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Before a family gathers for tika, somebody has already worked. The rice has been washed, the vegetables chopped, the puja thali prepared and the rooms made ready for visitors. After the photographs, somebody will clear the plates. A celebration that appears effortless is usually being held together by effort.

In households where that responsibility falls mainly on women, Dashain raises an uncomfortable question: who cares for the people making everyone else’s celebration possible?

The question matters especially during a festival that honours feminine power. It does not require dismissing devotion, family

affection or the pleasure of cooking for loved ones. It requires looking at how work is distributed—and whether the woman preparing the feast has the same opportunity to enjoy it.

The gap between reverence and everyday respect

The Nepal Tourism Board describes Dashain as a festival of worship, family reunions and blessings centred on Durga. That religious meaning gives the celebration its particular emotional force. For many families, receiving tika and reconnecting with relatives are acts of continuity across generations.

But reverence for a goddess does not automatically produce equality in a kitchen. A family can sincerely honour feminine strength while taking a mother’s or daughter-in-law’s availability for granted. Symbolic respect and practical responsibility need to meet somewhere between the prayer room and the washing-up.

Not every Nepali household follows the same pattern. Men cook, women lead rituals, and families negotiate responsibilities in different ways. Customs vary across communities and circumstances. The concern is not that every woman experiences Dashain identically. It is that gender should not decide, without discussion, whose festival becomes a working day.

The work that disappears into the celebration

Festival labour includes more than the visible act of serving food. Someone must decide what to cook, check supplies, plan around visiting relatives and remember what different people need. If an older relative needs assistance or a child becomes upset during preparations, someone must adjust the plan.

Consider the difference between cooking one dish and taking responsibility for lunch. The first is a task. The second includes checking ingredients, choosing quantities, starting on time, coordinating other dishes and making sure the kitchen is usable afterwards. Both involve effort; only one carries the whole chain of decisions.

This is why an offer to “help” can leave the underlying arrangement untouched. If one woman still has to identify every job, assign it, explain it and check whether it happened, she remains the festival’s manager. Responsibility has been delegated in pieces rather than shared.

Unpaid work is not worthless work. Feeding people, maintaining a home and caring for relatives make other activities possible. Their value does not disappear because no invoice is issued.

What the evidence shows—and what it cannot tell us

The broader imbalance is documented. In a statement published on 22 August 2023, the International Labour Organization reported that women performed 85 per cent of Nepal’s daily unpaid care work. It linked unequal care responsibilities to barriers facing women in paid employment.

That figure describes a wider care burden. It is not a measurement of Dashain, a survey of this year’s celebrations or proof about any particular family. It should not be used to claim an exact number of extra festival hours. What it provides is a reason to examine whether a holiday reproduces an already unequal distribution of work.

The distinction matters. A convincing argument for fairness does not need invented festival statistics or the assumption that every mother is exhausted. It needs attention to what is actually happening in the household: who begins preparing, who keeps interrupting their meal and who is still clearing up when others have settled down.

Love does not remove the need for choice

The strongest objection is familiar: many women enjoy preparing Dashain food and take pride in welcoming their families. That deserves respect. Cooking can express skill, affection and identity.

A grandmother may want to teach a recipe; a mother may look forward to a meal that brings everyone home.

The question is whether she can choose the scale of that contribution. Can she simplify the menu, accept a different method or decide to rest without being criticised? Can another person take over without expecting her to supervise? Enjoyment and fatigue can coexist. Pride in a tradition does not amount to unlimited consent to perform it alone.

Nor should change become another instruction imposed on women. Telling an older woman to leave her kitchen while ignoring her wishes can be patronising. Ask which parts she wants to keep, which she would like to share and what she would gladly stop doing. Then make those answers possible.

Share ownership, including the decisions

A fairer arrangement starts before guests arrive. Discuss the work as a household and assign complete responsibilities according to time, ability and preference. One person can own shopping, another a meal, another guest arrangements and another the final clean-up. The assignment should include preparation and follow-through.

For someone taking charge of dinner, that means checking what is available, buying what is missing, cooking or arranging the food, and dealing with the aftermath. Asking where every ingredient is

kept may be necessary while learning. Expecting permanent instructions turns someone else into a supervisor.

Skills can be learned, and standards may need to become more flexible. If every attempt is judged against one experienced cook’s method, sharing will be difficult. Equally, doing a job poorly and abandoning it should not become a route out of responsibility. The aim is dependable participation rather than a performance of helpfulness.

- **Before the gathering:** agree on the menu, guest numbers and who owns each part of the work.
- **During the meal:** rotate serving and care duties so the same person is not repeatedly called away.
- **Afterwards:** finish the dishes, leftovers and kitchen reset without waiting for instructions.
- **Across generations:** give boys and girls comparable, age-appropriate responsibilities.

Let the celebration become smaller if necessary

There is another possibility: reduce the work itself. A shorter menu, fewer elaborate preparations or a gathering where guests bring dishes can preserve the pleasure of being together. An impressive spread is a poor measure of a successful reunion if producing it excludes someone from the reunion.

This asks something of guests too. Arriving with an appetite does not prevent someone from carrying plates, watching children or helping to restore the room. Praise for the food can be followed by action. A host should not have to negotiate every contribution while continuing to serve.

Families with money may choose paid assistance. That can ease a burden, but fairness should extend to the person hired: agree on duties, pay and hours, and respect their own commitments. Moving the entire workload onto another woman does not, by itself, settle the question of whose rest matters.

The same question travels abroad

For Nepalis abroad, recreating Dashain far from home can carry particular emotional weight. Familiar food and rituals may help a family feel connected across distance. Yet a smaller household or limited time off can make an ambitious celebration difficult.

Keeping a tradition alive need not mean reproducing every task at full scale. Families can choose a manageable gathering, divide cooking between homes and share the work of organising calls with relatives. Cultural connection can be a common project rather than one person’s responsibility.

The same principle applies when relatives return to Nepal. A holiday for the visitor can mean additional work for the host.

Returning home offers an opportunity to contribute: prepare breakfast, take children out, organise groceries or clear the kitchen. Being welcomed does not prevent someone from taking responsibility.

A place in the celebration

Dashain’s meaning is not diminished when work is redistributed. Sharing the practical load can give more people time for the rituals, conversations and companionship that make the festival worth celebrating.

The useful test is concrete. Did the woman who prepared the puja thali get time to receive her own blessings? Could she sit through a meal? Was she able to join a conversation without listening for the next request? Did anyone else notice what remained to be done?

Appreciation matters, but appreciation should have consequences. It should change who shops, who cooks, who serves and who washes up. It should make rest possible without requiring a defence of why it is deserved.

This Dashain, leave a place at the table—and share enough of the work that the woman who made the celebration possible can stay there.

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