

2020

# Vulnerability and Religious Minorities in Nepal

In the context of Covid-19 pandemic

## RESEARCH SUMMARY



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#### **Published by**

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Disclaimer: The work reported in this research was supported by funding from the Global Ministries in collaboration with Samari Utthan Sewa (SUS). The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the Global Ministries or SUS.

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

Vulnerability is the amount of damage to social structures, services and geographical areas due to a crisis. It helps understand the effect of risks, and nature of hazardous zones. It also means the condition from which a person can deal with a crisis and recover from it.

Vulnerability is often created by society. It creates unequal effects and differentiation between different groups. So, while evaluating risks of a hazard, it is important to put into focus the social production of vulnerability as much as, if not more than, natural hazards. For that, it is necessary to understand that vulnerability is a mix of natural hazards and social inequality.

In the Nepalese context, religious minorities who have been facing structural discrimination and exclusion are highly vulnerable in the times of crisis. The objective of this study is to analyse how religious minorities become doubly vulnerable due to structural discrimination and exclusion in the time of Covid-19 pandemic.

This study uses primary and secondary sources on the basis of purposive sampling. The study uses SPSS and Microsoft Excel programs for data processing and analysis. The presentation of tables, graphs, pie chart and graph chart are made in Microsoft Excel.

The study included 371 households, out of which 128 were Hindu households in Chitwan, 122 from Christian households in Sarlahi and 121 from Muslim households in Morang. It included 54 percent women. Out of the total Hindus who participated in the survey, 11 belonged to Brahmin-Chhetri castes, 30 percent from Dalit, 49 percent from Janajati and 10 percent from other caste groups. Out of the Christians who participated, 10 percent were Brahmin-Chhetri, 35 percent from Dalit, 53 percent from Janajati and 2 percent from other caste groups. Out of the participants in the survey, 33 percent were Muslims.

In terms of social structure, most of the participants from the Muslim community were involved in agricultural vocation with minimal profit, and Hindus were in less numbers in the profession. Half of the Hindus who participated in the survey said they were involved in some kind of family business, whereas only 14 percent Muslims and 40 percent Christians said they were involved in household business. The number of Muslims in government services and specialized services was found to be comparatively lower than that of Hindus.

Sixteen percent of the Hindus who participated in the survey said they were unable to conduct religious activities freely. Twenty-seven percent Christians reported they were unable to conduct religious activities freely whereas 71 percent Muslims said they did not want to speak about it. This shows that the percentage of Christians and Muslims who could not organize on the basis of religion was higher than that of Hindus. This is further substantiated by the finding that 92 percent of Hindus said they conducted religious activities publicly, whereas the number of Christians is 45 percent and 55 percent Muslims did not want to speak about it. Among the Hindus, Dalits were found to be unable to freely organize on the basis of religion.

The study showed that social attitude towards Muslim minorities is also negative. Five percent of the Christians said society had negative attitude towards their religious beliefs whereas the percentage of Muslims claiming the same was sixty-nine. Seventy-seven percent Hindus, meanwhile, said society's attitude towards their religious beliefs was positive.

Fifty-one percent of the respondents said they had access to radio and television. Thirteen percent Hindus, 39 percent Muslims and 20 percent Christians said the the information provided about their religious rights was incomplete. Thirty-one percent Hindus, 82 percent Muslims and 81 percent Christians said their religious issues were not covered by the media. This exposes the difficult relationship between religious freedom and the media's bias against religious freedom. Fifty-four percent Christians and 5 percent Hindus said they felt the media had biased attitude towards their religious freedom, whereas 41 percent Muslims said they did not want to speak about it and 14 percent said they did not feel the media was biased against them.

There is a close relation between sensitization on religious rights and freedom of religion of religious minorities and the local government's action. For instance, 9 percent Muslims said they felt the need of such sensitization and only 2 percent said they found the local governments to be active in such sensitization campaigns. Seventy percent Christians said such campaigns were needed and 38 percent said their governments needed to actively campaign for it. Eighty-one percent Hindus found that such sensitization was necessary and 87 percent of them found their local governments needed to take such initiatives.

Sixty-seven percent Muslims and 77 percent Christians in the survey said they found that government representatives were biased towards a particular religious or caste group. Whereas, only 9 percent Hindus said they found such a bias. While 10 percent Muslims who felt there was no bias against a particular religion or caste is, 91 percent Hindus found there was no such bias.

To understand the relationship between power relations in local structures and crisis vulnerability, it is necessary to see the existing power relations. All three religious groups participating in the survey said that 14 percent Brahmin-Chhetri, 66 percent Janajati, 13 percent Dalit and 7 percent other groups existed as majority caste communities. However, local government structures (rural municipality and municipality, hospital, veterinary) had very less representation of religious minorities. Of the respondents, 87 percent Christians, 93 percent Muslims and 82 percent Hindus said their representation in local structures was negligible. However, 7 percent Christians and 16 percent Hindus said their community people were represented in such structures. Among Hindus and Christians, most of the people who were represented in those structures were Brahmin-Chhetri.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, local government and non-government structures involved in coronavirus control and management had negligible presence of people from religious minorities. The presence of religious minorities in such institutions was only in the form of relief recipients. Similarly, religious minorities were not seen in decision-making positions related to relief distribution and selection of recipients. The major positions of such structures (president, secretary and treasurer) had zero percent Muslims, 4 percent Hindus and 1 percent Christians.

The effect of local power relations is evident also in the religious activities of religious minorities. In the times of Covid-19, 11 percent Christians, 86 percent Muslism and 34 percent Hindus were involved in religious activities. And in doing so, 99 percent Christians and 46 percent Muslims had to hide their religious identity whereas Hindus did not have to hide it.

In the context of Covid-19 pandemic, 52 percent Hindus said the rights of religious and caste minorities were mainstreamed in local disaster management programs whereas 2 percent Muslims and 14 percent Christians claimed so. Thirty-eight percent Muslims said they didn't want to respond to this query. Thirty-one percent Muslims, 20 percent Christians and 2 percent Hindussaid their religion made an impact in their social, political and public lives. Among Hindus, the Dalits are to be considered to have been affected in terms of the exclusion, dehumanisation, violence and exclusion they face. Among Hindus, 30 percent felt this, whereas the number of of Hindu Dalits was also 30 percent. Similarly, 75 percent Christians and 46 percent Muslims said they faced religious violence (verbal harassment, exclusion, dehumanization, violence and false cases) on the basis of religion.

The fundamental causes of vulnerability mentioned above should be viewed in terms of how they create insecurity through multi-dimensional pressures. Fifty-two percent Hindus, 86 percent Christians and 100 percent Muslims said there was no sensitization program about Covid-19 among their communities. Thirty percent Hindus and 9 percent Christians said they had interactions with people from other religious communities. Eighty percent Muslims said they had no interactions with people from other religious communities, whereas 20 percent did not want to respond.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the fact that religious minorities are doubly vulnerable is evident in the finding that only 1 percent Muslims had enough drinking water and facilities for washing hands. Among Hindus and Christians, the number is 20 percent and 4 percent respectively.

In Nepalese society, there is discrimination in sources of drinking water on the basis of religion and caste. Four percent Hindus and 4 percent Christians participating in the survey said they faced discrimination while using public taps. Twenty-five percent Muslims said they did not have to face such discrimination. However, 61 percent Hindus, 90 percent Muslims and 80 percent Christians said the police did not register cases of such kinds of discrimination against their communities.

The condition of communities remaining safe from Covid-19 is contingent upon regular washing of hands. The survey showed that the number of respondents who washed hands frequently, less frequently and negligently was 65 percent, 16 percent and 19 percent respectively among Hindus, and 84 percent, 13 percent and 3 percent among Christians. Among Muslims, 39 percent said they washed hands frequently and 61 percent said they washed hands less frequently.

Similarly, the access to health insurance schemes was negligible among religious minorities. All Muslims who participated in the survey reported that they did not have health insurance, whereas 20 percent Hindus and 1 percent Christians said they had health insurance. Seventy-two percent Christians and 82 percent Muslims were also found to have lesser access to financial institutions. Seventy-four percent Christians, 98 percent Muslims and 24 percent Hindus said there were no organisations that looked after the rights of religious minorities, and that they did not have any access to such organisations. Whereas, 70 percent Hindus said social organisations had worked in their localities during the pandemic. However, Muslims said no organization worked for their welfare. Thirteen percent respondents said some organisations did some work, whereas 87 percent said no such work was done. These findings show that religious minorities are vulnerable to a greater marginalization in the time of Covid-19 pandemic for a lack of their mainstreaming in society.

**Key words:** Vulnerability, religious minorities, Covid-19 pandemic

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Conclusion

The discrimination against religious minorities is structural discrimination. In the Nepalese context, religious minorities are more vulnerable to the disasters like COVID-19. They are susceptible to discrimination in terms of enjoying their basic rights in the times of disasters due to religious belief, discrimination, lack of education, poverty and lack of knowledge about their rights.

Nepal has formulated laws and policies to manage natural and human-induced disasters, but those provisions do not address the concerns of religious minorities and other vulnerable groups. The effects of power relations related to religious groups are evident in rescue, compensation and rehabilitation activities. This has been apparent in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic as well. Since people from religious minority groups are not included in prevention and control of the coronavirus and identification of affected communities and distribution of compensation, religious minorities are seen to be excluded from such activities. Due to limited interaction with other religious communities, the society's view of them, and the lack of infrastructure, religious minorities are in a more precarious position than others. Their lack of access to media and the media's bias against them has pushed them to a marginal position in society.

Nepal is a secular state. Article 26(3) of the constitution has barred any kind of behavior that is related to proselytization or hampering the religion of other people. The Criminal Code's Article 157(1) also has a provision of a year of imprisonment and up to Rs10,000 in fine if someone causes harm to the rituals of others. Article 158(2) of the code has a provision of up to five years in imprisonment and up to Rs50,000 in fine. Foreign nationals doing this kind of behaviour are liable to be expelled from the country within a week after serving the sentence. The Civil Code has been used to marginalize religious minorities who are otherwise provided with the freedom by the constitution. The effect of such discrimination is evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. The incidents of people from religious minority groups being incarcerated for the promotion of religion go against the ideals of secularism.

The fundamental causes of vulnerability exert multi-dimensional pressures on religious minorities. The pressures include lack of information, limited access to media, limited knowledge on the risks of the coronavirus, lack of transparency among other stakeholders and the difficulties in livelihood. These pressures push religious minorities further towards insecurity.

Government policies and laws have failed in mainstreaming religious minorities in their disaster management programmes. In the times of Covid-19, many cases of human rights abuses from the state and non-state factors against religious minorities have not come to light. Human rights activists and civil society members have not played effective roles to address these problems, the reason for their lethargy being the absence of religious minorities in such groups and institutions.

## Recommendations

- In times of disaster, including the Covid-19 pandemic, the rights of religious minorities and marginalized people must be ensured in all structures of disaster management including rescue, compensation and rehabilitation.
- Incidents of discrimination against religious minorities in the time of Covid-19 must be investigated independently and the guilty brought to the book.
- Religious minority institutions and civil society members must work towards ensuring the participation of religious minorities in disaster management from the local to the federal levels of the government.
- Local governments must be allocated separate budgets for religious minorities, to ensure that they are not excluded, while allocating budgets for disaster management.

- Religious minorities are susceptible to be made victims of misinformation and smear campaign, leading to their increased vulnerability, in the times of crisis. To stop this from happening, journalists and editors should be provided with sensitization trainings and fellowships so that they become more responsible.
- The Covid-19 rescue and rehabilitation programs must give priority to the livelihood issues of religious minorities as they become even more vulnerable in these times due to existing structural discrimination in society.
- The responsibility of taking care of social, economic and physical security of religious minorities and minority communities is not limited to the minorities themselves. Rather, the government, the civil society and other religious communities are equally responsible for ensuring inter-faith cooperation and support.
- The skills and capacities of the Nepal Police, the local government representatives and other stakeholders should be enhanced to ensure optimum record-keeping, monitoring and justice to the victims of religious discrimination in the times of crisis.
- Government and non-government organisations should organize sensitization program to ensure protection of rights of religious minorities and provide them with justice in the times of crisis.
- International non-government organisations should prioritise the rights of religious minorities and campaign for removal of discriminatory provisions in the constitution, laws and policies.





Samari Utthan Sewa (SUS) is a non-government, not-for-profit social development organisation. It was founded in 2008 by a group of committed youths from Dalit community. It is registered with the District Administration Office in Chitawan district and affiliated with Social Welfare Council (SWC), Kathmandu, Nepal. Since its inception in 2008, SUS has been working with the Dalit, poor, vulnerable and other socially excluded segments of the society focusing on their basic needs and improving livelihoods, while also contributing in the process empowering them to raise their voices for the cause of human rights, particularly Dalit and women human rights.

SUS takes the privilege of contemplating Mr. Markku Voutilainen, from Finland, as its Honourable Member, for his contribution in establishing the organisation. SUS feels pride in mentioning that Mr. Voutilainen initiated and involved himself in the implementation the Uplift Project (UP) – Empowerment and Community Development project focusing on the poor and oppressed communities (Dalit and landless) of Badarjhula in Chitwan and Punarbas in Sarlahi districts from 2005 to 2007. This project, in fact, laid the foundation for the establishment of SUS. Soon after the completion of the project, with the practical experiences of working even during the conflict situation and inspiration received from such a result-based project, a team of like-minded young and creative persons including the then project staffs was formed to establish this organization, which later took the responsibility of continuing and accomplishing the project.