

## **Protecting Nepali Girls and Women**

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Although the interim constitution of Nepal (2007) guarantees all people, regardless of their gender, basic human rights and fundamental freedoms besides highlighting women's rights as essential to the overall development of the country, discriminatory practices against women and girls are still rampant in the Nepali society. In various occasions, Nepal has been found not only as having well-written documents, policies, plans and strategies, but also acceding to international treaties and agreements. But, when it comes to the implementation of the facts stated in these documents, Nepal lags significantly behind. For instance, Nepal ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as far back as 1991. More than a couple of decades down the line, eliminating discrimination against girls and women still remains a far cry even at household and community levels. The stark reality is that Nepal has been ranked 126th in the Global Gender Gap Index for 2011.

A number of studies and reports have cited deep-rooted beliefs and cultural practices prevailing in the Nepali patriarchal society as the main triggers of gender-based discrimination. For example, if a woman officially lodges a report about sexual violence committed against her, her move is not generally appreciated by her own family. She is rather very likely to face further marginalization in the family and beyond for dealing with such a shameful issue openly and thereby exposing the family and others. In other words, a victim is emotionally discouraged to report the case, which will in turn help to encourage the offenders to carry out similar crimes in future. In such a situation, one can imagine how many of the crimes committed against women finally make it to the official tallies. This is why the data on discrimination against women in Nepal is still elusive, although experts agree on the fact that it is rampant.

Another sad part is that even if a case is reported despite all the odds, the victim will have to face the mammoth challenge of waiting for the court hearing. The saying goes "Justice delayed is justice denied", but in the case of Nepal an overwhelming bunch of registered cases in court are given delayed verdicts—some taking even decades. And, it is also commonly known how difficult it is to prove the case of domestic violence against women in a patriarchal society. All these have contributed to pushing Nepali women further into vulnerability and deprivation.

Although there have been a number of international and national non-government organizations focusing on women's issues lately in Nepal, the size and scale of their interventions are still insufficient. Most of these organizations have launched their

programs in western and far-western regions of the country, as these are the most disadvantaged and remotest regions. While it make sense for these organizations to make the most of their scarce resources by investing in the most deprived regions, the other regions such as the Terai, which has equally marginalized women and girls, fail to avail themselves of such support. Even if some of the non-profit organizations are running their programs in the Terai, they are usually focused on other priority problems such as disaster mitigation, combating deforestation, etc.

One of the impressive non-government sector programs is the ‘We can end all Violence against Women (We Can)’ campaign. The strength of this model is the identification of individual Change Makers at household levels and channeling the support to the communities through these Change Makers. This program was launched by Oxfam as a regional campaign in response to the growing violence against women and girls in the South Asia region.

In order to have a desired impact, the non-profit organizations need to work in close coordination with the government offices. These organizations can benefit from the larger presence of the government units all over the country, while the government can avail the much-needed resources from the help of these organizations. Working closely with the non-government actors will help the government understand what the complexities are with regards to the implementation of the policies, plans and strategies they have devised, while complying with the international treaties they have endorsed. The non-profit sector will also have the opportunity of feeding the lessons learnt into the documentation process of the government, which will help ensure that the future policies are practical, implementable and based on the ground reality.