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## Madheshi Women's Struggles against Discrimination in Nepal

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### Abstract

Madheshi women experience various ways of discrimination in Nepali society. They suffer from race, caste, class and gender-based discrimination in society. In this context, this study explores the experiences and perceptions of Madheshi women about discrimination based on race, gender, class, caste/ethnicity, age and education through qualitative research. Eighteen participants were selected through purposive sampling. An in-depth interview was conducted with fourteen Madheshi women from various backgrounds and four Madheshi males were the key information participants. The Madheshi women from various backgrounds experienced discrimination and marginalization based on caste/ethnicity, class, race, gender, age and education. Madheshi women are not a homogeneous group, as they experience different kinds of exclusion in diverse settings. This study suggests enhancing the respect and recognition of Madheshi women in society. Furthermore, it suggests implementing and formulating relevant policies and legislation for Madheshi women, considering the prevalence of discrimination faced by Madheshi women in Nepal.

**Keywords:** Gender, intersectionality, inequalities, exclusion

### Introduction

The majority of Madheshi women primarily live in the Madhesh region of Nepal, which spans across the southern plains of the country. Madheshi is a citizen of Nepal, a non-hill origin, and a non-native speaker of the Nepali language living in the plain of Terai. The Terai area shares borders with India (Hachhethu, 2007; Lal, 2018; Nayak, 2011; Shah, 2006; Tiwari, 2013) with eight districts in Madhesh Province. The Madheshis claim that the upper caste of the Terai, Terai Dalits, Tharus



and Terai Muslims all fall under the Madheshi category. However, the Tharus refute this assertion, stating that they do not want to be identified as Madheshi. Similarly, certain Terai Muslims and Dalits reject their Madheshi identity although a majority feel comfortable with the Madheshi definition (Mathema, 2011, pp. 2-3).

Despite being a multicultural society, Nepal has historically been governed predominantly by rulers of hill origin. Madheshi women are backward compared to Pahadi women. The nationality of Madheshi is always questioned because of their proximity and close relation to the Indians. They have always been neglected and discriminated against by the state in various ways over the past years. Discrimination led exclusion of marginalized communities in the state which perpetuated cycles of poverty. They are less represented in Nepali politics, bureaucracy, planning process and administration sectors (Shah, 2006). This type of exclusion creates many forms of discrimination against Madheshi women. Discrimination impacts various dimensions including mental health.

Madheshi women face disadvantages across various social and regional activities, impacting their overall status. They often have minimal influence in household decisions concerning both domestic and organizational matters. They may have less autonomy in decision-making due to less education and access to power and resources. This situation is the same as politics where only a few Madheshi women secured a higher position (Tiwari, 2013). So, they are unable to contribute to policy-making for marginalized people.

Madheshi women encompass diverse identities determined by various factors such as caste/ethnicity, class, place of origin, marital status, ability and more (Lal, 2018). Among Madheshi, most Dalits are landless at Madhesh and living in *ailani jagga*. They are backward even in their community, and most of them do not have citizenship (Tiwari, 2014). Further, poverty remains high among Muslims who are living in rural areas and have below-average literacy rates (Shah, 2006). Poverty creates complex challenges as poor people cannot afford the quality of education and health facilities. They may not be assigned well-paying jobs, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Madheshi women faces greater challenges than the Pahadi women and men from their community. Academic writing on discrimination against Madheshi's women is rare. The discrimination faced by Madheshi women based on gender, caste/ethnicity, class and race is considered insignificant. However, gender, caste/ethnicity, class and race-based inequality are still practised in society which contributes to the further marginalizing of Madheshi women.

The women's experience of inequality differs from one to another based on race, sexual orientation, identity, class, history and political orientation

(Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). The intersecting factors create a wide range of discrimination. For instance, Madheshi *Jha* women may not face the discrimination faced by the Madheshi *Mushar* women belonging to the Dalit communities.

There is some literature on discrimination in Madheshi men, particularly highlighting the racial discrimination by the state mechanism. However, there is a dearth of empirical studies exploring various forms of discrimination faced by diverse Madheshi women in their daily life. Therefore, this study focuses on the Madheshi women's experiences of discrimination in public life where power dynamics are often controlled by men, Pahadi individuals and higher castes. This study will broaden the understanding of Madheshi women's marginalization, fostering respect and equitable treatment for them. Furthermore, it will also contribute to maintaining harmony in the multicultural society.

### **Marginalization of Madheshi Community**

The Muluki Ain (General Code) of 1854 was the first law of Nepal which categorized all Nepali into five major hierarchical ranks without considering cultural diversity. These ranks were *tagadhari*, *namasine matwali*, *masine matwali*, *touchable castes* and *untouchable castes*. The code was rigid and hierarchical (Höfer, 2004) introduced by Prime Minister Jung Bahadur and institutionalized by other Rana prime ministers.

In 1854, the *Muluki Ain* in Nepal ranked Parbatiya Brahmins higher than Madheshi Brahmins, since the people from the hills shared a sentiment of distinctiveness with the people from the plains. Madheshi were consequently perceived as outsiders (Whelpton, 2005, p.58). Their culture, dress and languages have not been recognized by the nation. They are often regarded as Indian due to the Madheshi community's shared culture and language with India, for instance, until 1958, Madheshi needed a visa issued by a Gurkha officer to enter the Kathmandu Valley from the plains (Chamlagai, 2020; Hachhethu, 2007; Sah, 2017, p.208). This statement is also supported by Gaige (1975). Terai residents and Indians were required to stop at the border town of Birgunj to get a passport before proceeding to Kathmandu, except during Shiva Ratri, when Indians were allowed to make pilgrimages to the Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu. Passports were then checked at Chispani Garhi on the way to Kathmandu. However, they can travel to India without restrictions which was the boundary of the British East India Company (Raut, 2018, p.26).

Programmes and policies have often been designed to favour hilly people. A large population of Madheshi finds themselves excluded from the policies and programmes of the state (Ghimire, 2013). They've faced marginalization and been

excluded not only from political, administrative and judicial bodies but also from development partners. Tamang (2009) argues that Madhesi women were absent from development programmes which was targeted towards Nepali women. She observed that in contrast to Janajati and Dalit women, Madhesi women have faced challenges in pushing their agendas through NGOs. The interest and activities of NGOs and civil society in the Madhesh are limited due to historical neglect by the state and foreign aid organizations. This is illustrated by the absence of a dedicated chapter on Madhesh in the draft report of the World Bank on social exclusion in Nepal, completed in June 2005. High-caste Bahun women are working as gatekeepers for non-speaking Nepali donors.

There is not an established system for documenting cross-border marriages. However, it has been frequently reported that a large number of Madheshi males marry Indian women each year and are brought to Nepal. It is observed that Madheshi men are not the only ones who tie with Indian women, but non-Madheshi, including some men from Kathmandu's elite families also marry Indian noblewomen, as well as non-Madheshi from the far-eastern districts, marry with ethnic Nepalis from Northeast India, have such relationships for a long time (Pandey, 2022). In the case of cross border marriage, women faced various challenges. They had to justify that they surrendered the Indian citizenship certificate, whereas there is no provision for a citizenship card in India. They do not have citizenship cards similar to Nepali citizenship until today. Instead, they have other types of certifications such as birth registration certificates, passport, aadhar cards, rasyon cards, PAN cards, driving licenses, voter cards and land registration for their national identification. Therefore, it was difficult for women to prove their surrender certificate to Nepal which was a provision in the 1962 constitution (Sah, 2017, p.219). In the absence of citizenship, they are facing problems in opening bank account, starting business, apply government jobs and so on.

The constitution of Nepal fails to reflect the language, religion and culture of marginalized groups such as Madheshi, Janjati, Dalit and others which make them invisible in their nation. The elites who hold power in Nepal since its inception in the eighteenth century, have deliberately ignored the ethnic/minority language issues for socio-political reasons (Giri, 2009). There was a domination of the Nepali language in the state to serve the interest of dominant groups. For instance, there was a provision in the 1962 constitution that one could read and write the Nepali language at the time of acquiring citizenship (Gaije, 1975; Sah, 2017). Learning the Nepali language for Madheshi's illiterate women was a big challenge because most of the Madheshi women were primarily homemakers and peasants. Plain people have controlled and prospered the Nepali plain land for thousands of years, and are well

recorded in ancient epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. In the recorded history since Budhha time too, plain people have controlled the land, and have been recorded as Vriji Republic, Tirhut, Videha, Kapilvastu, or Mithila civilization (Sah, 2017, p.219).

Madheshi has never experienced full integration into the Nepali socio-economic framework, national politics and human resource development agenda. They have faced exclusion from the state, resulting in inadequate participation in employment opportunities, educational facilities and development activities (Shah, 2006). They were not allowed to work in military service and only a limited number of Madheshi were able to hold major positions in political parties. Decision-making positions remain largely dominated by the higher caste *Bahun* and *Chhetri* communities. People of every community have the right to revitalize, utilize, cultivate and promote their language. Since 1990, the language issue has gained momentum and enthusiasts are highly motivated to develop and promote their mother tongues. However, some government employees pose obstacles to implementing plans and policies for preservation and development of minority languages (Tumbahang, 2009). Consequently, the curriculum that could enhance confidence and creativity at the primary level has yet to be developed in different languages.

### **Gender Inequality in Madhesh**

Women are excluded in society due to gender discrimination which is the most universal form of social exclusion (Sah, 2021). Boundaries between public and private are sharp where women's responsibility is associated with household activities and men's for public politics (Acharya & Bennett, 1983). Men are generally expected to work as breadwinners whereas women are in the caring and nursing roles. Household chores performed by women are not calculated in monetary value and are not included in the national income.

Education is a major component of human rights. But most of the schools have no gender-friendly environment. Gupta et al. (2021) found that education is the major tool for fighting against gender inequality. It also helps to eliminate patriarchy which is deeply rooted in Nepali society. However, even a well-educated person does not want to send their daughter outside of the city to get a higher education or to do a job. The women of the Madheshi community are considered as the *ijjat* of the family. The prestige of the family (*ijjat*) is attached to the daughter's behaviour in a patriarchal society. Women of the family are controlled in the family. They are suffering from socially ill practices such as witchcraft, polygamy, dowry, etc. The Nepali policy is inadequate and fails to address the issues of Madheshi women uniformly. Major decisions have not been made with the advice or input of women.

Traditionally, women's decisions were not accepted and acknowledged within the family. However, the trend is changing as some women are now making decisions on their own due to male migration to a foreign country. The practice of dowry exists in Nepali society and is considered as the prestige of the family. Unfortunately, in some cases, daughters-in-law commit suicide due to the mental torture inflicted by the family. Tragically, they are also killed by the family due to the insufficient dowry (Tiwari, 2019). They are physically and mentally tortured in the family. Parents of the daughter's family experience pain and psychological shock.

### **Untouchability and Caste-based Discrimination in Nepal**

Untouchability and discrimination based on caste persist in South Asian countries including Nepal. Dalit women face discrimination based on caste, class, gender and education. They suffer a higher degree of violence and exploitation by the upper-caste Hindu people in rural areas of India which is legitimized in the society (Kumar, 2021; Valarmathi et. al, 2017). Most Dalits are working as wage laborers and are exploited by their honor. Historically Dalit women were considered as *achhut* (untouchable) in Madhesh. They significantly lag in political, social and economic matters. Untouchability has been practised in Nepali society. However, it has been declared illegal and prohibits caste-based discrimination by the constitution of Nepal. They are also discriminated against among the same caste. Dalit women experienced discrimination compared to other women, not only people from the upper caste but also among their communities because of Dalit patriarchies (Arya, 2020). Dalit women face physical violence and abuse by the men within their families. Similarly, an earlier study conducted in India by Kumar (2009) stated that Dalit women in India are oppressed based on class, caste and gender. They are separated from general women based on their unique location, and occupation in caste-ridden society. Likewise, Madheshi Dalit women are exploited and excluded not only based on gender, caste and class but also because of their race in Nepal. Intersectionality believes that all women do not face the same level and kind of discrimination and oppression. They might suffer multiple forms of discrimination.

Dalit women experienced discrimination under the *Manusmriti* which was a social and religious code rooted in Brahminical Hinduism. According to this code, higher-caste men were permitted to engage in sexual intercourse with lower-caste women, with or without their consent, and could undergo purification by chanting a mantra (Höfer, 2004). Most of the Dalit girls are the victim of sexual violence in Nepal. In Madhesh, most of the higher caste individuals refuse to eat meals at the feast hosted by the Dalits. Incidents of untouchability are frequently reported in daily newspapers. For instance, a higher caste man was excluded from his community

because he attended the feast hosted by the Dalit (Mahato, 2023). Such kind of activity promotes untouchability in society.

Dalit women have been energetically participating in various social and political movements, fostering optimism for increased tolerance and reducing discrimination in society (Poudel, 2007). As a result of the movements, some changes have been seen in the average Nepali behaviour. Anti-caste discrimination programmes are inclusive and extended to non-Dalits as well. The major achievement is implementing a quota for Dalit women at the ward level. However, these women faced lots of challenges in the execution of their responsibilities (Kharel & Suji, 2019). The suggestions provided by the Dalit women members are often not considered seriously and most of them encounter challenges in playing an effective role in local-level planning and budgeting.

### **Methods and Procedures**

I have applied the qualitative approach in this study as it gives detailed information about individuals' experiences and their ideas. This study applied the intersectionality theory which believes people are marginalized by various sources of oppression including race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation and religion.

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants from Madhesh Province. The study incorporated participants to reflect diversity in terms of castes, education, political affiliation, districts and age. I conducted in-depth interviews with fourteen Madheshi women and four Madheshi males were selected for key informants' interviews.

I conducted in-depth interviews with the participants. I started by asking them for their demographic information. After that, I went with some general questions on their involvement in politics, journalism, and activism. The second round delved into their personal experience regarding discrimination. A checklist for interviews was developed and used to maintain focus on the objectives of the research.

The informed consent form was provided to participants to get permission to record the interview before the commencement of the interviews. The consent form was handed to the educated participants to read, the researcher read it loudly and translated it into their mother tongue for those who were uneducated such as Maithili, Hindi and Bhojpuri since the form was developed only in Nepali and English languages. Most participants gave the verbal consent to an audio recording. The researcher made notes during the recording, and pseudonyms were used for ethical considerations.

The researcher recorded and transcribed all interviews. The collected data were analyzed using NVivo software.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Gender Discrimination within the Family**

Gender discrimination is universal and people in developing countries experience gender discrimination in everyday life (Wadesango, 2011). Nepali women also experience more or less gender-based discrimination in their lives which varies based on age, education, economy and social condition of the community (Gupta et al., 2021). Further, they are subjugated based on their gender. It is an unfair treatment between the sexes. Many informants faced gender discrimination in their lives. Najbullah (pseudonym), the leader of Loktantrik Samajwadi Party Nepal, said:

More girls study in government schools whereas boys are sent to private schools. Parents tend to send their daughters to government schools whereas boys are at private schools because they are reluctant to invest in girls. They think that they will earn for others.

A study conducted by Barcellos et al. (2014) in India found that parents tend to invest less in girls due to the perception that investments have a lower return. Boys and girls are not treated equally especially in rural areas of India. Most of the women faced gender discrimination because of traditional social and cultural practices of the society which expanded male domination. Rural women experience more gender discrimination than urban women because patriarchal ideology is deeply rooted in rural areas (Gupta et al., 2021). A large number of people in rural areas are poor and uneducated and believe in the traditional value system.

Gupta et al. (2021) have a similar view that rich people suffer a lot more gender discrimination than poor and middle-class families. Another participant Naina who has two brothers and two sisters said that I experienced more gender discrimination than my friend who was from the Dalit community. She shared her experience:

I wanted to go to study India where my brother was sent but my father did not allow me. He insisted me on studying humanities and social science at the government college of Nepal. He went abroad, and then I appeared in the entrance examination for forestry and secured a good rank. I asked money for my mom to get admission but she told me if Papa knew then he would be angry. She was compelled to give me money because I did not eat for two days. We did not inform my father about my admission. After some time, he came to Nepal and got



informed. Then he became angry and did not speak with me for some weeks.

## **Gender Disparity in Politics**

Women's representation in politics is very low which is not satisfactory even though women's population is higher than that of men. Further, the study conducted by Kabeer (1999) stated that women's participation in politics is miserable even in developed countries. Women politicians are not appointed to major positions. Most decisions are made by the higher caste males in the political parties. Those women are given space in the political institutions who are close to the men's leaders (Manandhar, 2021). According to Lal (2013), due to the absence of internal democracy and structural participation, political parties in Nepal have been unable to gain true national status.

Deo (2009) noted that the Madheshi women's representation in higher positions is negligible even in major political parties. Regarding women's representation, most of the women leaders said that the women who have been actively involved in various movements were not given tickets to the election. Only a few women are provided the tickets who are closer to the top leaders, and family relations and able to influence financially. Furthermore, Muni, a leader, shared her experience:

I was ready to contest the election but the party denied the ticket to me. However, I participated in the movements. Women are not being trusted by the party. There are not enough women in the decision-making positions in any party. Each party uses women to show mass in the movements.

A political analyst Tulanarayan also holds similar views that it is difficult for women, Muslims, and Dalits to contest elections through first-past-the-post (FPTP). Not any party is trying to give them tickets. The party gives the tickets to women candidates where they will lose. One of the participants Sakina who was from the Muslim community was very frustrated with the politics and shared her story:

Top leaders said you should not go to the local election this time and come to the state assembly. I thought it was better to go to the province rather than the local's election. A large amount of money is also needed to fight the election. Then I did not give a nomination in the local-level election. My name was sent in the first number in the proportional representation (PR) list from the district. I had worked as hard as I could in the election as well. In the last hour, my name was put in second numbers due to some personal conflict and interest. However, I am

working for the party. The top male leaders of the party said you are too young and you will have an opportunity in the next election.

Lotter (2017) stated that women political leaders are always criticized for being excessively strong and dominant, or too traditional and submissive. Additionally, they are also accused of no decision of their own due to lack of education or being highly well educated but suspected of following the advice of their male relatives. Sometimes people even those who are well-educated attempt to disqualify women based on their dress such as the veil which is their identity marker and ignore their performance. These biases appear due to gender inequality in the political landscape.

### **Socio-cultural Bias**

Sanskrit Pathshala and University is funded by the government where most of the students are Hindu males. The state is imposing Hindu norms and culture on those who are non-Hindus. The state does not want to spend more on *Madrassas* and *Buddhist* monasteries. Hindu religious books are published by the Royal Nepal Academy (Lawoti, 2001). However, Nepal is a secular nation. So, everyone's culture and religion should be respected equally. One of the Muslim women's rights activists Mohana, a Muslim women right activist, shared her experience regarding the nature of the state.

The state's investment in the empowerment of Muslim women is less. A community in which the state does not invest then such kind of community could not be developed. Madrassas education exists in Nepal, but even within that, the segregation of males and females is another separation of the people in the education system. But going to the Madrasa is their obligation. They do not feel safe in mainstream schools. For example, some schools have a mandatory dress code, which causes them to drop out.

I talked to one of the Muslim former members of parliament. She shared her views as below:

I told Chief Minister Lal Babu Raut several times to form a Muslim Madrasa Board, but it was not formed. No one wants the Madrasa Board to be established. Everyone thinks that after the formation of the Muslim Madrasa Board, only the children of Muslims would study and they wanted to make Pakistan.

### **Discrimination in Formal Institutions**

Most of the participants reported they experienced bullying by their friends

due to their skin colour, tone and culture. It is common for Madheshi to face verbal and physical bullying. The students and teachers bully Madheshi students. Sometimes students in the school mimic Madheshi's accent and tone. Some teachers do not respond to the discrimination in the classroom. Bipana narrated her story as follows:

I studied at one of the recognized and most prestigious schools in Kathmandu. I was randomly questioned by my friends and teachers, "You must be visiting India during your vacation. Right?". I now think that it was not their fault. Society has enabled them to ask that type of question.

Bullying does not create a conducive environment for study. It promotes disrespect among the students. There are several consequences of bullying in students. It can have psychological and mental health. The research conducted by Eslea and Mukhtar (2000) explored that bullying among the same ethnicity was comparatively rare although several Hindu children said they experienced humiliation related to the caste system.

MP (Member of Parliament) of the Madhesh Province from FPTP states:

Lawmakers elected through the PR system often make a minimal commitment to the populace, so ordinary people do not expect much from them. Consequently, these lawmakers have relatively easier to win in the elections. However, ordinary people expect much from the MPs like us.

One of the former Dalit lawmakers shared her experience:

I served as a lawmaker elected through the PR system under the Dalit quota. However, I received significantly fewer funds for development programs than the lawmakers elected via the FPTP system. Moreover, they were unwilling to collaborate and work together. They even did not want to sit with us. They had their groups.

Another MP who was elected for the first time also shared her experience:

I have a problem in comprehending the rules, regulations, and procedures of the parliament because I am new in this field. Unfortunately, some highly educated women MPs from different parties who had extensive experience in politics, seem hesitant to share their knowledge with me. So, I seek assistance from a male colleague.

Yadav (2016) notes that during breaks at the CA (Constituent Assembly) divisions were easily observed. Women from Terai/Madhesh were seated on one

side, while women from the Pahadi community chose to sit separately (p. 70). The Nepal government has adopted policies and legal measures to prevent discrimination and promote equality. However, individuals still face discrimination in the workplace.

### **Discrimination against Women with Disabilities**

Persons with disabilities are marginalized, excluded, deprived and isolated groups of society and women who are disabled are the components of it (Timilsana, 2018). Madheshi women with disabilities are one of the most vulnerable and unrecognized groups in the society. A study conducted by Vidhya (2016) observed that women with disability face triple jeopardy in India. The disabled boy is generally acceptable in the family whereas the birth of a disabled daughter is viewed as a curse. They are considered a burden on the family. Their discrimination starts with the family. They are not allowed to take part in social gatherings or ceremonies (*Subh Karya*) at home. They could not get easily married.

Women are treated as second-class citizens in society. They are rejected by the family as well as the government institution. Disabled men are more privileged than disabled women. Their representation is disproportionate including education and other major sectors (Dhungana, 2006). They are not easily getting admission to the school. However, inclusive education is a process of responding to the various needs of students so that schools can promote inclusion (Poudel, 2007). They are deprived of education because the schools do not have disability-friendly physical infrastructure. One of the disabled staff of the disabled organization shared her experience:

Even parents of disabled children also argue about what they will do after studying. If the child is a girl, then they said no I do not want to send her to a school because who will take responsibility for gender-based violence? Teachers treat them differently in the school as well. Students were not enrolled in the school because they would hamper other students. Despite this, they faced racial discrimination as well.

Another female member of the disabled organization shared her experience. She said:

There is only one Madheshi woman and man on the board members of the National Federation of Disabled Nepal (NFDN) out of 41 members. A federation is also dominated by the Pahadi. In the last election of NFDN one Madheshi man and a woman gave the candidacy but both of them lost in the election.

I got Meera's (pseudo name) number from NFDN and called her. She asked me to come to her at noon. The next day I went to meet her. After informal communication, she shared her experience:

I have no siblings. I am the only child in my family. My father passed away when I was two years old. My relatives once suggested my mother that she could not do anything and should kill her. My mother has always been my unwavering support. With her encouragement, I have been able to study up to a bachelor's degree in Janakpur.

After her interview, she asked me, "Would you like to meet another girl with disabilities?" I replied yes, and she said, "Okay, come tomorrow. I will introduce and her home is very close to me." The next day we went to her house together. She requested me not to disclose her name and began to share her story.

I have two brothers and one sister. My siblings are about to finish their master's, bachelor and SEE respectively. I have never been to school. My mom used to tell me I would not carry you to school because of your weight. I could not walk because I had a problem with my legs.

### **Madheshi Dalit Women's Oppression**

Dalits are oppressed and marginalized in Nepal. Their basic human rights are denied. They suffer humiliation, harassment and structural domination including psychological as well as physiological violence. However, the experience of social exclusion is varied among Dalits, but Madheshi Dalits are more marginalized than the Hill Dalits (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). Madheshi Dalits are one of the major marginalized groups and are socially and economically excluded in Madhesh. Dalit women are not allowed to enter the temple along with the upper caste due to caste-based discrimination and untouchability (Tiwari, 2014). However, caste-based discrimination has been prohibited and considered illegal in Nepal. It has been practised in the country (Bhattachan, 2001). This resulted in poor mental health, economic status and unemployment within their community. The working environment is not conducive and they feel discrimination where they work. One of the well-known journalists Roshan Janakpuri said:

Untouchability has been reduced in public places somehow but has continued in private places. Such as Dalit women are not allowed to enter the kitchen and puja kotha of higher caste. However, higher castes use the materials in puja made by the Dalit. Such as Daura, Dala, Koniya, etc.

## **Caste-based Discrimination at Work**

Madheshi Dalit women suffer from caste-based discrimination in the workplace, public places, schools and more from the dominant caste. They faced discrimination within their caste because of their gender. Dalit women's rights activists said:

Now we are interviewing in this hotel freely and if the hotel's owner is from a lower caste, people might avoid having food. However, most of the Dalit women are working as dishwashing staff to sustain their livelihood in this hotel due to their poor economic condition. They are illiterate so they are working in low-paid jobs. Some of them are very good at cooking. Despite being skilled in cooking, they are not assigned as cooks.

Sunaina has a series of discriminatory experiences even after being involved in politics. She was elected as a ward member in 2074 B.S. Now she has been involved in various Dalit organizations including central-level politics. She shared her experience:

I was elected as a ward member and a member of the Municipal Executive Committee. There was a man who was from a higher caste and was also an elected representative in the municipality. He was older and more educated than me. He did not have tea with me for about six months in the office. Once, there was a sanitation campaign and lots of people were having tea after the programme. A tea vendor came and served tea to everyone. But his wife grabbed the glass of the tea and said that her husband would not drink this tea because a Dalit ward member (I) was sitting very close to him. After that, the man also refused to have tea. Then, the mayor told them, they could not do such behaviour because we are leaders working as a change agent in society. Then, the man agreed to have the tea because it was a public place. But he said he would refuse to have tea or food in his house with anyone belonging to the Dalit Community.

Madheshi women are discriminated against based on their caste, race, age and education in the workplace. Yadav (2016) stated that women are excluded based on their education, class, caste, region, political affiliation and age in a patriarchal structure. Similarly, Walby (1990) observed that patriarchy diminishes the agency of women, placing it in an inferior position.

Gender discrimination persists in Nepali society particularly in Madhesh Province. Most of the women faced gender discrimination because of traditional social and cultural practices of the society. The women who are very close to the party get tickets only in subordinate positions. Only a minimal number of women

get tickets for the major positions. A study conducted by Begum (2015) holds the similar view that Indian politics remains a male bastion. Only a minimal number of women have prominent positions of power, primarily due to their close relations with male leaders. It seems that women are portrayed as less competent. Sometimes people even those who are well-educated attempt to disqualify women based on several unnecessary factors. People with disabilities are often ignored by the family as well as the society. Disabled women face greater discrimination in life compared to disabled men because women's role is not recognized by the society as a breadwinner. Women with disability get less support in comparison with the other family members and their presence in any ceremony is considered as bad fortune and brings bad luck in the family. This is very similar to Dhungana's (2006) statement that a person with disability lacks their family support in terms of food, education, rehabilitation, love and more than other members of the family.

### **Conclusion**

This study found that Madheshi women faced multiple discriminations based on gender, caste, race, education and age discrimination in Nepali society. Madheshi women are not homogeneous groups. They are not treated equally in the country. There are lots of provisions to eliminate all forms of discrimination. The constitution of Nepal guarantees equal rights and eliminates all forms of discrimination based on class, gender, religion, language, ethnicity and or any other ground. However, marginalized communities including Madheshi women are excluded from male-dominated politics. Dalit Madheshi women faced untouchability and caste penalty in society. Untouchability has been diminished to some extent in public domains but still exists in private places. Madheshi women face discrimination and harassment in formal and informal institutions. They are discriminated against because of gendered roles and patriarchies of society. Women with disabilities are more vulnerable or burdensome because of gender stereotypes. They have the right to live free from humiliation and stress and get justice in society. Discrimination positions women socially, politically and economically in low status. They should also raise their voices and unite against discrimination reactively and proactively. Various kinds of discrimination are a major issue of justice in Nepal for Madheshi women. There needs to be more research on how discrimination affects Madheshi women and why discrimination still exists in Nepal. Future studies focusing on Madheshi women need to be conducted and should include the voices of more Madheshi women from ordinary backgrounds.

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