



GENDER EQUALITY  
AND WOMEN  
EMPOWERMENT



## SOCIAL WORK FOR SATISFACTION AND RECOGNITION

**N**irru Thapa, 32, of Ward no.1, Bhaudaha VDC in Morang plays an active role in the women's group. She is just as active at the child development centre and in empowering women. There are six members in her family, including her own mother, husband and three daughters. She lives in a thatch, two-room house, and the family owns 12 *katthas* of land. Both she and her husband have passed the SLC exams. Her husband is a daily wage earner. Her mother helps her with the household chores. The remaining time she spends on social activities.

She got married when she was 18 and came from Dharan to live in Morang. "I had brought some 'daijo' (gifts given by the parents during one's wedding), but they didn't want me to study any further," she said. But she is happy to be involved in various social activities, for which there is support of her husband and mother. Hence, there is an enabling environment for her to devote time and ideas for the sake of the community and help the children, poor and exploited women.

Because she is involved in social activities, she says she is aware of issues pertaining to child rights, women's rights, women empowerment, poverty, gender roles and the importance of education. She has three daughters but no son. There is no remorse, however. Her aim is to make her daughters self-sustaining by providing them a good education. Her husband is also very helpful and understands her feelings, she added.

Recalling her early experiences, she said both men and women in the community used to look down on her when she started involving herself in women's development and child issues with the support of the Women Development Office. Nobody was helpful to her when she initiated awareness raising and group formulating activities. She would be interrupted while speaking to the community. But she did not give up, instead she made even more effort to win them over. Gradually she was able to convince them to work for the poor.



She was able to do it with the help and support of her colleagues of the Women Development Office, UNICEF, local governance programmes and a few other social organisations. With the gradual success, some social workers, educated people and those who were aware about the issues of women and children started to

recognise and appreciate her and her group's efforts.

She says the government should be positive and active in improving the condition of women by conducting awareness and education programmes for them. On top of that, equal rights for women should be legally ensured to protect and promote their fundamental rights. Education and health services should be implemented with community participation based on their needs at the grassroots level.

She further added that mother's groups, women development groups and girls' groups should be extensively mobilised for women empowerment. National and local level planning should also be based on the local and the country's needs. The concerned stakeholders working on women's issues should listen to the voices of the needy women and act accordingly, she says. Last but not least, she wants the authorities to make available citizenship certificates. It has been agreed in principle but has not been put into practice yet.

## ACID THROWN ON WIFE'S HEAD

**S**adina Khatun, 25, is a resident of Katkappa, Ward no. 18 of Biratnagar sub-metropolitan city. Her maternal home is in Rani in the same city. She was married to three years ago. But she now stays with her parents in Rani after her husband turned violent against her.

Sadina says the wife-husband relation was normal for only about two months after marriage. Then her husband began abusing her. He was said to be having an affair with other woman. It is said he made serious accusations against his wife so that he could continue having affairs with the woman. As a result, he would abuse her verbally and torture her mentally and physically everyday.

Sadina's father-in-law and brother-in-law were aware of the affair her husband was having and the cruelty being inflicted on her. However, they kept quiet. When some neighbours tried to intervene, they were threatened with death by him.

"My husband would beat me with a stick or whatever he could lay his hand on. He

would turn on the volume of the radio so that others could not hear my screams," she said. Moreover, he threatened to kill her if she went and complained to her parents. And she was not allowed to go to her maternal home.

She has a child, a girl. Her parents-in-law were good to her, and she was provided food. Her husband used to sleep with her occasionally. But the violence got worse by the day, and her tolerance was reaching the limits. However, she blames her fate for the unhappy life.

"One day, I thought of committing suicide because I could not tolerate it anymore. But I first decided to go to my parents and tell them all that I was having to bear," she said.

On the way to her maternal home, her husband followed Sadina. He caught up with her near her home and asked for her silver necklace. He said he needed it for some purpose.

"I had no option other than to give it to him. As I was removing the shawl from

my head to give him the necklace, he threw acid on my head,” said Sadina. Her daughter and sister also suffered burns from the acid. While trying to flee, he was caught by her father, uncles and neighbours, and taken to the police station.

I was hoping action would be taken against my husband, she said. “Instead his elder brother deposited a bail of Rs. 60,000, and it has been four days since he’s been out.”

Now he walks around the village freely. Anyone who approaches Sadina for information or photographs is threatened. “What is the use of taking my photo? So what if the news is published in the newspapers? Five or more cases have been filed against him at the police station, but every time he manages to come out without any action taken against him,” she said.

Her parents have sold some cattle and also taken a loan to pay for her treatment. About Rs. 20,000 has already been spent on her treatment, but she has not fully recovered. “I feel very sorry for my parents,” she says. She doesn’t want to go back to her husband and fears for her life. She wants to run a small business so that she can look after herself and her daughter.

#### KEY MESSAGE

Some women in the village are forced to bear verbal, mental and physical abuse everyday. There should be a local mechanism to monitor domestic violence of an extreme nature.

## SOCIAL WORK – A WAY OF SELF-REALISATION

**S**ita Devi Basnet, 47, of Rampur, Ward no. 7, Mangalpur VDC has six members in her family - her husband, son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. Her husband retired as a *khardar*, a non-gazetted II class government official, in 2055 B.S. (1998). Says Sita, “I now have a one-and-a-half storied concrete (pakka) house and 10 *katthas* of land due to our hard work.”

Talking about her childhood days, she said, “My parents had four daughters and a son. They never saw the need of educating their daughters. My father used to say that since we daughters would be leaving for others’ home, we needed to learn how to do household work, not an education in school.”

But Shanti yearned to go to school and become a school teacher. She, however, was able to study only till the primary level and had to suppress her desire to finish school. Because she could not complete her SLC, she wanted to see her daughter go to college. But when her daughter passed the SLC examination, a suitable family came with a proposal for her daughter’s hand. The bridegroom was good

looking, smart and had done his B.A. The marriage was, thus, arranged.

She says higher or technical or vocational education is important for both boys and girls. It might be even more important for the girl because she must leave for her husband’s house. And should her husband try to dominate or neglect her, she will be able to manage a livelihood on her own.

After retiring from government service, her husband got himself involved in social work in the village through an NGO. After some time, he encouraged me to get involved in social activities, said Shanti. Initially, she joined a paralegal committee as a member.

She was involved in raising awareness about simple legal provisions and the processes that needed to be taken for action against exploitation and violence against women in the family and community. Her work also involved creating awareness about income generation activities among the rural women as part of the social and economic empowerment of women. After involving herself for some months in the paralegal committee,

she joined the CLRC, an NGO wing at the community level.

“Through those social organisations, I had to play the role of a lawyer or justice at times. I have always been advocating the fundamental rights of women, and we have received general knowledge on legal matters through various organisations.

“Based on these, I try to settle disputes in our community especially concerning women,” said Shanti.

When a dispute is reported to her or the committee, it is discussed within the team, and they listen to both the parties. The team tries to help in reaching a compromise between the two sides, and if legal action is necessary, the victims are helped with the process necessary to go to the district court.

On the nature of the cases reported, she said they mostly concern separation, partition of property, rape and domestic violence against women.

“I have been involved in settling 11-12 cases,” she said. “Sometimes, the victims come to my house even at midnight. At times, the exploiters (men) throw stones at my house, accusing me of provoking their wives to go against them. Sometimes my children feel that my involvement in social work is disturbing their studies and life. But this is social work, and there is social recognition. I feel proud of my social involvement.”

Says she, “When there are people who are active, clean hearted and motivated, we can do things to change the lives of women in the community.”

## NO MORE SORROWS FOR ME

**G**yanu Basnet, 34, of Ward no. 10, Bhaktapur municipality is a married woman. She has been staying in a rented room since the last 16 years as she does not have a house of her own. Her mother, Sita, had married a man from Chhaling village of Bhaktapur to become his second wife. Although the first wife had already passed away, the stepsons did not treat Sita well.

Unable to bear the mental anguish and domestic violence, she left the house to live in Bhaktapur. By then, she had two daughters. Sita's husband used to pay the rent of the room until he was alive. After he died, Sita had to meet the entire expenses of running the family. So she became a street vendor like her mother. When her mother became sick for a long time and failed to recover, Gyanu had to carry on the business alone.

As the days passed, she fell in love with a customer who came regularly to buy things like cigarettes, sweets and peanuts. The love affair lasted some months, and the man one day told her he was from Naubise of Dhading. Gyanu was

suspicious if he was not already married. But the boy told her he was a bachelor. So they got married. At that time he used to do house painting work. Their life was somehow going smoothly. He would at times say he had to be at the work site for some days and would be away. Gyanu did not suspect anything.

After they had two daughters, she told her husband to register their births as well as their marriage. He brought his citizenship papers for the purpose of registering the births of their children and their marriage. The address on the citizenship certificate, however, read Tathali, Bhaktapur, and she suddenly felt that something was wrong.

She again requested her husband to register the births of their children and their marriage. Accordingly, he also brought the forms from the ward office but never submitted them, on the pretext that the concerned staff were never there.

After her husband failed to register the births and the marriage for weeks, she came to the conclusion that the man was cheating her. This led to quarrels in the

house. One day, after a hot discussion, he left the house and never came back. Upon enquiring about his whereabouts for months, she came to learn that he was living with his first wife in his village. Gyanu refused to go to her husband's village, blaming everything on her fate.

When Gyanu's mother fell sick for a long period, she sent a message to her husband to come to the hospital. He came and stayed with her for months. He even gave money for the treatment and took great care of her and the mother. And Gyanu conceived for the third time.

Her husband would say, if you give birth to a boy, we will give him to someone; but if you give birth to a girl, we will keep her. This often led to friction between the two.

He often told her that he would take away the baby boy as soon as he was born.

"I, therefore, requested the doctor at the Prasuti Griha (maternity hospital) not to give my child to my husband before I was completely normal," said Gyanu. "Immediately after birth, my husband had come to the hospital to take away the baby, but the doctor refused. After that, we had a quarrel. My husband then told me he would never come back, and he hasn't. I now live with my three children."

The first daughter is sponsored by an organisation with the help of one Indramani, a school teacher; the second daughter is in a children's home at Ekantakuna and is sponsored by one Sunita Thapa, a resident of Jaukhel; and the third baby (son) is 10 months old.

"I am tired of my husband. Even if he came back to me, I will not allow him to enter my room. I tolerated all his exploitation and deceit, I cannot bear any more sorrows in my life," says Gyanu.

#### KEY MESSAGE

There should be massive awareness about registering events, especially marriages and births immediately so that no woman or child has to face problems.

## WE SISTERS ARE NEGLECTED BY OUR FATHER

**A**dimaya Tamang, 16, of Kakra Bari village, Ward no. 4, Nangkhel VDC studies in Grade 5 at Saraswoti Lower Secondary School. Her father is a carpenter and mother a daily wage labourer. Among the five daughters of her parents, Adimaya is the second eldest. Her parents have no son. Her father usually blames her mother for not conceiving a son, which often disrupts the family environment.

Due to frequent quarrels, her parents live separately although in the same house. All five daughters live with the mother. When Adimaya's mother speaks with other men while at work, her father talks as if she is a loose woman. When the parents start quarreling, he beats his wife and all the daughters. Therefore, they must run away from the house. In the presence of relatives and neighbours, her father keeps quiet, but as soon they leave the house, he starts fighting. The children are badly disturbed by the broken home.

"My mother usually earns Rs. 50-60 a day. With the amount she must manage all the expenses," says Adimaya. "My mother is

very depressed by the environment in the home and the behaviour of my father. Therefore, she says either the father or the mother has to die to bring peace in the house."

She continued, "One day, my father beat my mother badly, which I could not tolerate, and I also beat my father with a stick and ran away for fear of being beaten. The daily quarrels between my parents always haunt my mind, and I cannot concentrate on my studies. We don't even enjoy the festivals.

"The situation at home has frustrated me. Instead of guiding us properly, he mistreats us and does not care about the family. He has given the land certificate (*Lalpurja*) to the land brokers for the purpose of selling it because he does not want to give it to us. Some land has already been sold. He says, 'why to give land to you, you are daughters, not sons.'"

Due to the unhappy environment, Adimaya's elder sister got married to a homeless man. Adimaya is also thinking

of leaving school, but the headmaster has managed to provide her with a scholarship through an organisation, Jeevan Bodh.

During the vacation, she works on a daily wage basis to help with the family expenses. At other times, she helps with the domestic chores while her mother is away at work. She also has other work to

do - guiding her two sisters do their homework. The third daughter has also begun to understand the environment at home; therefore, she does all her work herself. Adimaya is all praise for her mother for taking care of all the daughters and the house. She thinks her father is mentally ill.

Adimaya thinks her father's preference for a son has led to his ill behaviour towards all in the family. She wants to continue her studies but is not sure if she will receive scholarships. Because of an irresponsible father, her mother and the children have no future, she says.

#### KEY MESSAGE

Awareness against discrimination between sons and daughters should be heightened at the community and family level.

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DESTROYS FAMILY LIFE

**S**abnam Khan, 35, stays with her parents at Masanghat, Ward no. 6 of Nepalgunj municipality. Her marriage was arranged to a man by the name of Madlub Khan from India six years ago. He had come to Nepalgunj for some business matters, and because she was pretty, Madlub's elder brother had proposed the marriage.

Gradually, Madlub and Sabnam came to know each other. After a few months, Sabnam, however, came to know of his drinking habits, which Madlub's brother attributed to bad company. But Madlub promised to stop drinking, and the two were married.

According to Muslim tradition, the bride's parents gave much dowry such as furniture, cash and ornaments worth Rs. 80-90,000. At the time of the marriage, Sabnam had passed Class 8 and had skills in sewing clothes, knitting sweaters and painting fabrics. After two months of marriage, they left for India.

There it suddenly dawned on her that Madlub had married her because of her

skills and that he wanted to use them to improve their living condition. Their life was running smoothly until her husband started drinking again. One day while drunk, she was told that he had another wife and a child. She was shocked and blamed her fate. But she never got a chance to meet them. She thinks the other woman must have run away because of Madlub's habits.

Sabnam's husband began torturing her physically and mentally. Madlub asked her to bring money from her parents to expand

**“Women are structurally vulnerable to poverty due to widespread social discrimination and denial of basic rights. There is no way other than to get the women organised so that they are able to fight for their rights and put an end to the discriminatory practices.”**

**Mandira Poudel**  
Social Mobiliser

Women Awareness and Income Generation Programme  
Women Development Office, Letang, Morang

his business. Sabnam conveyed the message to her parents. Her parents offered Rs. 5,000. Time and again Madlub would pressure Sabnam to bring money from her parents. Her parents would oblige, but it was very difficult for her parents to give money each time because they were also poor.

When she could not bring money from her parents, her husband would drink and beat her. He took her ornaments to pay for his drinking habits. If she tried to run away, he would beat her even more. So she kept quiet.

According to Sabnam, her husband's business didn't have enough capital, therefore, there was little profit. But he liked to present himself as a businessman. Sabnam used to earn money by sewing her neighbour's clothes, but her husband took it all away to spend it on his drinking and other bad habits. Every night he came home drunk.

Her neighbours would often ask why her parents had given her hand in marriage to this man. In India, Sabnam had no one to

turn to except her husband, no matter how abusive. She had no relatives to share her sorrows with.

After two years of marriage, she decided to return to her parents' home. But a few days later, her husband came and beat her up in front of everyone. She then shouted 'talak' (I divorce you) three times, and as per Muslim tradition, they were divorced. Mudlab then left her and returned to India.

These days Sabnam lives with her mother and newly married younger brother. His younger brother is a mechanic who repairs refrigerators. For fear that his neighbours might accuse him of not looking after his sister well, he doesn't allow Sabnam to work. But without his knowledge, she spends her days sewing clothes of her neighbours to make some money.

Although Sabnam was married, she never had a child. She is just 35 and beautiful, so her mother wants her to remarry. But Sabnam is not sure if she will get a good husband. "I will marry only if someone who is truly gentle accepts me. Otherwise it is better to be alone," she says.

## SUCCESS AFTER CONTINUOUS STRUGGLE

**M**ina Bagale (Sunar), 33, of Ananda Tole, Ward no. 18, Mahendranagar municipality, is an active social worker in the community. Her father had died of asthma when she was only 12. She is the youngest of her parents' three daughters. Her elder brother went missing at the age of 13 and was located 10 years after. During this period, he had survived working as a dish washer in a restaurant.

After he came back home, the family thought it was time for his marriage, so they went in search of a girl. But after the marriage, the bride's parents wanted the son-in-law to stay with them as they had no son. This led to conflict between the two families, and ultimately the Bagale family broke up. After staying for a few months with his in-laws, he again ran away without so much as leaving a hint, and no one knows where he has gone. They think he is living in India.

Mina used to live with her family in Silgadi. When she was about five years old, the family had migrated to Dang. And after finding her brother, they shifted to Mahendranagar.

In 2050 B.S., she got married to a man at the age of 19, with the hope that her life would improve. Unfortunately, things did not go smoothly. After marriage, Mina started a jewellery workshop with the 30 grams of gold given to her by her parents and her husband. They made jewellery according to the orders placed by the customer. The income helped sustain the family. Even though there was a big age difference between the husband and wife, life was running smoothly.

However, after a few years, a jealous relative tried to drive a wedge between the two. Unable to see that the relative was trying to create a conflict in their otherwise smooth life, the husband started suspecting Mina's character, and there was a gradual change in his attitude and behaviour. Sometimes she had to stay outside the house because of her husband's growing mental and physical torture. And she could not go to her maternal home because it was too far away, and also because she did not have the money to go there. At times, she would cry all day.



In 2060 B.S., she became a member of Srijansil Savings Group. And a year later, she was appointed vice-president of Mahila Adikhar Manch (Women's Rights Forum). Gradually her life started turning normal. Because of her involvement in the group, she came to know about women's rights, how to enjoy them and what the power of the group was.

#### KEY MESSAGE

Women's group has been a source of inspiration and help for the exploited and marginalised women in rural areas.

The woman who used to be afraid of talking to others became a successful leader and a good social worker. She received various trainings from that institution on women's rights, legal literacy, gender equality and income generating activities. Following the training, she began helping other women who were victims of domestic violence, exploitation and abuse. In the field, too, she proved that she could compete with men. Her husband then began respecting her. They took a Rs. 500,000 loan from bank and built a one-storey house.

Today she is a mother of three children - two sons and a daughter - all of whom go to school. She spends her time helping couples who can't get on smoothly in life. She says drinking is one of the reasons behind family conflicts and domestic violence. So through dramas, cultural programmes and meetings, she tries to convey the message that drinking habits can ruin families.

"But a community cannot do much to control heavy drinking; the whole nation must act against it," she says. "In most cases, the head of the family is a male, so if he takes to drinking, he is incapable of taking the right decision. In such an event, there is neither a present nor future for the families."

## WHY ARE ONLY WOMEN PRONE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

**L**axmi Sunar, 22, of Shanti Tole, Ward no. 3, Dodhara VDC lives with her mother and sister-in-law. Her parents are too old to work. Her two elder brothers work as coolies in India. They have built a hut on a small piece of land they own. Among the five daughters, she is the fourth. She has studied up to Class 4.

Her husband was cruel and had many bad habits. She was constantly tortured physically and mentally by her husband and her stepson. Fearing for her life, she has returned to her maternal home.

Six years ago, Purushottam Sunar, 40, used to call regularly on Laxmi's house. He addressed her parents as uncle and aunt. He developed a good rapport with Laxmi and her parents. The poor and innocent family had little idea what sort of person he was. One evening, he barged into the house and shouted, "Listen, my first wife has been telling our neighbour that we two (Purushottam and Laxmi) have been having an affair. Therefore, I want you (Laxmi) to come with me." And he forcefully took Laxmi with him even as the parents looked on.

At that time, she was only 17 years old, whereas the man had children older than Laxmi. "We did not want to give our daughter to that man, but we could not find a way out. She was taken forcefully in front of our eyes, and we could do nothing," said Laxmi's mother.

On the other hand, upon reaching Purushottam's house, Laxmi was badly beaten by the family members. Hearing the noise, the neighbours gathered at the house and held discussions with Purushottam and the family. The family members stopped beating her but would not allow her to enter the house. So she had to spend her night in their saw mill. After months of abuse and torture, she realised that she was pregnant. After that she requested her husband to build her a small hut to live in. A hut was built, but her stepson (Purushottam's son) would not let her live in peace.

One night, her stepson entered the hut and kicked her on the stomach very badly. She lost a lot of blood, and she thought she had lost her baby. So she ran down to the sugarcane field, and the next morning made her way to her maternal home. Seeing her

in such a condition, her parents took her to a nearby hospital with the help of neighbours.

After a few weeks, Purushottam came to take her back. Laxmi's mother would not allow him to do so. But he refused to listen and took Laxmi back again. In the hut, she gave birth to a baby boy all by herself without any help from others.

The next morning, when neighbours informed her mother that Laxmi had given birth, she went to help Laxmi. Instead of letting Laxmi's mother help, Purushottam's family accused her of coming to steal their goods. Somehow she managed to spend five days in the hut and completed the naming ceremony of the baby. Then Laxmi's mother took her back. The torment that the parents had to endure ultimately caused the death of her father.

Laxmi again had to go to her husband's house for the child's rice feeding ceremony. The same night, her stepson entered her hut and beat her up badly and threatened to kill her. She then swore never to return to her husband's house.

When the child was two-and-a-half years old, Purushottam came to Laxmi's maternal home drunk to take the child. Laxmi told him that she would not give him the baby until he was five years old. She tried to convince him that the baby needed to breastfeed, but all in vain. Since then, Laxmi has not spoken to her child. Even when she sees her son on the road, he fears to speak to her apparently because he has been threatened by his father.

"Had my father been around and my brothers been powerful, he would never have dared to treat me this way," said Laxmi. "Instead, I must spend the evenings in my cousin's house for fear of being killed by them."

The local women's organisation has served Purushottam's family a notice several times warning them not to harm Laxmi. But they say they fear no one. "They broke my heart, body and mind. They also took my child away from me," said Laxmi.

The doctor has advised her not to be tense all the time lest she go insane. To keep her mind occupied and free from tension, she helps others in the fields and also earns some money.

She questions, why is it that only women are victims of these forms of domestic violence? Why should we women tolerate violence? Why does a man want to destroy a woman's life? How can a woman like me get help to spend life smoothly?

### KEY MESSAGE

There must be efforts to raise massive awareness about domestic violence down to the grassroots level. There must be some institution in villages to listen to cases of violence against women and act upon it. In addition, there should be some supporting organisations to help victims of domestic violence and women who are exploited.



## AN NGO STOPS AN EARLY MARRIAGE

**G**irls in Nagena Kumari Sadha's community are married off by the time they reach 15. She, too, is preparing to get married next year. She has, however, not seen her groom. The bride and groom meet on the wedding day because everything is finalised by their parents. The children, especially the girls, have no say in choosing their life partners.

Nadena feels that women in Nepal are largely dominated by their fathers and brothers in the house. In her home, they make all the decisions relating to the household and also for her three sisters and mother.

There is a belief and custom in her community, as in other communities, that men are the breadwinners and women the homemakers. This notion has been ingrained in the community for centuries, so it is hard for Nadena to go against the wishes and decision of her father. She stays home all day and helps her mother with the domestic chores while the father and brother plough and sow the fields.

Nadena says that the womenfolk have to fulfil the roles that are expected of a woman. Beyond the kitchen, they are allowed to go only as far as the huge tree near the fields where all women and children gather during the afternoons to gossip while the male members are away working in the fields.

"I sometimes feel I am good for nothing, but I was conditioned to think and behave that way. There's nothing the women in this village do except cook, wash, eat and sleep," says she. "Once I had gone to Itahari with my father, where I was overwhelmed to see women riding bikes. Wow!" she exclaimed. It is only on very rare occasions that women get to leave their house to visit somebody or to run an errand but never to work.

Nadena, as all other young girls, is expected to be obedient, submissive and not question the decisions made for her. But she confides that life certainly would have been better if everybody was allowed to attend school, earn for themselves,

choose their life partners and decide when to get married.

“I will literally get beaten if I open my mouth in front of my elders. I do not talk with anyone except the girls. I wish I could convey my feelings to my brothers and father,” she said.

But talking about these things will land her and the family members in big trouble. They would be scorned and could even be boycotted by the community. Nobody would marry her or her sisters. Considering the consequences, it is better for her to keep silent. And she thinks that is why her mother and other women in the village, although they feel there is a need for change, never dare to raise their voice against what has been the norm for centuries.

“They are content with what they are because their mothers and grandmothers have done the same. I am young now and think of a hundred things, but when I get to their age, I may become like them, too,” she said. But she says women are of equal importance as they play the role of a good wife and a good mother, which helps in making family life a success. Sadly, they are not given due recognition for their contribution. Despite the huge compromises and sacrifices, the women are still treated as unequal. They are oppressed, and gender discrimination is pervasive.

Elaborating on her marriage preparations, Nagena says that girls are married as early as 10 or 11 years old when they do not even know what is happening to them. Some are married with young men or boys just a little older than themselves, but in

some cases, when the demand for dowry is less, the girls are married to men of their father’s age. The demand for dowry depends on the family background, looks of the girl and education of the boy.

The girls have no education and know nothing about the outside world, so they have no say in decision making matters. She admits that her parents are uneducated, but they have better experience in life than the youngsters. They help keep the community’s customs and traditions alive, although it is not good to maintain traditions such as marrying off girls at an early age.

“I am not totally against everything. There are some positive aspects in the village too. The men, for instance, are protective of the girls, and they do not like their wives or daughters working for others,” she said. “But not being allowed to speak at all or choose one’s life partner or visit the town without the company of a male member is annoying,” she remarked.

Nadena’s wedding ceremony was stopped by an NGO mid-way this year after they came to know that she hadn’t yet reached the legal age of 18. “They came and disrupted the marriage ceremony that was taking place. I am happy that I will not be getting married for one more year. Father was very annoyed because the expenses have doubled now. He will have to spend the same amount next year,” she said.

The boy and his family have been asked to return next year for the wedding when Nagena will be 18. They went back, promising to come back next year. Nagena awaits the same life she has had in her parent’s home, only it will be in a different place and with strangers.