

## **Gender Issues in Nepal**

**Ms. Bharati POKHAREL (Nepal)**

Gender-based discrimination is so much ingrained in Nepali patriarchal society that Nepali girls start facing discriminatory treatment from their very early stages of life. This is particularly true in the rural parts of the country, which account for more than 70 percent of Nepal, inhabited by inadequately educated people. First of all, a girl child is not at all wanted by parents who attach importance to patriarchal values. Hence, if it is known that the baby in the womb is a girl, the pregnant mother starts facing hatred held by her in-laws. She might as well have to face undue coercion and even assault to go for an abortion. The ordeal of hatred and discrimination continues throughout the life of the newborn. She will be denied access to education as much as possible, as the parents prefer her contribution to household chores and/or other farm-based income-generating activities. As a result, 14.2% of girls between the ages of 5 and 14 work full-time and do not attend school at all in Nepal. The deep-rooted cause behind parents' unwillingness to send daughters to school is that they consider girls as someone else's property as they are to be wed and sent to in-laws' houses ultimately. Hence, they consider investing in girls as a waste and prefer to utilize that resource for better food, clothing and education of male children. It is worthy to note that the adult literacy rate in Nepal for women is 34.9 percent and that for men is 62.7 percent. This signifies how difficult it is to raise the female literacy rate and level it with men.

There is also a widespread practice of making girls marry at an early age as much as possible, starting from the age of 10. It is very common that young girls become pregnant by the age of 16. This is why maternal and child mortality are among the leading causes of death in Nepal.

Women also bear a very disproportionate burden in the household. Many empirical studies have revealed that they spend on average 18 hours (from 4 am to 10 pm) daily for household and farm activities with very little breaks in between, while men spend only 8 hours productively every day. From early in the morning, women are pressed with household chores such as milking cows, tending animals, bathing and washing clothes, collecting food and cooking meals, etc. This is followed by physical work in the fields, farms and forests under harsh conditions until late afternoon. They are occupied with duties such as preparing meals, feeding the family, and taking care of the elderly and kids once they come back home in the evening. Depending on the location of a particular house, the household chores could be very demanding. For instance, as cited in many studies, women have to travel for hours to fetch potable water for household consumption.

This kind of daily practice would have severe health impacts on women, as they often suffer from a stooped back, prolapsed uterus, and so on. This is why female life expectancy in Nepal is one of the lowest in South Asia.

Nepali women are denied property rights as much as possible as most of the land titles are held by men. Likewise, women have almost no say in decision making as men are the key decision makers. This applies to decisions related to issues concerning households, families and the welfare of children, etc. While women are considered the main providers of food and care to families, it is a great pity that they are still denied an equal say in decisions affecting these affairs.

Recently, as a result of untiring efforts of many international and national non-government organizations, some progress has been made mainly on the policy and legal fronts. The promulgation of Gender Equality Act (2006), Human Trafficking and Transportation Control Act (2007) and Domestic Violence (Crime and Punishment) Act (2009) are the positive moves by the government. But this should never be considered enough as Nepal has been notorious for the lack of proper implementation of policies and enforcement of laws. Besides, since this issue is more concerned with changing people's attitudes and behavior, sustained efforts at the community level to foster awareness about respecting women's rights are required. In order to achieve a gender equal society, men need to realize the immense contribution of women to their and their families' well-being and accord due respect to women in all walks of life.