

The Girl Child in Nepal

1. The Prevalence of Problem

The girl child population in Nepal constitutes half of the total child population. As with the general population distribution most of these girls live in rural areas. The Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007 and international human rights instruments which Nepal has ratified, especially the CEDAW and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), provides equal rights to all girls, irrespective of caste, religion and gender. But reality is far from what the legal provisions have ensured. Boys and girls are not considered equal in daily practice. Girls are still considered a burden to parents and family while the birth of a boy is celebrated. Majority of girls are neglected, humiliated, oppressed and exploited in their every day life.

The prevailing unfair social and labour relations compounded by unequal power structure and patriarchal thinking contribute to the sorry situation of girls in Nepal. Social attitude towards girls is still regressive. Majority of girls are denied care, education, health service, recreation and other basic services right from the birth. The environment in which they are living is not conducive for physical and cognitive growth. Moreover, the atmosphere that prevails at home, family, community and at the national level obstruct the path of overall development of girls.

If we fail to properly analyze the nature and form of the problems and the reasons for such a situation of girls, not only will we be unable to ensure a bright future of our girls, but we will fail to ensure a secure future for our women and mothers. This means the movement for women's liberation will barely be able to keep its head above troubled water. Following facts reveal the situation of the girl children in Nepal.

a. Population: Girls in Nepal consist 50 per cent of the total child population. (CBS)

	<i>In every thousand children</i>	
	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
Infant mortality rate (IMR)	144.50	150.38
Child mortality rate (U5MR)	108.00	133.00

b. Gender Discrimination/Son Preference: Discrimination of girls is rampant in every sector of society. Son preference is very high. According to the 2001 census, the national ratio of boys and girls is 100:101, while in some districts such as Far West Kailali it is 100:84.

c. Literacy Rate: Literacy rate of girls is 42 per cent compared to 65 per cent among boys. In Nepal, primary school going girls is 74 per cent compared to 86 per cent boys. (MOE 2003)

d. Child Malnutrition: Child malnutrition in Nepal is 56.2 per cent in which the state of girls is more vulnerable than boys. Statistics on breast feeding indicate that 51 per cent male children are breast fed, while its number is only 43 per cent among female children.

e. Child Sexual exploitation: Almost 40 per cent of survivors of child sexual abuse and rape are girls below 18 years. Most of them are abused at home, in educational institutions, work places or any given place. They are insecure in all these places. (CWIN 2008)

f. Child Marriage: 34 per cent of total marriages in Nepal are with girls below 16 years. Some 7 per cent of child marriages take place with children below 10 years. (UNICEF 2005). Existing practices of dowry in many parts of the country further provokes child marriages in the society.

g. Child Labor Exploitation: Most household chores and child rearing activities are the responsibility of girls. Girls aged between 10-14 years work double compared to boys in the same

age group. It is also reported that 2.6 million Nepali children are working in different fields of labor. Amongst these 56% are reported to be girls. (ILO-IPEC, 2001)

h. Bonded Labour: Labour bondage still persists in the form of ‘Kamlari’ in the eastern part of Nepal, where girls are kept in the households of their ‘masters’ to serve them.

i. Girl Trafficking: Girls are trafficked for different purposes including domestic work, forced beggary, marriage, carpet weaving and sex trade. About 20 per cent (i.e. 40,000) of the total trafficked women for sex trade are girls below 16 years. (CWIN 2006) Annually approximately 12,000 girl children and women are trafficked. (ILO, 2001). Patterns are changing, as girls are now being trafficked to the Middle East, South-east Asia and also to Europe.

j. Street Children: Among 5000 street children in Nepal around 5 per cent are girls. (CWIN, 2006). Girls living in the streets are most vulnerable to sexual exploitation, drug use and HIV.

k. Conservative Tradition: Women and girls are regarded as “untouchable” during menstruation period. In some parts of far western Nepal, they are not even allowed to stay inside home and forced to stay outside, mostly in the cattle house. Despite legal prohibition, sexual exploitation of girls in the form of traditional and religious customs, such as *Deuki* still exists in Nepal.

l. Armed Conflict: In the 12-year-long armed conflict, 475 children died due to internal armed conflict. Among them 205 were girl children. In the course of armed conflict many incidences of sexual abuse of girls have been made public. Similarly, many children including girls have been displaced to city areas and are involved in exploitative labor sectors. (CWIN 2007)

2. Key Gains

Despite these challenges and gaps, following the immense change in political situation and establishment of republic state, Nepal has taken some important and historic decisions on issues concerning women and children.

- a. The Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007 provides equal rights to all citizens and also provides protection to women from discrimination. The Constitution of Nepal place educational and health rights as fundamental rights.
- b. The GoN has set up the Central Children Welfare Board and District Child Welfare Boards in all districts of Nepal. However, their activation is still a challenge for the government.
- c. Nepal has ratified two optional protocols of UN CRC, 1989, first on the rights of children in armed conflict and another on rights of children to be protected from prostitution and pornography.
- d. UNSCR 1325 / SCR 1612.
- e. Amendment of the Children’s Act, 1992 gives more specific mention to children’s rights.
- f. Endorsement of National Act Against Trafficking, 2007.
- g. GoN has constituted National Women’s Commission, in 2007. However, the Commission does not have a constitutional status.
- h. The non governmental organizations in Nepal have played an important role at the national as well as local level in carrying out different activities relating to attainment of girls' rights and their empowerment. Girls have become important actors in resolving their problems and are also being heard by different organizations and government bodies during policy decisions about their rights.

3. Key Government and NGO Initiatives

There have been many efforts and positive contributions to protect and rescue girls from risk and difficult situations, and ensure physical, mental, educational, social and psychological development of children. In order to change the gloomy picture of Nepali girls GoN and NGOs are working through education, empowerment, conscientization and social mobilization initiatives. The Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare has also been extending its support to programmes being carried out by NGOs.

NGOs such as CWIN have been continuously working with girls at risk for their socialization, social reintegration and empowerment through its programmes research, policy advocacy and social conscientization in the fight against discrimination and exploitation of girls. NGOs also extend direct support in the forms of residential care, emergency support, educational support and support for capacity building to girls at risk. These initiatives cater to the needs of survivors of torture and physical abuse, sex abuse and exploitation, trafficking, labour exploitation, girls affected by armed conflict and street girls. Special programmes to address education of girls and programmes for adolescent girls have also been initiated with support of UN agencies and others. Adolescent girls' groups are being formed by girls from urban poor areas. Peer Support Programme have also been initiated by various NGOs.

4. Emerging Issues

a. Increasing crimes against women and children: With increasing crimes in the society, crimes targeting women and children are also on the rise. Crimes, like rape, child prostitution, child marriage, child servitude, child abduction and child labour exploitation are incidences occurring in every nook and corner of the country almost everyday. Until crimes or violence against women and children are eliminated, their rights and dignity cannot be established and restored.

b. Indecent portrayal of girls in media: The trend of using children, especially girls in commercial advertisement in mass media like television, movies, newspapers and magazines is increasing with every passing day. The indecent presentation poses threat to the dignity of women and girl children.

c. Commercial sexual exploitation and pornography of children: Owing to poverty and ignorance in the country, as well as the absence of commitment, coordination and consistency among law enforcing agencies, the pathetic and objectionable practice of commercial sexual exploitation of children, especially girls, continue. There have been incidences and court cases where a renowned singer used girls for pornographic video films. There are also increasing trend of foreign paedophiles sexually exploiting girls and boys in the name of providing 'love and care'. They are also suspected of selling pornographic pictures of Nepali children to the paedophilia circle.

d. Girls affected by armed conflict/girls in post conflict situation: Social reintegration of girls associated with armed conflict (former girl child soldiers) remains a major challenge. They still face social stigma and are undergoing traumatic experiences following their engagement in conflict. Going back to villages after explicit exposure to conflict has also brought about adaptability issues. Furthermore, services for social reintegration, psychosocial support and self reliance for conflict affected girls are inadequate.

e. Safety of girls in cyberspace: As the Internet is becoming accessible to more and more Nepali children, they are exposed to age inappropriate and harmful materials. They can also become targets of predators. Girls seem to be more vulnerable to unwanted behavior from strangers. There has been a murder of a 17-year-old girl in Kathmandu in 2006, wherein her online lover killed her following her refusal to his sexual proposal.

f. Vulnerability to HIV: Increasing number of girls are into unsafe sexual practices and also doing drugs (from glue sniffing to IV drug use), making girls more vulnerable to contracting HIV. Besides girls from streets or those into commercial sex work who are highly vulnerable, even girls in urban centres are becoming equally at risk. Forced consumerism and lack of social security is resulting in more and more urban adolescent girls into a practice of ‘pocket money sex’, leading to full time commercial sex work.

g. Female Foeticide: There is increasing trend in the urban settings for sex determination tests which is illegal. Studies reveal that tests are openly carried out in most ultrasound clinics in urban centres. Women from remote rural areas are brought to urban centres for tests, while those from bordering districts travel to India for tests. The increasing tests are a signal to termination of female foeticide.

h. Issues of Empowerment of adolescent girls: However, there is also an inspiring trend of adolescent girls becoming empowered and making their voices heard in their communities and at the national policy levels. There is an increasing number of girls’ group or adolescent girls’ groups tackling various issues of girls, where they have become answers to their problems and have started putting an end to gender discrimination, sexual abuse and domestic violence in the society. They are proactively working with adolescent boys to end gender discrimination and violence.

5. Key Gaps

- a. There is a lack of realisation of urgency for upliftment of girls at the state level.
- b. The principle of social inclusion is only limited in slogans and not internalized by state actors and mechanisms. Women’s representation in state mechanisms is still limited.
- c. Powerful and sustainable initiatives are not taken to change the social and regressive attitudes towards girls.
- d. Fluid political commitments still persist. Proper measures are not taken and mechanisms not developed to implement national and international commitments.
- e. Girls’ access to mainstream education is still a major challenge for meeting the national and global goal of achieving education for all by 2015. Various social and economic causes and hindrances to girl’s enrollment and retention.

6. Key Recommendations

- a. There is need to conduct intensive and analytical studies at both local as well as national level to identify the real situation and problems of girls living under neglected situation in rural and urban areas of the country. Programmes devoid of sufficient information and statistics have failed to give appropriate direction and clear vision.
- b. Collective massive national initiatives to fight patriarchy, unfair power structure, regressive traditions and for women and girls’ empowerment are essential. The role of boys and family in girls’ empowerment must be promoted.
- c. Lack of education and ignorance remains the biggest obstacle in the path of girls’ development and empowerment. There must be innovative and intensive drive to increase total access and provide equal educational opportunities to girls from all sections, with priority to girls from marginalized communities.
- d. National intervention is required for social reintegration of girl survivors of abuse and exploitation with appropriate opportunities for self reliance and economic independence.

- e. There is a need for progressive amendments of existing national laws and harmonisation of International laws to ensure highest possible rights for girls. Proposed amended National Child Right Act and National Child Protection Policy must be endorsed by the government followed by their implementation.
- f. The national planning commission must come up with specific plan and allocate substantial national budget for the upliftment of girls. There is a strong need to strengthen the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, both financially and structurally, for effective national programmes.
- g. National initiatives are required to address specific issues of adolescent girls.

Sumnima Tuladhar
Executive Coordinator
CWIN-Nepal
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