

According to the 1991 census, the female literacy rate is 26 percent, compared with 57 percent for men. Human rights groups report that girls attend secondary schools at a rate half that of boys. There are many NGO's focused on integrating women into society and the economy. Most political parties have women's groups. Members of Parliament have begun working for the passage of tougher laws for crimes of sexual assault, but have had little success so far.

Violence against women is a serious problem, but it receives limited public attention. In a 1996 study, 50 percent of the respondents said that they know someone who was the victim of domestic violence. In another 1996 survey, respondents listed the perpetrators of violence in 77 percent of incidents as family members, and 58 percent reported that it is a daily occurrence. There currently is no law against domestic violence.

Rape and incest also are problems, particularly in rural areas. Laws against rape provide for prison sentences of 6 to 10 years for the rape of a woman under 14 years of age and 3 to 5 years for the rape of a woman over the age of 14. The law prescribes imprisonment for 1 year or a fine for the rape of a prostitute. The law does not forbid spousal rape.

The dowry tradition is strong, with greater prevalence in the Terai region. The killing of brides because of defaults on dowry payments is rare, but does occur. More common is the physical abuse of wives by the husband and the husband's family to obtain additional dowry or to force the woman to leave to enable the son to remarry.

There is a general unwillingness among citizens, and particularly among government figures, to recognize violence against women as a problem. In a survey conducted by Saathi, a local NGO, 42 percent of the respondents said that in their experience medical practitioners were uncooperative or negligent in cases of violence against women and girls. This unwillingness to recognize violence against women and girls as unacceptable in daily life is seen not just in the medical profession, but among the police and politicians as well.

The police department has a "women's cell" in five cities, including Kathmandu. These cells include female officers who receive special training in handling victims of domestic violence. The police also have sent out directives instructing all officers to treat domestic violence as a criminal offense that should be prosecuted. However, according to a police official, this type of directive is difficult to enforce because of entrenched discriminatory attitudes. Even though the police may make an arrest, further prosecution seldom is pursued by the victim or by the Government.

At least six NGO's in Kathmandu work on the problem of violence against women and on women's issues in general. Saathi's assistance program includes a women's shelter and a suicide intervention center. The shelter provides housing, medical attention, counseling, and legal advocacy for the victims of violence.

Trafficking in women remains a serious social problem in several of the country's poorest areas, and large numbers of women still are forced to work against their will as prostitutes in other countries.

Although the Constitution provides protections for women, including equal pay for equal work, the Government has not taken significant action to implement its provisions, even in many of its own industries. Women face systematic discrimination, particularly in rural areas, where religious and cultural tradition, lack of education, and ignorance of the law remain severe impediments to their exercise of basic rights such as the right to vote or to hold property in their own names.

Women have benefited from some changes in marriage and inheritance laws. In 1994 the Supreme Court struck down provisions of the Citizenship Law that discriminated against foreign spouses of Nepalese women. However, many other discriminatory laws still remain. According to legal experts, there are over 20 laws that discriminate against women. For example, the law grants women the right to divorce, but on narrower grounds than those applicable to men. The law on property rights also favors men in its provisions for inheritance, land tenancy, and the division of family property. In 1995 the Supreme Court also ordered the Council of Ministers to enact legislation within 1 year giving women property rights in regard to inheritance and land tenancy that were equal to those of men. Although legislation to comply with this order has been introduced, it remains stalled in Parliament.

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