



Gender relations and housing in matrilineal and patriarchal communities

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Summary

According to the author, housing is not only a technological product but also a product of culture and gender relations. Just as gender differentiation affects the structure of the house, the structure of the house reveals existing hierarchies and perpetuates differential access to opportunities. Architecture is, therefore, the record of the work of those that have the power to build. The process of building and the manner of using space are shaped by social, political, and economic forces and values embodied in the forms themselves. The first part of this paper examines housing design and gender relations among the Newar of the Khokana Village in Nepal. The second part of the paper deals with how the nature of housing in turn affects women's lives.

The Newar are the indigenous inhabitants of and the largest ethnic group in Kathmandu Valley. The study area here is Khokana Village, which is a small Newar village on the southern flank of the Valley and constitutes the smallest Village Development Committee (VDC) in Lalitpur District. The total number of households in this village is 665 and the population is 6,000. All the Newar here are Buddhist. Residence is patrilocal, and the woman goes to the husband's home after marriage. Widows rarely remarry, while widowers tend to get married soon after the wife's death. Newar women adopt the husband's family name; children too take the father's name. Family property is distributed among the sons, and daughters have no rights over parental property. The main occupation of the villagers is farming. As men have started working outside the village, the burden of farming has fallen on the shoulders of the women. Almost all women spin wool as a source of secondary income.

There is a very distinct gender division of labour among these Newar compared to the Karen and Isan people in Thailand. Although the primary responsibility for household tasks rests with women in all three communities, there is some sharing of household work among the Karen and Isan, but this sharing is absent in Khokana. Also, while men among the Newar make all household decisions, women have a say in household matters among the Isan and Karen. The restriction on women's mobility is also much higher among the Newar than among the women of the Karen and the Isan.

The layout of the Newar house is generally rectangular. The aim of each family or clan is to build a single house around a courtyard, providing security and privacy. Wood and brick are the main materials used for the superstructure, and mud or clay is used as mortar. The house has a vertical functionality. The ground floor, which has no protection from dampness, is usually used as a storeroom or shed for cattle. A central wall divides the ground floor into two rooms, one of which might also be used as a shop. The kitchen is on the top floor, and the hearth in the kitchen is located in a corner. The room on the second floor is used as a bedroom. All social interaction takes place on the first floor. In a Karen building, the kitchen is bigger and the hearth is located at the centre of the kitchen. All social and familial activities take place around the hearth. In an Isan house, the kitchen is in the corner, but the dining and living space is large and open. Most of the family and other social interactions take place in this open area. Both Isan and Karen houses have horizontal functionality.

During fieldwork in Nepal among the Newar, the author asked respondents what importance they assigned to different rooms in the house. Although all the couples cited here belonged to the educated circle, their gender awareness and perceptions were very different. Discussions with the respondents showed that women having decision-making power over household expenditure gave first priority to investment in their workplace, i.e., the kitchen. Women who had little or no say in allocation of resources gave first priority to spaces other than the kitchen. Women who had little or no say in household expenditure tended to give priority to the living room. The reason they cited was that the living room was the showpiece of the house/family. In the case of men, those that had some awareness of gender issues ascribed a high value to women's workplace.

The comparative size of spaces is another measure of the relative importance designated to the users of that space. Partition walls indicate the seclusion of one activity from other activities and seclusion of one user group from others. Partition walls are used, for instance, to veil women from outsiders. A comparison of the houses of the Isan in Khon Khen and the Newar of Khokana shows that fewer strictures placed on women means fewer partition walls. Newar women are subjected to restrictions on their mobility, which is evident from the partitions created to separate and seclude women's spheres



of activity. The open design (it has fewer partitions) of a house among the Isan on the other hand, allows for the possibility of sharing space and work, suggesting a more gender egalitarian ethos.

The location of spaces in individual homesteads also reveals the hierarchy of relations in the household. Some people have their kitchen in the backyard, separating the dining room and the kitchen. Because of this separation of kitchen from dining or living spaces, a woman or a servant has to spend more time not in, but adjacent to, the dining/living spaces. Hierarchy and location of rooms thus reflect the stratified relationships within a home – the subordination of servants to the family, family to wife, and wife to husband.

A cross-cultural study found that, as culture becomes more complex, the segregation of space by gender too is accentuated. Similarly, when power relations between men and women are tense, there is greater segregation of spaces. The more respectable and status-conscious the household, the greater the differentiation between front and back, the public sphere of the street and the parlour and the private sphere of the kitchen, the yard, and the back lane.

Another reason for the segregation of space is that roles and responsibilities are segregated by gender, influencing space utilisation. As the income level of a family increases, the function of a space becomes more rigid. Poorer people would use the same space for different functions at different intervals of time. A field survey indicated that the Karen house has less gender division of space, and both women and men spend most of their time in the kitchen, whereas, in a Newar house, men spend hardly any time in the kitchen.

Usually, the ownership of land or a house plays an important role in housing design. The person who owns or inherits a house usually has a say in the investment pattern, that is, the space he/she wants to invest in further. Among the Newar, it is the son who inherits the house, whereas, among the Karen, both daughters and sons inherit property, and it is usually the daughter who stays with the parents in their house. These inheritance patterns have a bearing on the importance given to spaces in these two communities. Priority is given to the kitchen in the matrilineal system, whereas it is the living room or bedroom that gets priority in a patrilineal system.

Although the Newar from Khokana are Buddhist, they follow many traditions and practices of the Hindus. Thus, they place a high premium on the concept of purity of women. During menstruation and for 10 days after delivery, a woman is considered impure. Her husband cannot touch her and she cannot enter the temple, the *puja kotha* (worship room in the house), storeroom, or kitchen. She cannot cook or touch potable water. Access to sacred spaces (*puja kotha*) is also taboo to people of lower caste and strangers. Thus, the kitchen and *puja kotha* in a traditional Newar house is usually located on the top floor.

Differences in eating and cooking habits affect the form of the house and vary between cultures. There is gender differentiation in the manner in which household activities are carried out. In Khokana's Newar families, women exclusively perform all household chores. The hearth is in one corner of the top floor in the Newar home, while the hearth in the Karen kitchen is in the centre, allowing room for men to share work with women. Among the Karen, although cooking is mainly the responsibility of women, there is a tendency to share household work. In an Isan household, the hearth is in a corner, but there is a larger dining area. In Newar families, the men and children eat first, while the women serve food. Women eat only after the men have finished their meal. Eating together or separately, cooking by one person or many, affects housing design. Thus, the space for the kitchen and dining area is smaller in Khokana compared to that in the Isan and Karen villages.

The size of the family is also reflected in housing design. As the family size decreases, the demand for smaller houses increases. Household decisions are taken by men in joint families and by both men and women in nuclear families among the Newar in Khokana. Further, communities where women are involved in household decisions have better housing and the women here are satisfied with the arrangements of space in the house. In comparing patrilineal (Newar) and matrilineal (Karen) communities, we find that in both communities the major decisions on maintenance and construction are taken by men – the difference is that Karen women have a greater say in these matters.

In the process of social interaction, the degree to which women interact with outsiders (other than family members) is revealed in the spatial arrangement of houses in that community. For instance, Newar women have greater restrictions on social interaction with outsiders than Karen women. The location of a Newar woman's workplace, the kitchen, is on the top floor of the house, and the living room (space for interaction) is on the first floor, so that outsiders can rarely interact with women who are usually cooking on the top floor. Karen women, who have fewer restrictions on interaction, have a joint kitchen and living space, which is where outsiders are entertained.

Restriction of women is also defined in terms of privacy by separating spaces within the house into male and female domains. Normally, people with a higher income can afford privacy/segregation, which they maintain more strictly than people with fewer resources. Women and men work to maintain households and communities but their work tends to differ in nature and value. Better-designed housing has a direct bearing on a person's labour, whether domestic or paid/economic work. Housing design can save labour time or provide comfortable working conditions, offering flexibility of space according to the needs of the users.



The percentage of married women that have taken up employment outside the home has increased in Nepal from 44.1% in 1981 to 50.1% in 1991. Working women have to take care of housing, employment, and child care simultaneously. Due to the problems of reconciling child care and domestic work, social restrictions on mobility, women's lack of human capital (skills, education, and job experience), and discrimination in formal employment, most of women's economic activities are predominantly in the informal sector, and frequently home- or community-based in nature. The percentage distribution of economically active women in Nepal by employment status (1991), shows that the largest proportion of women are self-employed (84%), the remaining being divided among employers (0.4%), employees (12%), and unpaid family workers (3.5%).

There are four major areas of domestic work for women: 1) child rearing; 2) caring for family members; 3) provision of appropriate food and shelter; and 4) clothing. Normally, women are expected to perform all these tasks and actually do so. Inadequacies in dwellings, community amenities, and infrastructure play a major role in intensifying this domestic work which, given gender divisions of household labour, rebounds disproportionately upon women. Nepali women spend an average of 76.4% of their time on domestic activities, whereas men spend less than 20% on domestic and expanded activities. The lack of essential services, such as domestic water supply, sewerage systems, and solid waste disposal systems, have a great impact on women's lives. In Khokana, out of 20 respondents, eight did not have toilet facilities at home. Likewise, in other villages surveyed in the Kathmandu Valley, 40% of the residents did not have toilets at home. Scarce amenities involve further time and trouble for women, especially where public transport is unreliable or expensive.

The design of individual dwellings as well as the whole built environment (created surroundings, including homes, public spaces, transport routes, workplaces, and community areas) maintains the concept that women's work is of less value. Since women's work at home is not recognised as work, the home itself has not been viewed as a workplace. As a result, there has been insufficient recognition of the needs of the users and little effort has been made to increase the efficiency and productivity of housework.

Conclusion

In the author's view, any housing design emerges in order to fulfil requirements of some existing gender relations. Religion, family and kinship systems, social interactions, and the means to meet basic needs determine gender relations. The author's field work shows that communities having unequal gender relations have different housing arrangements than communities having relatively better gender relations. In Khokana, gender differences are seen in the quality of space of the dominant users, size of

space, hierarchy of space, and the gender division of space. And once a house is built in such a way, it has a long-term bearing on the lives of the residents, particularly women and children, as they spend many more hours at home than men. Housing also has an impact on women's domestic work and paid work. The lack of basic amenities to suit the main users impacts health. Field data show occurrence of accidents and diseases, women are the primary victims of these health hazards. Further, it is important to remember that gender relations are not static, they change over time. It is imperative, therefore, to see housing in terms of its consequences for gender relations and to build structures that are flexible enough to be amenable to changes in the future.

