

“Women In Nepal Face Discrimination From the Womb”
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Last Monday, I had the opportunity to meet with Uma Bhandari, the president of Ruwon Nepal. Ruwon, also known as the [Rural Women's Network Nepal](#), is an organization based out of Chabahil that focuses on gender equality and women empowerment through education.

Unfortunately, Uma was not feeling well so I was unable to take video footage of my interview with her. She is resting at the doctor's recommendation, so I met with her in her home. During our discussion, she shared with me her thoughts on gender discrimination in Nepal and Ruwon's approach to fighting it.

“Women in Nepal face discrimination from the womb,” Uma told me. Since Nepal is a patriarchal society, the birth of a son is valued at more than that of a daughter. This is due, in part, to religious beliefs that only a son can help give salvation to his ancestors. In Hinduism, it is traditionally believed that only sons or elder grandsons can perform shraddha, or funeral rites that pay homage to the dead. Even though some villages closer to the city now allow women to perform funeral rites, Uma said that traditional beliefs lead some families to abort a pregnancy for this reason if they discover that it is a girl.

In more rural areas, which make up the majority of Nepal's population, this type of discrimination may persist throughout a woman's lifetime. Traditionally, a woman belongs in the home, taking care of the children and household chores. Her property is her husband's. In fact, until recently inheritance laws only allowed sons in the family to inherit property. In the event there are no sons, property is inherited to the men in the husband's family. Husbands have traditionally been given multiple provisions in the law to divorce their wives or remarry additional women. The primary reasons include if his wife did not give birth to any children in the first eight years of a marriage, if she did not bear him any sons, or if she displayed “misdemeanor characteristics.” Divorce for women was allowed under only one provision: after her husband's death.

Uma told me that these laws have since been changed. Legally, men are not allowed to have multiple wives or divorce for these reasons. However, as seems to be common in Nepal, there is little enforcement and many rural areas continue to practice traditional norms without regard to the law.

It is very difficult to change gender roles, particularly those that are grounded in traditions and beliefs. Ruwon Nepal focuses on educating women and promoting awareness of these issues as a way to what Uma calls “culture refinement.” She believes that Nepali culture thinks of a woman's social self, a term she uses to describe a woman's role in the community, and does not focus enough on her as an individual person.

This is part of the problem in raising awareness of domestic violence. According to Ruwon, one in three women in Nepal are victims of domestic violence. Many women, Uma said, are aware that they are being mistreated and try to get help, often from her own or her husband's family. Instead of being told to think about herself and her own needs, she is often told to think about how leaving a marriage or exposing her husband's behavior will affect her family and her community. In this way, she is urged to put her social self and the sustainability of her family before her individual self, and tolerate violence because of a social stigma attached to divorce.

“Human rights are individual issues,” Uma said, adding that through education, “a girl child can become an individual.” Originally from a rural village outside of Kathmandu that still has no electricity or water, Uma is the only woman in her village not currently doing traditional housework. She completed her master's degree in education and is currently pursuing a doctorate at Tribhuvan University. Her research on gender, identity, and education has been published widely and her master's thesis, titled *Beyond Patriarchy*, is set to be published in the next year.

“When we read, we become clearly aware,” she said, “and intolerant of these issues.” Her husband, who was present during our discussion, told me not a day goes by that she doesn't talk about how something is gender biased in Nepal.

A professor in the journalism department at Tribhuvan University, her husband said that he was unaware of women's issues until he married Uma. Interestingly enough, their marriage was arranged by one of her brothers. Since their marriage, he has learned more about women's rights in Nepal, currently serves on Ruwon's advisory board, and tries to include some of his wife's experiences in the field in his classroom discussions. Sometimes, he finds himself pointing out gender bias to others.

Uma joined Ruwon Nepal three years ago, after meeting Dhruva Prasad Ghimire through a mutual professor. Dhruva, who I met at the bicycle rally launching [the "Disarm Domestic Violence" campaign](#), founded the organization in Sinhuli, a rural area in Nepal. He was the one kind enough to set up a meeting between Uma and me.

The organization is optimistic about change for women in Nepal, citing the increase in women in parliament. However, Uma says NGOs are still facing a lot of work given the current political situation. Now that everything has "sprouted up so fast, everyone wants something," she said

Can be read online:

<http://advocacynet.org/wordpress-mu/imehmood/blog/2009/07/10/women-in-nepal-face-discrimination-from-the-womb/#comments>