

## Status of Dalit Women in Eastern Terai: A Post-Madhesh Movement and Federal Democracy Perspective

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### Abstract

*This article examines the social condition of Madheshi Dalit women in eastern Terai following the Madhesh uprising of 2007, 2008, and 2015, as well as the establishment of Nepal's federal democracy in 2006. This research examines how caste-based structures entrenched in Hindu traditions affect the lives of Madheshi Dalit women. The study concludes that the introduction of federal democracy and the Madheshi movement in Nepal had no substantial impact on the lives of Dalit women. Poverty, unemployment, violence, and discrimination based on gender and caste continued. According to the findings, the underdevelopment and poverty of Madheshi Dalit women are caused mainly by caste- and gender-based discrimination, social and economic isolation, and inequality. Nonetheless, the growing political participation of Dalit women activists has had a significant impact. Political rights are increasingly being recognised, and Dalit women are becoming more visible in local government agencies. As they battle for women's representation and speak out against various forms of violence and social inequity, both within and outside of their communities, Dalit women's voices are being heard more and more.*

**Keywords** Caste, Dalit, Madhesi, Movement, Pahadi, Terai.

### Introduction

In the history of sociology, social movements and social change have been considered distinct fields of study. Nonetheless, there is a close connection between the two (Das,

1981). A social movement is an organised movement by a group of people working together toward shared goals to bring about social change (Tarrow, 1994). A movement is considered successful when its goals are met. The main goal of social movements is to change the existing social structure. Social movements are essential for social progress. Impersonal circumstances can also affect social change. This does not mean that society always welcomes change; it may also resist it. As a byproduct of the social structure, social movements develop in response to particular social conditions (Mukhrji, 1977).

The Nepali people have participated in democratic movements at various times (1950, 1990, and 2007), resulting in the establishment of federal democracy in Nepal. The Federal Democratic Movement of Nepal has promoted social inclusion, equal rights, fair political representation, and respect for each person's individuality.

In the history of social movements and change, the Madheshi movement is particularly significant. It aimed to ensure federalism, identity, recognition, equitable representation, social inclusion, and development in the Madheshi community. Despite the promises of the Madheshi movement and the restructuring of Nepal as a federal democratic state, the socio-political status of Madheshi Dalit women in the Terai remains essentially unchanged. The issues faced by Dalit women are often overlooked. They continue to experience gender- and caste-based discrimination and violence. Poverty, unemployment, poor educational outcomes, lack of quality health facilities, limited economic opportunities, exclusion, deprivation of citizenship, and limited political representation are major social issues for Dalit women in Madhesh. Although some progress has been made in literacy and political awareness in local representation, these improvements have not translated into substantive socio-economic development. Terai Dalit women, such as Dom, Chamar, Mestar, and Musahar, suffer from inter- and intra-caste discrimination and untouchability. Multiple layers of gender and caste discrimination, combined with poverty, have further victimised the Dalit women.

The study aims to explore the relationship between constitutional provisions and the real-life realities of Dalit women. It also examines the role of social movements in improving

the condition of Dalit women and the structural socio-economic changes that affect them. In this regard, the researcher has raised the following research questions. How have the Madhesh Movement and federal restructuring improved the socio-economic conditions of Madheshi Dalit women? What forms of caste discrimination continue in the post-federal democratic era? How politically represented and socially empowered are Madheshi Dalit women today?

While several studies on the topic of identity and representation, including those on Madhesh, have been conducted (Mahato, 2010; Giri, 2008), very few have focused specifically on Madheshi Dalit women. There are several studies on caste-based discrimination in the Terai region, but scientific studies on caste-based gender discrimination remain limited. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge the research gap by examining the democratic movement and transformation of Madheshi Dalit women's lives in the Eastern Terai is the primary goal of this study. This paper aims to assess the socio-economic conditions and caste-gender-based discrimination faced by Madheshi Dalit women following the Madhesh Movement.

## **Methods**

This research was conducted in June 2024 in Inarwa Municipality, Ward No. 9 of Sunsari District. Using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, the researcher selected 20 respondents from 67 households representing Dalit women from various caste groups: Dom, Khatwe, Paswan, Mushahar, and Chamar. This method was chosen because some of the Dalit women in the study region were unable to understand the socio-political situation of Dalits, had difficulty understanding the researcher's questions in Nepali, and were unfamiliar with the issues being discussed.

The researcher has selected Dalit women activists, local leaders, and homemakers who could understand the Nepali language as a purposive sample unit. The researcher has applied a mixed-method approach to explore the information. A quantitative research design was used to collect numerical data from the field through survey methods. The

data collected through the survey were presented and analysed using tables. Meanwhile, qualitative information was collected to capture the broader context, including the history of the Madhesh movements, the effects of untouchability and caste prejudice on the social transformation of Dalit women, and case studies and narratives of social discrimination. These data were gathered through interviews and case studies and analysed using content and thematic analysis.

### **Theoretical Application**

The researcher used the capability method in this study. Drèze and Sen (1999) describe capacity as a broad notion that encompasses concerns about what is commonly referred to as the 'standard of living,' but extends beyond that. Living standards are directly related to the quality of an individual's life. At the same time, a person may value the potential to influence others and benefit society, in addition to pursuing personal well-being (Sen, 1999, p. 12). Capability refers to having the necessary ability or quality to do something. In this sense, being capable means being able to do something and to achieve what needs to be done. So, capability refers to an individual's ability to perform actions. However, it has also been conceptualised differently in various studies and reports by different scholars, institutions, and organisations.

Sen (1999) stated that the denial of fundamental talents is a defining characteristic of poverty. Many factors can deprive people of these talents, including ignorance, repressive government policies, a lack of funds, poor health, inadequate education, and unplanned accidents, among others. This technique has a broad reach, encompassing all variables that impact people's skills and abilities. Capability theory encompasses social and political processes, gender, inequality, all types of discrimination, social exclusion, disability, climate, and individual and psychological factors that may impact human capabilities, the primary measure of human well-being (Sen, 1999). The features, such as poverty, deprivation, and exclusion, are also prevalent in Madhesh, which motivated the Madheshi people to unify in the Madheshi movement.

Apart from the Capability approach, the researcher also applied the “Relative Deprivation Theory” (1970) of Ted Robert Gurr. He has mentioned that the key to social movement is relative deprivation, where people are deprived of the opportunities they expected and have achieved. People become angry and frustrated when the government cannot fulfil their expectations. Gurr explains that the causal factors of social movement are not only poverty, unemployment, and oppression, but also the feelings of discrimination, unfairness, and disappointment, which lead to revolt in a society seeking social change (Gurr, 1970). With the aid of these theoretical perspectives, the researcher analysed both the Madhesh movement and the condition of Dalit women in the study area.

### **Federal Democratic Restructuring and Dalit Inclusion**

Nepal made a significant effort to transition to a federal system through the 2015 Constitution. This was a significant achievement, as it involved restructuring the state to promote inclusivity, equity, and decentralisation (Adhikari, 2021). Federalism promised to address structural injustices by empowering marginalised groups, including Dalits and women, through proportional representation and local autonomy (International IDEA, 2020). Article 18 of the 2015 Constitution of Nepal guarantees the right to equality. In keeping with the pledge, Article 40 guarantees Dalits’ political participation, education, land rights, and economic opportunities, while Article 24 makes caste discrimination and untouchability illegal (Government of Nepal, 2015).

Likewise, the constitution also mandates the inclusion of Dalit women at the ward level, requiring that each of Nepal’s 753 local governments include at least one Dalit woman member in every ward committee. This provision, implemented through the Local Level Election Act, 2017 (UN Women, 2022), was a key step to ensure the marginalised, Dalit, and women’s representation in politics. Similarly, to monitor implementation and advocate for the rights of Dalits and women, institutions such as the National Dalit Commission and National Commission for Women were established (IFES, 2021). Although federalism has created new political spaces for women and Dalits through the constitutional provisions, the practice of improving the everyday lives of Dalit women remains limited and uneven (Khadka, 2023).

## Madheshi Movement

Throughout its history, Nepal has witnessed several social movements. The Madheshi movement is considered an effort by the Madheshi to achieve social inclusion, fair political representation, and recognition of their identity in the Nepalese constitution and society at large. Additionally, the participation of Madheshi Dalits was greatly valued; about 25% of the martyrs of the Madheshi revolution were Dalit. Many young Dalits, including schoolboys, lost their lives during the Saptari and Siraha movements (NEMAF, 2019). The primary concerns facing the Terai/Madhesh region were language, identity, autonomy, inclusiveness, and representation (Upreti, 2012).

## Dalit Women

The Hebrew word “dal,” meaning “broken” or “crushed,” is the origin of the English term “Dalit.” According to Massey (2009), it means “downtrodden,” “oppressed,” or “exploited” in Sanskrit. The 1910 BS Muluki Ain, based on the Hindu Varna system, classified “Dalits” as a social group excluded from the political, social, educational, and religious mainstream of the state. They were subjected to untouchability, considered impure, and even required to undergo purification rituals for water use (NDC, 2017). In the context of “Dalit,” we are referring to “Sudra,” “untouchable,” “Kujat,” “Pauni,” and “Atisudra.” Disparaging language was used to control them in society (Aahuti, 2010).

Dalits make up 13.4% of Nepal’s total population, of which Terai Dalits account for 5.9% (NSO, 2023). Nepal’s Dalits are classified into two categories: Madheshi Dalits and Pahadi Dalits, based on their geographical location. Pahadi Dalits, such as Gandarva, Pariyar, Badi, Bishwakarma, Mijar, Pode, and Chyame, generally reside in the hills and highlands, speaking Nepali as their mother tongue. People who speak their native tongue and have lived in Terai or Madhesh are known as Madheshi Dalits. Terai/Madheshi Dalits include the following: (NDC, 2017). Chidimar, Dom, Tatma, Dusad, Dhobi, Pasi, Bantar, Mushahar, Mester, Sarbhang, Natuwa, Dhandi, Dharkir, Kalar, Kakaihiya, Kori, Khatik, Khatwe, and Kori.

Madheshi Dalits are Hindus who reside in the Madhesh region. They are at the bottom of the caste system, face social exclusion, cultural discrimination, and are economically marginalised and impoverished. They work in traditional, stereotyped, or subsistence-based occupations, including mud carving, pig rearing, playing musical instruments, hunting rats, manufacturing musical instruments out of leather, and producing bamboo products. Along with carrying the Dola during marriage rituals, they also do sanitary tasks, including sweeping public areas and cleaning toilets. Marginalised communities in Nepal, Madheshi Dalit women have been subjected to many types of social prejudice based on their geographical identification, caste, gender, and class. In the community, Madheshi Dalit women have an extremely low social standing. Madheshi Dalit women have a literacy rate of 44.1%, which is significantly lower than the national average of 69.6% (NSO, 2023).

### **Occupation**

Economic independence and occupational opportunities are central to human development. However, most Terai Dalit women live below the poverty line. According to national data, 40.7% of Terai Dalit women live in low-quality houses, compared to 11.3% of Nepal's overall population. This shows that the living conditions of Terai Dalit women are worse than the national average. Similarly, their unemployment rate is 51%, compared to 42.9% for Nepali women overall. These figures highlight the poor economic status of Terai Dalit women, which is linked to economic deprivation, lack of opportunities, and illiteracy (NSO, 2023).

Opportunities for employment and economic independence are essential to the general advancement of human existence. Meanwhile, the Dalit women of the study region are living with poverty, unemployment, and economic hardship due to illiteracy, lack of skilful training, and caste-based social prejudice. The low salaries of Dalit women have prevented them from meeting their necessities, despite their long hours of work for pay. Eight respondents, or 40% of the 20 respondents in the research region, owned small-scale land. According to field data, 40 percent of the study region consists of small-scale land

that cannot support the families of the 20 respondents. To meet their basic requirements, they work as wage labourers in the agricultural fields.

Similarly, 2 or 10% of Dalit women in the research region work as supervisors in Dalit NGOs and as assistants in private boarding schools. In a similar vein, 1% or 5% of research participants had been running small businesses in the Dalit community. Approximately 4 or 20%, of the respondents work for pay in various factories across the Biratnagar and Duhabi industrial sectors. The remaining Dalit women without land in their names reside in modest thatched homes on public property and engage in traditional occupations, including pig husbandry, agricultural labour, sanitation, and the production and sale of bamboo baskets.

## **Education**

Education is essential to societal transformation. It transforms civilisation from darkness to light, and is considered both the foundation of capability and a fundamental component of human civilisation. In comparison to the national average, Dalit women in the study area have a lower literacy rate.

As of 2023, only 44.1 percent of Madheshi Dalit women are literate, according to the National Statistics Office. Ten of the twenty respondents in the study region, or fifty percent, are literate. This is 5.9 percent higher than the national average for Terai Dalit women's literacy rate, which is forty-one percent. 2, or 10 percent, of the Dalit women in the research region had held positions as supervisors in non-governmental organisations and as assistants in nearby schools.

Although literacy rates have improved, Dalit girls often fail to meet the minimum educational requirements for scholarships offered by government and non-government organisations. Dalit women historically had an extremely low literacy rate. The 2011 report from the Central Bureau of Statistics states that the Madheshi Dalit's literacy rate was 34 percent, which is 17 percentage points lower than the 51.9 percent literacy rate reported by the National Statistical Office in 2023.



The Dalit women in the study area were engaged in menial work, such as cattle grazing and household chores, for their landlord. Currently, there has been a shift in school enrollment, reflecting a gradual yet significant change in attitudes toward education within the community. Sen's Capability Approach posits that deprivation encompasses both a lack of income and a lack of substantive freedoms, such as the opportunity to vote, work, and receive an education (Sen, 1999). Dalit women of the study area would have greater potential if the state and non-state actors offered skill-based, career-oriented education (such as instruction in mechanics or nursing support). By doing this, people would be able to live lives they have reason to value, become self-sufficient, and lessen discrimination and social isolation.

### **Health and Sanitation**

Health is often understood simply as the absence of physical illness. However, the World Health Organisation (WHO) defines it more broadly as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Maternal health, in particular, is a crucial component of overall well-being.

In Nepal, especially among the Madheshi Dalit community, health awareness is weaker compared to other groups. According to the 2021 National Statistics Office, the life expectancy of Dalit women is 70.6 years, lower than the national average. The fertility rate of Terai Dalit women is 3.3; however, survey data from the study area indicate an even higher rate of 3.5. This is mainly due to inadequate maternal health education and conservative attitudes that prioritise sons. Among the 20 respondents, 18 (90%) reported knowing about family planning. However, most did not practice it due to financial constraints. While awareness of menstrual health exists, women primarily rely on cloth instead of medicated sanitary pads because of low income.

During fieldwork, the researcher observed that although Dalit women were aware of the legal age of marriage and maternal health concerns, child marriage remained widespread. Around 70% of Dalit households in the study area married off daughters before the age

of 20. This practice persists due to illiteracy, lack of awareness, cultural traditions, and weak enforcement of marriage laws. The child marriage rate in these households is 16.3% higher than the national average, posing serious risks to maternal health.

According to the 2023 National Statistics Office, 17.6% of Madheshi Dalits use piped water, 77% rely on tube wells, 1.9% use rainwater, 0.9% use natural streams, and 0.1% depend on ponds. In the study area, all respondents reported drinking untreated well water from a tube well. Dalits in this region, therefore, have less access to safe drinking water than the national average.

The same report indicates that 24.6% of Terai Dalits do not have access to a toilet. In the study area, traditional pit latrines were present in every household, but children were not accustomed to using them. Poor sanitation and contaminated drinking water have led to illnesses such as jaundice and urinary tract infections among Dalit women.

### **Dalit Women in Politics**

Dalit women in the study area have actively participated in the Madheshi movement and are affiliated with several political parties. Their political engagement has been essential for the growth and social transformation of the Dalit community. Some Dalit women leaders have been elected to provincial party committees and their sister organisations, including labour unions and Dalit Sangha. At the local level, one Dalit woman is elected from the Dalit quota as a ward woman's representative in the municipal council. Among the 20 respondents, eight (40%) were active members of political parties and labour unions. Respondents noted that without the mandatory constitutional provision requiring the election of at least one Dalit woman per ward, such representation would have been nearly impossible. These constitutional provisions have encouraged Dalit women to enter politics by guaranteeing their presence at all levels of government. This has provided opportunities not only for social recognition but also for economic advancement and leadership experience.

**Table 1***Caste, Gender, and Ethnicity-Wise Representation in Inaruwa Municipality*

Group	Number
Pahadi Khash Male	9
Pahadi Khash Female	7
Pahadi Dalit Female	1
Madheshi Janajati Female	4
Madheshi Dalit Female	9
Madheshi Janajati	15
Pahadi Janajati	3
Musalman	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>

Source: Inaruwa Municipality, Sunsari, 2025.

The table above shows the growing representation of Dalit women in eastern Terai following the Madheshi movement and the establishment of federal democracy. The presence of nine women from the Madheshi Dalit community highlights the impact of constitutional provisions aimed at uplifting marginalised groups in Nepal. While their increased representation is a positive step, intersectional gaps in caste, gender, and regional inclusion remain significant challenges to achieving equitable federal governance in the Terai.

### **Dalit Women and Social Discrimination**

Social discrimination occurs whenever someone is mistreated because of their gender, colour, caste, class, community, culture, religion, or other factors. Long-standing caste-based practices of discrimination and untouchability hamper society's progress and remain widespread in Hindu societies, including those in India and Nepal. Dalit women in the research region have been subjected to various sorts of discrimination in a variety of areas, including social engagement, pay, decision-making, and ownership.

The 2015 Nepalese Constitution declares that the government is not allowed to treat its inhabitants differently based on their origin, language, location, ideology, caste, tribe, sex, economic status, religion, ethnicity, or any other comparable criteria. However, the Madheshi Dalit women have been unable to fully exercise their constitutional rights due to the Hindu social structure of the studied region. Based on studies, Dalit women in the Terai region have been subjected to caste-based and gender-based discrimination in public spaces, including public buses, tea shops, temples, workplaces, feasts and celebrations.

*Dukhiya Mestar of Inaruwa-9 recalled being invited to help plant rice by locals from a higher caste. The landowner summoned her into the house's yard for breakfast. She was forced to sit by herself outside, while her high-caste companions, who were also labourers like her, were allowed inside and given meals in appropriate dishes. As though touching their plates might contaminate them, the landowner served her lunch on a leaf plate. She conveys her profound sadness and dismay at this discriminatory action. She felt deeply insulted and wounded. She argues that she would not have been treated this way if Pahadi landowners had employed her. Even if she were still supposed to wash the dishes herself, they would have served the food on steel plates. Nevertheless, there is at least some dignity. She reflects on the significant degree of caste-based taboos and social inequality that still exist in both the Madheshi and Pahadi populations. "Discrimination exists in both," she claims, "but the treatment and behaviour vary".*

Discrimination levels among the study's Dalit women also revealed that women within the Dalit community do not share the same social standing. The Dusadh (Paswan), Tatma, Khatwe, and Dhobi are regarded as superior to the Chamar, Batar, Musahar, Halkhor, and Dom.

In the study region, thirty percent of the interviewees, or six Dalit women from Dom, Chamar, and Mestar, reported encountering fierce social prejudice. In tea shops, temples, feasts, festivals, and cultural events, Dalit women face severe discrimination. It was discovered that tea merchants forbid them from sitting with non-Dalits and use separate plastic cups and plates for them. The Madheshi Dalit caste, known as Khatwe (Sharma),

which comprises 55% of the population in the study regions, has a higher level of political access, a 60% literacy rate, and a relatively stronger economy. Compared to other Dalit women in society, they have experienced less social prejudice.

### **Dalit Women and Violence**

The rise of violence as a societal issue is impeding a society's ability to achieve peace, wealth, and civilisation. Violence may take many different forms and intensities depending on the situation, time, culture, religion, and environment. Dalit women in Nepal's Terai region have been subjected to many types of violence, including psychological, physical, and sociocultural abuse. Discriminatory social, cultural, political, religious, and economic customs and beliefs have contributed to a higher incidence of social violence against both men and women. In the research area, violence can be categorised into two types: domestic and public.

Domestic violence arises from factors such as alcoholism, economic crises, the dowry system, inter-caste marriage, extramarital affairs, the emphasis on male children, and other public forms of violence. Public violence, on the other hand, stems from caste-based hierarchies, untouchability, societal norms, values, customs, culture, and the failure of laws to prevent violence against people. For example, due to the caste system and untouchability, Dalit women in the study region are not permitted to enter public spaces such as temples, wells, or even tea shops. Compared to other Dalit castes, women from lower castes like Dom, Chamar, and Mestar are impacted, especially in accessing public tube wells, ponds, and temples.

**Table 2***Types of violence experienced by Dalits in the study area*

S. N.	Type of Violence	Number	Percentage
1	Socio-cultural	12	60
2	Psychological	5	25
3	Physical	3	15
	Total	20	100

Field survey: 2025

According to the aforementioned data, sociocultural violence affects 60% of Dalit women in the research region. Untouchability and caste-based prejudice have mostly affected them at places of worship, temples, festivals, private residences, tube wells and ponds, and tea shops. Twenty-five percent of Dalit women have experienced psychological violence, like derogatory slurs and caste-based insults, name-calling or labelling them as “untouchable,” “dirty,” or “low-born”, mocking dialects, food habits, or culture, public shaming or belittling in front of others. Similarly, 15 percent of Dalit women in the research region have experienced physical violence, like brutal beatings for minor or fabricated reasons (e.g., using a typical well, entering a temple), mob attacks on individuals or families, flogging or public thrashing to “teach a lesson”, and rape or sexual assault. These acts often target Dalit women and girls as a tool of control and humiliation. Survivors frequently faced injustice due to caste and gender bias within the police and judiciary in the field.

### **Social awareness**

Social awareness, progress, and change are driven mainly by social movements. Following the Dalit and Madheshi movements in Terai Madhesh, it has been observed that the level of consciousness among Madheshi Dalit women has increased. During the interview procedure, 18 out of the 20 respondents, or 90%, said that the Hindu caste system in

Madheshi culture is the root cause of social inequality and discrimination against Dalit women. Seventy percent of the respondents, or fourteen of them, are aware of social inclusion and human rights, including Dalit rights. All the Dalit mothers who responded value education and send their kids to school. Eighty percent of the Dalit, or sixteen respondents, are also members of different political parties and understand democracy and the multiparty system.

Most respondents are also aware of the causes of social discrimination, injustice, and violence, as well as how upper caste members and leaders exploit them to further their own agendas. Similarly, 14 respondents, or 70% of Dalit women, understand the value of education for females as well as the detrimental consequences of child marriage, the system of dowries, and the system of witchcraft. However, they decide not to follow these practices out of fear of orthodox custom. According to the Dalit women during the field visit, they have participated in numerous Dalit welfare initiatives run by governmental and non-governmental organisations, including those that address Dalit rights, education (especially girls' education), political engagement, constitutional provisions, social inclusion, and exclusion.

### **Social Involvement**

The involvement of Dalit women in collective activity is critical for social progress. Through exposure to a variety of concepts and information, it helps to alter individual mindsets. The study discovered that there were several forms of Dalit women's involvement in the social organisations within the research region. Out of the 20 respondents, five, or 25%, have been involved in sister organisations of political parties and social organisations that work to uplift Dalit women. These include the Dalit Welfare Organisation, Dalit Sangh, women's groups, local NGOs, and schools.

### **Religious Belief and Social Taboos**

The majority of Madheshi Dalits are Hindus. They observe the holidays and traditions followed by higher caste Hindus. However, Dalit women are denied the same cultural

privileges enjoyed by other upper castes, such as access to and worship in temples, due to long-standing caste-based prejudice and untouchability. Since they are regarded as untouchable and not permitted to pray in temples, some Dalit women have been drawn to Christianity. However, Lalmati Sada claims that many continue practising Hinduism, the traditional faith, due to pressure from the fervent Hindu community.

Since they are not allowed to enter the main temples where Hindus of higher castes worship, the Dalit community has constructed a temple dedicated to their own deities (Ista), the Gods of Dina and Bhadri, within their own community, where they worship and celebrate festivals. The researcher discovered during fieldwork that Dalit women are frequently discouraged or prohibited from utilising the same barber, washerman, or priest, sharing water sources (such as wells, tanks, or even teacups), and sitting with upper castes at village meetings. Intercaste marriages frequently result in societal boycotts and acts of violence. A Dalit must go through a ceremonial purifying process if they come into contact with someone or something from the ruling caste. Dalits may be compelled to bathe, pay penalties, or publicly apologize for “polluting” areas in communities. The societal prejudice against Madeshi Dalit women is demonstrated in the case study that follows.

## **Discussion**

Nepal has experienced numerous social movements throughout its history, with the Madheshi movement being one of the most significant. This movement aimed to create a more inclusive and equitable society in Nepal. During the Madheshi movement, leaders expressed concerns about discrimination based on caste, colour, and region, as well as the social exclusion faced by the Madheshi community. They garnered support from women, Dalits, and other marginalised groups, aspiring to bring about meaningful changes in the lives of Madheshi Dalits, women, and marginalised individuals in the Terai region. Despite the country’s transition to federal democracy and a new constitution, the socio-economic circumstances of the Terai’s Dalit and marginalised communities have not significantly improved. Many continue to face poverty, unemployment, and social discrimination. This



study on Dalit women distinguishes itself from previous research by examining various aspects, including caste- and gender-based discrimination, literacy, and occupation.

In the study region, Terai Dalit women's adult literacy rate is 50%, which is 5.9 percent higher than the national average (44.1%) (National Statistics Office, 2023). This is a result of the local government's investment in Dalit women, as well as the involvement of the local communities and NGOs working in the field of education. In the research region, societal violence is acknowledged as a common social problem. In the research region, Dalits have experienced sociocultural, psychological, and physical assault. Dalits continue to live without full protection of their human rights, as evidenced by the fact that 15% involving physical assault, 25% involving psychological damage, and 60% involving sociocultural violence.

In a similar vein, 25% of Dalit participants in the research are active in social groups, including trade unions and the Dalit Sangh. Dalit women, however, are only nominally involved in politics. The participation of Madheshi Dalit women in the national political arena is a topic worth discussing. Each ward council elects one Dalit woman as a ward member according to the constitutional provision allowing for Dalit women's election. This has helped empower Dalit women in society. Likewise, the study also indicates that the Dalit women of the study area are gradually changing their occupation, leaving the traditional work due to the educational improvements of their children and governmental and non-governmental programs of Dalit-based organisations and local bodies. The life expectancy rate of Terai Dalit women reached 70.6 years, which is 9 month shorter than the Pahadi Dalit (71.5). It is the optimistic part of the health sector.

In the field of social discrimination and inequality, such as caste and gender based discrimination and untouchability, are prevalent in various workplaces, including the public sphere, public transport, temples, public water taps, and festivals. Dalit women are still facing social discrimination and violence. While the Dalit activist, Dalit women ward member, and Dalit leader have not faced such types of violence, indirectly, they are suffering from caste-based discrimination in private houses. Dalit women are publicly

denouncing caste-based violence, untouchability practices, and economic exploitation. The optimistic change for Dalit women is that they are participating in the policymaking and planning of local development programs, such as the school management committee, drinking water project, and forest consumption committee, through the local government, which is a positive sign for Madhesi Dalit women.

## **Conclusion**

The study concludes that Madheshi Dalit women in the study area have been living with multiple forms of structural inequalities and discrimination, including those based on gender, cast and class. They have been trapped in a vicious circle of poverty, illiteracy, different forms of violence, social exclusion, untouchability and political representation of their community. However, gradual improvements have been observed in areas such as literacy, social awareness, life expectancy, political participation and representation, and involvement in social organisations and political parties. These positive improvements are not sufficient to alter the lives of Madheshi Dalit women. These include the pervasiveness of violence and discrimination based on gender and caste, both within and between castes. The constitution has provided caste and gender-based rights as fundamental rights, which have not been strictly implemented to secure the Dalit women's rights. Despite the challenges, the growing awareness, legal support, free and affordable legal aid services for Dalit women, political representation, and social inclusion can help to transform the social status of Madheshi Dalit women.

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