

There is no evidence that rape or spousal abuse are extensive problems. However, there are credible reports by refugees and human rights groups that security forces raped large numbers of ethnic Nepalese women in the southern area of the country in 1991 and 1992. According to Amnesty International, some women reportedly have died as a result. In one independent survey of 1,779 refugee families, 26 percent of the respondents cited rape, fear of rape, or threat of rape as a prime reason for their departure from the country. The Government has denied these reports.

Rape was made a criminal offense in 1953, but that law had weak penalties and was enforced poorly. In 1993 the National Assembly adopted a revised rape act with clear definitions of criminal sexual assault and stronger penalties. In cases of rape involving minors, sentences range from 5 to 17 years. In extreme cases, a rapist may be imprisoned for life.

Women constitute 48 percent of the population and participate freely in the social and economic life of the country. Approximately 43 percent of enrollment in school is female, and 16 percent of civil service employees are women. Inheritance law provides for equal inheritance among all sons and daughters, but traditional inheritance practices, which vary among ethnic groups, may be observed if the heirs choose to forego legal challenges. Dowry is not practiced, even among ethnic Nepalese Hindus. Among some groups, inheritance practices favoring daughters reportedly account for the large numbers of women among owners of shops and businesses and for an accompanying tendency of women to drop out of higher education to go into business. However, female school enrollment has been growing in response to government policies. Women increasingly are found among senior officials and private sector entrepreneurs, especially in the tourism industry. Women in unskilled jobs generally are paid slightly less than men.

Polygamy is sanctioned provided the first wife gives her permission. Marriages may be arranged by the marriage partners themselves as well as by their parents. Divorce is common. Recent legislation requires that all marriages must be registered; it also favors women in matters of alimony. 🇧🇹