

Witchcraft: An Entrenched Form of Violence Against Women in Nepal



Nepal has always been considered as one of the rich countries in terms of its religious, cultural and linguistic diversity. Unfortunately, within the hidden periphery of such richness, there are practices and traditions that have discriminated one human being from another. 'Witchcraft' is one of those traditional superstitious practices, which has widely been followed in different parts of Nepal, but is mostly entrenched in rural parts, where majority of population reside. It is usually women, mostly innocent, poor, illiterate, single and aged women who have been victims of false accusations of being witches. It is believed that witches are suppose to have some kind of supernatural (magical) powers, through which she brings ill to her family, community and society. If people in a village fall sick, or there is a sudden death of anyone in the community, it is then usually a woman who is considered 'witch,' and blamed for all these tragedies. As a punishment to crimes she never committed, she has to face different forms of psychological and physical trauma. Witches are tortured, beaten, insulted, forced to eat human excreta and even murdered in extreme cases, as castigation of accused ill deeds. They are also excluded from their families, communities and villages and even children throw stones at them. Having no place to go and no food to eat, a large number of women are on streets begging and at times been raped. 'Witchcraft' is one of those widely practiced brutal form of 'violence against women,' which the civil society, law makers and the state should consider addressing strongly. The public hearing was first of its kind to discuss the issue in detail and develop a concerted efforts towards this end.

Public Hearing on Women Accused of Witchcraft

With support from CARE Nepal, FEDO (Feminist Dalit Organization) and Sancharika Samuha (Forum of Women Communicators) organized a public hearing program in Kathmandu, Nepal on December 15, 2009. The selection of the venue in Kathmandu was done purposefully to take the issue to the national level for further discourse and lobbying. High-level government officials including minister for women, children and social welfare Sarwadev Prasad Ojha, president of National Women Commission, Naina Kala Thapa were present along with human rights activists and media representatives.

There were six women from different parts of Nepal, mostly Tarai flat land, who described their heart wrenching experiences of torture by their own community in the name of 'purifying the witches'. All of these women were from poor underprivileged groups and were of age from 26 to 40.

Kalli Kumari B.K. of Lalitpur district narrated her story of being beaten until she completely collapsed. At the accusation of a school principle, she was named a witch and was isolated from the whole community. She was given no food and when she begged for water, the locals gave her water mixed with kerosene. They all accused her of casting ill spells over everyone else. Many of the locals were suffering from similar cold and flu symptoms when they accused Kalli of witchcraft and making the community sick. They compelled her to accept that she was a witch and that she would then wear the spells off from the community, especially from the sick ones. Kalli however, managed to flee to the local administration for help to which the administration asked her to reach an understanding with the perpetrators instead of taking any actions against them.



Shea Devi Mandal of Saptari district started having problems with the community when her mother in law died all of a sudden. The locals blamed her of killing her mother in law and that she was a witch. The locals also verbally and physically abused her brother in law and son whenever they went out to the public places. The locals said they feared Shea's family was casting bad spells over them. Her husband works as a migrant labor in India. She keeps awake everyday until 2 to 3am at night in fear of being killed. The locals even looted a little foodstuff that she had saved. She has two marriageable daughters but every time there is a marriage proposal, the villagers tell the prospective grooms all rumors and they too run away. Everyone says her daughters are also witches. Therefore, her daughters may now never be able get married. She went to local administration office in hope of justice. Instead, they advised her to resolve the problems with the locals through dialogue. How can she do that? No one wants to even look at her face?

Series of torture began for **Kuleshwori Devi of Siraha** after her brother in law died all of a sudden. Immediately thereafter, her nephew died too. Everyone in the community started to accuse her of casting spells and killing her own family members. The locals beat her black and blue. She was bleeding from her nose, ears, mouth and even eyes and she collapsed. When she came to her senses, she was in an isolated area. She was raped and had no one to go to for help. Kuleshwori is very poor but she somehow managed to receive treatment from nearby bordering India and spent all her savings Rs 10,000 (US\$150). When she came back to her village, the villagers ran after her to forcibly make her eat human excreta. But this time she was lucky to flee. She spends many nights staying awake in fear of being killed. She is too scared to ask for justice because she has nowhere to go.



Jabarun Khatun of Sunsari is just 26 years old, but she has been through hell. After being accused on being a witch, popularly known as bokshi in Nepali, she was beaten nearly to death. When she collapsed out of pain, the locals took her to a public place where a man stood on her chest and poured a mixture of urine and stool on her mouth. In tears, she asked for mercy but there was no one to help her. Her husband too was in India and the family was in deep loan. So she had to agree what they ordered her to do.



Kanchi Maya Ghole of Makawanpur and Juhu K. Chaudhari of Kailali too had stories to narrate. The stories were the same, so was the pain and helplessness that they experienced. During the program some of the accused women were too choked to narrate anymore, some only spoke their dialect and many of the essence was lost when the stories were translated briefly, and others who could not even properly articulate the torture and



pain that they had underwent. They had problems (physical and emotional) to express their self in front of their supporters. How could anyone expect them to face the administration officials and demand justice? They needed help, they needed strong voice to which the administration would heed their ears.



From left: Representative from police, Human Rights activist, Ms Indu Pant, Minister Ojha, FEDO president and women accused of witchcraft

Discussion on the Issue

There was an open discussion on how to take this issue forward in the days to come and to identify the priority area. The floor expressed concern over extreme delays by the judiciary on delivering verdict on cases related to women issues. There was also concern on commitment of the government towards ending gender based violence after joint secretary at the home ministry left the program abruptly in the middle. The floor also questioned the police administration for not taking necessary actions against the perpetrators of such heinous acts. The floor suggested that pressure groups be formed at all relevant sections of the government to tackle the problem more effectively.

Shri Kanta Poudel of Supreme Court accepted the slow work at the court. He stressed on amending the laws and regulations to deliver timely verdict and make the judiciary more effective. A senior human rights activist Charan Prasai urged all to ensure human rights of the poor and the underprivileged from their quarters. Indu Panta, Gender and Inclusion Coordinator at CARE Nepal demanded response from the police spokesperson on what the administration has done to the police officials who suggest 'resolving the issue through talks at the community' instead of filing cases and taking actions against the perpetrators. To this, spokesperson of Nepal Police, Bigyan Sharma said that the cases are contextual and there must have been a reason behind such request. He expressed solidarity in raising awareness against such mal practices though distributing GBV IEC materials through police beats across the country. Sarwadev Ojha, minister for women, children and social welfare stressed on education and massive public awareness to end mal practice like accusing others of witchcraft. Noting that the country will observe 2010 as the year of VAW, the minister expressed the urgency to amend existing laws and regulations to make them more gender sensitive.

Follow-up

The public hearing received massive coverage, in almost every national dailies in Nepal. The television stations too covered the program extensively with interview of experts. The public hearing also provided an opportunity to express solidarity and form a pressure group to work in the issue in the days to come. Through media the program hoped to garner support and build opinion on one of the worst forms of VAW.

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A Case Study on accused witchcraft:

Dik Bahadur Bhujel of Karmaiya VDC, Sarlahi, killed Goma Devi Singdali, 70, and Ratna Maya Subedi, 60. He killed them with a large knife accusing them of causing stomach pain that lasted for three weeks. It sounds ridiculous but it is true.

LB Thapa, Charging Women of Witchcraft, The Rising Nepal

It is sad to see women been victims of discriminatory practices, how come men are never considered as 'witch' or are associated with any other form of cultural, social, and religious taboo? Why does it always have to be women? These questions reflect the position of women in the society and patriarchal ideology they are entrenched in. Nevertheless, it is more demoralizing to notice women belonging to well-off families in the village amplifying such practices against other women in the name of culture, tradition and belief. Until and unless we are able to change the deep rooted beliefs and values of people, it would not be possible to bring substantial changes in the society. As such inhuman practices are a result of illiteracy, poverty, ignorance and blind following of religion. Furthermore, it is also a weak implementation of existing laws and policies, and inappropriate mechanisms for women to claim their rights, which has further accelerated such practices. Although the Interim Constitution of 2006 has guaranteed women equal rights and made all discriminatory practices punishable by law; also Article No. 221 of Chapter 24 of Criminal Code, 2001 states "whosoever accuses any person as witch or banishes such person from the village or boycotts socially or commits any inhuman or insulting treatment, shall be punished with an imprisonment for a term up to one year or with a fine of up to ten thousand rupees or with both." In addition, In 2007/7/30, the code of conduct was formed with the initiation of civil society and victims of such practices. Despite which, the offender most of the times has not been punished and laws are only limited in the book. There are thousands of women who have been victims of 'witchcraft,' but they are weak and powerless to claim their rights, as there lacks strong government instruments to safeguard and provide justice to victims.