

The Unsolved Story of a Little Girl

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On July 26, 2018, thirteen-year-old Nirmala Pant from Kanchanpur, far western Nepal, got on her bicycle to go to her friend's house in order to complete her homework. A grade nine student, Nirmala never came back home. Her parents, both of whom are daily wage earners, went to the police to request them to look for their daughter. However, police officials took the complaint lightly. Nirmala's body was discovered in a sugarcane field the next day, on July 27. She had been raped and brutally murdered. Protests began in Kanchanpur and spread across the country with the public demanding action against the police officers for their negligence and the arrest of the perpetrators. It was also discovered that police officers had engaged in unethical behaviour and were suspects in the brutal rape and murder. A recorded video of the crime scene which went viral on social media showed a police officer washing Pant's trousers and covering the body. The District Administration office had to impose an indefinite curfew to curb the growing agitation, leading to a death of a fourteen-year-old boy and injuries to an additional five adults when police opened fire. A nationwide protest demanding **#JusticeForNirmala** took central stage with protesters demanding that the government take action against the perpetrators. Locals alleged that the police were reluctant to investigate the case as officials found out that the evidence pointed at two important figures.

A high-level committee was formed to probe the case, and the Central Investigation Bureau and National Human Rights Commission launched an investigation but came nowhere close to identifying and arresting the perpetrators. In addition, the Minister for Communication and Information personally summoned the editors of all five state-run media outlets and instructed them not to publish any critical news related to Pant's rape and murder.



Photo : Bikash Rai

Recently, the number of rape cases have increased significantly in Nepal, and especially in the Tarai region, because perpetrators have not only gotten off scot free but are often rewarded for their crimes. Most of these cases remain unaddressed as a result of social stigma attached to the victim or inaction on the part of state authorities. Victims are either forced to marry the rapist or arrive at a settlement, and in some cases, they are even forced to withdraw their cases by powerful locals in the area. Five rape cases are reported daily in Nepal (data from Nepal Police).

Nepal's constitution stipulates that perpetrators of sexual violence receive the maximum punishment. Yet, although there has been an increase in the number of cases of reported rape, the conviction rate is low. The Nepal Police recorded 1,138 cases of rape and filed as many

charge-sheets against 1,440 suspects in relevant district courts in 2016 and 2017. Out of this number, only 885 people were convicted, as was mentioned in the annual report of the Office of the Attorney General. Police said the low conviction rate had in turn led to a rise in the number of crimes.

A study conducted by the rights body showed that violence against women and children was among the key security problems in Nepal. Therefore, the National Human Rights Commission has been monitoring the role of the Nepal Police in minimizing violence against women (VAW) and upholding human rights. Yet, Nirmala Pant's case remains unsolved. There are many more Nirmalas in Nepal whose cases go unreported, leaving the world in the dark about their lives or deaths. Of late, people have started to demand capital punishment for rapists, although the government of Nepal abolished capital punishment in 1990. Nepal needs legal changes to close loopholes and provide a safety net for victims. If ever there is a debate on whether Nepal should revive capital punishment, Nepalese women will support it unanimously, but the verdict remains in the hands of feudalist characters who are in decision-making positions. The verdict will not be in favor of women.