

Chapter 2 Social Status of Women

A. Patriarchy and Marriage

Across the cultural diversity, the majority of communities in Nepal are patriarchal—a woman's life is strongly influenced by her father and husband—as reflected in the practice of patrilocal residence, patriarchal descent, and by inheritance systems and family relations. Such patriarchal practices are further reinforced by the legal system. Marriage has an overwhelming importance in a woman's life. The event of marriage determines almost all her life options and subsequent livelihood. According to Hindu tradition, marriage is essential for all, whether man or woman. While a man's life is not considered complete without a wife, a woman has no option but to marry. In the Indo-Aryan culture, in particular, girls are encouraged to marry in their early teens or even earlier by their parents. Early marriages are rooted in both the concept of purity of the female body⁴ and the need for helping hands in farm households in general⁵. Marriage is a social contract between two clans rather than the personal affair of the bride and groom. Women and also men rarely have any role in the choice of their own life partners. In addition, polygyny, though outlawed, can be still observed especially in the rural areas of the Terai. In the Tibeto-Burman group, there is far more flexibility in the choice of marriage partners. Nevertheless, the majority of the population is dominated by patriarchal value systems that accord overwhelming importance to early marriage and male children.

Issues in patriarchy and marriage

- Little control over marriage choice
- Early marriage, more so in rural, Terai, uneducated women
- Vulnerability of widows and divorcees

Table 2.1: Mean Age at Marriage by Sex
(Age in years)

Year	Male	Female
1961	19.5	15.4
1971	20.9	16.8
1981	21.8	17.1
1991		
All Nepal	21.4	18.1
Urban	23.5	19.6
Rural	21.1	17.9
EDR	22.5	19.2
CDR	21.3	17.7
WDR	21.2	18.0
MWDR	20.7	17.6
FWDR	20.4	16.9
Mountain	21.9	18.6
Hill	22.2	18.6
Terai	20.6	17.0

Source: CBS, *Population Monograph of Nepal*, 1995.

⁴ Lynn Bennett, "Tradition and Change in the Legal Status of Nepalese Women" in *Status of Women in Nepal*, Vol. 1, Part 2 (1979).

⁵ Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS)/NPC/HMGN, *Nepal Living Standards Survey 1995/6*, Main Findings Vols. I and II, Kathmandu (1996).

Hence, the overwhelming majority of both men and women are married before they are 25 years old. In 1991, more than 86 percent of women and 61 percent of men were married before that age (Appendix Table A2.1). In the Indo-Aryan community, women are tied for life by their marriage bonds. Hence, a woman's power to accept or reject marriage partnership is evidently an index of the degree of freedom she exercises in the management of her own life, and thus also of her status. In the case of early marriage, the children concerned are too young to comprehend the issues involved. By the time they understand the reality, they are tied for life. An increase in the mean age of marriage, therefore, may be taken as an indicator of increased power for individual women and men in the choice of their own life partners, and hence their empowerment. In the non-Aryan communities, they may enjoy greater freedom of divorce and remarriage, but they face the risk of being left with young children without assets or helping hands to provide for them.

The mean age of marriage for women in Nepal has increased significantly from 15.4 years in 1961 to 18 years in 1991, indicating a slow but steady change in social perceptions about the institution of child marriage (Table 2.1). The change is most pronounced for young girls. In 1991, 7.4 percent of females in the 10-14 age group were reported to be married, compared with 24.9 percent in 1961.

There are significant differences in the mean age of marriage between rural and urban women, among women of various ecological zones, and between educated and noneducated women. Urban women marry later than rural women do. From an ecological zone perspective, a higher proportion of females is married at an earlier age in the Terai than in the hills and mountains. In 1991, more than 90 percent of the females in the Terai were married by the time they had reached the age of 24. The corresponding figures were notably lower for the hills and mountains, standing at 82.4 percent and 83.6 percent, respectively (Appendix Table A2.1). The mean age of marriage varies also with level of education. NFHS⁶ (1996) reported nearly four years' difference in the mean age of marriage between girls with no education and those with secondary education.

Early widowhood with little possibility of remarriage, particularly in the Indo-Aryan culture, is another curse upon women. More than 1.6 percent of the female population—i.e. 7,000 women—were already widowed by 29 years of age in 1991. The risk of widowhood tends to increase with age. Only a small proportion of women are divorced or separated in Nepal. However, this rate has shown an increasing trend (Appendix Table A2.2). Divorce rates also increase with age.

While a higher proportion of divorced women may indicate the increased determination of women to escape from oppressive marriages and situations of polygyny, it may also indicate increasing abandonment by men. Even today, women who are divorcees are stigmatized in the Hindu tradition. Thus, a divorced woman has little chance of remarriage within her own socioeconomic group if she comes from a high caste/class Hindu family. The need, from the religious point of view, to keep the clan blood pure is a paramount factor in thus condemning women to single status for life or to a loss of social status, if her first marriage fails.

⁶ Family Health Division, Department of Health Services/Ministry of Health (MOH)/His Majesty's Government of Nepal and New ERA, *Nepal Fertility Family Planning and Health Survey 1996*, Kathmandu.

B. Fertility and Family Planning

In a patriarchal society, women derive social status primarily from fertility as carriers of "clan seeds" and mothers of the male progeny. But they have little control over their own fertility or children. In the Hindu tradition, women are worshipped for their fertility, in the exalted status of mother goddess, while infertility is considered a curse⁷. On the other hand, childbirth and lactation force women to withdraw from active economic work, thus making them dependent on other members of society. Frequent pregnancies impinge on their health and sometimes even on their lives. Therefore, one of the most important indicators of women's empowerment is control over their own fertility. To date, no research has focused on the degree of control that women exercise over their own fertility in the various communities of Nepal.

Table 2.2: Trends in Fertility
(Age-specific rates)

Age Group	All Women			
	1976	1981	1991	1996
15-19	0.145	0.094	0.098	0.132
20-24	0.290	0.248	0.280	0.266
25-29	0.295	0.253	0.245	0.237
30-34	0.269	0.197	0.187	0.154
35-39	0.169	0.160	0.129	0.087
40-44	0.075	0.067	0.060	0.031
45-49	0.023	0.034	0.019	0.012
TFR per woman	6.33	5.27	5.09	4.6

Source: *Nepal Fertility, Family Planning and Health Survey*, 1996, Table 3.3

Total fertility rate (TFR) is defined as the number of children an average woman is expected to bear by the time she completes her reproductive period. There has been a continuous decline in the TFR since the 1970s (Table 2.2). Most recent estimates put the average total fertility rate at about 5.1 per woman for the decade of the 1990s and indicate an accelerated decline during the 1990s. Compared to 1976, the decline is visible in 1996 among all age groups. The TFR for 1996 is estimated at 4.6 per woman, still remaining high even compared to other South Asian countries (regional average of 3.4 in 1996).

There is a significant difference between the fertility behavior of urban and rural women (Table 2.3). Urban women give birth to 2.9 fewer children during their lifetime than their rural counterparts whose TFR is 4.8.

Issues in fertility and family planning

- Little control over fertility
- Still high fertility rate, more so among rural and uneducated women
- Low contraceptive use

The TFR differs perceptibly also by education levels. Women with no primary education have as much as 2.6 children more than those with some secondary education. Higher school education also makes a substantial difference. The TFR for women with secondary education is only 2.5 while for those with primary education it is 3.8, and for those with no education, 5.1.

Table 2.3: Selected Indicators of Fertility and Family Planning

⁷ Lynn Bennett, *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters* (Columbia University Press, New York 1983); John D. Kasarda, John O.G. Billy, and Kirsten West, *Status Enhancement and Fertility* (Academic Press Inc., New York 1996).

**Behavior,
by Socioeconomic Status**

	TFR (NFSH)	Children Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS) Ever Born (per Woman)	Family Planning Method (NLSS)	
			Awareness	Current Use
Residence				
Urban	2.9	2.1	82.2	31.3
Rural	4.8	2.7	57.9	14.0
Ecological Region				
Mountain	5.6	2.4	45.2	7.1
Hill	4.5	2.5	61.7	17.2
Terai	4.6	2.8	60.2	14.1
Development Region				
Eastern	4.1	2.4	65.5	14.5
Central	4.6	2.7	65.5	17.5
Western	4.7	2.7	54.1	14.3
Mid- Western	5.5	2.7	46.4	12.4
Far- Western	5.2	2.4	53.7	9.5
Income quintile				
First		3.1	47.2	8.3
Second		2.9	47.7	10.3
Third		2.8	58.2	15.0
Fourth		2.4	65.2	16.4
Fifth		2.1	79.5	23.5
Education			98.0	26.4
No Education	5.1		99.7	30.8
Primary	3.8		100	39.6
Secondary	2.9		100	52.0
Nepal	4.6	2.6	59.7	14.8

Sources: *Nepal Fertility, Family Planning and Health Survey, 1996* and *NLSS, 1996*

The effect of income on fertility behavior, however, seems to be low (Table 2.3). Only the difference between the first and fifth income quintiles is significant. Decline in fertility behavior is slowest in the mountains and this may be attributable to the access factor. In spite of greater access to family planning services, the Terai population exhibits a slightly slower pace of fertility decline. In terms of development region, the mid-West region lags far behind other regions, once again caused by a lack of accessibility.

There seems to be a wide variation in survey results on contraceptive awareness and use. Reported contraceptive use varies from 15 percent to 29 percent⁸ of reproductive age women. Similarly, while awareness about family planning devices has been reported as being as high as 98 percent by NFHS (1996), NLSS (1996) reported this awareness at only about 60 percent. Awareness varies significantly with income (Table 2.3). Residence and educational levels have much influence on awareness, contraceptive use, and birth intervals. There is significant unsatisfied demand for family planning services, estimated to have been 31 percent in 1996⁹.

⁸ NLSS, 1996 and NFHS, 1996.

⁹ NFHS, 1996.

C. Health and Nutrition

Over the past two decades, within the overall progress in the general health situation, there have been some significant improvements in the health status of women (Box 1). However, Nepalese women and girls at large still suffer from poor health compared with their male counterparts, due to lack of adequate health services, general poverty, and, in some cases, the sociocultural preference for male children.

Women suffer from lack of medical facilities in case of pregnancy complications, malnutrition, anemia, and many other diseases related to their reproductive functions. Although nationwide data on anemia are not available, the Department of Health, based on small hospital surveys, has estimated more than 50 percent of women in 15-49 age group to be anemic. It is estimated to be more than 60 percent among pregnant women. Risk related to pregnancy and child delivery is the largest killer for women. Although maternal mortality rate (MMR) has fallen to 539 per 100,000 live births today from the figure of 850 reported during the 1980s, this is still high even by South Asian standards. Doctors and nurses assisted only nine percent of mothers during delivery (Table 2.4). Village health workers (VHWs), mother and child health workers (MCHVs)¹⁰, etc. assisted another 1 percent. Over 90 percent of women deliver at home and only 5 percent of rural women delivered at a health facility in 1996. Even in urban areas, this proportion is below 50 percent. Antenatal care is rare, with only 2.8 percent of mothers receiving it. Seven percent of women were chronically ill. There is a large discrepancy between urban and rural women in terms of their access to health services.

Box 1

PROGRESS IN SOCIAL AND HEALTH STATUS OF WOMEN

- The mean age of marriage for girls increased by more than 2.5 years between 1961 and 1991.
- The fertility decline has accelerated during the 1990s, with the TFR falling from 6.3 in 1976 to 4.6 in 1996.
- The maternal mortality rate has fallen to 539 per 100,000 women compared with more than 800 reported during the 1980s.
- No gender disparity in the rate of vaccination against measles, breast feeding, or the extent of stunting due to malnutrition (Appendix Table A2.3).
- The life expectancy of women has increased by more than 11 years between 1975 and 1993, though still remaining lower by 1.5 years compared to that for men¹.
- There is improvement in overall sex ratio in the country and in all ecological regions.

¹Strictly speaking life expectancy rates cannot be used for comparison of male/female gender status of health since birth and death registration is not practiced widely. Male life expectancy is derived from an estimate of female life expectancy and an assumption that men live longer than women in South Asia (see CBS, 1995, p 94).

~~The high incidence of malnutrition and a lack of health awareness lead to much sickness in children and to high infant and child mortality rates. It is good to note, however, that sex discrimination and the strong preference for sons in Nepal are not translated into differential behavior towards the~~

¹⁰ NFHS, 1996.

Issues in women's health

- Shorter life expectancy for women than for men
- Still high infant and child mortality rates and neglect of girls' health
- High maternal mortality rate
- High male/female sex ratio, reflecting the physically more difficult life of women
- Lack of access to adequate health services, especially for reproductive health care and for contraceptive devices

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health status of male and female infants. The difference in male/female immunization rates is not significant either in urban or rural areas. However, according to NLSS (1996), the Terai and hill populations show higher differences in male/female immunization rates than the mountain population. Similarly, the middle two income quintiles (3rd–4th) show much larger gender gaps in immunization rates than the top and bottom two quintiles. This indicates that gender discrimination is not directly linked to economic status (Appendix Table A2.3).

Infant and child mortality rates are important indicators of women's status for two reasons. First, they reflect social attitudes towards male and female children. Second, they also throw light on the health situation of women as mothers. A comparatively higher female infant and child mortality rate signifies social neglect of female infants and children. At the same time, a high infant and child mortality rates force women to multiple and wasted pregnancies, thus depleting their strength. The infant mortality rate in Nepal is high even by South Asian standards.

Male/female IMRs do not indicate any discrimination towards female children. The *Demographic Sample Survey* of 1976 estimated the IMR at 141 per 1,000 live births for males and 123 for females (Appendix Table A1.3). The most recent NFHS reports IMR at 102 and 84 for males and females, respectively. Thus, the strong preference for sons reported in various studies is not reflected in the IMR.

**Table 2.4: Selected Indicators of Women's Health Status
(in percent)**

Variables	Indicators				
	Pregnant Receiving Tetanus Toxoid ¹	Professional ¹ Antenatal Care (Doc + Nurse)	Delivery in ¹ Health Facility	Delivery with ¹ Trained Attendant (Doctor+Nurse)	Reporting Chronically Ill ²
Residence					
Urban	48.3	66.2	43.8	46.6	5.7
Rural	34.5	20.7	5.1	6.4	7.1
Ecological Region					
Mountain	13.8	16.3	2.0	2.9	9.2
Hill	26.7	24.3	9.0	10.0	8.1
Terai	40.6	24.1	7.2	9.1	5.6
Nepal	32.6	24.0	24.0	9.0	7.0

Sources: ¹ NFHS, 1996.

² NLSS, 1996.

On the other hand, gender discrimination in the family behavior towards male and female children is captured distinctly by the gender difference in child mortality rates. Contrary to the scientifically proven fact that female children are stronger than male children during their infancy and early childhood—resulting in higher mortality rates worldwide for male infants and young children—the under-five child mortality rate

is still higher for girls than for the boys in South Asia. In Nepal, 125 per 1,000 boys under five die each year, compared with 139 per 1,000 girls (Table 2.5).

Overall, a higher proportion of women than of men dies each year in Nepal. Consequently men live longer than women do. This is contrary to the international trend, and even the South Asian trend, which indicate higher mortality rates among men. The higher mortality rate of women in Nepal is attributed to higher female child and maternal mortality rates.

Table 2.5: Selected Demographic Indicators for SAARC Countries

Indicators	Nepal	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
1. Under five mortality per 1,000 children						
Male	125	130	188	123	137	25
Female	139	136	200	125	139	19
2. Sex ratio (females per 100 males)	100	94	100	94	93	101
3. Life Expectancy at birth (in years)						
Male	55.8	56.3	49.8	61.1	61.3	70
Female	54.9	56.5	53.2	61.4	63.3	74.6
Total	55.35	56.4	51.5	61.25	62.3	72.3
4. Maternal Mortality (per 100,000 live births)	539	887	na	437	na	30

SAARC = South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

Sources: World Bank, *World Development Report* 1993, 1997; *UNDP Human Development Report* 1993, 1997; CBS 1995; and NFHS, 1996

na= not available

A sex ratio, defined as the number of males per 100 females (or females per 100 males as in Table 2.5), is an important indicator of women's status because it is a cumulative product of demographic and social behavior patterns. A sex ratio over (below) 100 denotes an excess of males (females) over females (males) and a ratio below 100 denotes an excess of females (males) over males (female). As a natural rule, there is a preponderance of male births over female births among the human population in general. By the age of five, the sex ratio is about equal since, by nature, male children are physically weaker than female children are, and thus a smaller proportion of males than females survives¹¹. Furthermore, universally, a larger proportion of women than men survives to old age. Consequently, there are more women in the world than men. However, in South Asia, the economically more backward countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, and India used to have opposite overall sex ratios due to the socioeconomic discrimination against female children and against women in general. In Nepal, however, while the overall sex ratios observed in 1971 and 1981 were in favor of males, the 1991 census shows a slight dominance of females (Appendix Table A2.4).

The ratio of males per 100 females had decreased in almost all age groups in 1991 compared to 1981. The sex ratio shows an excess of females in the prime fertility age range (20—34 years of age) from

¹¹ United Nations, *The World's Women—Trends and Statistics 1970—1990* (New York, 1991).

1971 through 1991 (Appendix Table A2.4). That would seem to be clear evidence of male out-migration from native areas, probably to the Terai, India, and other parts of Nepal. This floating population seems to be omitted from censuses. Adjusted population figures, therefore, still show more men than women, with a sex ratio of 101.6.

Among the ecological regions, the Terai had the highest sex ratio both in 1981 and 1991 (Appendix Table A2.5). The Central Hill region—which includes the Kathmandu Valley—definitely had more men than women. An additional reason for the highest sex ratio being in the Terai is related to the relatively lower socioeconomic status of women in Terai communities of Indo-Aryan origin. This leads to a higher death rate among women¹². Nevertheless, even in this region, the sex ratio declined from 108.3 in 1981 to 103.9 in 1991, indicating a general improvement in the health status of women.

D. Education

1. Literacy

Women have made substantial gains in literacy over the last 25 years, partly due to vigorous government programs for girls' education starting in the early 1970s, including the training of female teachers from backward areas. The female literacy rate (six years and above) increased from a meager 4 percent in 1971 to 25 percent in 1991. A recent survey¹³ reports literacy rates of 57 percent and 27 percent, respectively, for males and females over six years of age. Likewise, two recent surveys (NMIS and NLSS, 1996) reported adult female literacy rates as being between 19 percent and 23 percent.

Issues in Education

- Low absolute levels of female education (literacy rate, educational attainment, and enrollment rates)
- Significant gender gaps in education
- Major reasons for not sending daughters to school include lack of household resources; lack of sense of importance since girls will marry; girls' workload at home; high school fees; lack of female teachers or adequate facilities

Table 2.6: Literacy Rates, 1971-1996
(percent of the total population 6 years old and above)

Census	Male	Female	Both	Male/Female Differentials
1971	23.59	3.91	13.89	19.68
1981	33.96	12.05	23.26	21.91
1991	54.10	24.73	39.34	29.37
1996	57.00	27.00	42.00	30.00

Sources: *Population Census* 1971, 1981, 1991; and NPC 1996

Despite the gains in overall educational opportunities, however, the level of literacy is still low, and the gender gap in the literacy rate remains enormous (Table 2.6). The trend exhibited by Table 2.6, moreover, shows that the gender literacy gap has in fact been expanding. However, the good news is that in the younger 10-14 age group, the gender gap is declining¹⁴.

¹² Meena Acharya, "The Maithili Women of Sirsia," *The Status of Women in Nepal*, Vol. II, Part 1 CEDA, Kathmandu 1981.

¹³ NMIS, 1996.

¹⁴ Meena Acharya, *The Statistical Profile of Nepalese Women: An Update in the Policy Context* (Institute for Integrated Development Studies (IIDS), Kathmandu, 1994).

Urban/rural differences in literacy levels and male/female ratios are quite noticeable (Table 2.7). While 47 percent of adult urban women can read and write, only 17 percent of adult women can do so in rural areas. There is also a significant difference in female/male literacy gap among various ecological and development regions (Table 2.7). The Kathmandu Valley has the highest female literacy rate and also the highest female/male literacy ratio. There are 68 literate adult women to 100 literate adult men in the valley, while there are only 34 literate women to 100 literate men in rural areas. Similarly, this ratio is associated positively with income.

Table 2.7: Literacy Rates (Population 6 Years and Older) by Gender
(percent)

	Population 6 Years and Older			Population 15 Years and Older		
	Male	Female	M/F Ratio (per 100 male)	Male	Female	M/F Ratio (per 100 male)
Development Region						
Eastern	54.2	29.6	55	55.9	24.3	43
Central	50.2	20.8	41	51.4	17.9	35
Western	58.2	32.8	56	59.3	25.4	43
Mid Western	46.9	17.6	38	50.8	12.9	25
Far Western	50.0	14.9	30	47.2	8.5	18
Ecological Belt						
Mountain	43.4	13.4	31	42.9	8.7	20
Hill	61.6	31.1	50	63.1	24.5	39
Terai	45.4	19.9	44	47.1	16.5	35
Urban	77.3	50.5	65	80.7	47.4	59
Kathmandu Valley	88.6	65.3	74	90.4	61.9	68
Other Urban	70.1	41.5	59	73.8	37.4	51
Rural	50.1	22.4	45	51.1	17.3	34
Quintile Group						
First Quintile	31.9	8.8	28	33.9	6.2	18
Second Quintile	41.3	15.6	38	42.0	11.2	27
Third Quintile	45.7	20.9	46	44.5	14.7	33
Fourth Quintile	63.0	30.5	48	63.7	23.3	37
Fifth Quintile	74.9	44.0	59	75.5	36.8	49
Nepal	52.2	24.4	47	54.0	19.4	36

Source: *Nepal Living Standards Survey*, CBS, 1996

Among the five development regions, the Western Development Region has the highest proportion of adult literate women: 25 percent in 1996. The Mid-Western and Far-Western Development Regions lag far behind that level. In spite of much greater accessibility, the Terai is far behind the hills in both female and male literacy.

Disadvantaged caste/ethnic groups have much higher gender gaps than other groups. A recent research study¹⁵ classified the population in five groups by educational status and male/female literacy ratio (Table 2.8). Each of these educational groups are composed of specific ethnic groups and castes (see footnote to Table 2.8). There is a clear negative relationship between overall literacy level and the gender

¹⁵ S. Sharma and D. Chhetry, *MIMAP Research on Poverty in Nepal: A Synthesis*, MIMAP Project, Agricultural Projects Services Center (APROSC) and International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Kathmandu, Nepal 1996.

gap: i.e., in the group where overall literacy rate is lower, the gender gap is bigger. Populations with high female literacy have much higher overall literacy rates.

Table 2.8: Average Literacy Rate and Female-Male Ratio by Literacy Status

Clusters ¹	Literacy Rate	Female Literacy Ratio (per 100 male)
Cluster 1	8.9	16
Cluster 2	26.2	30
Cluster 3	38.6	43
Cluster 4	45.3	48
Cluster 5	61.2	63

Source: Sharma and Chhetri (APROSC), 1996

¹Cluster 1 = Chamar, Dusadn, Aallah, and Mushar from the Terai; Cluster 2 = Damia, Kami Sarki, and Tamang from the Hill origin, and Dhanuk, Kewat, Muslim, Tharu, and Yadav/Ahir from the Terai origin; Cluster 3 = Teli from the Terai origin and Magar and Sherpa from Hill origin; Cluster 4 = Bania and Sudhi/Kalwar from the Terai, and Chhetri, Gurung, Limbu, Rai, Sanyasi, and Thakuri from the Hills; Cluster 5 = Brahmin from the Terai, and Brahmin and Newar from the Hill.

2. Enrollment and Attainment

Enrollment levels still show a severe gender gap in access to education. The net enrollment (weighted) was reported at 80 percent for boys and 60 percent for girls (Appendix Table A2.6). A girl has more than two and half times the risk of not attending school. This risk increases with age. Household chores and registration fees accounted for 45 percent of the responses in the NLSS to explain why girls were not sent to school. The NMIS reported help required on farms and parental wishes as the main reasons for not sending girls to school.

Similarly, dropout and repetition rates are higher for girls than for boys. For each two boys, four girls drop out, and for each 22 boys repeating, 25 girls repeat. The risk of dropping out is higher for girls in all regions and ecological zones. As in the case of literacy, regional variations in school enrollment levels are quite significant, and urban-rural differences are also quite high (Table 2.9).

As the level of education increases, the female enrollment rate declines progressively. The current gross enrollment ratio for grades 6–10 is 40 percent, and there are twice as many boys in schools as girls. The enrollment ratio for girls is only 31 percent compared with above 46 percent for boys in lower secondary, and just 6 percent for girls, compared with 16 percent for the boys in higher secondary. Children in the rural and remote areas have much less opportunity for secondary education. Poor quality, internal inefficiency, low pass rates, high dropout rates, and the large number of untrained teachers are major problems in both primary and secondary education.

Table 2.9: Socioeconomic and Regional Variation in Social Indicators

Regions	Health Sector		Education Sector		
	Immunization Rate (5 yrs. and above)		F/M Literacy Ratio (per 100 males)	F/M Enrollment Ratio (per 100 males)	
	Male	Female		Primary	Secondary

Development Regions¹						
EDR	41.3	33.4	4.1	55	88.9	52.0
CDR	43.8	40.2	4.6	41	59.6	47.1
WDR	34.0	32.3	4.7	56	89.1	9.1
MWDR	35.1	30.7	5.5	38	65.6	100.0
FWDR	23.2	25.1	5.2	30	47.6	0.0
Ecological Belts						
Mountain	24.9	24.8	5.6	31	54.8	0.0
Hill	42.2	38.0	4.5	50	82.6	45.0
Terai	36.1	32.9	4.6	44	62.9	26.7
Urban	58.8	57.7	2.9	65	97.1	72.4
Kathmandu Valley	86.4	82.9		74	97.3	84.8
Other Urban	48.9	49.9		59	98.0	44.4
Rural	36.5	32.9	4.8	45	70.0	33.3
Eastern Hill/Mountain	44.8	39.4			80.0	62.5
Western Hill/Mountain	31.6	29.8			77.1	13.3
Eastern Terai	39.9	33.1			57.3	42.1
Western Terai	28.0	28.6			63.6	0.0
Consumption Groups						
First Quintile	23.0	20.8		28		
Second Quintile	33.2	30.8		38		
Third Quintile	39.8	33.7		46		
Fourth Quintile	45.6	37.4		48		
Fifth Quintile	59.2	60.5		59		

¹ EDR = Eastern Development Region; CDR = Central Development Region; WDR = Western Development Region; MWDR = Mid-Western Development Region; FWDR = Far-Western Development Region.

Household income, workload, and the level of concern with the purity of the female body, which leads to early marriage, are important influences in deciding whether to send girls to school. As long as there is no financial resource constraint for the family, the primary school-age girls may be able to go to school but, as soon as it arises, the first casualty is the female child's education. Girls in lower income groups get little opportunity to go to school at all. Those who do go to school can hardly further their education beyond the secondary level. Girls in the 6—9 age group have been reported to be working 2.6 to 4.5 hours per day compared with the 1.7 to 2.9 hours of work per day undertaken by boys. Girls in 10—14 age group work as many hours as adult men¹⁶.

Another compelling factor hindering women's education in general is the fact that girls are transferred to their affiance households after marriage, with the result that parents have no claim on their work or income as adult women. When parents are asked in surveys why they are not sending their girl children to school, one of the often-repeated answers is that "they will go to other people's houses (*Arkako*

¹⁶ Nepal Rastra Bank, *NPHBS 1984/85* (Kathmandu, 1989).

Ghara Zane) so what is the use of educating them?"¹⁷ In summary, poverty, workload, and cultural perceptions are the major factors hindering female education.

High fees in the private schools and the emerging dichotomy in the private and public education systems are other major issues. Girls and children from poor households have much less access to private schools. Social factors aside, the lack of physical facilities (such as toilets and hostels) and a lack of trained teachers (especially female teachers) are considered to be major constraints in increasing girls' enrollment in secondary education.

For those who attended school, according to NLSS (1996), the mean number of years of schooling (primary + secondary + higher secondary) was uniformly lower for girls by about one year, with little difference according to socioeconomic variables, such as ecological zone, rural or urban residence or consumption levels. As a result of discrimination in educational access, women are much more disadvantaged educationally than men (Table 2.10). In addition, although there has been a significant improvement in female educational achievement at all levels, the higher the educational level, the lower the female representation.

Table 2.10: Females Completing Various Levels of Education
(Females per 100 males, 6 years and above)

Level	1981	1991
Primary	41.5	53.5
Lower Secondary	27.9	^a
Secondary	21.4	39.2
School-Leaving Certificate	22.2	31.2
Intermediate	21.5	26.4
Graduates	18.7	22.2
Postgraduates	17.6	23.7

^a Combined in Secondary in the Census

Source: Acharya 1994

E. Gender-Based Violence and Trafficking

Violence against women takes various forms, ranging from verbal "eve teasing", physical/sexual abuse within the household, to rape and trafficking. All these cases are widespread

¹⁷ Center for Educational Research Innovation and Development (CERID), *Impact Study of Adult Education in Nepal*. Kathmandu, (1997a).
 ——— *Gender and Secondary Education: A Study Report* Project/Cambridge Education Consultants Ltd., (1997b).

Definition of violence

"Any act of gender based violence that results or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life...." (submitted to Secondary Education (Article I, UN Commission on Status of Women Declaration)

in Nepal, but lack of comprehensive data and people's awareness of these issues, as well as a lack of law enforcement, has left these cases almost untouched. However, recently, there have been some comprehensive studies done on this issue¹⁸, upon which this section primarily draws information. According to SAATHI and the Asia Foundation (1997), 95 percent of the women and girls surveyed reported first-hand knowledge of violence, of which 77 percent was from their own family members. Such violence was reported across all ethnic, caste, and income groups.

Beating was reported as the most common form of violence by both women and girls (82 percent), followed by assault, rape, and forced prostitution (see Table 2.11). About one third of the respondents reported knowledge of sexual harassment in public places, and about one fifth reported knowledge of it occurring in the workplace.

Issues in gender-based violence

- lack of reliable data and under-reporting on violence, especially domestic violence
- lack of bargaining power of women, dowry, polygyny, and alcoholism as underlying causes of domestic violence
- trafficking of women widespread across all ethnic groups/castes
- poverty and lack of access to economic resources for women outside marriage as causes of women entering into commercial sex work
- inadequate legal framework and general law enforcement on gender-based violence.

1. Domestic Violence

Studies on violence in Nepal have concentrated on public violence and trafficking (see next section) while only little information has been collected on domestic violence. According to the New ERA (1997) report, however, one of the major causes of women leaving the married household has been polygyny and subsequent violence against one of the cowives. Alcohol-related

violence in the domestic arena was reported high all over Nepal and across all communities. Incidents of dowry-related violence are reported to a lesser extent. This could be due to lack of information collection and reporting, and the myth that traditionally a dowry system has not existed in Nepal.

In Western hills and in some Indo-Aryan communities, however, a "bride price" system, similar to the dowry system, is prevalent. In the Maithili communities of Western Terai as well, a system called a *Tilak* has been widely practiced under which a bride's price is negotiated and received by the groom or his family before marriage. Traditionally, a milder form of dowry has been also prevalent among the Brahmins, Chetris, and Newars in Nepal's hill areas. The dowry usually consists of bed and bedding and some utensils. But, recently, as in Bangladesh and India, the demands from the groom's family for a

¹⁸ Two reports, SAATHI and The Asia Foundation, *A Situation Analysis of Violence Against Women and Girls in Nepal, Kathmandu*; and New ERA, *A Situation Analysis of Sex Work and Trafficking in Nepal with Reference to Children*, (submitted to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Pulchowk, Lalitpur, Nepal, 1997), provide comprehensive information. Another report, Action AID, *A Public Secret: An Exploratory Study on Hidden Sex Work in Kanchanpur District*, Kathmandu, provides detailed case studies (1998).

larger dowry are considered to have been rising, adding further psychological pressure on women. Extreme cases of stove-bursting and women's "dowry death" have also been reported. The old tradition of nominal dowries is being converted into a new channel for accumulating business capital and acquiring modern goods, such as motorcycles, televisions, furnishings, freezers, etc. In the SAATHI and Asia Foundation survey (1997), knowledge of violence related to dowry was reported by 38 percent of respondents in Banke, a western Terai district with a predominantly Muslim population. In other districts in the sample—which included Jhapa, Kanchanpur Kathmandu, and Nuwakot—much lower proportions (26 percent, 18 percent, 11 percent, and 7 percent, respectively) of respondents reported such knowledge.

Table 2.11: Type of Physical and Mental Violence Reported

Psychological	Percent Reporting	Physical	Percent Reporting
Mental torture	61	Beating	82
Emotional torture	32	Assault	66
Sexual harassment in		Rape	30
- public places	31	Forced prostitution	28
- workplace	17	Untouchability	21
		Abortion	13
		Child sexual abuse	13

Sources: SAATHI and the Asia Foundation 1997.

Other pervasive forms of domestic violence, as mentioned earlier, are the practice of polygyny and alcohol-related abuse. The same report notes, "...the most common traditional form of violence against women in Nepal was seen to be polygamy (polygyny) which was reported without fail by respondents from all districts, with the highest reporting from Nuwakot (33 percent) and the lowest from Kathmandu (12 percent)." The incidence of alcohol-related abuse was also reported to be prevalent.

Lack of women's economic and bargaining power in the household is an underlying cause of domestic violence. As the report notes, "women's economic dependency on the spouse and extended family was identified as the primary reason (73 percent) for women not reporting incidents of violence against them, followed by lack of education and the need to keep the family intact due to children (49 percent)."¹⁹

2. Public Violence and Trafficking

The extreme forms of violence include rape, trafficking, and forced prostitution. Prostitution by choice and trafficking are distinct but related problems. Women may be forced into prostitution in the later stages of their lives to earn a living after having earlier been raped or sold.

According to New ERA's 1997 survey, trafficking and commercial sex work in Nepal is widespread and deeply rooted in society. Public opinion was collected for this survey from 180 places in 40 districts, and nearly 90 percent of interviewees knew about some commercial sex work in their area. Commercial sex workers are found all over Nepal, but they tend to be concentrated in large cities, border

¹⁹ SAATHI and The Asia Foundation, 1997.

towns, trunk route townships, and in *Hatt* bazaar areas in the villages. About 28 percent of the respondents knew of at least one incidence of trafficking to India or within Nepal in the previous year.

Women of all ethnic groups and castes were reportedly involved in this trade, but the largest number came from low-service castes and high-caste Brahmin/Chhetri groups. The middle castes of Tibeto-Burman groups like Tamang, Magar/Gurung, and Rai/Limbu were also involved in large numbers. New groups, such as Tharu/Chepang/Dhimal/Tribal/Batar/Satar/Jhanger/Dhanger and Mushars were also reported as being involved. Among those trafficked to India, the Tibeto-Burman group dominated. Families with no previous experience in sending a family member away for commercial sex work appear to be increasingly involved on a large scale, as 83 percent of the commercial sex workers (CSWs) interviewed said they had no tradition of sex work in their families²⁰.

Overall, the majority of survey respondents (including CSWs) identifies poverty and the search for jobs as the *immediate* causes for adult women becoming CSWs. The progressive decline in the demands for the services of village craftsmen, and the accelerated impoverishment of the lower peasantry due to land division and subdivision, seem to have pushed women from both low-service castes and high caste families into prostitution, besides the traditional groups. However, the *underlying* cause, as suggested by the New ERA report, appears to be that women have little means of livelihood and social status outside marriage. In consequence, for single women, prostitution seems to be the quickest way to access economic resources besides marriage and, for married women, the failure of marriage often force them into such an occupation.

Modern consumerism and drug use among youngsters have also lured young women of even middle class families into prostitution, as evident from the fact that the CSWs are not necessarily illiterate or from poor family backgrounds.

Violence against girls and women on a large scale by husbands and other members of the affiance household, as well as occasionally by natal relatives — particularly uncles, brothers, and aunts — and members of the community especially, was identified as a major cause pushing women into prostitution, especially for those in low-caste households.

Trafficking of children for sex work also appears widespread. Most of the children involved are either sold forcibly or duped into the trade. According to the New ERA survey, almost 48 percent of the total 196 CSWs interviewed entered the trade between the ages of 10 and 15. Of these, more than 13 percent started sex work between 10 and 13 years of age, while 4 percent started even earlier, between 10 and 11. According to the interviews with Nepalese CSWs in India, more than one fifth of girls trafficked to India are currently between 12 and 15 years of age. Some groups of children, e.g., those whose mothers and sisters are CSWs, who work in *bhattis* (local pubs), lodges, and restaurants, and domestic servants, orphaned and low-caste children seem to face special risks, as most of CSWs seem to come from such groups.

Bhatti pasals, hotels, restaurants, and lodges play the key role as places for soliciting sex work, *dalali* (pimping), and trafficking. Owners/workers of these places, drivers, and professional pimps are reported to be the groups most heavily involved in *dalali* and trafficking.

²⁰ New ERA, 1997.

Traffickers, in which all kinds of escorts may be included as most of the girls are duped with promises of jobs and fake marriages even when going voluntarily, largely consist of locally known people, including friends, neighbors, close relatives, coworkers, and returned or visiting CSWs. The destinations of the traffickers were identified primarily as Mumbai, Calcutta, Delhi, and other big cities in India. Although very few CSWs or people in general thought about trafficking within Nepal, the duping and escort of girls to big cities in Nepal, with a job and various other promises of a good life, and their eventual sale are widespread.

3. Government Policies and Laws Against Gender-Based Violence

Government policy and the legal framework for gender-based violence in Nepal are far from complete. The area in which most progress has been made is girl trafficking, for which the Government initiated a new policy in 1997. The policy lays down that the Government will (i) initiate an extensive campaign against girl trafficking; (ii) promulgate laws to end discrimination against women; (iii) strengthen cooperation with nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and international nongovernment organization (INGOs) to implement programs for controlling trafficking; and (iv) initiate cooperation with other countries at bilateral and multilateral levels to control girl trafficking and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). In addition, the Government committed itself to further actions, including increased compensation for the victims of sexual exploitation, the creation of a national commission on girl trafficking, and the building up of consensus among all political parties on the issue of girl trafficking, and on adopting appropriate measures for alternative employment. The Government has also promised the creation of family courts to resolve family disputes.

Nepal also has adequate laws on trafficking, but this is the only area for which an adequate legal framework exists among all other gender-based violence issues²¹. Human trafficking, particularly among minors, is punishable by up to 20 years of imprisonment. However, the punitive provisions of the law on rape are not considered to be equal to international standards. For example, the rape of girls below 14 years of age is punishable by imprisonment of 6 to 10 years while, in the case of women above 14, by imprisonment of 3 to 5 years. The punishment provisions for rape criminals are considered to be insufficient, and accordingly, amendments for more strict treatment have been introduced in the Parliament. The bill proposes imprisonment for 10 to 20 years in the case of victims below 10 years of age, 7 to 14 years in the case of victims being 10 to 16 years of age, and 5 to 10 years in the case of victims being above 16 years old²².

Violence against women both in the domestic and public spheres (i.e., workplace) is hardly touched by current laws. The only available redress to women victims of domestic violence is their share of property in the affiance household. Mental violence is almost completely ignored as a human rights issue.

4. Law Enforcement

The police are often reported to be the part of the problem rather than the solution to stopping gender-based violence. Discussions with local population and case studies indicate that the police

²¹ SAATHI and the The Asia Foundation, 1997.

²² Parliamentary Secretariat, 1996.

themselves are often involved in illegal practices such as polygynous and child marriages and the trafficking of women. They also take the side of men in cases of domestic violence. Moreover, in case of force trafficking, it is often the CSWs who are penalized rather than the traffickers or the clients.

However, fortunately, women's cells have been established at the center and in district police offices in Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Morang, and Kaski, which will provide more women-friendly services on such issues as trafficking, rape, polygyny, child marriage, and abortion.

Similarly, being disappointed by inept law enforcement, the grassroots women's movement across the country has been playing an increasing role in putting some of the violence-related issues on the agenda, including alcoholism and the trafficking of women. For example, the antiliquor campaign brought together women at different levels — including a national coalition of women's pressure groups, women's wings of various political parties, and district and village offices — and put pressure on national policies. However, positive results have yet to be achieved.