

## ► Economic Empowerment Key To End Violence Against Dalit Women

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**Violence against the Dalit women will continue as long as as they are not economically empowered, states a yet-to-be-published report.**

The report, an outcome of a study conducted by a team led by Hira Bishwakarma of Dalit Studies and Development Center (DSDC) on behalf of Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO), claims that the Dalit women are forced to suffer more than the non-Dalit women due to their low economic status combined with the caste-system, which still pervades our society.

Unlike other study reports, this report, prepared on the basis of an extensive survey conducted in 16 districts, does not single out the lack of effective acts, regulations, plans, policies, programs or implementing agencies as the cause of violence against the Dalit women. Instead, the report cites poverty, illiteracy and ignorance on the part of both victims and culprits as the reason behind prevalence of violence against Dalit women and children in Nepal.

The report has presented violence against women in general and the Dalit women in particular not just as a social issue but also as an economic challenge. Since most of women do not work outside and the work they do at home does not bring in hard cash, they feel inferior to their husbands and end up being dominated by them.

Therefore, economic empowerment of women is a key to combat Gender Based Violence (GBV), suggests the report. When it comes to violence against the Dalit women, their economic empowerment becomes more important as they lag far behind the women belonging to non-Dalit communities, especially the so-called upper castes, in all indicators.

According to the report, the other problem with the victims is that they often prefer to remain silent instead of lodging written complaints against the perpetrators. They fear that their families may fall apart if they speak up against injustice because the perpetrators, in most cases of violence against women, happen to be their own immediate family members. On the other hand, the perpetrators remain blissfully unmindful of existing laws that could throw them behind the bar if the victims ever decide to seek justice.

Thanks to the victims' tendency to endure pain, suffering and injustice for fear of family breakdowns, violence against women has become a very complex issue, which is not so easy to intervene and overcome, says the report. Owing to poverty and illiteracy, the degree of violence against women is quite higher in the Dalit families rather than in non-Dalit families, says the report.

Bishwakarma, the team leader of the study, says, "The Dalit women are at the receiving end of violence, whether domestic or social, for two reasons: they are treated as the second sex and belong to the most oppressed social group."

According to him, the caste system plays a very crucial role in prevalence of GBV. "If a woman belongs to the so-called lower caste, chances of her being subjected to GBV would be much higher than that of a non-Dalit woman," he opines.

### **Highlights of the report**

- Domestic violence among Dalit women is quite high. A little over 14 per cent of the total 1,513 respondents, almost all of them women and from the Dalit communities, said they are being

subjected to several forms of mental and physical violence at home.

- 12 per cent of the respondents said they suffered from the effects of the decade long insurgency in one way or the other.
- The paralegal committees are the primary mediator between the victims of GBV and women rights activists but only 3.2 per cent of the respondents said they have consulted this body for help
- One third of the respondents said they have faced discrimination while fetching water from public taps and dug-wells.
- Only 4.4 per cent of the respondents said they sought the help of police when they were subjected to violence.
- 30 per cent of the respondents said the locals believe in the existence of witchcraft in their villages and women charged with witchcraft suffer from mental and physical tortures.
- Violence against women are correlated and 46.9 per cent of the Dalit women are still illiterate.

According to Bishwakarma, alcohol consumption, highly fueled by poverty, is rampant within the Dalit families, which often aggravates domestic violence. And, owing to their low social and economic statuses, the Dalit women get subjected to several forms of violence like charges of witchcraft, tortures for touching public taps and dug-wells and even rapes outside their families.

"In most cases, the perpetrators might have thought that they could easily get away with raping the Dalit women because the latter are poor and hence unable to fight for justice," says he. "Unfortunately and very shockingly, the perpetrators are right to an extent."

Over half the Dalit population lives below the poverty line, which is far higher than the national average. As per the Nepal Living Standard Survey (NLSS)-2012, only one fourth of the Nepali people, 25.16 per cent to be precise, are now living below the poverty line. However, when it comes to the Dalit population, as many as 63.8 per cent of them do not have sufficient foods to eat.

As Nepal relishes its success to bring down the poverty rate to 25.15 per cent and targets to renounce its tag of a least developed country by 2020 for once and all, Dalit rights activists say the country now needs to focus on the poorest segment of the population.

"Only then will Nepal be able to achieve its target in real sense," says Bishwakarma. "Without bringing down the poverty rate of the Dalit population, it would be impossible to curb violence against Dalit women."

Durga Sob, chairman of FEDO, says the government, donor agencies and women rights activists always look at all forms of violence against women through the same lens. "This is exactly where we are making mistakes," says Sob, adding, "It is high time we realize the fact that the degree of violence against women and children is very high within the Dalit communities. Until and unless we come up with some specific and focused plans and strategies, we cannot save the Dalit women and children from being victims of gender- and caste-based violence."

Since violence against women is a very complex issue, the report suggests the government, rights-based organizations and donor agencies initiate interventions at the household level. Sob explains it further: "We need awareness programs but not only for the Dalit women but also for men of the Dalit communities. I would like to focus on the youth as they are the ones who will be at the helms of their families, society and the government in the future. No one but the youth can break the tradition in which the Dalit women are subjected to violence."

### **Progressive policies, regressive attitudes**

The report acknowledges Nepal's efforts in adopting progressive policies, laws and programs to end violence against women. But, almost in the same breath, the report maintains that laws and policies alone would not be sufficient to tackle such a deep-rooted issue.

Nepal has already ratified international conventions like Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). Also, there are several national laws and policies to curb violence against women.

Beside laws and policies, several government bodies like the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare (MoWCSW) and the National Women Commission (NWC) are in place. The Nepal Police has formed separate cells for women and children at the central as well as local level. There are Women Development Offices (WDOs) under the MoWCSW in all 75 districts. The Village Development Committee (VDC), the lowest political and administrative unit of the government, can also function as a quasi-judicial agency, albeit only to a certain extent, to curb violence against women and children.

Nepal is one of a few countries to allocate gender-specific budget at the local level. The VDCs as well as the District Development Committees (DDCs) allocate ten per cent of their total budget, which do not include grants with preconditions and matching funds, for development of women. With the passing of Local Resources Mobilization and Management Guidelines-2069 B.S., the idea of allocating gender-specific budgets has become more cemented. Also, Nepal has already passed a law enabling women to inherit their ancestral properties.

However, despite so many conventions, policies, laws and government mechanisms, along with the strong presence of scores of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), violence against women still remains one of the biggest and widespread social maladies.

"So long as the men possess regressive attitudes to their better half, the women are less likely to be free from violence," says Sob. "This is where comes the importance of efforts to change our old mindset, our regressive attitude."

The report also stresses the need of empirical evidence-based advocacy – rather than emotions-based advocacy – for genuinely doing away with violence against women. "Over the years, we have been just saying we did not get rights and social justice," says Bishwakarma. "In fact, it does not make much sense. We should stop talking vague. Instead, we should come up with empirical evidences to show where and how we have been excluded. Only then will we be able to hit the right target."

The report, which Bishwakarma describes as an effort to advocate for the Dalit women's rights on the basis of empirical evidence, calls for addressing the problems of poverty and illiteracy of the Dalit women beside raising awareness among them and encouraging them to take remedial measures to get out of the vortex of violence.

#### THE MINORITY REPORT

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