

Interview 25: NEPAL: Rachana Bhattarai

Mrs. Rachana Bhattarai is the Executive Director of the Women's Rehabilitation Center-WOREC Nepal, a national NGO which has been working in favour of social justice and the rights of women since its creation in 1991. WOREC has been leading campaigns to stop violence against women and encourage economic, social and cultural rights. As part of their violence against women campaign, Women Human Rights Defenders networks have been set up in almost every district of Nepal to assist women survivors of violence in achieving justice.

“When we report cases of violence against women at police stations, we see that the way the police behave towards women is not very considerate; the way they deal with the women, the language they use is something that one cannot tolerate. They use abusive language and women who have survived violence are not comfortable going to the police station and reporting their cases. They would rather go to a women's group to report their cases instead of going to a police station, because the police are not very sensitive. The police ask questions in front of everyone and women do not feel comfortable expressing their experience in such a public space. As I told you, they would rather chose a women's group to express their feelings, express their pain and express the level of violence they have undergone.

I guess such groups are not available in all the regions.

WOREC has WHRD networks in every district. Right now, we have reached 72 districts in Nepal; there are only 3 districts left where those networks have not been formed yet. In most of the districts, our networks are very active and women feel more comfortable - especially those who are survivors of violence - reporting cases of violence to the WHRD network rather than going to the police station. In some of the districts, the police officers themselves have referred women to our network. So, I don't blame all the police officers for not acting positively; in some of the districts we also have some very good police officers. But in most of the districts the language police officers use is very abusive and it's something that cannot be tolerated by women rights activists.

So would you say that there is an increase in this kind of behaviour? Are police officers becoming increasingly sensitive to this issue?

Some of them are, yes, but most of them are not. Their sensitivity is very important. Nowadays, we have also started training police officials on gender-based violence and so something is taking place; some positive steps have been taken. Let's hope that in a couple of years, most of the police officers will be sensitive in terms of asking questions to those who are the survivors of violence and have undergone other such difficulties.

How do the police officers behave towards women human rights defenders?

It depends upon the police officer: in some of the cases, they do act positively, but in most cases, they are not particularly respectful of women human rights defenders. We had an incident last year in Sunsari District in the eastern part of Nepal when women human rights defenders went to file a case of a girl there; the police did not treat them positively. The police asked these women human rights defenders to go back home and cook good food for their husbands and be loyal to their husbands, rather than coming to the police station to report such minor case. So the women human rights defenders became very angry and there was a kind of dispute. It was sorted out later on, but the police

didn't react positively. It was a very painful incident. There was physical violence that took place also, the police officials started beating those women and pulled their guns out. It was an aggressive, uncontrollable incident which took place within the police station. It took us almost a week to get it settled down.

How did you calm it down?

We informed other international organisations; the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as local organisations working on human rights issues. We also had a press conference, where we informed journalists about what had happened. It took us almost a week to calm things down. It didn't settle down 100%, but the incident was taking place in a very aggressive way, and we tried to settle down the aggression as much as we could.

More generally speaking what kind of remedies would women have in this kind of situation? Can they hope to get some redress?

It is difficult to say that women will get justice in this kind of situation, even in the case of women human rights defenders, because the circumstances make it difficult to get justice. Those women who were beaten up by the police still express anger when they talk about it, because they are not happy with the way the police treated them. They still have that anger; they still have that fire inside them. Women everywhere are not treated equally, especially women human rights defenders; they are not treated equally and they do not get justice. That is how this whole movement is taking place; women are also isolated in the mainstream human rights movement. They are not well recognized, they don't have their work identity, so the situation is not very positive.

Would you say that what happened to those women is symptomatic of the behaviour of police officers who treats women differently to men? That is one example, but it applies everywhere. Nepal is a patriarchal society where women are always looked down upon, so they are always kept in a lower position than that of their male counterparts; they are treated like second-class citizens in their own country. You can see the implications of this everywhere; in government offices, in police stations, in organisations. It's everywhere even though we project the idea that we are in a transition phase. We say that Nepal is moving in a new direction, but our old concepts, our old attitudes of treating women have not changed as yet. We are still repeating the same kind of behaviour. If you go to government officials, you will see that bureaucrats treat women in the same way they have been treating them before. In terms of attitude, nothing has changed, I would say. It is not only new policies that will make change; the first thing is changing your own attitude and only then will other things will come up. The police is one of the parts, but as I told you even in organisations, even in government offices, even at the policy level, women are still treated as second-class citizens. The situation I told you about is an example of the kind of incidents where women human rights defenders are not treated equally. Because our attitudes are guided by patriarchal norms and values, those values reinforces these kinds of incidents.

Do you think that all the transformations taking place now can bring change to the condition of women?

To some extent it will, in terms of policies, but in terms of changing our own attitudes and behaviour, it will take a long time; changing attitudes and changing policy are two different things. Even if we have those changes in the policies, nothing will happen unless we have the same changes in our own attitude.

Change in policy is very important, we cannot that deny that fact, but the change in the attitude is the most important aspect and it is not going to happen overnight.

Has the law against domestic violence been well implemented? Has it changed things?

No, it hasn't been implemented well because there has to be a regulation to implement that law, and the regulation is still under the preparation process. The regulations have to be ready to actually implement that domestic violence law.

Did the fact that such legislation was enacted encourage women to speak out and encourage police officers to take up such cases?

Well, there are still many loopholes in that law. It only speaks about domestic violence, but violence against women can take place anywhere, in public places, anywhere. That law is only for the violence that occurs at the domestic level. It is still a very positive step, we cannot deny that fact, but there are still many loopholes within that law which need to be addressed properly. The activists are raising their voices against those loopholes, and they are saying that the law needs to be amended. Let's hope that this process will take place. But the law is there, it hasn't been implemented as yet because the regulations are still in the preparation process. The law was passed by the CA a year ago, but still we are not in the process of finalizing the regulation; the process is very slow. Let's hope that after this law is passed, the implementation process will be able to work towards solving domestic violence cases. Let's hope that there will be a mass sensitization process of the police officials which would help the women who are survivors of violence to come to the police station without any hesitation and report their case.

Is there anything you'd like to add?

The government of Nepal has also declared the year 2010 to be the year where they focus on eliminating violence against women. The office of the Prime Minister is also very serious about solving this problem. The Prime Minister's office is about to form a unit that works on violence against women; the Prime Minister himself is very keen in addressing this issue. Let's hope his own actions, his own steps would help, we cannot say to end the violence, but it will help to reduce the violence against women in Nepal."