Child and minorities

Introduction

Nepal, a nation of remarkable ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, is home to more than 125 caste/ethnic groups and 123 languages as per the 2011 Census. While such diversity is often celebrated, it also brings forth unique challenges—particularly for minority communities and children within those groups. Children from minority backgrounds often face compounded disadvantages due to systemic social exclusion, discrimination, and poverty. This article delves into the intersectional challenges of children and minorities in Nepal, highlighting their rights, vulnerabilities, and the state’s efforts toward social inclusion.

Understanding Minorities in Nepal

The term “minorities” in the context of Nepal broadly refers to ethnic, linguistic, religious, caste-based, and gender minorities. Notable among these are:

Janajatis (Indigenous nationalities) such as the Tharu, Tamang, Magar, Gurung, and Rai.

Madhesis from the Terai region.

Dalits, historically marginalized due to caste-based discrimination.

Muslims and other religious minorities.

LGBTQ+ communities, often invisible in national discourse.

These groups, despite their significant presence, often find themselves underrepresented in politics, administration, education, and other spheres of national life. Their children, who are supposed to be the most protected under both national and international child rights frameworks, face multidimensional barriers to development.

Child Rights Framework in Nepal

Nepal is a signatory to numerous international conventions that safeguard children’s rights, including the \*\*UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989\*\*, which Nepal ratified in 1990. Furthermore, the \*\*Constitution of Nepal (2015)\*\* guarantees several rights for children under Article 39, including:

\* Right to name and birth registration.

\* Right to education, health, and proper care.

\* Protection from exploitation, child labor, and trafficking.

However, despite these legal safeguards, the practical implementation of these rights remains inconsistent, especially among minority children who suffer due to intersectional vulnerabilities.

Intersectionality: When Minority and Childhood Overlap

Minority children in Nepal often face the dual burden of social exclusion—both as members of marginalized groups and as minors. Their challenges can be grouped into the following categories:

1. \*\*Education and Language Barriers\*\*

Many minority children grow up speaking a mother tongue different from Nepali, the language of instruction in most public schools. As a result, they face:

\* Learning difficulties due to unfamiliar language.

\* Higher dropout rates and lower academic performance.

\* Limited access to culturally relevant teaching materials.

While the 2015 Constitution allows for education in mother tongues and there are some government programs to support multilingual education, implementation is weak. According to UNESCO (2016), only a handful of schools provide effective instruction in local languages.

2. Child Labor and Economic Marginalization.

Poverty disproportionately affects minority communities, pushing many children into child labor. Dalit and indigenous children are more likely to:

\* Work in hazardous industries like brick kilns, carpet weaving, and agriculture.

\* Serve as domestic workers in urban households.

\* Face exploitation due to lack of legal protection and oversight.

A 2021 ILO report indicated that about 34% of child laborers in Nepal come from minority or marginalized communities.

3. Child Marriage and Gender Discrimination

Child marriage remains prevalent among some minority groups due to cultural practices and economic pressures. Girls from Tharu, Muslim, and Madhesi communities are particularly vulnerable. Though child marriage is illegal, social norms, lack of education, and poor enforcement of the law perpetuate this harmful practice.

According to UNICEF (2020), around 40% of women aged 20-24 were married before 18, with higher percentages in the Terai and rural indigenous regions.

4. Access to Health Services.

Minority children often live in remote or underserved areas with limited access to healthcare facilities. Key issues include:

\* High rates of malnutrition and stunting.

\* Low immunization coverage.

\* Discrimination in public health services.

A 2019 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey revealed that \*\*under-5 mortality rates\*\* were significantly higher among Dalit and rural Janajati populations compared to national averages.

5. Representation and Participation.

Children from minority groups rarely have a voice in decision-making processes that affect them. Despite policies promoting inclusive participation, minority communities remain underrepresented in local and national governance, education councils, and child protection mechanisms.

Legal and Policy Measures: Progress and Gaps

Nepal has made noteworthy efforts to uplift minority children through various frameworks:

Key Legal Instruments:

\* \*\*Child Rights Act 2018\*\*: Aligns with international conventions and protects children from discrimination, exploitation, and abuse.

\* \*\*Inclusive Education Policy 2017\*\*: Promotes access to quality education for marginalized children, including linguistic minorities and children with disabilities.

\* \*\*Dalit Empowerment Policy 2019\*\*: Focuses on social inclusion, literacy, and economic upliftment of Dalit communities.

Major Gaps:

Implementation gap: Policies exist but suffer from poor monitoring, weak enforcement, and low budget allocation.

Lack of disaggregated data: Data on children by ethnicity, caste, and language is often missing or incomplete.

\* \*\*Continued social stigma\*\*: Deep-rooted cultural biases continue to marginalize certain groups regardless of formal protections.

Role of Civil Society and NGOs

Numerous NGOs and INGOs operate in Nepal, working to bridge the inclusion gap for minority children. Some notable organizations include:

Save the Children Nepal: Works on child protection, education, and disaster response, especially in marginalized communities.

Dalit NGO Federation (DNF): Advocates for Dalit rights and monitors caste-based discrimination.

National Indigenous Women's Federation: Focuses on empowering indigenous girls through education and awareness programs.

However, these efforts often remain fragmented and dependent on donor funding, highlighting the need for sustained state commitment and community ownership.

Case Study: Tharu Community in the Terai

The Tharu people, an indigenous group residing mainly in the western and southern Terai regions, face severe socio-economic disadvantages. Their children are:

\* Less likely to complete primary school.

\* At higher risk of being victims of bonded labor (e.g., Kamalari system, now outlawed).

\* More vulnerable to trafficking and child marriage.

Though the Kamalari system was officially abolished in 2013, many rescued girls lack rehabilitation support or access to education, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and exclusion.

Recommendations for Way Forward

To ensure that all children, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities for growth and development, Nepal must commit to the following strategies:

1. \*\*Strengthen Inclusive Education\*\*

\* Scale up mother-tongue based multilingual education.

\* Train teachers in cultural sensitivity and anti-discriminatory practices.

2. \*\*Enhance Legal Implementation\*\*

\* Improve local-level monitoring of child rights violations.

\* Allocate more resources to child protection mechanisms.

3. \*\*Promote Data-Driven Policymaking\*\*

\* Collect and publish disaggregated data on children by caste, ethnicity, and language.

\* Use data to tailor targeted interventions.

4. \*\*Combat Discrimination Through Awareness\*\*

\* Launch national campaigns promoting diversity, inclusion, and equality.

\* Engage youth from minority groups in leadership and civic participation.

5. \*\*Empower Communities\*\*

\* Support local NGOs and child clubs in advocating for their rights.

\* Provide economic support and scholarships to minority families to reduce child labor and dropout rates.

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Conclusion

Children are the future of any society, and how a country treats its most vulnerable speaks volumes about its values and priorities. In Nepal, the dual challenge of being a child and a member of a minority group significantly increases the risk of exclusion, poverty, and discrimination. While Nepal has made commendable strides in recognizing the rights of children and minorities, much work remains to translate these rights into reality.

Achieving equity for all children requires not just legal provisions but a societal shift toward inclusion, empathy, and justice. In doing so, Nepal can ensure a future where every child, regardless of caste, ethnicity, language, or religion, can live with dignity, access opportunities, and reach their full potential.

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