Reducing Maternal and Child Mortality in Nepal – Revisiting the Role of the Mother-in-law

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Abstract

This qualitative sociological study explores mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships focusing on the mother-in-law's views of transition and transaction through life stages as determined by patriarchal kinship principles and the influence such principles exert in decision-making process in childbirth issues. This background informs an understanding the socio-cultural barriers to quality maternity care in Nepal. The grounded theory analysis of the narratives reveals that in many rural Nepali societies, mothers-in-law are managing childbirth based on experience and knowledge, as they have a positive vested interest for the outcome. It is only because mothers-in-law are embedded in patriarchal kinship norms, that some practices that can result in adverse outcomes endure. This study proposes alternative models for maternity care, which bring harmony to the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law to reduce conflict and increase collaboration with medical personnel when needed.

Key Words: Childbirth, mothers-in-law, relational hierarchies, patriarchy, social dynamics, gender

Word Count 134

Introduction

This study explores mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships through the lens of patriarchal kinship dynamics and their influence on childbirth practices in remote Nepal. This information makes several contributions to the childbirth literature. First, by indicating the indispensable role of mothers-in-law in managing the health and welfare of younger women, we explain key tensions between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in 'rites of passage' is simply a structural one. At the same time, by analyzing patriarchal kinship dynamics, we foreground patriarchal kinship as a mechanism of social control that can lead to adverse pregnancy outcomes. In addition, by demonstrating the mothers-in-laws' crucial position in the patriarchal kinship, we advocate for the development of the alternative childbirth practices.

Mothers-in-law are the central pillar of the traditional domestic household. Mothers-in-law are the nucleus of family life, preservers of the established household order and the perpetuators of traditions insofar as they impart them to children. The past is continued through them, not only in the physical life of their children, but also in the sense of the heritage that they instill into them. As the Great Goddess rules the heavens, their earthly counterpart, the mothers-in-law, rule the home. In the household sphere, mothers-in-law are the ones who regulate daily life. In so many ways they mediate the welfare and health of younger women. On close scrutiny of the literature, during less medicalized times, and presently in many rural Nepali societies, mothers-in-law have managed childbirth with their experience and practical knowledge (Chawla, 1998). However, their knowledge is limited to traditional healing methods, as they often lack formal training in a society where access to education reflects male privilege.

As an organizational structure, in patriarchal societies, the principles of kinship determine how individuals become part of certain social groups, how resources are distributed, how decisions pertaining to the family and household are made. The Nepali kinship system can be taken as typical of patriarchal organization, tracing descent through the male line and making male authority supreme. In this patriarchal society women occupy a subordinate status and can even be considered to be a source of negative powers that can bewitch and bring harm to others (Ortner, 1996). Patriarchy, by definition, is a male-centered worldview, which devalues or excludes female perceptions, critique and contributions. Dhruvrajan (1998) argues that this androcentric norm has effectively sustained the patriarchal social structure that gave rise to assumptions and beliefs regarding the nature of men and women and their proper inter-relationships.

The presence of women in such patriarchal societies will reveal their otherness and consequently provide an articulation of the normative structure of masculinity (Caldwell, 1983:172). Women often experience their identities, experiences, and activities being created, in large part, through their engagements and negotiations with kinship, rather than through personal choice. According to Althusser (1971), women have never been defined via their perception of themselves, but through the patriarchal notions of what a woman should be in a given socio-cultural context. As socio-cultural context changes, the definition of woman also changes.

In the patriarchal socio-cultural context, becoming a mother-in-law means finally acquiring certain social authority. However, the mother-in-law, who are considered to be powerful women in the Nepali society, derives her power only from her status in the patriarchal arrangement—if she were a single woman, or a married one with no children,

she would not have this power. In other words, a woman derives power by proxy, by virtue of the fact that she mothers a male child. In essence a patriarchal system puts obligations and pressures on males too by virtue of their position in the culture. During infancy and early childhood, the mother needs to indoctrinate her sons' loyalty and devotion so that as adults, her status in the family is secure. A wife becomes a threat to the patriline of her new family. She not only has the potential, but the motive, to draw her husband's loyalty from the patriline to herself.

Method

To explore how such forces have shaped women's childbirth experiences, fifteen current postpartum women from various ethnic groups, age groups, economic status, educational status, and geographical regions of rural Nepal were interviewed. In order to understand the extent to which these forces forged relationships between women, data from eight mothers-in-law who have already lived these transitions have been included. Their experiences are discussed and analyzed to see how they view themselves; their first person narratives, perceptions and events are included in this paper. Their own accounts exemplify the ways in which these women interpret childbirth and how their lives are affected. These narratives also provide an understanding of this process in order to reconstruct it in ways that will enhance the description and understanding of their experiences. The grounded theory analysis of the data reveal two important discourses and several themes.

Results

Rites of passage

'Rites of passage' discourses feature in the mother-in-law's views of transitions and transactions through life stages as constructed by patriarchal Nepali society. Their experiences are analyzed and discussed under various themes, for example, benevolent dictator, disciplining mothers, and slave or servant.

Benevolent dictator

The first example under this theme comes from the mother Sati. She was a sixty-two-year-old mother-in-law with two daughters-in-law and five grandchildren. Some fifteen years ago her eldest son married Uma. Uma invited her mother-in-law, Sati, to stay with them in a small village in the Chitwan district. Before that, Sati had been in the far Eastern hilly region of Nepal looking after property she had inherited:

> My daughter-in-law was one of the best things to happen to me in my life. I always wanted to tell this to her, but didn't get the chance I suppose. When Uma entered my house I was happy to have someone that could take over my entire burden of family care, and most importantly, massage my legs at bedtime [in rural Nepal there is a ritual that daughter-in-law has to oil massage her mother-in-law's foot before going to bed]. I was doing this for years to my mother-in-law. I was cooking for my family and was tired of complaints that I wasn't a good cook. I was happy when I became a mother-in-law. Now I didn't have to be scolded time and again. Many times I wanted to visit my parents' place, but I couldn't do that because there was no one to take care of my family. Once I asked my sister-in-law to do me this favour, she replied, 'I'm not your servant doing all these rubbish cooking and dish washing'. After that I figured that I could never visit my parents' place. But the situation changed. I know now I could do this. I don't have to ask any one's permission. I can even order my daughter-in-law. I can make rules to run my house. (Sati, age 60, mother-in-law)

As a new mother-in-law, Sati underwent a significant change in status compared with her previous role as daughter-in-law. Her thoughts and feelings took a new direction. Reshaping the perception of oppression of life she had as a daughter-in-law, the transition process had finally placed her into the controlling position of mother-in-law. She saw the change as an important step forward towards greater authority. Her word in the women's domestic sphere could now be law. Her authority and new role gave her responsibility in preserving traditions and cultural practices in the family.

Dulari had a similar experience to Sati: as a daughter-in-law she had an oppressed perception of life in the least powerful adult role in the household. This was replaced by an empowered view when she assumed the role of mother-in-law. Dulari was a fifty-three-year-old mother-in-law. She spent her entire life under the shadow of various (male) authorities. That experience of a lifetime of sorrow and ultimately wisdom had left fine lines imprinted on her still lovely face:

> When I was a daughter I had no choice other than taking my father's orders. Then in my married life, my husband and mother-in-law were the two principal persons controlling my life. The first thing that I had to do in the morning was to touch their feet and take blessings. Blessings didn't come spontaneously. If they were not in a good mood it could even be a curse. My mother-in-law sent me in the paddy field immediately after Nawaran [ritual purification after eleventh postpartum day—a naming ceremony]. My role and relationship in this house changed after twenty five-years of my marriage. From a daughter I became a mother. I'm a mother-in-law and a grandmother. (Dulari, age 53, mother-in-law)

Dulari's discussion about her search for happiness opened up the past and images of her earlier life came back. She recalled herself passing through a succession of authorities until she gained some authority as a mother-in-law. She was a protected daughter, a dutiful wife, and an abandoned daughter-in-law. She felt that she had to pass

through a complex set of power relations in order to come to this authoritative stage. Dulari re-evaluated and redefined her past bitter experiences and adjusted her interactions and relationship with her daughter-in-law, trying to ensure that what happened to her would never happen to her daughter-in-law:

> I had my life and learned my lessons. Let my daughter-in-law to live her life and learn. But, I asked my daughter-in-law to give some chance to play with my grandchildren. I wanted to fill my vacant feelings. And, I'm happy that I was the first to hold the newborn. My son and daughter-in-law asked the nurse to give me that opportunity. (Dulari, age 53, mother-in-law)

Dulari presented an example of the benevolent, diplomatic dictator theme. In a very polite way, she was able to gain her daughter-in-laws' respect, as well as establish authority over her grandchildren. She not only survived past oppressions, but triumphed over the stigmatized image of how 'all mothers-in-law' act.

However, not all mothers-in-law leave the stereotype behind like Dulari. Some mothers-in-law might be termed 'not-so-benevolent' dictators. They perpetuate the same sort of abuse that they suffered themselves.

Disciplining mothers

The previous theme the 'benevolent dictator' showed that in the rites of passage to becoming mothers-in-law, some women chose the role of a benevolent dictator. However, some women were significantly less benevolent. These mothers-in-laws' stories are compiled under the discourses of 'disciplining mothers'.

Bhawani was one of those not-so-benevolent dictators. She was a fifty-nine-year-old woman. The village where she grew up was a few hundred houses, most of which

were traditionally self-contained units. Some were ruled by councils of elders, others by headmen. Her husband, the headman of the house, was not at all concerned about household issues. Hence, Bhawani automatically became the headwoman. This headwoman's story was framed from the beginning to the end by her behaviour towards her daughter-in-law, Sanu (Sanu had a homebirth and the baby died immediately after the first breath). Her rivalry with Sanu seemed to be for her son's love (Sanu's husband):

> This woman (Sanu) made me mad. She ignored my advice about what could be better for her and her baby inside her womb. She refused to cook and do her chores, pretending she had a stomachache. Since she is here for sometime I thought I should be relieved of work. I know she will leave this place in few weeks. Sanu took the occasion to quarrel with me early in the morning, saying my advice made her sick. I'm sure she tells this to my son by telephoning him in Kathmandu. She is controlling all money that my son sends. Anyway I'll have to bear all this because she is carrying my grandchild in her womb. (Bhawani, age 55, mother-in-law)

It seems Bhawani and her daughter-in-law, Sanu, shared a common concern of what would be the best for the baby. The conflict arose because of the difference in their status in the family context. Sanu was struggling to find a place for herself within a system that has an interest in restricting her to the narrow role of obedient daughter-in-law.

The mother-in-law Bhawani was afraid of her daughter-in-law Sanu. In her opinion, Sanu came from a different world and intended to take away her only son. The reverse dynamic was encountered in the story of the daughter-in-law, Heera. She was afraid of her mother-in-law competing for her husband. Heera was confined by heavy domestic responsibilities dictated to her by her mother-in-law.

> My mother-in-law always keeps an eye on me when I am with my husband. I hardly get chances to go out with my husband. The whole day

> my husband goes to work. The entire morning and evening I have to be stuck in the kitchen. I wanted to buy some garam mashala [ingredients for enriching soup's nutritious value] before I gave birth to this child, but my mother-in-law stopped me, saying that some guests were expected. This happened on several occasions. (Heera, age 28)

Heera expressed disappointment, and anger towards her mother-in-law because she perceived her mother-in-law as the principal person playing a significant role in assisting, observing and applying strict rules over her. Other dynamics existed and were described.

A slave or a servant

The first mother-in-law who felt she was being treated as a servant was Tara. Tara was a sixty-one-year-old woman. Three years ago her husband died from the effects of alcohol consumption. Since then, her personal life has been in turmoil because Nepali social norms work to sideline widows, and certainly to disempower them. A widow is seen as inauspicious in Nepali society. Tara wore only white saris, which signify her status. She was excluded from all cultural celebrations:

> Years ago, when Nanu came to my house as a daughter-in-law, I handed over the bunch of keys. I left nothing for me thinking that Nanu would take care of my needs. Recently my daughter came from her in-law's house for Teej [special women's festivals of dance and singing. People celebrate this for three days] celebration. I wanted to buy some glass bangles for her [parents present glass bangles to their married daughters in believe that it will prolong her husband's life span]. I needed a few rupees for that. When I disclosed these things to my daughter-in-law, she didn't even look up from her armchair. She said, 'nothing-wrong ma [mother] it's all old-fashioned tradition you don't need to keep this going on'. I looked at my son but he seemed to be with his wife. Sadly, he started dancing on his wife's direction [a popular Nepali saying]. I kept quiet. I had nothing left with me. My husband died three years ago and whatever was with us that automatically went into my son's authority. I have nothing with me so no one values me. (Tara, age 61, mother-in-law)

Tara felt marginalized in her own home. Her property rights were buried at her husband's funeral three years ago, and her value and social standing were greatly reduced. Tara's daughter-in-law, Nanu, did not seem to realize that daughter-in-law/mother-in-law roles are an unbroken cycle that most women have to endure. Additionally, the time comes in the lives of all daughters-in-law when they have to give back the same bunch of keys—keys that symbolize power and strength,. Such a dynamic indicates that the relationship between mother-in-law/daughter-in-law is little more than a social construction that they create and in which they participate.

The mother-in-law Radhika was another example of someone finding herself in the status of a servant in her own house. Radhika was a fifty-seven-year old mother-in-law. She was from a mountain region of Nepal where older women shifted their responsibilities to their daughters-in-law:

> I have only gotten to the bottom of my discomfort when I became a mother-in-law. I always had strong, independent, older women to guide me in my life. But, when Maya came in this house I became a mother-in-law. After a year of marriage she gave birth to this boy and the process continued until this little one, the fifth grandchild. Now I am the grandmother of five children, and two great-grandchildren. Then I realized growing older in this relationship was difficult. Every Sunday my son and daughter-in-law go to the hat bazaar [Sunday market]. They always ask my permission, but none of them even asks if I wanted to go. I am left alone to take care of all the grand children. I hate to be older in this relationship. (Radhika, age 57, mother-in-law)

When Radhika became a grandmother, she felt herself converted into a child minder. Her faith, her peace, her freedom and her eighty-eight-year-old heart became weary when her son and daughter-in-law, Maya, expected Radhika to act as the caretaker of their children. Radhika found that growing older meant that she found herself in the

position of assuming significant, not-so-welcome childcare responsibilities and trying to make other people happy at the expense of her own happiness.

Kinship as a mechanism of social control

This section 'kinship as a mechanism of social control' explores the complexity of the patriarchal kinship system in rural Nepal and its influence on mothers-in-laws' social status. Two key themes emerged: mothers-in-law as the product of patriarchy, and motherhood as a social construct.

Mothers-in-law as the product of patriarchy

The narratives under the theme 'mothers-in-law are the product of patriarchy' reveal an important double bind: mothers-in-law are both the product of patriarchy, and they maintain the patriarchy through mechanisms such as those previously explored in the rites of passage discourses. The mothers-in-law expressed various experiences of patriarchy shaping their lives.

The mother-in-law Mahadevi experienced difficulties in achieving control over family activities and issues that men in her family. Mahadevi appeared spry and alert in her red sari, which helped to hide the dust from her trek to the interview site and offset her gray hair. She was fifty-nine years:

> My daughter-in-law (Phull) was upset with me because she thought I'm excluding her from important household discussions. It was not me, but rather other senior male members—her father-in-law, her husband, and her brother-in-law, who do not want her to know all the ins and outs of family matters. I asked these males to allow Phull to join our discussion but they did not agree with me. Phull's brother-in-law whispered in my ear 'I want only my family members, but not the others to know our household affairs.

> Because of that I had to ask Phull to leave the room immediately. (Mahadevi, age 59, mother-in-law)

Mahadevi's narrative illustrates the norms that govern male-dominated social institutions. Mahadevi's experiences were confirmed by the experiences of Malti, a daughter-in-law, who had a hospital birth after seven years of infertility treatment. Both observed that the male members of the family oppress female members, even though the females are older. For example, although Malti's husband was junior to her mother-in-law in terms of age, her mother-in-law yielded to her son for managing money. The following excerpt from Malti's narrative illustrates this point:

> I was scared since one of my friends died during childbirth. However, the desire to have a family was surely there. It has always been there. I could not imagine I would not have one. I simply thought it was too far. When I see other women with babies in their arms, I felt sad and even envy them. My husband refused to consult a doctor. My mother-in-law was trying to help me. But she had no money that we could receive doctors' advice. Two years ago my father-in-law had sold a piece of land for 20000 Rs. He gave that money to his son [my husband]. My mother-in-law asked some amount for my treatment; however, he refused and handed it to my husband to keep safely. But he spent that on his motorcycle. He gave only 200 Rs to my mother-in-law. In those days of mahangi [raising prices] we could do nothing with such a small amount. (Malti, age 24, daughter-in-law)

Malti found that both she and her mother-in-law were trapped in the system. This made it difficult for them to access necessary support such as health or maternity care. She described how some types of male status and privilege extend across property or income lines—denying women the same forms of status, recognition and honour as men, and thus excluding women from the advantages enjoyed by male groups.

Motherhood as a social construct

Motherhood is neither a solitary experience for individual women nor do all women experience it similarly. It carries multiple, diverse, divergent, and often shifting meanings (Josselson, 1996; McMahon, 1995; Palriwala, 1994). This is true, as well, for the informants in this study. For Phull, motherhood was a symbol of sacrifice:

> I've done this! I spent my whole life getting ready for it! I got the real meaning of my life this morning with the birth of this baby. I didn't even sigh while I was in labour. I came to know the importance of motherhood. I feel the sacrifice that my mother did to bring me in this world. I can't imagine how she managed to have twelve children! Her mother-in-law helped her looking after us. My mother had no time to look after her baby because she became pregnant twelve times. She spent her life in becoming pregnant. (Phull, age 23, daughter-in-law)

Phull's experience revealed the story of Nepali women invoking their status as mothers, as the ones primarily responsible for nurturing and bringing up children, as the ones to bear the greatest burdens and pains, to justify their entitlement. In reality, it is the culture and institutions of these societies that create certain norms and preferences that lead to females being more responsible and specialized in caring for children.

While Phull took motherhood as a symbol of sacrifice, the mother-in-law Lali portrayed motherhood as a source of conflict and confusion. Lali was a fifty-three-year-old mother-in-law who had never left her village in her life. For years she was confined to her village and, similarly, to the mother role. Suddenly, when she became a mother-in-law, it became difficult for her to adjust to two roles simultaneously. Her animosity heightened when the opposing feelings intertwined making it difficult to distinguish herself as a mother or mother-in-law:

> It was little bit difficult for me to accept Sukannya's presence in my house. She reminds me of my daughter, Sharmila, who got married a year ago. Although Sharmila does not talk about her in-laws, I feel that she is not happy there. The whole day I spent thinking about her. I want to keep my daughter-in-law Sukannya happy thinking that she is someone's beloved daughter like Sharmila is mine. But, sometimes I use to think if my daughter is suffering in her in-laws' place why shouldn't Sukannya be! Sometimes I start thinking it is the old age making me powerless. (Lali, age 53, mother-in-law)

Lali's conflict became more pronounced as she admitted her own inability to be a sensitive mother-in-law. Upon reflection, she struggled with her own failings to easily experience positive, loving feelings for her daughter-in-law. This inability was troubling, as she had imagined that she would love Sukannya easily, without conflicting emotions or motivations.

Discussion

The informants' experiences revealed that in their rites of passage from mothers to mother-in-law, women often experienced their identities, experiences, and activities being created, in large part, through their engagements and negotiations with others (especially kin and social institutions such as family and patriarchy), rather than being straightforwardly assigned. A woman's status is a result of social conditioning within which her relationships are formed as necessary for coping with transitions and adjustments. The methods for coping and adjusting to transitions have individual variations. For example, on the one hand, Dulari was unable to escape the legacy of her long-suffering mother-in-law. On the other hand, she looked forward to the day when she could rule her son's wife (Dulari) with the same heavy hand. Just as the mothers-in-law suffered abuse and neglect during their early years, they can perpetuate the cycle of

abuse, changing from victims to perpetrators. In the past they may have been sent into exile to give birth alone in a barn. They know how terrifying and bewildering that experience can be, yet they now follow the same script modeled by their own mother-in-law.

Out of all the potential relationships that can exist between women, the one that often seems to bring forth a wealth of opinions is the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. As expected, in-law relationships can range from those characterized by care and love to those burdened with hostility. They are both trapped in a conflicted cycle, both pawns in a system that plays them against one another. In order to maintain harmony in the relationship, it is important for both mothers and daughters-in-law to understand that the roles within the kinship are socially determined.

The role of the contemporary 'mother-in-law' is well suited as a childbirth assistant. First, they could work to transform their culture in a way that the values that so dominate their lives, the values of the radical individualism—yield ample room for the values of care, connectedness, inter-dependence, and the other values necessary for social worth for women. They have to allow younger women to enjoy a renewed sense of purpose, passion, and power within themselves. Second, as they are helping their daughter-in-laws to bring their own grandchildren into this world, mothers-in-law have a stake in achieving the best outcomes. Mothers-in-law arbitrate most of the domestic medical decisions—whether a birthing woman in their household should be permitted to seek professional care in the event of an emergency or difficult labour. Yet, most mothers-in-law are not trained to make such decisions, nor do they always make these calls based on benevolent motives grounded in health and safety considerations. Mothers-

in-law could serve a critical role as on-the-spot triage agents in childbirth, especially if they were deputized to do so, as well as given additional training.

Third, in order to evaluate claims regarding the quality of maternity service provided, both the service provider and the service receiver must have at least a minimum 'understanding' with regard to one another. If a common sense of reasoning and justification is missing, it will become extremely difficult to make the processes that happen during a hospital birth acceptable. As she shares the same household norms with her daughter-in-law, the mother-in-law is in the position to better understand her needs and preferences. The same applies to the health workers. If they belong to the same culture they should then be able to understand the world or context of their patients. They must find a balance between their role as an 'expert' and their role as a caregiver.

Finally, effective communication helps to cope with emergency situations. For example, mothers-in-law are easily accessible even in the odd hours. Moreover, they have indigenous healing knowledge to comfort birthing women. One mother-in-law offered her daughter-in-law a glass of alcohol that acted as an analgesic and anesthetic. Another mother-in- law's oil massage synchronized the uterine contractions. Furthermore, if the complications are beyond their knowledge, they know whose help to seek. In this way, the mothers-in-law have reduced unnecessary hospitalizations. This is a significant finding because this allows health workers to concentrate on complicated childbirths only. By implication, mothers-in-law could conceivably play a much bigger role in changing the nature of health care utilization in rural areas, if health professionals recruited their help and prepared them for this role.

Both mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are challenged to the same rigours, challenges and ultimately the reversal of roles and responsibilities. Bearing a child is the major rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood, and it constitutes the more salient elements of adult female identity. Rather than disqualifying her from societal prestige and esteem, a woman's procreative powers command considerable respect and motherhood is a basis of their rites of passage. Similarly, another rite-of-passage is from daughter-in-law to mother-in-law. More research needs to examine ways to influence a positive change of status.

Recommendations

The premise of childbirth is arguably rooted in societal conceptions of the roles of women during the course of their lives. Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are two significant roles that almost all women experience in their rites of passage. Therefore, we recommend an integrated mother-in-law and daughter-in-law training package. The aim of training mothers-in-law is to motivate them to exercise power benevolently, to improve outcomes for women and their newborns while preserving the best aspects of Nepali culture and identity (e.g. family network support for the pregnant woman, social solidarity invoked and expressed in rituals specific to childbirth). Instead of offering only biomedical classes for mothers-in-law, the education should focus as well on the burdens and roles of good mother-in-law strategies. As mothers-in-law are the source of considerable cultural knowledge, such training would help to ensure that knowledge is informed by scientific principles, and contemporary health care practices.

Breastfeeding also needs to be promoted. The strategy should work to strengthen the bond between the birthing women and the other family members, develop communication skills with other childbirth stakeholders. The training discourages cultural practices that may have unintended adverse outcomes (e.g. nutritional taboos). Along with gender discrimination in the distribution of food, there are many misconceptions in a Nepali family. Pregnant and postpartum women are restricted from eating green leafy vegetables based on the rationale that this would cause women to pass green stools. There is also a belief that leafy green vegetables might get stuck inside the child's intestine. Women are deprived of green leaves, which are an important source of iron.

Efforts must be made to educate the mother-in-law to improve the utilization and distribution of food once it enters the home in order to overcome gender discrimination. For this nutritional awareness through documentary films, workshops, role-play and posters could be arranged for mothers-in-law, or the members of the mothers' club, of the particular community. In turn, they can help to create awareness among all the villagers. To overcome the deficiency of micronutrients resulting from a poor postpartum diet, the government could also distribute iron tablets free of cost for the first six weeks of postpartum period.

It is equally important to create awareness among the birthing women, as they are at the centre stage in the birthing process rather than being secondary stakeholders. In a way their role is like that of the archers in the battle of Uhad. The battle of Uhud was a reprisal against the Muslims. There were leading members of Quraysh such as Abu Jahl, Utbah, Shaiba, Walid, and Hanzala bin Abu Sufyan. Also accompanying the army was a band of warlike women. Their duty was to wage 'psychological warfare' against the Muslims by reading poetry and by singing amourous songs to spur the courage and the will-to-fight of the soldiers. They knew that nothing held such terror for the Arabs as the jibes of women for cowardice, and they also knew that nothing was so efficacious to turn them into utterly reckless fighters as the promise of physical love. Women's role looked less important, but was the key to the fate of the entire army. If women hold on to their front, the entire army will succeed (Alaska, 2005). If they leave it for 'greater action' elsewhere, everyone will lose. That means they themselves are in charge of their lives and the expected new life.

Conclusions

The life stories of fifteen postpartum women and eight mothers-in-law reveals the low status the patriarchal system affords to Nepali women. Significantly, it is also women themselves who entrench and maintain their subordinate social standing by virtue of the roles they play within the patriarchal system. Just as the mothers-in-laws suffered abuse and neglect during their early years, they can perpetuate the cycle of abuse, changing from victims to perpetrators. At one time they may have been sent into exile to give birth alone in the barn. They know how terrifying and bewildering that experience can be, yet they follow the same script they inherited from their own mother-in-law.

Since mothers-in-law are crucially placed in a patriarchal system as mediators of male authority in the female world, they could potentially play a leading role in destigmatizing a socially sanctioned lower status of daughters-in-law and women in general. Mothers-in-law are potentially very important allies in an effort to improve maternity care.

Mothers-in-law make most of the medical triaging decisions—whether a birthing woman in their household should be permitted to seek professional care in the event of an emergency or difficult labour. Yet, they are often not trained to make such decisions, nor do they sometimes make these calls based on benevolent motives that are grounded in safety and health. If women in the household could function together as partners, they could reduce much of their conflict. This opens the door for a potentially powerful strategy for improved maternal and child health outcomes — of building healthy, knowledgable relationships between daughters and their mothers-in-law during the childbirth years.

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