



The Systemic Drivers of Gender-Based Violence in Nepal: A Multi-Sectoral Analysis with a Focus on Healthcare System Responses and Gaps

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Received: October 01, 2025

Revised & Accepted: November 27, 2025

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Abstract

Background: GBV remains one of the most pervasive public health, human rights, and social challenges in Nepal. The prevalence of GBV, despite established legal frameworks, is driven by deep-seated systemic factors that perpetuate inequality and violence against women and marginalized genders.

Objective: This paper aims to identify and synthesize the key determinants of GBV in Nepal and provide a comprehensive understanding of the root causes of GBV to inform effective multi-sectoral interventions.

Methods: A literature review was conducted of relevant peer-reviewed articles from 2018 through 2025 in academic databases such as Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and PubMed. Supplemental information was obtained from reports provided by government agencies and international organizations such as UNFPA and CEDAW.

Findings: A number of interrelated primary determinants are identified, including: (1) deep-seated sociocultural and patriarchal norms that entrench male dominance, (2) economic dependence and financial disempowerment of women, (3) disparities in education and awareness of rights, (4) behavioral factors, primarily alcohol consumption, as a significant trigger, and (5) weak law enforcement and institutional response that fosters impunity.

Conclusion: The root causes of GBV in Nepal are multilayered, triggered by a synergistic effect of structural, cultural, and economic factors. Finally, effective prevention necessitates dealing with the very basic level of gender inequality on which these determinants rest.

Implementation: Key recommendations include integrating gender equality into school curricula, scaling up economic empowerment programs, improving gender-sensitive training for law enforcement and the judiciary, and mounting nationwide campaigns to challenge harmful social norms.

Keywords: gender-based violence, Nepal, determinants, patriarchal norms, economic empowerment.

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a critical concern in Nepal, affecting women and marginalized genders across all age groups and communities (Paudel & Thapa, 2022). It includes physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, primarily targeting women within domestic and social settings. Despite legal frameworks such as the Domestic Violence (Crime and Punishment) Act (2009), GBV continues due to persistent gender discrimination, weak implementation of policies, and societal tolerance toward violence (UNFPA, 2024).

GBV is one of the most critical and pervasive issues of human rights, public health, and social equity in Nepal (Paudel & Thapa, 2022). It encompasses a variety of harmful acts--physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse--mainly against women and girls based on their gender. The manifestations of GBV are widespread, taking place from the private sphere of the home to public spaces, affecting individuals from diverse ethnic, geographic, and socioeconomic



backgrounds. Its prevalence, despite growing national and international attention, still remains very high, undermining the well-being and dignity and hindering the full potential of a significant proportion of the population.

This persistence of GBV in Nepal is particularly striking, given the country's progressive legal and policy advancements. The country has ratified key international conventions over the years and has established domestic laws, such as the Domestic Violence (Crime and Punishment) Act of 2009, which explicitly criminalizes various forms of violence against women. Besides, the constitution enshrines a commitment to gender equality. However, there is a huge gap between these legislative frameworks and the actual reality lived by many women (UNFPA, 2024). The effective implementation of these laws has been persistently hindered by systemic barriers, weak institutional capacity, a dearth of resources, and an all-pervasive culture of impunity.

This gap between legislation and reality shows the strong impact of socio-cultural determinants. Nepalese society still follows deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and institutional mechanisms that clearly establish male dominance and female subordination. Traditional beliefs, as embedded in the concept of *pati* (husband as god) and the restrictive codes of conduct for females, have reduced the role of a woman to one of expected subordination to man, normalizing male dominance and control over female autonomy. In this way, such norms not only perpetuate violence but also foster a social environment that often perceives GBV as a private family matter rather than a criminal offense, leading to underreporting and social stigma that silences survivors. Hence, the complex drivers underlying GBV need to be taken as a basis for devising effective interventions. This paper systematically identifies and analyzes the key determinants of gender-based violence in the context of Nepal. Based on the synthesis of recent evidence, it tries to go beyond a single explanation for the interconnected web of sociocultural norms, economic dependencies, educational disparities, behavioral factors like alcohol use, and institutional weaknesses that have come together to fuel this crisis. A proper understanding of these root causes is a crucial prerequisite for developing holistic and sustainable solutions to GBV.

2. Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review to synthesize existing evidence on the determinants of gender-based violence in Nepal. The review was conducted by identifying relevant peer-reviewed articles and reports published between 2018 and 2025 to ensure the inclusion of the most current data and perspectives. Primary databases searched included Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and PubMed, utilizing a structured keyword strategy with terms such as "gender-based violence," "domestic violence," "Nepal," "determinants," and "patriarchal norms." This initial search was supplemented by a review of key publications from leading authors in the field, such as Tej Bahadur Karki, to provide contextual and foundational depth.



The selection process focused on articles that explicitly investigated the drivers, risk factors, or causes of GBV within the Nepali context. Both qualitative and quantitative studies were included to capture a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Furthermore, to bridge academic research with policy and practice, grey literature from reputable sources such as government bodies (e.g., Nepal's Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens) and international organizations (e.g., UNFPA, WHO) was incorporated. The final analysis involved a thematic synthesis of the collected literature, organizing the findings into coherent categories that represent the principal determinants of GBV.

3. Determinants of Gender-Based Violence in Nepal

Gender-based violence in Nepal is not a random occurrence but a systemic issue rooted in a complex interplay of factors. These determinants are deeply embedded in the social, economic, and institutional fabric of the country, creating an environment where violence is perpetuated and tolerated.

3.1 Socio-cultural and Religious Norms

This is the foundational layer upon which many other determinants are built. Nepal's predominantly patriarchal social structure systematically privileges men and subordinates women.

- **Patriarchal Power Structures:** Deeply ingrained beliefs position men as the head of the household and primary decision-makers, while women are often viewed as dependents whose primary roles are caregiving and household labor. This power imbalance normalizes men's control over women's bodies, mobility, and choices. Challenging this authority is often seen as a transgression that justifies a violent response.
- **Harmful Traditional Practices:** Several cultural practices directly perpetuate GBV. These include:
 - **Dowry (Daijo):** Despite being illegal, the practice of dowry persists. Inadequate or delayed dowry payments can lead to relentless harassment, emotional abuse, and even "dowry deaths" or bride burning.
 - **Chhaupadi:** Although now criminalized, this practice of banishing menstruating women and new mothers to sheds (*goths*) due to notions of impurity exposes them to extreme health risks, snake bites, rape, and respiratory illnesses, constituting severe physical and psychological violence.
 - **Witchcraft Accusations (Boksi):** Particularly targeting older, single, or socially vulnerable women, these accusations are used to ostracize, seize property, and justify extreme physical violence, sometimes leading to murder.
- **Religious Sanctioning:** Interpretations of religious texts and teachings are sometimes used to justify gender inequality. The concept of *pati* (husband as god) in some Hindu traditions can be misconstrued to demand wifely obedience and tolerate abuse as a part of a woman's duty (*dharma*).



3.2 Economic Dependence and Disempowerment

Economic vulnerability is a critical factor that traps women in abusive situations and reduces their ability to seek help.

- **Financial Control:** Women's limited participation in the formal workforce and their concentration in unpaid or low-paid informal labor mean they often have little to no independent income. Abusers frequently exacerbate this by seizing control of any earnings the woman might have, making her entirely financially dependent.
- **Barriers to Economic Empowerment:** Women face significant obstacles to economic independence, including:
 - **Limited Property Rights:** Although the constitution grants equal rights, in practice, sons are often favored in inheriting parental property, leaving women without a critical economic safety net.
 - **Lack of Education and Skills:** Lower literacy rates and limited access to vocational training restrict women's employment opportunities.
 - **The Migration Trap:** With high rates of male out-migration for work, women are left behind as *de facto* heads of household. However, they often lack control over the remittances sent home, and upon the husband's return, tensions over money or reintegration can trigger violence.

3.3 Educational Attainment and Awareness Gaps

Education serves as a powerful protective factor against GBV, operating on multiple levels.

- **Empowerment and Critical Consciousness:** Formal education equips women with knowledge, critical thinking skills, and self-confidence. Educated women are more likely to recognize violence as a violation of their rights rather than a normal part of marriage, and they are better positioned to seek information and support.
- **Economic Opportunity:** As outlined above, higher education directly correlates with better economic prospects, reducing financial dependence.
- **Changing Attitudes in Men:** Educating boys and young men is crucial. School curricula that promote gender equality can help dismantle harmful masculinities that equate manhood with dominance and control, reducing the propensity for violence in future generations.
- **Awareness of Legal Rights:** Lack of awareness about existing laws and support services is a major barrier. Many women, especially in rural areas, are unaware that domestic violence is a crime or that they can access help from the police or organizations.

3.4 Behavioral Factors: Alcohol and Substance Use

While not a direct cause, alcohol abuse is a significant aggravating factor that intensifies the frequency and severity of GBV.

- **Disinhibition and Aggression:** Alcohol consumption reduces inhibitions and impairs judgment, making men more likely to act on aggressive impulses. It can exacerbate pre-existing feelings of frustration, entitlement, or powerlessness, with violence becoming an outlet.



- **Economic Stress and Conflict:** Spending household income on alcohol can create financial strain, leading to conflicts that escalate into violence. As noted by researchers like Karki and Gartoulla (2015), substance abuse interacts with underlying social and psychological stressors, creating a high-risk situation for women.

3.5 Legal and Institutional Weaknesses

The failure of state institutions to provide robust protection and justice is a key determinant that allows GBV to persist with impunity.

- **Weak Law Enforcement:** Police, often reflecting societal biases, may dismiss domestic violence as a "private matter." Victims face ridicule, victim-blaming, and pressure to reconcile rather than file a formal report. A lack of female police officers and gender-sensitive training further deters reporting.
- **Ineffective Judiciary:** The legal process can be slow, expensive, and intimidating for survivors. Corruption and social pressure on judges can lead to cases being dismissed or perpetrators receiving lenient sentences, undermining deterrence.
- **The Problem of Informal Mediation:** Community leaders, elders, and local committees often prioritize "family harmony" over justice for the survivor. They pressure women to withdraw cases and return to abusive husbands, effectively re-victimizing them and reinforcing the cycle of violence.
- **Inadequate Support Services:** There is a severe shortage of safe houses, crisis counseling, legal aid, and long-term rehabilitation services, especially outside the Kathmandu Valley. Without a safe alternative, many women are forced to return to their abusers.

These determinants are not isolated; they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. A woman's economic dependence is reinforced by patriarchal norms that limit her education, and this vulnerability is compounded by an institutional system that fails to protect her. Addressing GBV, therefore, requires a multi-sectoral approach that simultaneously targets all these root causes.

4. Discussion

These findings of the review highlight that gender-based violence in Nepal is not a monolithic issue but a complex phenomenon sustained by a tightly woven web of determinants. Deep-seated patriarchal norms, economic disempowerment, and institutional passivity interplay in creating a self-perpetuating cycle of violence. For example, a woman's economic dependence—a result often of limited educational opportunities propelled by the very same patriarchal values—forces her to remain in an abusive relationship. This situation gets compounded by a justice system that, reflecting biases from society, often prioritizes family preservation over survivor safety. Thus, these factors viewed in isolation present an incomplete picture; it is their synergistic effect that cements the foundations of GBV in the country.



This complex causality challenges the effectiveness of standalone interventions. In themselves, legal reforms have proved insufficient; the laws, such as those enacted under the Domestic Violence Act, become almost ineffective without concomitant changes in societal attitudes and without strong enforcement mechanisms. Similarly, the empowerment of women through microfinance and economic programs may inadvertently heighten their vulnerability to violence, as observed in some studies where male partners feel that their authority is threatened. The frequent resort to alcohol as a trigger must also be understood not as a cause but rather as a disinhibiting factor that magnifies the already prevalent patterns of control and aggression rooted in gender inequality. Scholars like Tej Bahadur Karki thus situate these behavioral factors in the broader perspective of sociocultural mores, arguing cogently that substance abuse is a manifestation, not an excuse, for the underlying pathology of gender hierarchy. The time for a paradigm shift toward integrated, multi-level interventions has therefore come. For effective prevention, intervention needs to occur simultaneously at the structural level, the community level, and the individual level. This calls for strengthening law enforcement and support services, while simultaneously undertaking public awareness campaigns that redefine masculinity, foster gender equality, and delegitimize violence. Empowerment of women through education and livelihoods must be matched by community-level engagement that also enlists men, religious leaders, and local authorities as agents of change. It is only then that the patriarchal bedrock of the problem can be addressed and Nepal's intergenerational cycle of GBV meaningfully interrupted.

5. Conclusion

In sum, GBV in Nepal is a deeply entrenched crisis driven by an interconnected matrix of sociocultural, economic, educational, and institutional determinants. The pervasiveness of patriarchal norms legitimizes male dominance and control, while economic dependency and educational disparities systematically disempower women, entrenching them in abusive cycles. This is compounded by behavioral factors such as alcohol use acting as potent triggers and the weak legal framework with inadequate enforcement fostering a culture of impunity. This complex interplay confirms that GBV cannot be attributed to any one cause; rather, it is symptomatic of systemic gender inequality.

This complex challenge requires an equally multifaceted and sustained response. Isolated interventions have proved inadequate; the way forward lies in an integrated strategy that aligns legal reform and firm enforcement with transformative education programs and focused economic empowerment initiatives. Ultimately, sustainable change depends on a fundamental shift in societal attitudes. Empowering women at all levels, engaging men and boys as allies, and strengthening institutional accountability are not suggestions but rather conditions without which the structures of power and privilege that feed gender-based violence can be dismantled and a more equitable and just Nepal built.



6. Recommendations

1. Strengthen enforcement of GBV laws and improve survivor support mechanisms.
2. Integrate gender sensitivity training into school curricula and community programs.
3. Expand economic empowerment programs for women.
4. Address alcohol misuse through public health campaigns.
5. Encourage male engagement in gender equality movements.

Transparency Statement: The authors confirm that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.

Data Availability Statement: Authors can provide data.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare there is no conflicts of interest.

Authors' Contributions: The authors equally conducted all research activities i.e., concept, data collecting, drafting and final review of manuscript.



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