

# Gender Equality Issues in Nepal

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On September 20, 2015, Nepal's new constitution, which declared the state as a federal democratic republic, was promulgated. The Nepali parliament then unanimously elected Mrs. Onsari Gharti as the first ever woman Speaker to lead the legislative body of the country. Nepal achieved yet another milestone towards women's empowerment and gender equality on October 28, 2015 by electing Mrs. Bidhya Bhandari as the first woman president of the Himalayan republic. Many people from all over the world congratulated Nepal for this noteworthy progress, as women have been lagging behind in this patriarchal country. Six months down the line, Nepal saw another achievement by appointing Mrs. Sushila Karki as the country's first Chief Justice. These steps have led Nepalese population to believe that the republic is seriously committed towards fostering women's leadership.

Nepal needs further efforts directed towards educating more girls, as the literacy rate for women still stands at 42.49 percent against the overall national literacy rate of 52.74 percent. Besides gender-based discrimination, women and girls are commonly subjected to domestic violence. These barriers greatly reduce girls' possibility of attending schools. Disparity also exists between the girls in urban and rural areas in terms of attending schools. For instance, the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) data show that women from rural parts never attending schools are 51.1 percent while such women from urban cities are 25 percent.

Overall data pertaining to girls and women is still far below the global standards recommended by the United Nations. For instance, female life expectancy at birth is 71.1 years and mortality rate under five years of age (per 1,000) for girls is 33.6 percent. Limited school attendance has obviously pushed women behind in their lives. For example, according to the World Bank data, female wage and salaried workers are only 12.8 percent. As most of the women are not hired by the formal employment sector due to the lack of their qualification, they are usually engaged in self-employment. The latest World Bank data demonstrates that 87.2 percent women are self-employed. Usually, they are self-employed in the agriculture-based small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

In order to empower women in Nepal, their literacy rate has to be improved in the first place. To do so, there has to be an enabling environment for the young girls to attend school. Parents have to be educated about the value of sending their girls to school. This could be very challenging particularly in the rural areas where people adhere to the traditional and patriarchal ideas of denying education for women. Another important aspect would be to tackle violence against women (VAW), which is also

prevalent in rural areas due to the lack of proper knowledge. Menfolk and whoever committing the VAW should be made aware in such a manner that they would shun violence and start respecting women. Utilization of local and community media would be very effective to effect such behavioural changes.

There have been many national and international non-government organizations (I/NGOs) working in Nepal these days. In order to help the quickest recovery from the devastating earthquake of April 2015 which caused 9,000 fatalities, many international organizations have established their presence in Nepal. These organizations can do a lot not only in terms of re-establishing the lost livelihoods of women and men, but also towards enhancing women's participation in policy and at decision-making levels. The lack of training and knowledge on gender mainstreaming and the absence of specific budget to undertake gender-related activities have been cited as the key barriers to women's empowerment. Hence, these institutions can offer targeted training on gender mainstreaming to relevant officials at the government agencies.

It is very important to convince the rural masses particularly about the need to acknowledge the contribution of women to sustain their families and communities. In rural Nepal, where majority of men have migrated mainly to foreign countries for employment, women have been taking care not only of all their family members but also of farmland and livestock. If these women who are acting as the persons-in-charge or heads of their households are empowered with proper access to information and other resources, it will not be long when rural Nepal presents the real example of gender equality.