

# **The Situation Analysis for Dalit Women of Nepal**

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## **Background**

To begin with there is a need to identify the community to which Dalits belong to. Caste system at large refers to an occupationally segregated, hierarchical and ritually discriminatory social system based not on heredity of an individual or group of individuals. It is a complex social system reinforced by orthodox rules of endogamy, commensality and notions of purity and pollution. In other words, caste system is a decent-based hereditary social system that assigns a certain social group to a position of power over others on the basis of superiority, dominance and purity. It is also one of the manifestations of socio-political exclusion, and economic and ritual discrimination that accords differential access to power, prestige and property.

## **Dalits in Nepal**

There is general belief that Dalits are part of the lowest of the four Varnas, i.e. Shudras. However, in the real sense, Dalits are not Shudras rather they are outside Chaturvarna. In some literature Dalits are economically exploited, politically voiceless, socially humiliated and even treated as 'untouchables'. In essence, the victim of caste-based discrimination and untouchability can be considered as Dalits. Besides so called Brahmins and Chhetris both Vaishyas and Shudras perpetrate caste-based discrimination and untouchability against Dalits.

## **Dalit women in Nepal**

Dalit women comprise of more than half of sky (space) of Dalit community in Nepal. Dalit community in general and women in particular have been treated as sub humans for ages. The women fold as a whole became the victim of Manu order. Manubad is so deeply rooted in our society, no any sort of reference seen to bring change promptly.

After the political change in 2007, the situation of women has certainly changed but not to the extent it should have been. The fact is that Dalit women also consist of one-fourth of the total women population. The whole women are the victim of gender discrimination in the society. The basic difference between high caste women and Dalit women lies on the ground of caste based discrimination and untouchability, which Dalit women have to face. In comparison to other high caste women, the Dalit women have been forced to live in most vulnerable conditions. They constitute the major workforce doing hard manual labour and engage in agricultural operations. Dalit women are thrice alienated on the basis of class, caste and gender. The whole Dalit community has to struggle for survival. Thus they need helping hand from their women. Through this perspective, Dalit women deserve better position than those of higher castes. But high caste people/women perpetrate caste based discrimination and untouchability against Dalit women. The reality of the Dalit community is that the whole family has to depend at least partly on their income. Regarding the Dalit craftsmen artists and labors, women participate in productive activities and thus become the part of economic chain. So in certain caste groups like Chamars, Badi, Poda etc. there is some respect for the women in comparison to higher caste women where they are also considered as tool of sex.

### **Population of Dalit Women**

It is obvious that Dalit community comprises one-fourth of the total population of the country. The census of the past (2001) was not based on the scientific criteria in which lot of Dalit sub-castes were included under upper caste group on the ground of similar creed (Thar) like Gautam, Ghimire, Dulal, Derlami, Khapangi, etc. According to the census held in 2001, the total Dalit population is 2,962,591 (13.05%); of which the whole female population is 1,496,622 and the male population is 1,465,969. To have a look at the total Dalit population scenario, there is a table given in the appendix.

### **Health and Educational Condition**

The whole Dalit community is compelled to adopt traditionally humiliated and unclear occupations such as scavenging, night soil carrying, removing animal carcasses, leather work, beating of drums etc which has put them a low position in the traditional caste hierarchy. In respect of some caste like Chamar, women help in delivering child and caring maternity. However, they do not command any respect in the society. Of the total Dalit population, 90% live below poverty line, which exposes the naked picture of the life of Dalit women. Dependence on upper class high caste land owners for agricultural labour and perpetual subjugation force many of the Dalit women as well as their mail partners/children to live as bounded labors (Haliya/Harawa-Charawa).

Whereas the average life expectancy of Nepali is 55 years; it is only 50.8 years in the case of Dalit (HDI). Dalit lack the access to clear drinking water in most of the rural areas. The woman have to walk 5-10 kilometers for getting drinking water. Mostly the women have to depend on the dirty water of the ponds and rain water which ultimately can effect the hygiene at large. Due to the lack of awareness, most of the Dalit women became the victim of gynecological disease like prolapsed uterus.

In the Dalit settlements, particularly in rural areas the Dalit women do not have access to proper toilet facilities, clean drinking water and medical facilities as first aid. Dalit women with their children are severely malnourished due to illiteracy, ignorance and even poverty. As a result, the mortality and fertility rate among them is very high. According to the 1991 census, the national literacy rate is 48% where as Dalit literacy is 10.7% and women literacy rate is 3.3%. Among Dalits, the female literacy rate is 12% which is lower than that of male (33.9%). The literacy rate of Madhesi Dalit is only 11%. Therefore, the literacy percentage of Madhesi Dalit women is very lower than that of Hill Dalit women. The following table shows the literacy rate among different Dalit castes:

Table 1: Literacy rate of Dalits

<b>Caste Group</b>	<b>Male%</b>	<b>Female%</b>
Kami	26.87	14.22
Damai	28.91	17.14
Sarki	25.09	13.15
Chamar	10.79	03.34
Mashahar	04.85	02.34
Majhi	12.77	04.10
Dushad	10.73	04.02
Dhobi	21.53	08.77
Kumal	28.86	14.97
Khatwe	12.39	03.70
Badi	21.53	11.77
Gaine	31.32	18.33

*Source : CBS-2048*

### **Violence against Dalit Women**

Dalit women have been facing lot of violence from various areas. Dalit women including male are considered untouchables by caste Hindus. They have no access to public places including drinking water sources. In some rural areas, Dalit women have to wait long in the water taps and wells until so-called high caste women are ready to serve water for her. If at all they interfere, they become the victim of violence and punishment.

Dalit settlement in general is outside the village of the caste Hindus and mostly in the town areas. They face the difficulty of two basic necessities of any human being—drinking water and sanitation. It is observed that Dalits are not provided with even on tap/well for hundred of houses.

Dalit women become victim of their male partners when they use alcohol. They are also facing hardship due to the child marriage, double marriage, bride price and even dowry systems that prevail in the society.

According to the research study done by S.C.F.U.S., 23% Dalits are landless whereas 48.7% have less than 5 ropanis of land. Furthermore, 15.6% Dalits have 6-10 ropanis of land, 9.6% Dalits have 11-20 ropanis of land and 3.1% have more than 21 ropanis of land. They hardly have 1% of cultivable land. 95% Madhesi Dalits are landless. Their per capita income is US \$39.6, which is almost the lowest in the world. Higher class and caste people monopolized the national resources and all other income sources. They have enjoyed the fruit of all development. Dalits have no easy access to national resources, public services and even development projects. In such a situation, we can imagine the reality of Dalit women. They participate with their male partner's work in the agricultural field of the upper caste people. More than 90% of our Dalit women living in the village earn their livelihood by working as agricultural labors under the upper caste/class landlords. Their employers sometimes rape them. In Hindu society, some women from Badi community have become involved in prostitution in the name of religious tradition,

which is alike Devdasi system in India. Their condition and enjoyment by upper caste Hindus is sanctioned by the Hindu religion. Badi women are looked down as inferior to dogs in the society. Badi Dalit women *per se* are treated as untouchables in the society, however, there is no untouchability as far as sexual exploitation is concerned.

Besides domestic works, Dalit women are entirely involved in agricultural work as well. Their work is greater than the Dalit males. Every body is familiar with the sight of a sweeper woman in Kathmandu cleaning the city area carrying their small babies on their back. Similarly, we can see Dalit woman working in the paddy field leaving their small kids in the side of the field in hill and Tarai areas. In respect to Halia, Dom, Chamar women they have significant roles in terms of earning income. In terms of earning livelihood, Dalit woman can be considered as one of the wheels of the cart. We may never think the present day situation of socio-economic development in the absence of Dalit women.

Dalit women get less wages in comparison to their male counterpart. Generally, Dalit women work as daily labour for transplanting seedlings, threshing paddy/wheat or even as labour in road or building construction. In the village of Tarai, Chamar women accomplish maternity job. The irony is that these women are permitted to enter the houses at the time of childbirth but as soon as the job is over they are again reverted back to the untouchables status. Though they provide most valuable service, they get nominal fees in the form of 5-10 k.g. of food grains.

Chamars and Doms are supposed to clear the village or town even by throwing away dead animals. They have to do such work free of charge but earn a little bit by selling hides and skins, bones etc. of the dead animals. Dalit women from these caste groups help their men folk in doing such works in the name of religion and tradition. Dalit women from Dom, Badi, Damai, Gaine, Hudke sub-caste groups are supposed to entertain the high caste people with various folk songs and dances. In return, they get nominal tips as the mercy from high caste people.

Dom, Chamar, Mehtar, Pode/Chyame women like their men folks perform the humiliated job of clearing the houses, surroundings of the public places even to the extent of carrying the night soil. The greatest irony is that these people are considered as untouchables even by other untouchables.

Patriarchal feudal system considers women folk in general as commodity, means of entertainment and second-class citizen. That is why, even Dalit women face discrimination in justice, education, job, property rights, wages and decision-making process. Dalit women like other women get to loose their identity after marriage since their children follow their father's family name that is reflected in getting citizenship certificates. The great tragedy is that some people from Badi community face hardship in getting citizenship just because of their unknown father. Having guided by Hindu societal norms, Dalit community is also indifferent to educate girls as they think them other's property. Dalit women have to face violence in home, in public places and even at work in different occasions. However, there is no any proper legal provision as to protecting their basic human rights.

The next tragedy lies in the area of women trafficking in which the high percentage of Dalit women falls. As a result of which they have to suffer a lot from dangerous diseases like AIDS. Similarly, a great number of Dalit women are being victimized in the accusation of Boxi (witchcraft). Recently, there occurred lot of such Boxi incidents in the Tarai.

Nextly, Dalit women have been the victims of dowry and bride price systems which are still continuing in our country. Mostly Dalit women have been the victims of intra-caste and inter-caste marriage. So-called upper caste people engage in fake love with Dalit girls and then right after pregnancy or marriage they give up them just on the ground the caste factor. Hence, a great number of Dalit girls have been facing hardships.

Any violence on the Dalit community is ultimately born by Dalit women. Specifically during the eight-year of Maoist war, many of Dalit youths have lost their lives by being the victim of both Maoists and state. It is the Dalit women who have to bear all such unbearable sufferings socially, economically, culturally and politically at great risk of her own and her children's life.

### **Efforts to improving situation of Dalit women**

Despite the civil Code (1964) along with its eighth amendment and the constitution of the kingdom of Nepal (1990:11/44) ensuring equitable justice for Dalit rights, the caste-based discrimination and the practice of untouchability still continue. There are contradictory laws and by-laws which violate Dalit rights. Still there is an urgent need to formulate laws as to abolish disparity both in principles and practice. National Planning Commission came out with special provisions for the whole Dalit community in Eighth Plan (1992–97), Ninth Plan (1997–2002) and the Tenth Plan (2003–007). Particularly the Ninth Five Year Plan had put some major objectives for Dalit upliftment with a view to abolishing all forms of discrimination. However, the state commitment could not be translated into reality. The Tenth Plan is focusing on Dalit empowerment and development programs. INGOs, NGOs and even government agencies have spent a big amount of money in the name of Dalit empowerment for decades. But the so-called Dalit empowerment programs seem to be mostly Kathmandu-based, activists-centered and are out of the reach of grassroots levels. Actually some forward Dalit activists including women have been benefited from several projects rather than the unaware-targeted community. It is notable that right after 1990 various Dalit organizations, along with Dalit women activists are working for the Dalit cause. The significant change so far is seen in the field of awareness raising.

The creation of Dalit Bikas Samitee in 1978 has become an asset to Dalit community, although the budget allocation to its program is nominal. In May 2002, the government constituted National Dalit Commission with a view to protecting Dalit rights. Since this Commission was created through executive decision of the government, there arises a question of its legitimacy. Thus, in reality it could not meet the minimum aspiration of Dalit community. The current government, for the first time in the history, has declared

reservation policy to Dalits, indigenous and women. Definitely, from the perspective of inclusiveness this step of the government is positive one and it is hoped that it will help bring change in the life of the Dalit community. Moreover, the approach adopted by Maoists might be debatable to many but it brought certain level of awareness and practice of equity in the Nepalese society.

It is praiseworthy indeed that some INGOs and NGOs have given due attention to Dalit empowerment programs in Nepal. The next important juncture was the WCAR conference where for the first time Dalit NGOs became successful in raising their voice at international level.

### **Conclusion**

The 'Manubadi Brahminical social order' is the root cause of the caste based discrimination, untouchability and all forms of intolerance. Caste ideology has divided our society into mutually mistrustful groups. In our country, Brahminic leaders lead to the consolidation of conventional caste hegemony in yet newer forms. The economic policy is being implemented on the same class-caste structure. Thus, Brahminic feudalism and capitalism have become the prime enemies of Dalit community. Dalit women in Nepal are the first victim of this system who are standing at the bottom bearing unbearable atrocity.

Nepal government fell to separate itself from the passive cultural attitudes by not taking actions against blatant acts of caste based discrimination and untouchability. The Chamar incidents of 2000 and 2003 in Siraha and Saptari clearly illustrate this lack of will.

The liberation of Dalit women is impossible unless the Brahminical social order is reversed and a new culture and cultural order is established where Dalit women shall enjoy the real freedom and power. Then only the society shall be considered as egalitarian in the real sense.

### **Recommendations**

1. Awareness raising among Dalit women about their rights is a must. Massive movements is needed to educate, organize and aware the Dalit women for the entire emancipation.
2. There is an urgent need of making new constitution on which there should be guarantee of secular state, periodic reservation system in all sectors for Dalit community and adequate provision to eradicate discrimination and untouchability based on caste and gender. Special legal provisions should be made to safeguard Dalit women from all sorts of violence and additionally effective measures should be adopted to provide liberation and dignity to Badi women being involved in prostitution.
3. Gender and caste biased discriminatory laws and sub-laws must be waved out and then as a state party Nepal government should make new laws and sub-laws to

- abide the words and sprits of CEDAW 1979, ICERD 1965, ICCPR 1966, ICESCR 1966 and all other relevant conventions and conference declarations.
4. The UN should recognize 'Dalit rights as human rights' and then interfere the issues being faced by Dalit community paying special attention to Dalit women.
  5. The government, political parties, CSOs, INGOs and NGOs should come out with adequate commitment, policy, plans and programs to preserve and protect the traditional skills arts and occupation of the Dalit caste groups. To do so they have to pay due attention to the effects of globalization which can destroy the Dalit community in terms of socio-economic part.
  6. The concerned bodies should focus on the socio-economic upliftment of Dalit women particularly in terms of equal rights to land, property, job, wages and other access to national resources.
  7. The whole Dalit community movement is limited to advocacy level and it should focus the agenda to improve economic status of Dalit community as well.
  8. Dalit women movement cannot be successful in isolation. Hence, this movement should join hand with the whole Dalit movement, human rights movement, women movement and all kinds of democratic movements by forming proper mechanism. The reality is that Dalit women liberation is a part of the total liberation of the whole oppressed people.
  9. Need is felt to reject Brahminic Hindu religion and adopt other egalitarian religions in case there will be no any reasonable change in Hindu religion.
  10. Dalit community as a whole should struggle against inter-and intra-caste discrimination and untouchability.
  11. It is necessary for the Dalit community to join pro-Dalit political parties and try to influence them to incorporate Dalit issue as a political agenda.
  12. There should be proper representation of Dalit women in all government, semi-government, civil society and NGO sectors.

Appendix 1:

Population table of Dalit community in Nepal

S.N.	Caste/Group	Total	Percentage	Male	Female
1	<b>Kami</b>	<b>8905954</b>	<b>3.94</b>	432937	463017
2	<b>Damai</b>	<b>390305</b>	<b>1.72</b>	188329	201976
3	<b>Sarki</b>	<b>318989</b>	<b>1.40</b>	153681	165308
4	<b>Chamar</b>	<b>269662</b>	<b>1.19</b>	138878	130783
5	<b>Mushar</b>	<b>172434</b>	<b>0.76</b>	88041	84393
6	<b>Dushad</b>	<b>158525</b>	<b>0.70</b>	82173	76352
7	<b>Sonar</b>	<b>145088</b>	<b>0.64</b>	72331	72757
8	<b>Lohar</b>	<b>82637</b>	<b>0.36</b>	42270	40367
9	<b>Dom</b>	<b>8931</b>	<b>0.04</b>	4631	4300
10	<b>Gaine</b>	<b>5887</b>	<b>0.03</b>	2857	3030
11	<b>Badi</b>	<b>4442</b>	<b>0.02</b>	2152	2290
12	<b>Tatma</b>	<b>76512</b>	<b>0.34</b>	39606	36906
13	<b>Badhai</b>	<b>45975</b>	<b>0.20</b>	24160	21815

14	<b>Satar</b>	<b>42698</b>	<b>0.19</b>	21515	21183
15	<b>Dhagar</b>	<b>41764</b>	<b>0.18</b>	20892	20872
16	<b>Khatwe</b>	<b>74972</b>	<b>0.33</b>	38643	36329
17	<b>Bantar</b>	<b>35839</b>	<b>0.16</b>	18139	17700
18	<b>Chidimar</b>	<b>12296</b>	<b>0.05</b>	6516	5780
19	<b>Halkhor</b>	<b>3621</b>	<b>0.02</b>	1848	1773
20	<b>Koche</b>	<b>1429</b>	<b>0.01</b>	693	736
21	<b>Dhunya</b>	<b>1231</b>	<b>0.01</b>	614	617
22	<b>Dalit/No caste</b>	<b>173401</b>	<b>0.76</b>	85063	88338
	Total	2962591	13.05	<b>1465969</b>	<b>1496622</b>

Source: CBS 2058