purpose of My Study**

My awareness of the patriarchal society of Nepal in which I have witnessed and experienced numerous gender biases encourages me to research why such norms exist, especially between men and women. Among this gender category, women are often underprivileged, and their abilities are challenged based on the assumption that a boy child will continue the family generation. Women are also responsible for performing submissive roles, whereas men regulate the domineering positions in a household and society. Likewise, while studying in Finland as an international student, I became more motivated to write about Nepalese women because I see women in Finland generally have more equality and freedom than women in Nepal. However, the burden of household works here in Finland is unexempted from falling in women's division, here too, those responsibilities are being done more by women than men (Yle, 2020). Thus, the urge for this research is the gender biases in the domestic domain where usually the roles and responsibilities of managing home befall upon women whereas men avoid involvement in this area.

Moreover, the source of my thesis topic emerged from reading about the subject matters discussed in a Facebook women's group from Nepal called *Buhari Gang*, or Daughter's-in-law group (*We, Buhari*, n.d.). In this group, women shared matters based on household difficulties and behaviors of the family elders towards women who were daughters-in-law in Nepalese joint families during the lockdown in Nepal from March 2020 to July 2020 (Rayamajhee et al., 2021). Although some positive stories portrayed how supporting their family members and elders were towards women, most of them showed the opposite. The most common problem presented was the position of women in a household belonging to a joint family in Nepal who experienced inferior position among family members. Reading to their experiences, I also saw gender-based biases contributing to women's subordination in Nepal, which relates to my life before coming to Finland. That knowledge needed an outlet, and I also wished to learn the roots of such positionalities of women in their households which is why I chose this topic.

This is also to say, Nepalese women, as elsewhere, are responsible for completing a majority of household work. They are involved in multiple household management tasks, such as the family's health care, worrying about family members' well-being, caring for family's needs, and ending in doing continuous labor from morning to night. Considering this, the burden of care work upon women could usually heighten during social emergencies, such as a pandemic lockdown when families are stuck inside their homes. Such a situation might lead women to have less time for their recreational activities. If this continues to happen, then with the rising pandemic effects, women might devolve more into care and domestic needs having less time for themselves, therefore continuing gender inequality in the households. Therefore, my purpose is to explore how such gendered roles prevail and how those norms affect Nepalese women, especially during the pandemic lockdown.

My study aims to address the following questions:

- What factors influence the formation and furtherance of gendered roles in the domestic sphere in Nepal?
- How gendered inequalities in the household affect Nepalese women during social emergencies such as the COVID-19 lockdown, and in what ways?

This thesis pursues answers to these two research questions and revolves around the main themes of gendered roles in a household and how such roles affect women during social emergencies. More precisely, the discussion areas focus on the impact of COVID-19 lockdown upon women in different sectors such as the domestic environment, health, education, and career. This study will fulfill the criteria of reaching a scientific standard by highlighting current developments in the scholarly debate on the topic and undertaking qualitative analysis through interviews with various females of diverse family backgrounds in different cities of Nepal and Finland. With this, the study provides a clear picture of the current situation of women in Nepalese households, whether they feel unsupported by the male members in their domestic spheres and during health emergencies or not, and if so, what challenges they experience. The medium of analysis is from the data received through the interview materials by linking them to historical and theoretical backgrounds to relate to the outcomes from the interview.

### **Chapter 3. Material, Methodology, and Method**

#### **3.1. Informants and Material**

Finding informants for my research was challenging for me. At first, I tried to seek out participants online in the Facebook<sup>1</sup> group, *Buhari Gang*, a daughter-in-law page (We, Buhari, n.d.) of more than fourteen thousand Nepalese women members to share their happiness, troubles, success stories, and confessions. Since my study interest relates to Nepalese women's household experiences, I posted an invitation status on that online page, asking for voluntary participation in my research. Initially, there were around twelve people's appreciative comments and suggestions on my post. However, quite the opposite of my expectation of receiving numerous responses, only two women showed their interest, who also could not manage time later when I approached them through text messages. Therefore, I applied the snowball sampling method to find my respondents through some of my friends and some people I know from different cities in Nepal and Finland.

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<sup>1</sup> Facebook is a social networking website where users can post comments, make group pages to interact and share information, make contents, and many more (Nations, 2020).

Snowball sampling method is a technique for finding respondents; one subject provides contact information of other subjects, which provides the contact of other participants. In snowball sampling, the researcher gathers data from a few of the targeted population they can locate, then ask them to locate other members of the targeted population whom they happen to know (Babbie, 2014:188). Thus, one of my respondents living in Finland gave me information about one other participant from Finland. Likewise, my sister's friend, my informant in Nepal, introduced one more respondent, and for the one remaining respondent, I located her from my previous contact. There were seven respondents whom I initially chose; however, two of them found it intimidating to appear in an interview and were nervous about questions. To make them comfortable, I sent them initial details about the kind of questions I would ask. Later on, both women were unresponsive when I tried to reach out to them. Thus, considering the importance of people's consent to participate in an interview, I left them unbothered for my research interview.

The final five informants for my research are from different family backgrounds. Among them, two of the participants are from a city called Pokhara, which lies in the western part of Nepal, whereas one is from a village called Kavre, near Kathmandu, the country's capital city. The remaining two participants are originally from Nepal but residing in Turku, a Southwestern city in Finland. I have used pseudonyms for my informants' names as Sajhana (Kavre), Sima (Pokhara), Gita (Pokhara), Nita (Turku), Biva (Turku). All of my informants are well-educated among whom, Sajhana and Nita are university graduates, and the other three, Sima, Gita, and Biva, are soon graduating. Most of the participants were between the age of 28 to 33 years. All of the respondents are from Brahmin ethnic groups<sup>2</sup> of Nepal except Biva, belonging to the Newar ethnic group<sup>3</sup>. The Nepalese informants living in Finland live in a single-family<sup>4</sup>, and the remaining participants live in a joint family<sup>5</sup> in Nepal. Sima and Nita worked before the pandemic but lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 lockdown; however, only Nita found her job back as a Finnish old-care home worker later when the lockdown ended. The other of my participants were struggling with their house works and their education during the lockdown. These participants mainly shared their home

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<sup>2</sup> Brahmin ethnic groups are the caste who are sacred thread bearers and Hindus (Serchan, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Newars are known as the historical inhabitants of Kathmandu, Nepal.

<sup>4</sup> A single family in Nepal usually consists of 2-4 members including husband, wife and their children .

<sup>5</sup> A joint family generally comprises of 6-12 members including parents-in-law, husband, wife, their brother's family, and children.

environment, their time during the lockdown in Nepal and Finland affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which supported me in answering my research questions.

### **3.2. Research Methodology**

Gender discrimination in the domestic sphere and its effect on women at home during social emergencies are the subjects of a couple of findings based on qualitative research. For instance, K.C. (2019) studied women's changing gender roles in Nepal, where she conducted in-depth interviews. Similarly, Homan (2016) adopted a focus group qualitative method to explore Nepalese women's honor-defined positions in their households. Likewise, Gupta et al. (2021) adopted an intensive qualitative inquiry through phone interviews considering the in-person contact restrictions during COVID-19 about early difficulties brought by the pandemic in the lives of people in Nepal and India. These gender inequality research methods assist in developing a diverse approach that facilitates the gathering of rich knowledge about socio-cultural contexts and personal experiences. In light of this, I decided to conduct this research using a qualitative approach.

My role as a researcher was that of an insider since I was aware of the study area. Being a Nepali married woman myself, I have confronted and experienced gendered roles in a household in Nepal. Thus, my prior knowledge of the subject helped in asking meaningful questions, which respondents could understand rather than being concerned about the study's reliability and ethical concerns. Although reliability and validity are complex and contentious in qualitative research, Patton (2002) notes that one must consider them when planning a study, analyzing outcomes, and assessing its quality. While validity refers to the degree to which research results match reality, reliability refers to the repeatability and accuracy of research methods (Golafshani, 2003 as cited in Thapa, 2009). To achieve an accurate and reliable finding of this study, I took caution while selecting informants and research tools. I chose five informants of various backgrounds to explore the women's experience of gendered roles in their households and their influence in times of social emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the medium of conducting physical interviews with my informants in Finland. Since there were increasing cases of virus infection in my respondents' residences (Yle, 2021), my respondents asked to maintain distance and conduct

interviews through online media. In addition to Nepalese origin respondents from Finland, many of my respondents are from Nepal. Thus, considering the physical distance from Finland to Nepal and the safety of Nepalese women in Finland, I conducted interviews using Zoom, an online meeting application recently recognized as a viable tool for qualitative data collection (Archibald et al., 2019). The Zoom interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes. Most of my participants were mothers of small children and housewives, and they chose their own interview time as per their availability. All of my respondents requested that I conduct all five interviews in Nepali. Since I am a native Nepali speaker taking an international degree in English, I recorded, transcribed, and translated the interviews into English.

During my online discussions, I met interruptions such as children coming in the video and disturbing the mother in Finland and an infant wake up crying during one of my Nepal interviews. The mother whose infant was crying when I was taking the interview also had other disturbances. As she was initially sitting at some convenient place that seemed like the porch of her house, she was still disturbed by someone when we started talking, but there she was. I knew that because she responded with a short “yes” to the person while still talking with me, her expression and speech changed at once when responding to my question. Later, she moved from the porch and into her house, where her son woke up at her sound of talking. Another disturbance I faced was when I was interviewing one of my interviewees from Finland. Our interview had just begun, and her four-year-old son came from day-care and started talking to his mother. Consequently, I had to start the interview again in a few minutes when my respondent was ready.

The experience of conducting interviews for research through Zoom was a new technique for me, which gave a feeling of incompleteness as we were sharing a screen rather than eye contact. Despite this, receiving honest attention, answers, and accord from the interviewees fulfilled the search of materials related to my research topic. Additionally, I was also wary of my research tool: virtual semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Having considered all of this, I am hopeful that my study will reach valid and reliable findings.

### **3.2.1. Interviewing as a Method and Narrative analysis**

Seidman (2006:8) states that interview is a primary mode of inquiry since, throughout documented history, humans have made sense of their experiences primarily by recounting

narratives of their experiences. For example, the purpose of an in-depth interview comprises the comprehension of lived experiences of other people and the sense they make of those experiences. I applied a qualitative research method through virtual interviews and open-ended questions via the online meeting application Zoom to fulfill my research pursuits. I chose such an online platform considering social distancing with respondents from Finland involved in the study and the geographical distance from Finland to interview participants in Nepal. I conducted semi-structured interviews with five participants from January to March 2021. The purpose of my research is to explore women's experiences of gendered roles in their households along with the influence of those roles upon them in times of social emergencies, like, COVID-19. This kind of study is difficult by studying statistics, as conducted in a quantitative method. Thus, I found the qualitative research method more suitable and sensible to apply in this study. I used both primary and secondary data; however, primary sources of data are the basis for this research. The narratives of five informants are the preliminary data collected through an online interview for this research. As secondary data sources, I accessed various eBooks, journal articles, and websites related to the topic.

The qualitative approach generates a vivid and rich account of human experience used to understand the depth of any research. As a qualitative researcher, I am interested in finding subjugated knowledge, hidden and unarticulated, bringing previously untold stories. According to Silverman (2013), a qualitative method attempts to subjectively tap the deeper meaning of human experiences in specific periods. It explains how people organize their environment and make sense in their lives. Through this research method, the researcher also becomes closer to the interviewee through semi-structured interviews, assisting in collecting empirical data in detail. Therefore, qualitative data collection is an effective tool for my research. It will provide my participants an occasion to choose their own words, especially in particular subjects related to their experiences.

My study is built on the primary data, which is the firsthand information I gathered from my interview participants. The primary investigative tool for the collection of data is the semi-structured Zoom interview with open-ended questions. It generally refers to a context in which the interviewer has a sequence of questions in a general form of an interview schedule but could differ question series during the interview (Bryman, 2012). Thus, my purpose for choosing semi-structured interviews is to enable the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to noteworthy replies. This type of interview approach allows for a more in-depth examination

of my research questions and collecting original responses from my informants. Overall, I conducted individual interviews with my respondents regarding the topics of discussion, which I recorded, transcribed, and categorized under the common themes that emerged from all discussions.

For the analysis of my data, I used a narrative analytical tool in this study. This research tool assists in a better understanding of how people express themselves or their experiences to themselves and others (Riessman, 2008). In this research, I applied the interpretative paradigm's narrative analytical method to investigate how people interpret their daily lives. I transcribed and translated the collected data for review from the interview with my five informants. I presented the quotes from the informants and wrote their interpretation in each section to support my research findings. Moreover, earlier researches and a theoretical background assist me with insight into narrative interpretations. In the final chapter, I will keep my conclusions with previous research and theories.

### **3.2.2. Ethical Considerations**

Ethics play a significant role in research to establish the moral standard for its conduction. It supports the pursuit of avoiding mistakes, constructs public support, encourages social responsibility, and honors human rights and values. Additionally, ethics is essential in research as it ensures the topic is respected and minimizes adverse effects by limiting the researcher's unbounded power (Baker, 1999, as cited in Kafle, 2017). When researching any topic, the researcher must adhere to high ethical standards to protect the informants' privacy, dignity, and interests. I am also concerned about ethical problems that could arise during the interviewing process since some of the questions may be uncomfortable to answer for some informants. For example, I was careful not to push further defining what gender means to them, which some of the respondents find challenging to answer. Considering this, as a social researcher, I am entirely responsible for adhering to every ethical code outlined in each procedure.

The custom of a qualitative study venerates through informed consent. Thus, an accountable equilibrium between over- informing and under-informing is maintained (Kvale, 1996 as cited in Bhandari, 2013). During my study, I was conscious of the issues of prior informed consent, keeping privacy and confidentiality of the research subject, anonymity, et cetera.

Informants have a right to know about the study's dedication and usage of the data. Thus, I took their consent a few days before the actual interview date to explain their right to withdraw from the research any time they wish. Before the interview, each of my participants consented to this study. During the interview, I was sincerely cautious about asking questions regarding their physical, mental troubles as they are delicate issues from social perspectives in Nepal. Primarily, to manage it ethically, I built a rapport with the participants and made a comfortable environment for them to participate. In this research, I replaced the participant's names with pseudonyms to protect their identities as most of my respondents were hesitant in providing their original identities and requested to hide them by any means. Thus, I assured all my participants involved in this research about the anonymity of the data received from them.

#### **Chapter 4. Theoretical Framework and Previous Research**

In any academic project, relevant literature and review are essential since they create a strong foundation for advancing knowledge, facilitating theory development, and uncovering a plethora of studies and research areas (Webster & Watson, 2002). This section aims to provide available information about the gendered inequalities in the domestic sphere. Also, it will decipher literature regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the well-being of Nepalese women. Additionally, the previous studies mentioned here will support in analyzing my materials from the interviews in the form of a theoretical lens. Thus, in this section, I will present published information related to and contribute to arguments presented in this thesis from various online sources, such as articles from eBooks, journals, and online news portals. Furthermore, the upcoming topics will present literature on historical evidence on patriarchal social structure, the family structure of Nepalese societies, kinship roles, agents of change for Nepalese women, and COVID-19 lockdown influences upon women in the everyday domains.

##### **4.1. Patriarchal Norms in Nepal**

For analyzing most of the received data, I have chosen Seira Tamang, a political scientist with considerable experience studying social exclusion and fostering good governance practices and policies in Nepal (Sharma & Tamang, 2016). Also, she holds a Ph.D. in International Relations and has done her researches in gender, global political economy, and

citizenship. Currently, she is the chairperson of Martin Chautari, a research and policy institute based in Kathmandu, Nepal (Social Science Baha, 2019). In my study, I have highlighted the works of Tamang to understand the development of patriarchy in Nepal. Her works (Tamang, 2000, 2002, 2009) are essential in understanding the development of Nepali women, patriarchal relationships in Nepal, and gendered meanings of the private and public spheres in Nepal. The historical context of women's status in Nepal has played a significant role in defining the position of women in their household in contemporary times. She has made remarkable contributions to illuminate Nepal's history in gender, inequalities, and power distributions through her works. My study mainly bases on Tamang's findings on law amendments made during the Panchayat period (1960-90), thirty years of autocratic royal rule governed by village councils (Sharma & Tamang, 2016), which is significant to understand the history of gender in Nepal. Further, Tamang's account of gender history in Nepal explains how the patriarchal structure settled in Nepal with the country's growth and modernization, which I will write in detail in upcoming sections.

Panchayat period is the bright era with an enlightened, progressive, and modern era that came after the dark period of the dictatorship of Rana rule<sup>6</sup> (Onta, 1996 as cited in Tamang, 2000) when the ruling system of Nepal made amendments to a former country code called Muluki Ain of 1952 in 1963. On those rewritten laws, King Mahendra<sup>7</sup> implemented a single national culture, the concept of a single-family law system based on Hindu norms for the whole country (Gilbert 1992: 737 as cited in Tamang, 2000). This single-family format compelled all citizens of Nepal to follow the same culture, religion, speak the same language, et cetera. The crafting of this single Hindu nation during Panchayat rule based on a belief, "development," also called the national project to modernize the country to walk hand-in-hand with others nations of the world (Tamang 2000: 130). It was also when global aids saw Nepal as a country struggling to become 'modern' after the self-induced isolation by the Feudal Ranas (ibid). Thus, the Panchayat rule legitimized autocracy for the development projects for the reform of Nepal.

Further, when Nepal was entering the community of nations for its development, Nepalese women were the focal point for reform because, before the Panchayat period, they were

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<sup>6</sup> Ranas were the former autocratic rulers of Nepal before Panchayat period.

<sup>7</sup> King Mahendra ruled over Nepal from 1955-1972.

utterly oppressed and treated like slaves (Acharya, 1988 as cited in Tamang, 2000). Additionally, foreign donors also directed funds to develop Nepali women to match them with liberal women in development in the global sphere accelerated by the 1975 U.N. International women's year and U.N. decade (Tamang, 2002). Then, the Panchayat hegemonized women from all caste and religions in the name of unification and presented them in a non-threatening system of development and welfare. At that time, Nepali men were referred to as brave warriors, whereas 'the Nepali women' as Hindu, backward, illiterate, tradition-bound, agency-less, and helpless, and in need of development by the paternal state (Sharma & Tamang, 2016; Tamang, 2002). Thus, the state-recognized women's development as the most vital project regulating their conduct to promote women's role in development conceived by the then Hindu male elites (Tamang, 2009). Tamang notes that these male elites were the head of Panchayat village authorities to govern local communities (ibid). Due to these legislative arrangements made under Panchayat rule, the Nepali state had more power to interfere directly in family relations, appropriating authority to redefine family relationships. Under such circumstances, the creation of separate gendered realms of the feminine domestic domain of the private and the masculine of the public had been encouraged, leading to a switch from 'family patriarchy' to 'state patriarchy' (Tamang, 2000: 127).

Thus, the picture of 'Nepali women' needing development had not existed, but the development policymakers constructed that 'need' through their institutions, practices, and discourses (Tamang, 2002: 316). Those discourses then became study materials to make a modern country where old Nepalese traditions, culture, history, and social attitudes hindered the implementation of equality and development. Tamang (2000) concludes that even though the laws and discourses of Nepal highlighted equality and developmental matters to rise from traditional history to the modern period, the practice of patriarchy developed simultaneously

#### **4.2. Women's Position in the Households**

Several kinds of research illuminate the domestic role of Nepalese women. In Bennett's (1983) book *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters*, she shares abundant information on Nepalese Hindu high-caste women's roles in a patrilineal society. Additionally, she presents the ideals of patrilineality, how they position a daughter and a daughter-in-law in a household and a society. Those principles placed daughters in a sacred position at first in their natal

homes, but it changes into an inferior member after they are married, when they move from their natal homes to their husband's home, under the rules of their mother-in-law. However, the daughter-in-law's position is elevated and becomes equivalent to her mother-in-law if she gives birth to a son rather than a daughter (Bennett, 1983). Bennett's study portrays a thought-provoking account of Nepalese women's situation, roles and responsibilities in their homes, and their positions in a patrilineal society.

Similarly, there are other studies on Nepalese women and their spaces in the domestic world. Homan (2016) also discusses the meaning of daughter-in-law, especially regarding family's honor. Through fieldwork conducted in two urban locations in Nepal for two years, she portrays urban Nepali womanhood. She shows the perspective of a society that places women's honor as the defining element of a family's reputation. According to her, situating women as the carrier of honor is central to the gendered framework that directs the societal practices, beliefs, and rules in urban Nepal (Homan, 2016).

Bhandari (2013) provides an account of a patriarchal social system causing and implementing several stereotypes regarding women of Nepal. To her, patriarchy is a social system based on a power relation that creates a hierarchy between males and females. In this system, men dominate, oppress, and exploit women and their labor by controlling their sexuality, production, and reproduction. This kind of patriarchal system and its values are prevalent in the Nepalese societies and in people's minds, which manifests inequality and discrimination between genders. Bhandari's research sheds light on some general practices in Nepal that contribute to the country's patriarchal stability. Some of them are the legal system of property inheritance rights to male heirs, constrictions to women in making household decisions, and limitations on self-marriage decisions marriage for girls et cetera (Bhandari, 2013).

Similarly, a review by Forum for Women Law and Development (FWLD, 2006) provides detailed information on the status of women in Nepal. The report states that popularised belief of Hindu culture considers men as the sole breadwinners whereas women confines to household work which goes unaccounted for the family. Their primary responsibilities include household chores of cooking, washing, collecting fuel and firewood, fetching water, engaging in agriculture, maternity, and service to family members (Forum for Women Law and Development [FWLD], 2006: 3).

Another study by Pokharel (2008) investigated gender inequality in Nepal from the viewpoint of women. The research documents women's perceptions of discrimination in different ways in a male-dominated society. She claims that women face biases in society and household areas. Married women, in particular, face biases in terms of property, education, and employment. Unmarried women, nonetheless, experience discrimination in schooling, freedom to leave home, and manner of behaving. She discovered that women in her study consider gender and traditional practices as significant factors contributing to discrimination.

### **4.3. Advocating for change in the status of women in Nepal**

Homan (2016) discusses how traditional gendered images of womanhood are emerging in modern pictures. What she means is that Nepalese women are engaging more frequently in both personal and private spheres. Nepali women are consciously negotiating and reworking traditions rather than ignoring them. They are convincing family, community members, and themselves for change, raising voices, and making public demands, and pointing about their position in society (Homan, 2016: 245). When such change and resistance are required to end inequalities, advocacy plays a vital role in this process. There are several organizations in Nepal that advocate women's rights for their empowerment. These organizations have active participation of the women seeking change and the agents who work to bring change. For instance, Women Acting for Transformative Change (Women Act, n.d.) addresses gender inequality and empowerment of women and girls in Nepal. Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC, n.d.) is also a Nepal-based organization that works to ensure women's economic, socio-cultural wellbeing. Similarly, Women Acting Together (WATCH, n.d.) is a Nepali organisation working for the empowerment of girls and women to achieve economic independence and prevent trafficking and exploitation. Another is Women Development Advocacy Center (n.d.), which supports securing sustainable livelihoods for young women and homemakers in Nepal. Likewise, Maiti Nepal (n.d.) carries a long history of 28 years and has been working to eradicate gender discrimination, gender violence, and child and women trafficking. These organizations conduct awareness and training programs to teach women and children about anti-trafficking, speak for violence and inequalities, and empower and educate oppressed people to carry out action research to improve their lives. One more organization that addresses unpaid care work done by women in Nepal is Action Aid Nepal (n.d.), which has also shared the success stories of capacity building training that encourages both men and women to equally value and distribute their household works.

#### **4.4. Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown upon Women in Nepal**

The pandemic lockdown impacted Nepalese people most severely in terms of health, economy, livelihoods, education, and transportation, confining people inside their homes most of the time. Giri et al. (2020) review that gender-related concerns require addressing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and encouraged relevant stakeholders to develop effective policies and actions. The findings of their study show that the social status of girls and women was noticeably affected by the pandemic because they are a systematically marginalized and disadvantaged group of people in Nepal. Also, not only were women's jobs, their reproductive and mental health at risk, but women living in poverty were also vulnerable to domestic violence resulting in economic insecurity brought about by the lockdown (Giri et al., 2020). Overall, their study provides a thorough account of the effects of the pandemic lockdown on women's health, socioeconomic status, and educational opportunities.

Unpaid care work refers to the non-market, unpaid services in a household that includes direct care of persons, such as children or elderly, and indirect care, such as cooking, cleaning, or fetching water (Da Silva, 2019). When these tasks seem as non-productive, in the global arena, 75% of women and girls are responsible for unpaid care and domestic work in homes and communities (Power, 2020). In the Nepalese context, a news report by K.C. (2020) states that the burden of care work upon women's shoulders in Nepal rose during the lockdown. At that time, not only did household duties take up the majority of women's daily chores, but they also had to take care of children and the elderly. The report also stated that patriarchal norms pressure women to take all the domestic duties and obligations (K.C., 2020). The lockdown ensured the closure of schools and offices, leaving people stuck at home. K.C. also discusses that deep-rooted patriarchal social norms pressurize women to carry the domestic, child, and elderly care work burden upon their shoulders. Additionally, Dugarova (2016) reports that women do more unpaid care work than men in all regions and nations throughout their lives. Deeply ingrained inequalities result in disparities in the gendered division of unpaid care works (Dugarova, 2016: 5).

Likewise, Mahato et al. (2020) presented their data on how Nepal was affected by lockdown due to COVID-19. According to their report, lockdown in Nepal started from 24 March 2020

until 14 June 2020 as a safeguarding measure. However, the claim is such that the strict nature of lockdown made lives more vulnerable to deaths from different other mediums than only from COVID-19. Those modes developed from the obstruction in the daily way of living. Thus, these difficulties were in people's education, employment, travel, business, social life, wellbeing, et cetera. Among many such areas, health was the most deteriorated as the infection COVID-19 directly worsened it. Himalayan Climate Initiative (2021) and Poudel R, Dangal G (2020) also provide an account of the pandemic effect on women's economic, psycho-social, and sexual and reproductive health.

These studies supported the data regarding the situation of women in my research concerning their economic problems, household burden, mental health, and childbirth complications during the pandemic.

## **Chapter 5: Analysis of Empirical Data**

Different groups of women have different statuses and journeys; thus, it is impossible to make a generalization that extends to all Nepalese women. My analysis exempts me from claiming to represent the situation of every Nepali woman and their households; instead, it is only an overview based on the information I obtained from my respondents during my research. In this chapter, I will present qualitative data on "Gendered inequalities in the domestic sphere: a study of Nepalese women's situation during COVID-19 lockdown" in depth. I am also concentrating on discovering women's gendered responsibilities in their households, gender roles women performed, and how these roles positioned them in their domestic environment, especially during the pandemic. For conducting such research, I gathered information focusing on the impact upon Nepalese women in terms of the gendered nature of household works, career and economic weight, health conditions, and social domains. My participants shared matters about their home environment, their time during the lockdown in Nepal and Finland affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

My analysis and discussion will show how Nepalese women enact and negotiate the gendered meanings in the context of their everyday lives. I have aspired to shed light on and understand the nature of experiences and responses that women have in their daily life and during social emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. I will also discuss and demonstrate

how women resist various gendered roles and practices in the way they attempt to minimize specific inequalities in the domestic sphere.

In the parts that follow, I will first go over the data related to gendered experiences in the household, which works as a foundation for understanding the parts where the effects of the pandemic upon Nepalese women in the following parts.

## **5.1. Gender and kinship**

### **5.1.1. Gendered definitions and separate spheres**

Tamang (2009) states that the legal system of Panchayat era laws constructed a particular way of understanding gender through kinship systems. To her, developing the Nepali women to match them with the global women, legal amendments structured their legal identity with their husbands and families. Addressing to this, she states, “the legal gendering along more dichotomously defined spheres of the private - feminine and public – masculine brings to the fore the fact that Gilbert’s “uniform Nepalese citizen” who emerges from the legal structures (Gilbert 1993:465) is not so uniform - as the citizen in Nepal is gendered” (Tamang, 2000: 152).

Tamang’s quote expresses how in the process of uniting the citizens and developing women of Nepal, the Panchayat period’s legal structure organized women’s identification to be determined by their kinships relationships, such as husbands and families. It also illustrates how this action created a separate world for men and women, men for the public and women for the private, resulting in gendered citizenship. First, I will look for the concept of gendered meanings in the participants’ responses to their definition of gender. I begin by inquiring about my respondents’ perceptions of gender, to which, Sajhana replies:

Gender, in my opinion, is a natural distinction, and in a family, a person’s role and response establish from birth. Boys and girls, for example, are taught the differences between them from an early age, and the reaction to them in a family differs, with boys pampered more and girls scolded if they engage in childish behavior. Also, a boy child’s demands are more easily met than a girl child’s demands when buying products.

This response shows how gender makes meaning within a hierarchal kinship and family system, where it values the masculine more than the feminine. Since it was clear that the meaning of gender came tied to family and kinship, I wanted to open up this aspect by asking further questions related to home and family relations.

On asking whether boys and girls do different things in their households, Sajhana answers:

Men and women in my family do things differently. Though my mother-in-law and I are in charge of household chores and management, my father-in-law and husband are utterly uninterested in such matters. Although my mother-in-law and I provide moral support and treatment when a family member becomes sick, my father and husband consider supplying medication. When our baby wets himself, for example, instead of changing his diaper, they look for us (females) and carry the baby to us. My husband does not even make his bed in the morning; he gets out of bed and goes outside.

The informant reveals that men and women in her family have different duties to accomplish. She points out that women are involved in the domestic chores and management, whereas men of her family prefer to avoid those duties. She indicates that men have more privilege in the choice of household task performances.

Similarly, another respondent, Sima, has the same narrative:

There are different kinds of works for men and women in our house. Me and my mother-in-law work in the household and perform tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and washing. Whereas my husband and father-in-law just eat and sleep.

These responses from my informants show that males and females have different roles in their households. The feminine is mainly responsible for looking after the household matters and care works that the masculine chooses to ignore. Tamang (2000) stresses that the Panchayat laws organized the Hindu template for 'family,' which naturally levied women's roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, and falling more specifically under the Hindu state's jurisdiction. State patriarchy bases on these roles, which regulate the 'proper' function of the husband, stating men of a family as the protectors of women than the supporters (Tamang, 2000: 145). Thus, the portrayal of the familial roles as described by Tamang is visible in my respondents' households. The depiction of both participants' household duty arrangements is

similar to Tamang's Hindu family template depiction, which assigns women's roles as mothers and wives who have no choice but to perform household duties. Likewise, Sajhana's view on seeing males who are the husband and the father-in-law as the superiors than females of a household shows the patriarchal regulation of men as the protectors who enjoy privilege in choice of tasks. Therefore, this arrangement of familial positions of men and women shows the meaning of gender defined by patriarchy-led kinship relations in Nepalese households.

Such gendered meanings derived from my respondents urged me to learn their opinions on the prevalence of this system. Therefore, I asked them why men and women do things differently in their homes, to which, Sajhana answers:

I'm not sure why my family's males do this; it may be because they believe it is women's responsibility to do the household work, not men's; it may also be because they believe we females are doing it, so they do not want to interfere, or it could simply be that they consider these tasks to be trivial. Women, on the other hand, believe that if no one cares, things will not run smoothly in the home, so they must step up because men, for instance, will not pay attention if their child throws tantrums when eating and will ignore them, whereas women's hearts will melt for their children and they will feed them anyhow. In my opinion, males believe that they are the sole breadwinners who bring the required money into the house from outside and that it is women's responsibility to take care of the household affairs.

To the same question on men and women doing different things, participant Gita responds:

In my understanding, men and women do different things because they have always learned to do such since childhood. The elders in their family taught men to perform roles according to their gender.

These responses provide an insight into how gendered meanings continues to exist through systems and practices. Tamang (2000) argues that the emergence of division of private/public spheres led to the active installation of gendered roles to fit the definitions of masculinity and femininity in Nepal. Therefore, Sajhana's response of how she understands men as the 'sole breadwinners, and women as being responsible for 'caring of household affairs,' and Gita's 'roles performance according to gender' exhibit how kinship, private/public spheres, and

division of labor are gendered and how people navigate and live their lives according to these meanings.

Overall, the structure of gender in the familial environment I learned through the interviews showed an unequal hierarchy. Women who participated in the conversation expressed their understanding of the term ‘gender’ as something constructed at a child’s birth and processed during their lifetime. Moreover, this ‘process of gender’ conveys the unequal position for males and females in a household. When gender is a primary factor of structured inequality, the devalued gender has less power, prestige, and economic rewards than the valued genders (Lorber, 2018), and even in the countries where gender discrimination is discouraged, women still do most of the household labor and childrearing where men dominate the positions of authority. If Lorber is to be comprehended, the women in my study have conceptualized that females are equally important gender as males are; however, men have more free choices of exempting from tasks in a household that women do not have.

### **5.1.2. Gendered division of household works**

In a household, a woman’s well-being links to their affiliation with their living spaces, which differs from their residency rules, their rights upon material resources, and the kinship system (Dube, 1997). Thus to understand why women are the main targets of being affected when it comes to an emergency, it is important to comprehend the roles and position of women in the domestic sphere. In a patrilineal culture that consists of descents from the male members, marriage displaces the bride from her natal home to her husband’s home with his family (Dube, 1997). This custom is prominent in societies where family structure is patrifocal, consisting of strong male authority and control over resources. These patrilineal heritages propose limited resources to women and virtually no inheritance rights making them dependent, secluded and segregated, also their sexuality managed by men (Dube, 1997). In Nepal, a South Asian country, women are living in an environment led by a Patrilineal family structure (Bennett, 1983). The roots of patrilineality could be traced in contemporary times too. To understand the roots of patriarchy and male supremacy in the Nepalese context, Tamang (2002: 315) illustrates:

In this masculinized discourse of sovereignty, independence, and modernization, the need to re-established a ‘virile’ masculine nation of

citizens was not just dependent on definitions of that which it is not--- femininity (Enole, 1989). In that nationalist imaginings of masculinity project of *bikas* necessitated deliberate efforts to circumscribe women's behaviour in order to facilitate the type of development, and women's role in development, thought appropriate to the 'modern Nepal' as conceptualized by Hindu male state elites.

This quote refers to how Hindu male state elites of Nepal, for modernization, highlighted it as a nation of strong and brave warriors by limiting women's behavior and their role in development. This regulation of women's conduct in Nepal's history has contributed to how women make meaning of different roles performed by men and women. On asking my respondents about what kinds of things are important for them as women, to which, Sima replies:

Being a female, first of all, she should have discipline, a good nature. Then as a woman, she must do household works, focus on cleanliness, maintain family discipline and focus on running a home smoothly, that is all.

This answer depicts how women form ideas about their roles in the family that they must be careful to maintain the family's discipline. Women see themselves as a responsible person who has the roles to accomplish household tasks. Along with this, I wished to ask what they see as being important in a man. Sajhana responds:

Man has the role of a father who looks after the family's needs, protects them, decides right or wrong for the family, provides economic support for a family; these are the father's responsibilities as a man.

Men, according to Sajhana, are the family's benefactors, who have the burden of running a household by providing economic support, who also protect the family, and are the decision-makers of the household. This I see as how both respondent's opinions are founded on their account of experiences they have seen during their lives. Lorber also says, "In social interaction throughout their lives, individuals learn what others expect from them, act and react in expected ways, and thus simultaneously construct and maintain the gender order" (Lorber, 2018:114). Relating to this notion of individuals learning and acting in expected ways in their social circle, it is clear that my respondents acknowledged, performed, and understood the concept of gendered roles throughout their lives in their domestic sphere.

Familial values and togetherness walk hand in hand in societies where the familial meaning binds people of blood and kinship relation sticking and living together thick and thin. Gilbert (1993) asserts that in Nepalese societies, family, property, ownership, and kinship have great importance in shaping the base of a person's relations during their lifetime. Tamang (2000) also talks about the legal stature of Nepal provided women's right to property inheritance even though defined through their husbands, family, and kin where they need either their husband's or son's approval to inherit familial acreages. Because women gained property inheritance rights as either daughters and wives, Nepal's legal policies controlled the marriages and familial relations and assisted traditional patriarchy to preserve male supremacy (Tamang, 2000). This way, the state holds the power of regulating internal relations of the family in Nepal. It could mean that familial and kinship norms also guide people to perform roles in their households. Regarding this, one of my respondent, Nita, shared her experiences of sharing household responsibilities when she was in Nepal:

I did not have many responsibilities at home, but my work was usually to cook and clean in the kitchen, which my mother-in-law supported. Regarding the switching of work, mostly I have seen that boys do not do house works and it is also not normal that after getting married, I will stay at my bed and my husband will go to cook for me, even though there was no pressure of heavy work load, but in Nepal, I have not seen men or boys do the household works, instead, it is girl's duty.

Nita's view stands as an example of the gendered nature of domestic work and their connection to familial and kinship rules and systems. To reach into the depth of her thoughts, I asked why she thinks men do not do household works. She replies:

Because there are male-dominated societies in Nepal, men do not learn to do house chores since their childhoods, so they never have to do it.

In Nita's response, she sees male supremacy as the reason that exempts men from doing household tasks. Lorber (2018) opines that gender builds into a family through everyday gendered experiences that strengthen gender expectations for individuals. The building of norms in the household tasks, where women's work is normal, but men do nothing of a similar kind, shows gender-related expectations in a male-dominated system. Likewise, this could be related to the account of Bhandari (2013), where she opines that patriarchal social systems based on a power relation that creates a hierarchy between male and female where the male dominates, oppresses, and exploits women and their labor by controlling their

sexuality, production, and reproduction. Thus, the meaning of gender expressed by my respondents shows their base of life, leading by the theme of males being the superior and benefactor, whereas females are inferior and benefitted respectively.

This way, the picture of 'women' as expressed by my respondents shows the feeling of superiority and pride of being a woman. However, what is noticeable in the statements above is that these women see themselves as belonging to a specific gender category according to their roles and responsibilities as housemakers whose primary concern is to look after domestic affairs.

### **5.1.3. A different story**

Women's familial background has an important role in how they form gendered meanings. When referring to the familial environment playing a part in how women make their meaning of gender and their roles, there is an exceptional story to share. Among my respondents, when most of them shared their household work responsibilities arranged to females only, one respondent had a different experience of roles division in her family. Biva belongs to a different ethnic group called Newar, who lived in Kathmandu, her hometown, most of her life. Unlike my other respondents, she had a different experience of role division in her home. She says:

We have a work-sharing environment in our family where I have never realized the division of household works according to gender. We have a business of making handicrafts in Kathmandu, which needs a lot of physical effort, which is why everyone in our family had to be involved in accomplishing it. My mom, dad, uncles, and aunts had to be involved in completing the handicraft tasks. At home, too, no one waits for household tasks to complete by others; Everyone does the household works. I have never experienced the divisions regarding household works arranged for males and females in my home.

All of Biva's family members accomplish the household tasks, and there is no work division regarding the household task or outside. Relating to this, I wished to know more on how caregiving roles are shared in her home, to which she says:

In our home, whenever anyone falls unwell, especially me and my sister used to be sick too often, then all of our family members care about us, especially it is my dad or my uncle, who looks after us and our health care.

From Biva's response, it is clear that all of the family members, even men are more involved as care providers when in need. This mutual sharing of workload shows the values and culture where there is respect for each member's roles. As Biva is a Newar, this ethnic group have their own culture, and they rank as the most economically, politically and socially advanced community of Nepal (Nepal Human Development Report, 2014). Biva's explanation of her family is similar to the finding of Tamang (2000) that in some communities, women's role did not restrict them to private home affairs contradictory to the 'Hindu template' because of their cultural variation from that of other ethnic groups. The norms and values of a diverse cultural group from where Biva comes also differ from other respondents in terms of gender and kinship values as there is no division between public and private spheres since they all share the same task of handicrafts. Similarly, learning about this structure of the household arrangement, I wanted to learn how she understands gender. When I asked Biva about the meaning of gender, she says:

On hearing the term gender, I can only think of the division of people between sexes, male and females, differentiation biologically and naturally. My family members never let me feel male and female are different; we were taught differently in our school courses. When we were young, we learned a different definition of gender roles because they taught that in a parental figure, dad goes to the office, and mom looks after the house, and doctors are always the males where females should be a nurse.

This response illustrates how the meanings and discourses are institutionalized and how gendered roles formulate young people's minds. According to Tamang (2002), the picture of Nepali women in need of development in the Panchayat period constructs through institutions, practices, and discourses. Thus, the study materials provided to Biva at her young age had regulated her thoughts about different roles to be performed by males and females where males worked in the public sphere and females in private. This is how I see the thought process of patriarchy continues in people's life. Even though Biva's home experiences show how one could exempt from this concept of gendered roles, the discourses she mentioned portray an example of continuing the gendered system.

#### **5.1.4. Career and Education Negotiations**

In Nepal, married women do unpaid labor in the domestic sphere and thus provide an important input to the whole economy. They are active in providing care works and familial tasks, which is, however, not counted. Women also deal with physical and biological changes in childbirth and make adjustments in their education and career while childrearing, but they view it as their natural jobs, which means fathers take less or no responsibility (Subedi, 2016). I wished to learn about how women are motivated in their future jobs and education at their homes. Thus, I asked one of my respondents, Sajhana how her family supports her education and career, she replied:

I have never done a job in my life, and I also have been encouraged by my family to find a governmental job for which I have to do much-focused exam preparation. I have to go through two major papers for my desired governmental post, and I had successfully passed the first paper, but I failed in the second paper because I could manage much less time for my study. It was the time when we lived in the city. I took the preparation classes for the government service during the daytime, but the better classes were conducted during the morning and evening. Our daughter was only three years old, and she had just started school; however, her father would not give her time, even during the morning and evening time when he was at home. So I had to compromise and take day classes, but still, I needed more time to do intensive preparation. Hence, without my husband's support, there was an unfavorable environment for my groundwork, and I failed the exam of government services job.

Although Sajhana was encouraged to do a job, she found less support when looking for a dream job. The reason behind this was, as she stated, her husband's ignorance of household affairs and childcare where he could have assisted. To achieve her dream job, she needed support. On this matter, she shares:

Often, I have asked my spouse to look after our children, and I could do something or study for exams, but he never agrees. If I find support for at least six months or one year, I would be doing my dream job at the governmental office. I had even targeted to find one, but my husband did not have time for my efforts. Neither he even discussed sharing our jobs at home. Even before my son was born seven months ago, I had a miscarriage a few months before that; thus, I was fragile at that time. During that time, too, we were living in our city apartment, and my husband would not care for household affairs or look after his daughter, I had to struggle a lot.

The voice tone of my interviewee was sad while telling this, as it reflects how a woman negotiates for her family when she could achieve her aim. The above-recorded response of

Sajhana made me realize how women's motherhood and care work is supported more than her career choices. Additionally, balancing work/life is more difficult when one has an uneven burden of family responsibilities. Her narrative shows that Nepalese women with small children are less supported for seeking employment opportunities. This arrangement links the legal amendments made during the Panchayat period to undermine family patriarchy regarding women and childcare. Tamang (2000) elucidates that a child welfare law made central to the Hindu concept of woman's notions of motherhood and womanhood. While this right for nurturing marked women's special capability for childrearing, it weakened paternal custody rights, as these reforms, apparently for women and in the spirit of International Women's Year, did little to challenge gendered roles. In her view, this act was a state's control over the women's lives to ensure they fulfilled state-mandated child-rearing obligations. Thus, this children's welfare responsibility kept women as the first option to look after the children (Tamang, 2000: 151). Reflecting on this finding and my respondent's answers, I argue that the notion of childcare-related family responsibilities is gendered as feminine roles in Nepal. This notion provides fathers space and the possibility not to take responsibility. The system provides fathers and husbands with more space for the agency as their reluctance to share tasks is politicized by legal, cultural and kinships systems that naturalize a division of labor.

## **5.2. COVID-19 Lockdown**

### **5.2.1. Economic Dependency**

During the COVID-19 lockdown, Nepalese women had to face more difficulties to keep their jobs intact than men. Giri et al. (2020) point out that the position of women in the labor market is less secure while comparing to men because they also fall under vulnerable groups, such as informal workers, migrants, youths, who faced job cuts and lay-offs during the pandemic outbreak. Due to those job cut-offs, women's unpaid care work of children and elderly increased with household work. Regarding this, I questioned my respondents how their careers or education were affected by lockdown, to which Sima replied,

I was working for nineteen months at an educational consultancy before lockdown started. I was pregnant, but I had thought that I would work three months more until June 2020 before I take a leave for my child's delivery and rearing. But due to lockdown in March, my office got closed earlier, and there were no online tasks, so my job was also gone. As I was

jobless, and while I was at home, there were mostly jobs related to home cleaning and maintaining and working in the kitchen and in the vegetable field outside. I could not do heavy works because of pregnancy at that time, but sometimes I was tired, and I wished that I was doing a job outside the house so that I would not have to do household activities which I had to handle most of the time.

Sima's answer indicates that she preferred to have a job outside than being at home doing household tasks that were seemingly heavy since she was pregnant. Also, she had wished to take time off because she could focus on her child, who was yet to be born; however, the job market was closed for her when lockdown started in Nepal. She had also said that her husband was still working when her job was laid-off. Thus, it too shows the difference between men's and women's job security during the pandemic, because according to Giri et al. (2020:154), women fall under the vulnerable group to lose employment during the pandemic.

Similarly, concerning the participant's financial stature in their households, Sima said:

The primary source of income for our family is our Cow farm, managed by my father-in-law. My husband also earns money from his job at the transportation office. Also, my mother-in-law looks after the expenses because everyone who earns in the house gives to her the earning needed for home necessities, groceries, and all. But for outside expenses like medical care, my father-in-law handles all. Moreover, when I need money for my needs or our child, my husband supports me.

It is quite surprising how Sima had earned her own, but it was under the control of her family. In the expectation of autonomy, she became more dependent because of family and kinship arrangements. It shows that the mother-in-law has authority over deciding the family's household expenses, but the daughter-in-law does not. Bennett (1983) opines that in a Nepalese family of Hindu high caste, a woman has low rank as a daughter-in-law and has to obey everything her family decides for her. However, when she becomes a mother-in-law herself, she has the authoritative power to formulate decisions in a family. It is clear how Nepali women are under the flagship of single Hindu family norms (Tamang, 2000). Sima's position in her household is inferior according to the norms of patriarchy (Bennett, 1983), and she falls prey to various patriarchal norms in her everyday life. Therefore, although she seems economically independent, her earnings are controlled by the family, which shows patriarchal control over women's economic resources.

Besides this, women dependent on their spouse for monetary support tend to compromise on their necessities. Sajhana recalled her experiences before and during the lockdown on how she managed finances at home and how she regrets not having her income:

As I am unemployed, I rely totally on my husband, and he also has to look after the whole family for the financial needs, like, looking after our child's education and our daily household expenses too. Thus, I have to understand and control many things that I wish to buy, but I need to organize my expenses for the extreme necessities.

Sajhana experienced economic dependency, and she was helpless because she could not utilize her potential to support her family financially. This moment occurred due to the lack of proper assistance from her partner. Although she said that she was encouraged to find a job, the neglect in avoiding child care responsibility from the partner also affected the outcome when the difficult time comes. The lack of sharing based on patriarchal gendered roles affected the whole family and its income. The gendered nature of roles and the division of labor where the male member habituates to act as the governing gender in the family hinders women from seeking employment even if they would have support for getting a job. As Lorber states, "when gender is a major component of structured inequality, the devalued genders have less power, prestige, and economic rewards than the valued genders (Lorber, 2018: 116). Sajhana, as a devalued gender than her husband, shows a gendered structure of roles division, where she performs the role of child and household caretaker who is dependent on her husband for economic assistance. This structured inequality of gender, where the husband's role as the money provider signifies a gender of higher rank and governs the wife of lower rank.

### **5.2.2. Child care roles and compromises**

Women can bear children and have a nurturing capacity. However, this nurturing role of mothers are overlooked and at times understood as they have the sole responsibility of rearing up children in the Nepalese concept. Men are involved in the overall baby care in a less amount or not at all. When the COVID-19 lockdown started in Nepal, women were under pressure to complete household tasks and take care of children and elderly stuck at homes (K.C., 2020). Relating to this, one of my interviewees shared her frustration with her

partner's ignorance in the full support of raising their children. When asked what their caregiving tasks were during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nepal, Sajhana said:

My four-year-old daughter's school was closed along with lockdown, and my brother-in-law's two children who lived close to us were in the house the whole day to play with my child because it was dangerous to send them out to play. Thus, apart from my morning and evening chores, my whole day's work would be to look after them, feed them, and help with their homework. Thus, at other times, they would be at school in the daytime, but I had to spend more time caring about them during the lockdown.

This shows that childcare roles fall upon Sajhana along with household works when the pandemic lockdown started. Thus I asked to her roles were shared by any other members of her family, to which she replies:

About other family members taking care of our child, it was rarely possible. We lived in the city before lockdown, and I used to take care of her most of the time; thus, she was more attached to me than to her father. She needed me each time she had to do something, such as her homework or caring about what she eats or wears. She would hardly listen to her grandparents only when I was not around or if I were unwell. Once our daughter fractured one of her legs while playing, I had weakness from being pregnant with my next baby. During that time, too, I had to carry her to help her in the bathroom. Still to this day, she trusts and depends more on me, and after this lockdown, today, too, I walked her to school. Her father often lures her if he asks her to take her to school by his bike. Often, when I was not around, I have noticed that her father is less interested in home affairs, like helping his children get changed when they have wetted their clothes. Moreover, I do not even expect from him that he would do unless I am unwell. That is probably the reason our daughter clings to me more than to her father.

Thus, Sajhana shares that there was rarely any switch of childcare duties with other household members or with her life partner. This shows children's dependency on one parent when another chooses to ignore their duties towards them. I further questioned her to understand why her husband had less interest in child care, as my interest was to see if he might have other duties to complete, then Sajhana answered:

Well, he was not that busy, and it was not like working under someone, as he had his own business where he could manage time according to his wish. However, for him, I have not understood why he cares less about

home affairs. Either he ignores or does not have interest, he does not look after our children.

It is clear from these responses that childbearing roles are only her duties, which she usually accepts as her responsibilities, which cause fathers to ignore their roles towards their children. Even in the time of lockdown when everyone was within their homes, the partner's support in taking care of the child was not as expected. Because the husband ignored, the wife accepted the role of a nurturer. This ignorance could be analyzed based on how the active restructuring of family relations by the state during the amendment of Panchayat laws made women closely associated with their bodies because their roles were ascribed as 'natural' (Tamang, 2000: 151). I understand this as the legal gendering of mother's role also structured father's role by encouraging them to avoid child care responsibilities, giving them more power and space to neglect and enjoy the results of women's labor.

### **5.2.3. COVID and Unpaid Care work**

Intense fear and uncertainty, harsh deductions in livelihood opportunities, and growing food insecurity were challenging factors in Nepalese peoples' lives during the lockdown (Gupta et al., 2021). During my study, the respondents, most of whom were mothers of one or two children, had adverse effects on their mental and physical health-related areas. Their statements showed how women in Nepal, as a vulnerable group, experienced mental and reproductive health during the lockdown. Also, Poudel R, Dangal G, (2020) presented several reasons behind such effects on women's health, among which fear of being infected while seeking medical counseling and inaccessibility of transport to travel health institutions.

Furthermore, concerning such health emergencies, like COVID-19, inquiries regarding the division of care work among household members, and their participation in family support during such emergencies, Sajhana replied:

Whenever I am unwell, my mother-in-law looks after me rather than the male members of my family. Moreover, when other family members are unwell, I care for them, and I always do such. Moreover, during the lockdown, too, my daughter's leg had fractured, so at that time, I took the critical step, called my relative's for binging their car to take her to the hospital. Then after that, I was the only one taking all the care of her. Being nine months pregnant from my second child, I was weak myself, but my daughter would not accept any other's help; thus, I had to help her in

all her needs by myself. If it's not me at our home, then it is my mother-in-law caring for the family. The males are there just commenting and telling us what to do and what not to do rather than trying things themselves, such as helping us in the household works.

There are two things noticeable in this response; the first one is the involvement of women in the care works. Another is males giving opinions on the work done by women, which they are not involved in. Relating to this, the news report of K.C. (2020) reads that patriarchal norms pressurized women to take all the domestic duties and obligations during COVID-19 lockdown. Thus, I understand as the males in this matter are representing their patriarchal position who have control over women and regulate their activities. Additionally, when Sajhana mentions caring for her daughter or a sick member by only women of her house, this nature of care work could be referred to as unpaid care work. According to Dugarova (2016), women in all regions and countries do more unpaid care work than men during their lives. Such disparities in the gendered division of unpaid care work stem from deeply rooted inequalities. Thus, this is correlated to the type of care work allotted to women of Sajhana's family, where she mentioned, while women are a performer of care roles, men are it's an observer in her house. Thus, an unequal division is visible in the gendered roles of unpaid care work during a pandemic that affected women more than men.

#### **5.2.4. Distorted daily lives during the lockdown**

When the pandemic broke out across the world, it disrupted many people's lives, including my respondents. Women who had jobs before the pandemic lost it to the pandemic, and women who had to change their habits and decisions due to the pandemic. Therefore, to learn about how women were coping with their daily lives, I wished to learn about how women's experiences before and during the lockdown. Thus, I first inquired about how they lived their lives before the pandemic, and one of my respondent Gita replied:

On the weekdays, after waking, I would freshen up, drink tea, and went to morning college from 6 am- 9:30 am. After that, I would come home, spend some time with my infant son, eat food, finish the kitchen tasks, and then look after the house for some chores like cleaning and laundry. After some time, I would make afternoon snacks for my family, and then I would prepare dinner with my mother-in-law. Thus, when the dinner and cleaning up is done, if my son is playing with his grandparents, I will have some spare time to study and do college assignments, otherwise, if he needs me, I had to leave the studying aside, and while taking him to bed, I

would also go to sleep together. On most of my normal days, my family members I spend time with, apart from going to college to study.

Life on a typical day was simple for Gita before lockdown started. However, the schedule and daily activities had a change in their pattern after lockdown started:

During the lockdown, all of our family members were at home, schools and offices were closed, and all day I spent with my family members. Usually, I would wake up in the morning, make breakfast for my family, feed my son, and then start making preparations for lunch, then do household chores, sit with my family members and talk with them, then again making snacks, and later on making dinner and then after cleaning up the kitchen, I would go to bed.

Moreover, she also shared how lockdown affected her daily life,

Lockdown had made my life a little uneasy. I am a college student too, so I used to enjoy going to colleges and meet my friends there, I used to be a little fresh rather than staying at home. But during the lockdown, when every member was at home all day, sometimes I wished we could at least go out for a walk for an hour. All of us in our family was feeling stuck inside and felt like we were in a cage. Also, before the lockdown, I used to do household chores in the afternoon and the evening only. Now during the lockdown, I had tasks to do all day. Moreover, there were not any online classes, so I was missing my studies and my friends.

One noticeable thing in Gita's response is the imbalance between the burden of domestic works and her student life. Although she had her in-laws support in looking after her son, she still managed between house and college assignments. Moreover, the role of women in her house before and after the lockdown was unchanged, where women were still taking care of household duties, and men were not. During the lockdown, men were also at home, but their tasks seemed minimal to care about domestic duties. Furthermore, the obstacle in educational areas also had an undesirable impact on my respondent. Her statement indicates how she tried to escape from household burdens and spare some of her time in her studies and friends.

Fear is an adaptive emotion that mobilizes energy in response to a possible danger (Mertens et al., 2020), and regarding COVID-19, fears came in the form of being contaminated, economic tensions, fear for significant others, et cetera. Thus, COVID-19 brought stress to people's lives and adversely affected their mental and physical health. The respondents in my study also expressed different forms of fears, such as worries about their health, concerns for their families, stresses about money management during the lockdown. In response to my

question on how was their mental state during the pandemic lockdown, my respondent Nita answered:

Mentally, I was too scared, thought as if we are going to die. I was more worried about my parents in Nepal. Also, I became cautious of my health and started caring more about my health habits; in a way, I realized that our own health comes first to tackle diseases. Moreover, I left my job due to fear of getting infected.

It is clear that when facing a life-threatening problem, people are more conscious of either preventing it or stressing about it. My respondent made it clear that she was concerned about her health and her parents. Also, the fear of being infected led her to leave her job to become safe, affecting her economic life.

Along with mental stress brought by COVID, women also dealt with physical health problems which lacked proper health counseling due to lockdown. When lockdown started, it was difficult for women to access transportation to attend medical appointments, which caused an unprecedented increase in stillbirths and maternal and neonatal mortality (Poudel R, Dangal G, 2020). Also, during the first two months of lockdown, 56 new mothers were said to have died, and 60,000 women refused the mandatory check-up and other medical services (Himalayan Climate Initiative, 2021). As the time was scary for the women who were expecting child, I was curious about how my respondent coped up regarding health care to which Sajhana, my respondent from Nepal, shared:

Lockdown mainly impacted my health because I was pregnant during that time. Because of it, hospitals would not allow patients unless there was an emergency, so people who were above 60 years of age, children, and even pregnant women like me could not visit hospitals since there was a greater risk for these people being quickly infected by corona. Also, vehicles were also prohibited from running. The news told me not to go out of the house besides for necessary goods. So I could not follow my regular hospital check-ups but had to rely on a small health post nearby.

In a similar circumstance, another respondent Sima also shared her story,

My husband was going to his office sometimes, and since it was a transportation office, there was still a crowd. So, I was scared that he would be infected, and we all could be affected by it. I was even worried about my unborn child. I knew everyone was scared about the infection. I felt that whatever happens will happen for good, and if anything happens, it will pass away.

From this, it is apparent how the pandemic lockdown had risked maternal health in Nepal. Women in my study were at great risk, and the matter of health concern was not only for themselves but also for their unborn child. Thus, the life-threatening risks went side by side in the lives of participated women during the pandemic lockdown.

Along with health matters and household workload, women were dealing with income-generating activities. A report also states that during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nepal, women's stress levels exacerbate resource limitations at home, increased household job burdens, unemployment, and resulting poverty (Himalayan Climate Initiative, 2021).

Considering this, respondent Sajhana also shared how economic problems had stressed her:

During the lockdown time, the income had stopped as my husband's garment business was closed. Likewise, he had some loans to pay, which was impossible, and there were places where his money was stuck. My husband's parents also were unable to support us, and our pockets were almost empty, banks were closed, ATMs not working, it was pretty much a tight time. Thus, we had to control our expenses by buying only the important goods, such as groceries, and we had to be satisfied with how much we had at that time.

As a pregnant woman, when there are already health-related troubles she was facing, economic stress was an added burden for Sajhana's mental health. Moreover, there was fear and uncertainty in her expression that was for herself and her family. Shrestha et al. (2020) found that people's fear of contracting the virus has restricted their social measures and economic hardships, contributing to developing mental trauma in them. Thus, this insecurity brought by imposed restrictions on safety from COVID also influenced a person's mental health and weakened it.

### **5.2.5. An Equilibrium**

The status of Nepalese women remains poor in terms of health, education, income, and decision-making. The patriarchal practices controlling women's lives also continue through legal systems. Thus, I wanted to see if my participants have some thoughts about the changes they would want to bring in the system and practices they have been following. Regarding what they shared about the gendered roles in household works, I asked if anything could be done to make a harmonious environment in the home regarding roles division. Biva responds:

First of all, there must not be gendered roles in a household, saying which things should be done by males and which must be done by females. For example, before birth, when people organize gender reveal in a baby shower, they categorize blue colors for a boy baby and pink for girls, so what if the baby boy likes pink and girl likes blue later. As a girl, I never liked pink, but blue. Thus, I feel that gendered roles should be eliminated from households, there should not be roles according to a gender category, and every child at home must learn the works they need to do rather than learning only the categorized works. Biological divisions should not be gendered to perform responsibilities.

Biva's answer shows how gendered concepts are formed and incorporated in people's activities, even before their birth. Her view portrays that one's household is the principal place where they learn to act in gendered ways; thus, abolishing gendered norms must start from there.

Similarly, to the same question, Nita says:

I think in an ideal home, there must be much sharing. For example, every household member must trust each other, be it a daughter-in-law, or daughter or son, everyone must trust each other and create an environment of harmony where they could share their inner feelings in an unhesitant manner. So that they might not feel the person they are sharing problems with is judging them, there should be an understanding environment. Moreover, boys and girls must be raised in an equal manner and taught household items to sons. For example, if I stop my son from doing particular household works when he is small, he will think it is not his duty to do housework when he grows up. In my view, parents play an important role in the upbringing of children to be equalist in the future.

This response depicts Nita's idea of the significance of parenting and mutual trust to discontinue the prevailing gendered norms and practices in the future. Likewise, I wanted to learn their thoughts regarding sharing care work during social emergencies like COVID-19. I asked my respondents about what is their view of family members supporting each other during those times. To which, Sajhana says,

During such emergencies like COVID-19, I think family members should help each other in need. Because it is not one's neighbor that we look towards but the family's most essential support.

Similarly, Biva says:

In my view, family members must support each other, and such a pandemic brings much mental stress and physical pain. One must not despise if the other is infected but rather take good care of the weak. I have heard and seen people ignoring an infected person, so they must not carry hatred but support the infected person physically and mentally.

Both respondents believe that family support is vital during tough times of social emergencies, including the pandemic. In addition, from all these responses, it is clear that these women feel that family and household is an important place for learning and unlearning gendered roles and norms. My respondents, furthermore, discuss that even though there are patriarchal systems, women do negotiate and understand their position in a system. Homan (2016) observes that Nepalese women consciously negotiate working traditions rather than putting them aside by approaching people around them in their families and communities. Therefore, from the responses of my participants, I realized that they are seeking to change the gendered roles embedded in their families while remaining within the patriarchal structure.

## **Chapter 6: Concluding Discussion**

In this chapter, I will present a summary of the main findings of this study. The distance and safety of respondents during the COVID-19 pandemic are important; thus, this study bases on five online interviews and open-ended questions with five Nepalese informants living in Nepal and Finland. The tool for collecting data in this study is through the Qualitative data collection method. I have used a narrative analytical frame relating to previous studies as the theoretical framework to elucidate the study's central findings.

### **6.1. Summary of the key findings**

To summarise my thesis' observations, I have addressed the conclusions reached after analyzing the interviews of the participants. This study has shown that Nepalese women's understanding of themselves as the inferior gender is shaped by familial and kinship norms formulated in the Panchayat period, regulating women's behavior. Thus, these norms articulated patriarchy that values men more than women, which also separates the public sphere for the former and the private domestic environment for the latter group. The active

continuation of such gendered disparities in the work division affected women and confined them more within the domestic sphere. This situation furthered in bringing adverse effects on different aspects of their lives during the pandemic lockdown, such as increased unpaid care and domestic work and deterioration in health, education, careers, and mental well-being. Although in some exceptions of a different ethnic culture where gendered norms do not matter, many other ethnicities are regulating gendered norms. Thus, women are also opting out options to negotiate the old norms of patriarchy and gendered roles.

According to the narratives, gender is better understood within a hierarchal kinship and family system that values masculine more than the feminine. This meaning is defined by patriarchy-led kinship relations in Nepalese households, which arranged separate spheres, males for the public and females for the private. Such bargaining also allows men have more free choices of avoiding household works than women.

Similarly, to modernize the country in the Panchayat era, Nepal's Hindu male state elites portrayed it as a nation of powerful and brave warriors by restricting women's behavior and participation in growth. Such limitations have shaped how women point out meanings regarding the roles of men and women in their family, which they saw and performed during their lives. According to the narrative of women in my study, they see themselves as fit to a proper housemaker's roles whereas men as the economic provider, thus belonging to the private and public spheres, respectively. This notion has furthered the existence of a patriarchal system and practice where men govern women's control, making women see themselves as the inferior and men the superior.

However, in my study, I found that women's statuses differ from one group to another. The Newar respondent portrayed equal distribution of tasks for both males and females in the public and private sphere. This experience differs from my other ethnic groups, like Brahmins mentioned in my study, who follow the strict Hindu code where women's roles mainly restrict household affairs. Nonetheless, it is also visible that discourses designed as study materials play an important role in directing young minds to learn about gendered roles and patriarchal norms even if their household keeps them away from learning.

Furthermore, women's career and education negotiations are attached to their child care and domestic duties. They have to make compromises in their desired jobs when they have small

children to look after. At times, even their partners are unsupportive of what they want to achieve as a career goal. Thus, in a familial environment, childcare is considered feminine rather than masculine, which hinders women in their desired pursuits.

In a household, when women are economically dependent on their partner or household members due to their care roles, they have to endure the rank of a helpless, devalued member in a family. Women's gendered position in their households also makes them more vulnerable during social emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. Looking at the economic situation of women during the lockdown, job insecurity and economic dependency are major problems they face due to their position as a devalued gender and the patriarchal control over their earnings. Similarly, the legal gendering of women in natural caretakers also prompts men to ignore their duties as caregivers in their home, adding burden to women only. Such custom worsens women's situation and adds a load of providing overall support work during lockdowns, when schools and offices are closed, and everyone is confined at home. This kind of support work is unpaid and often goes unaccounted for by men in a household.

COVID-19 lockdown harmed Nepalese women's physical, mental, and emotional health, also distorting their daily lives. Likewise, fear of being infected, inaccessibility to proper health care during pregnancy, economic problems increased mental stress in women during the pandemic lockdown. Compared to the situation before lockdown when they enjoyed more freedom in their jobs or colleges outside of their domestic environment, home confinement limited such activities. Due to distorted schedules during the lockdown, the added burden of household tasks, and minor support from men of the household, women felt trapped inside their households.

Women are aware of the inequalities they experience in their domestic environment, and they understand the grasps of gendered familial and kinship norms in their surroundings. However, they value family relationships which are most needed during times of difficulties like the pandemic. Thus, they pursue change in their situation by redefining the patriarchy-led gendered roles by remaining in the same system.

## **6.2. Concluding remarks and further research**

This thesis provides insight into the gendered inequalities in Nepalese households and their impact upon women during the COVID-19 lockdown. It indicates that laws formulated during the historical Panchayat period regulated state patriarchy, interfering with the familial and kinship relations for gendered roles in Nepalese households.

For the formation of gendered roles in the domestic sphere in Nepal, the historical process of Nepali women in development during the Panchayat period has played an important role. Thus, the laws made during that period governed families and women's activities, implementing state patriarchy in familial relationships that further separated women's sphere as the private and domestic and males outside. Thus, the continuation of those historical norms is evident in my research finding where most women are relegated to domestic rules, furthering gendered roles in domestic realms. Furthermore, the gendered household work pressure and minor support from the males in the domestic sphere have affected women's well-being. This situation led to an increase in women's economic dependence on men and education discontinuity, job instability, and the burden of unpaid domestic and childcare tasks during the pandemic lockdown.

While conducting this research, I noticed several issues related to the status of women confined to the domestic world and devalued by gendered roles. For instance, evaluation of familial norms regarding the roles of women in the domestic spheres, address to the equal participation of each family members in care works and household labor, and active counseling of family members to support women during social and health-related emergencies would be notable for studying in further research.

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