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THE VALUE OF SONS AND DAUGHTERS AMONG THE GURUNGS IN NEPAL

Narayani Tiwari

Introduction

This paper¹ addresses the issue on the value of sons and daughters in the Gurung village where the fieldwork was carried out. The conceptual framework of this paper is based on theoretical literature about the fertility transition. In the literatures, questions are raised about the relationship between fertility and value of children, as well as the relationship of high fertility with preference for sons or daughters. In this paper, the value of children and the preference for sons or daughters is placed in the context of household activities and the role of sons and daughters in those activities.

Literature review and conceptual framework

The value of children in Nepal involves certain socio-economic, cultural and religious factors, which sometimes conflict with the interests of the family and the inheritance rules. The values attached to the role of sons and daughters can influence fertility trends. Various factors are responsible for the fertility patterns and changes in Nepal and elsewhere. Many demographers (Davis and Blake 1956; Bongaarts 1978; Freedman 1987; Jones 1990; Caldwell 1996; Cleland 1993; Volland 1998; Crow and Allan, 2001; Singh *et al.*, 2003) have noted factors affecting fertility through proximate variables (Bongaarts 1978) or intermediate variables. These can be clustered into three groups: first, variables relating exposure to intercourse; second, variables relating to conception; and, third, variables relating to pregnancy outcome (Jones, 1990). Age at marriage is an important variable in the first cluster, the use of contraception is an important one in the second cluster and socio-economic and cultural factors affecting fertility are placed in the third cluster.

Authors like Karki (1988), Niraula and Morgan (1995) and Riley (1999) have reported that the meaning of masculinity and femininity in patriarchal society is often such that it contributes the population growth. The meanings and value attached to masculinity and femininity will influence parental investments in sons and daughters. While the latter should be equal, this is often not the case (Sieff, 1990; Casimir and Dutilh, 2003). Also the status of women, their fertility choices and gender preferences have direct effect on fertility trends in any country.

Due to socio-economic and cultural differences, the demand for and the value of children vary between the developing and developed countries. Freedman (1974) observed that the preferred number of sons is relatively

high in many Asian countries. The decisions on whether to have a child and on how to share education, food, work, health care and local resources are in large measure made locally at the household level (Dasgupta 1995). Children are needed for household chores, but sometimes they are also regarded as a nuisance because they put emotional strain and an economic burden on their parents (Bulatao 1979). Bulatao further added the demands of more work create problems for disciplining children and worrying about their future increases parents' aspirations to make good provisions for their children or to make them more successful in the family.

Demographic transition is one of the most important theories in demography. It was developed in relation to the European demographic history before being applied to recent population change in the Third World (Jones 1990; Caldwell 1991; McDonald 1993). The demographic transition theory describes the change from high levels of fertility and mortality to low levels of birth and death rates as a traditional, rural or pre-modern society develops into an urbanized and industrialized modern society (Caldwell 1991; Jones 2003). The goal to reduce fertility in many developing countries resulted in strengthening family planning programs (Cleland 1993). Fertility regulation has thus been an important element of population policy throughout the world (Alam 1993).

Caldwell and Mackensen (1980) observed that the high fertility has greatest economic value in family-based production, like traditional agrarian subsistence farming. On the one hand, children are costly to feed and educate and need to be looked after. On the other hand, children are important for family welfare and can contribute to the household economy. Once a traditional society changes, family-based production becomes less important, and the value of children declines. In a modernizing society parents have to invest in their children's education. What happens then is a reversal of the wealth flows: changing from flowing from children to parents to flowing from parents to children. Children become a net loss instead of a net gain. In another way children also can give economic support to the family by looking after their parents in their old age. This is why Caldwell and Mackensen (1980: 172) note that the benefits and disadvantages of high fertility must be measured over the rest of a person's lifetime. This means that the value of children includes their perceived future contribution to a secure old age of their parents.

Edmondson (1992) tested the theory of the reversal of wealth flows in a rural area in Bali (Indonesia). She looked at an intergenerational exchange and the fertility transition over for a period of more than a decade. She found a relationship between economic change and family size. The economic transition (from a traditional rice-growing economy to an economy with an important services sector) stimulated the fertility transition. The study showed the importance of the economic responsibilities of male children for

the parental household and kinship group. The exchange of wealth is stretched over a longer period of time. Parents provide economic and educational support to the children first and then the children are expected to support the parents in old age.

While looking at the fertility transition in Asia, several demographers use cultural and institutional factors as explanatory variables for fertility behaviour (McNicoll 1992; Dahal and Fricke 1998; McDonald 1993; 2000). McDonald (2000) notes that the particular social and cultural values that play a role in using contraception, timing of first marriage, timing of first birth, and status of women, determine the fertility transition. The fertility intervals between births, and using contraception, which prevents women from having children determine the number of children that a woman may have during her lifetime (McNicoll 1992; McDonald 2000). The fertility decline relates to different associations between socio-economic and demographic variables that help to stop child bearing after the birth of son (Leone *et al.*, 2003). Fertility decline often depends upon prior institutional change of gender equality in a particular society (McDonald 2000: 403):

Firstly, fertility in a society falls as a result of the cumulative actions of individual women and men to prevent birth. Secondly, sustained lower fertility in any society will lead to fundamental changes in the nature of women's life. Thirdly, in pre-transitioned societies, high fertility was socially determined, not naturally determined. Lastly, the transition from high fertility to fertility around replacement level is accompanied by an increase in gender equity within the institution of the family.

Freedman (1987) mentioned that many countries that face a long uphill struggle for development should reduce fertility levels. In this context, the status of women determines the conditions for successful family planning. Another approach that could explain fertility patterns and levels is to examine the value of children in society. Caldwell (1996) and Cleland (1993) noted that changes of fertility patterns from Europe to Asia resulted from the decline of infant mortality and the transformation of illiterate agricultural societies to literate industrializing societies. The high value attached to children leads to mortality reduction, raises aspirations, and reduces child labour. It also leads to emergence of the conjugal family, and weakening of cultural props for high fertility (Bulatao 1979; Bongaarts and Greenhalgh 1985; Caldwell 1996).

Parental preference for a particular gender of child, or preference for a balanced number of each gender exists throughout the world (Krishnan 1993). Demographically, a strong preference for sons may lead to higher fertility, as exemplified by the case of the patrilineal Batak in Indonesia (Tan and Soeradji 1986). The higher values attached to sons than daughters in India as compared to a greater gender equality in Indonesia partly explains

the persistent higher fertility in large parts of India in comparison with substantial fertility decline in Indonesia (Niehof 2001). For the case of Indonesia the significant fertility decline has to be placed in the context of comparative gender equity and ongoing social change, leading to different reproductive choices of women (Niehof 2003; Niehof and Lubis 2003).

Value of children in Nepal

In this study, the value of children approach was applied to the Gurung community, looking more specifically at different values attached to sons or daughters. Generally, the Gurungs prefer to have equal numbers of sons and daughters (Macfarlane 1976). In this paper, specific attention is paid to gender preferences. Son preference is an important determinant of fertility in Nepal (Karki 1988; Niraula and Morgan 1995). Preferences for sons and daughters and their social and cultural relationships to values of masculinity and femininity in society make a difference for fertility patterns. In Nepal, fertility regulation was started through family planning services (MOH 1986). Son preference is far more prevalent, especially in South and Central Asia than a preference for daughters (Freedman 1974; Niraula and Morgan 1995). Gender discrimination and son preference are key demographic features of South Asia, from which Nepal cannot escape (Leone *et al.* 2003).

Nepal is an agriculture-based traditional society. There is a strong preference for sons, which can be attributed to the patriarchal norms and values among the Gurungs nearly the same as "Hindu" and the cultural and economic roles, the sons play in the family and society. For example, they continue the family name and the use of parental property and provide support to their parents during their old age. Although different ethnic groups and communities have their own socio-cultural traditions and practices with regard to gender preference, some surveys and micro-level studies have proved that there are strong preferences for sons (MOH/Nepal 1976; MOH/Nepal 1986; MOH/Nepal 1981; MOH/Nepal 1986; MOH/Nepal 1991; MOH/Nepal, 1996).

During the 1970s, the value of children in Nepal was studied at the community level (Karki 1988). In spite of the general preference for sons, daughters are also valued for their religious and cultural roles in relation to certain social practices. Son preference affects fertility regulation because a couple stops child bearing only when they have one or more sons. To have one or more sons and at least one daughter is perceived as the ideal family in large parts of Nepali society (Karki 1988). In Hindu culture the birth of a daughter is considered to be fated. The expression "late birth but son birth" proves that in the Nepali culture a family does not exist without a son. Some people in Nepal still think that children are God's gift and it is immoral to interfere with the *Will of God* (Karki 1988). This expression is also exists among the Gurungs.

The level of son preference in Nepal is substantial (Leone *et al.* 2003). Rural women in Nepal frequently express a strong preference for sons, mostly for economic reasons, which reflects women's subordinate position in society and the low economic value placed on women's work (Winkvist and Akhtar 2000). Mothers of sons have higher status in the family and society. They even get more attention with respect to their nutrition and health during the pregnancy and child-rearing period than mothers of daughters.

Table 1 below presents some gender and fertility indicators of Nepal in the Asian context.

Table 1: Gender and Fertility Indicators in Nepal

Gender Disparities	Nepal	South Central Asia
Primary school enrolment M/F	126/112	
Illiterate percentage >15 years M/F	37/65	
Mortality under -5 years M/F	78/83	92/97
Reproductive health and fertility		
Births per 1000 women aged 15-19	113	72
Contraceptive prevalence modern methods	35	41
Total fertility rate	3.50	3.04

Source: UNFPA, 2005: 108,112

There are clearly gender disparities in Nepal, as can be seen from the male-female differences with regard to schooling and illiteracy in the table. The table also shows that the female mortality below five years old is higher compared to that of males. Fertility birth per 1000 women aged 15-19 is much higher in Nepal compared to the Asian average, which indicates a very early start of the childbearing period in Nepal. Likewise, contraceptive prevalence is relatively low and the total fertility rate is high in Nepal compared to the Asian averages. The sections below briefly discuss the Gurung community of Lamjung district and values of sons and daughters within their community.

The Gurungs

The Gurungs belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of the Himalayans region. They live predominantly in the Himalayan range or high hill region in central Nepal, in closely tied communities surrounded by other groups (Macfarlane and Gurung 1990). According to Macfarlane (1976), almost certainly many thousand years ago their ancestors lived in the high mountain of western China and their language is still variation of Chinese and Tibetan. Gurung caste system has been fragmented into two parts: the four-caste (*Charjat*) and sixteen-caste (*Sorajat*) systems. Donald (1976) and Macfarlane (1976) report about the conflict inherent in a dual social organization in this case consisting

of two Gurung sub-tribes called *Sorajat* (coming from south) and *Charjat* (coming from North), each comprised of many clans and lineages. In the research area the Gurungs of both groups can be found. The common belief is that *Charjat* is supposed to be superior to *Sorajat*.

Many Gurung men join the Indian and British army or in the UN peace keeping forces. If the family has a son with a job in the army, the parents feel proud of their son and are financially secure in the present and the future. Mostly, the wives of men in the army or in other employment stay at home as housewives while their husbands are away. In this way women are the main household managers and look after the house, the farm, their children and other members of the family. Gurung women are rarely employed and are generally minimally educated. Gurung women's opinions and attitudes towards having sons and daughters and fertility-regulating behavior seem to be similar to those of other ethnic groups in Nepal.

Kinship and marriage

Marriage among the Gurungs within the same caste (*Jat*) has traditionally been important. Marriages between *Charjat* and *Sorajat* are not accepted. There is a fair amount of cross cousin marriage where ego (male) can marry the daughter of the maternal uncle (MBD) or the daughter of the paternal aunt (FSD) (Bhattarai, 2003). These types of marriages are still common among the Gurungs, but individual selection by boys and girls and love marriages are increasing these days. Gurung girls are taking initiatives and decisions for postponing marriage, freedom in mate selection and changes in the attitude towards marriage. Religious culture and taboos still have a strong influence on the marriage ceremony. Formerly, it was customary for the father's sister's daughter (FSD) to tie a knot with the mother's brothers' son (MBS). However, this custom is dying out now. The kinship system is patrilineal with virilocal residence.

Importance of sons and daughters

Sons are the inheritors of parental property and the representatives of Nepali orthodox Hindu culture that exists among the Gurungs as well. Also in Gurung society, traditionally, culturally and by law property rights family formation inheritance goes from the parents to the sons. The recent law on property rights (2003) indicates that daughters can acquire parental property up to the marriage. Once married, she loses all her property rights. In this way, sons are the link for the continuation of family property. Furthermore, the sons have to take the dead body of the parents to the place of cremation.

Daughters are also important in the family in different ways. A daughter is needed during the funeral ceremony. Unlike in many other communities and ethnic groups, among the Gurung sons and daughters hold equal importance and have equally important ritual functions at the time of a

parent's death. Gurung daughters are allowed to participate in the funeral ceremony like their brothers. Without the presence of a daughter and son-in-law, the funeral cannot proceed. The daughter has to leave her hair loose and uncovered and has to stand in front of the corpse and put some money to the corpse before it leaves the house. The Gurungs believe that they will not reach heaven if they fail to continue these practices.

Findings from the field

In this section, the results from the survey of 350 households and the focus group discussions and case studies are presented and discussed. First, we will look at the expressed desire for (more) sons or daughters. The data in Table 2 shows that the expressed desire for more sons or daughters of respondents who have either no sons living with them or no daughters living with them.

Table 2: Expressed desire for sons or daughters in relation to having sons or daughters

Not having sons or daughters living with	Expressed desire for more son or daughters in percentage			Total Numbers
	Desire for more sons ⁽¹⁾	Desire for more daughters ⁽¹⁾	Neither sons nor daughters	
No sons	59 (58 %)	36 (35 %)	7 (7 %)	102
No daughters	40 (27 %)	59 (40 %)	47 (32%)	146
Total	99 (40 %)	95 (38 %)	54 (22%)	248

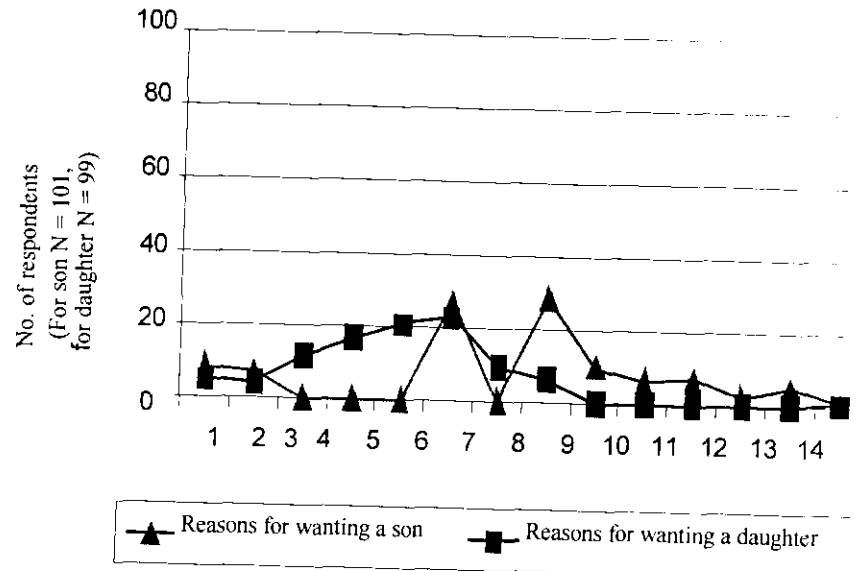
⁽¹⁾ The respondents include only wishing for more sons and daughters. Son preference is significance on Chi-square 31.4 (P < 0.01).

Table 2 shows that of the 102 respondents who do not have sons living with them (only daughters), 59 desire more sons and 36 desire more daughters. However, of the 146 respondents with no daughters living with them (only sons), 59 desire more daughters and 40 desire more sons, in spite of the fact that they have no daughters. Only 54 respondents both with no sons and no daughters desired neither sons nor daughters. The table indicates that for people who don't have sons they desire to have a son is more important than the desire to have a daughter for people who don't have daughters. Hence, the significant chi-square value (p<0.01) seems to indicate a slighter preference for sons than daughters, in spite of the more or less equal cultural value attached to sons and daughters in the Gurung culture. The important role of both sons and daughters in the funeral ceremony of their parent is clearly visible in Figure 1 below.

Activities of sons and daughters

There are some common activities in the Gurung households that involve a gender division of labour. The activities of sons and daughters in the household are described in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Reasons for wanting sons and daughters



Source: Households and Fertility Survey 2003

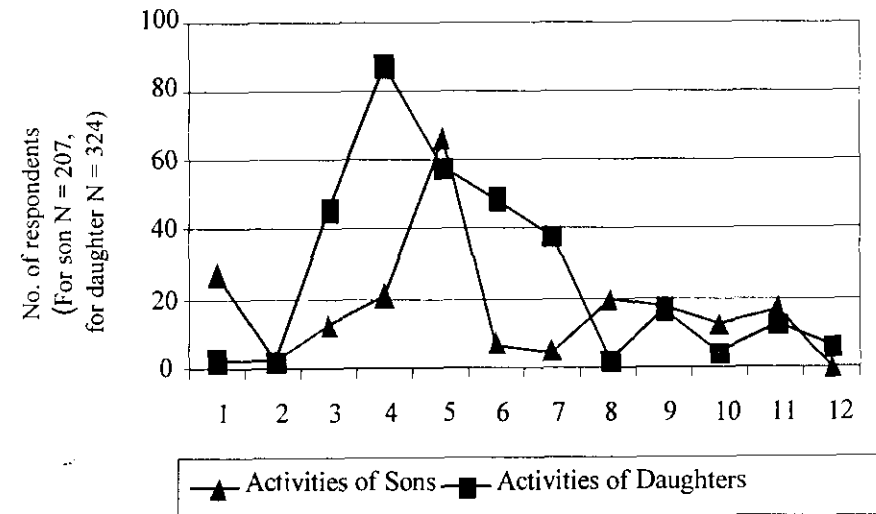
*Multiple answers of respondents

Note: 1 = Already have sons/daughters, 2 = Both are essential for family, 3 = Daughter as jewel of the house, 4 = To love the parents, 5 = Help in the household work, 6 = Attend the funeral ceremony, 7 = Understand the parent's problem, 8 = Look after the parent at old age, 9 = Gain prestige in society, 10 = Maintain family reputation, 11 = Support the family, 12 = Access to the public sphere, 13 = Continue the progeny, 14 = Others.

The importance attached to sons for looking after their parents in old age is related to the pattern of virilocal residence. Traditionally, the son stays with the parents because of the patrilineal society while the daughter follows the husband. Because the son stays at home and inherits the property, he is obliged to look after the parents in old age. The daughters follow their husbands. There are some common activities in the Gurung households that involve a sexual division of labour. Figure 1 shows the different activities of sons and daughters in the household. Sons are highly involved in fetching water for the household and also participate in agricultural work. Notably, almost an equal number of respondents said that their sons also do cooking and go to the market or the shop. Daughters, on the other hand, are involved

more in food preparation, washing clothes and cleaning the dishes. But just like the sons, daughters also fetch water. The daughters work more in the house and reflect women's reproductive role. Sons do more work outside the house and in agriculture, which reflects their future role as provider.

Figure 2: Activities for which sons and daughters valued



Source: Households and Fertility Survey 2003

*Multiple answers of respondents

Note: 1 = Agriculture work, 2 = Child care, 3 = Washing clothes, 4 = Cooking food, 5 = Fetching water, 6 = Cleaning dishes, 7 = Cleaning houses, 8 = Marketing/Shopping, 9 = Fuel wood collection, 10 = Livestock stalling/grazing, 11 = Grass/Fodder collection, 12 = Cow dung removal

The main reasons for wanting sons are that they are supposed to look and their role in after the parents at their old age and the funeral ceremony. The main reasons for wanting daughters are for their role in the funeral ceremony in the household, and for love and affection. The important role of both sons and daughters in the funeral ceremony of their parent is clearly visible in the figure above. The importance attached to sons for looking after their parents in old age is related to the pattern of virilocal Gurung residence. Traditionally, the son stays with the parents because of the patrimonial society while the daughter goes to her husband's house when married. Because the son stays at home and inherits the property, he is obliged to look after the parents in old age.

Personal statements by respondents about sons and daughters

The birth of daughter is welcome because of religious, cultural and social values. Daughters are valued for their help with housework, taking care of younger children and companionship with the mother. Sons and daughters are valued equally because of their importance during the parents' funeral ceremony. The ceremony is not conducted unless a daughter is present. This is not the case in some communities where daughters are not allowed to attend the funeral of their parents.

One case study shows that Shreemaya, who has two sons, desires a daughter. She has a strong desire for a daughter in her family which is a wish of almost every Gurung family. Shreemaya prefers a daughter to a son because she believes that daughters give more love and care to their parents. She also considers them a source of inspiration and crutch for old age. She expressed her wish as follows:

If I would have a daughter, she would give me deep love, care and affection until old age. I love to hear a lovely voice of "Ama" from my lovely daughter now and in my very old age. She would be looking after my health and help me address female-oriented personal problems. Unfortunately, I do not have a daughter in my life.

Shreemaya is not sure whether her sons love her. Neither son shows love and care to her. Hence, she feels insecure now as she is getting old. She is worried about her future, particularly about her funeral where a daughter is needed to take the dead body from the house to place of cremation. Her husband had a vasectomy in Chitwan without informing her. She laments that all she has left is the dream of having a daughter.

Kumari Gurung, another respondent who is a mother of four daughters, was married at the age of twenty-two years with a young man of the Indian army. Her husband remarried another wife when she was thirty-five years old. Her children were all below twelve years old at that time. The eldest daughter was eleven year old, the second was six, the third was four, and the youngest was only one year old. She has fourteen stepchildren with the second wife of her husband. Kumari's husband has now eighteen children all together. Kumari feels rich because she considers her four daughters her wealth. Hence, she does not desire a son. She also doesn't care for her husband and the co-wife anymore.

Being a mother of four daughters makes me feel proud of them and I never feel something is missing because of having no sons. I am enjoying my four daughters and I did not like to maintain a male partner after separation. The males always want to take advantage of the women. I could remarry if I wanted to but I did not because I want to give my attention to my four daughters. I also do not

wish to have a son because I am happy with my four daughters now. Sons and daughters are equal in my two eyes.

Another respondent, Ashmaya, does not expect to have more children. She has already a son. Her husband married a second wife when she was pregnant and now she is separated from him. Being a single mother it is would be difficult for her to look after her child because of financial constraints. However, she wants to give a good education to her son.

I simply did not marry again for the future of my son. If I remarry and have another children, that will affect my son's economic security and education as well. I do not have the capacity to provide all the needs of my son. His father does not give me any money for his education. My parents-in-law would like me to remarry so that they can get back the land from my son and me. I did not remarry for my son's future.

Rukumaya has different views of sons and daughters. Rukumaya likes to look after her children and think their future. She expressed this as follows:

I have twin sons and two daughters, who I consider my precious property. Actually I wanted only two children but because my first two children were daughters I waited for sons and had twin sons. Hence, I now have four children. Gurung families do not have any preference for sons or daughters. We provide education to our daughters and sons equally, if daughters like to have education. However, daughters marry at an early age without completing their education. Daughters feel life is better after marriage. This is the case for myself; I also did not continue my education. Anyway, we treat our daughters and sons equally in my family and in the community. We value our sons and daughters equally especially for their role in the funeral ceremony.

In Ratanpur, a thirty-one year-old male respondent, father of a boy, disclosed that he had a vasectomy a year ago without his wife's permission. He inherited limited land from his parental property and now he has no source of income to continue livelihood. He is worried about the production from his parental land, which is not enough to feed his family. He said that his land is already small since his grandfather's property was divided into parts for him and his two brothers. Later his father's brother divided the land into four small parts. His father gave him one part of the land among the three of his own brothers. This is the case when there are more sons in the family so that at least part of the land will be theirs. Therefore, he thinks that it is difficult to maintain the livelihood and produce enough food from decreasing land resources. He said:

I have no regular job and even no enough parental property either. I, therefore, did a vasectomy after a birth of my first son. I am sure, one son gives every good value as a single moon giving light at night all over the world.

The case studies show that mostly women strongly feel about contributing their life to their children. They feel a great responsibility for the children's welfare, education and future. This is illustrated by the case of the single mother who does not intend to remarry and have more children. She is happy remaining single and looking after her child. The women are very affectionate with the children. Women's feeling is that either sons or daughters are their wealth and source of happiness.

Conclusion

Among the different demographic theories with regard to the fertility transition the value-of-children approach proved to be fruitful for looking at the Gurung community. The Gurungs seem to prefer slightly sons to daughters, mainly because of the importance of sons for the security in old age. However, both sons and daughters are important in the funeral ceremony. There does not seem to be a great gender disparity to the effect that people want sons and will not stop childbearing until they have a son. Hence, the Gurung son preference is not an issue and a cause of high fertility. On the other, the necessity to have at least one daughter might influence fertility. The need for having a daughter would require a gross reproduction rate of at least one.

Based on the statements of the informants a picture of masculinity and femininity among the Gurungs can be constructed. It seems that masculinity is associated with providing for the family and providing for the parents at old age. Femininity is associated with nurturing and duties to family and household, as well as with giving love and affection to children. Contributing to the funeral ceremony of the parents is part of both masculine and feminine roles. National legislation with regard to inheritance in Nepal still favours sons. The fact that parental property goes to sons rather than daughters influences the value attached to having sons and daughters and discriminates against women, also among the Gurungs. Thus, although there is a great measure of gender equality among the Gurungs, they are also affected by discriminatory national legislation.

Note

1. This paper presents the partial findings of a PhD research project on "Women's Agency in relation to Population and Environment in Rural Nepal". The fieldwork was done in October 2002-December 2003 in Bhotedar and Udiapur, Lamjung, Nepal. The data were collected using

both qualitative and quantitative methods. The quantitative data are derived from the household and fertility survey conducted by the author in February 2003 (sample size 350). The respondents were married women between the ages of 15-49 years. The qualitative statements in this paper are taken from the results of the focus group discussions and case studies that were conducted. The given names of the respondents are pseudonyms.

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