

Dalit Women in Nepal

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It is important to understand the meaning of Dalit first. In Nepal, we still practice a very rigid caste system, which is broadly categorized as touchable and untouchable. Traditionally, the caste system is divided into four classes, which are Brahman (priests and scholars), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaisya (merchants and traders), and Sudra (laborers). Sudras are the last among all and are called the impure, polluted and untouchables.

The word “Dalit” is widely used both at national and international level. But in Nepal, the government uses this term to refer to untouchables. According to Dalit NGO Federation, there are about 4.5 million Dalits out of the total population of 26 million in Nepal. Because of the lack of education and access to productive resources such as land, Dalits and their families often live with economic hardship and depend on higher castes for survival.

When it comes to Dalit women, they actually face multiple forms of abuses such as being stigmatized as witches, and tortured with different types of domestic violence. The socio-cultural, political, economic and educational status of these women is at the bottom in all indicators. For example, the literacy rate of lower-level Dalit women is 17.4% and their access to toilet is just 5.5% whereas others have 42%. Likewise, the malnutrition among Dalit children is high with 35.9%. Dalit women and children are living in a precarious condition for long and still face discrimination. Another problem that is making the lives of Dalit women and children worse is early pregnancy and child marriage. For example, girls who get married before reaching 15 years of age range up to 62% among Dalit girls.

Some sociologists argue that Dalits have been excluded from joining the military, owning property and attending school, and historically they were denied rights over their own wives and relationships with non-Dalit women were not allowed.

Government provision

The Nepali government has been implementing various programmes to combat multiple discrimination against Dalit women, but there have been many areas where more work is needed. Thus it is recommended that help desks for Dalit women should be established in District Administration Offices including the National Woman’s Commission and the National Dalit Commission. It is also vital to give priority to all programmes formulated targeting women combating multiple forms of discrimination against Dalit women. Nepal has adopted various legal provisions to combat discrimination against women and had ratified CEDAW. Public education and awareness raising campaigns involving media, political and religious leaders are also very important.

Experts argue that Nepal, as a member and signatory state to international human rights instruments, has an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment and action to eliminate caste-based discrimination.

Positive change is happening

Nepali people got an opportunity for voting in a local election for the first time in 20 years, and the Local Level Election Act 2017 stipulates that at least two out of the four members of each Ward Committee must be women and that one should be a female member from the Dalit community. As a result of this, 7,526 Dalit women stood as candidates in the elections and more than 6,000 got elected. This is a huge achievement for Dalit women, and hopefully this will slowly change the Dalit women’s political participation.

Women's rights activists say that the women who used to confine themselves only to household chores have now started coming out of their houses and appearing in public seeking for their identity and rights. Dalit women these days are becoming aware of their rights and have been witnessing a shift in their lifestyle and livelihood. Dalit women in many villages have also taken the place which was traditionally occupied by male members by engaging in development works including the installation of drinking water pipes, the construction of roads and primary schools, and the distribution of scholarship. Some also approach the municipality for facilities and services they are entitled to be provided by the government. This positive change will elevate the status of Dalit women and help break the practice of caste-based discrimination and bring about a revolutionary change in our society.



Dalit family performing their household chores in the eastern village of Nepal