DALIT "WITCHES" FACE EXTREME VIOLENCE IN NEPAL'S VILLAGES

Pyutar, Nepal: Advocates for the Dalit in Nepal are calling for government action to stop attacks against lower-caste women accused of witchcraft, following the brutal beating of a 45-year-old woman and her family.

The incident occurred March 20 in the Lalitpur District of Nepal, about 25 miles (40 kilometers) outside of Kathmandu. Kalli Kumari Bishwokarma, a Dalit, was accused of witchcraft, attacked, and forced to eat excrement. Ms Bishwokarma is shown above left with her husband.

The case has been taken up by the Jagaran Media Center (JMC) a leading advocate for Dalit rights and a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP). It has caused an uproar, and shows clearly that caste discrimination persists in the new, democratic Nepal, despite being formally outlawed in the interim constitution.

When JMC journalists heard about the case, they traveled to the village with a Dalit Constituent Assembly member, as well as representatives from the National Dalit Commission, National Women's Commission, and human rights organizations. Villagers tried to attack the team with stones and sticks, but the journalists were able to rescue Ms Kumari BK, her husband Chet Bahadur, and their 17-year-old daughter.

The family is now staying at a shelter in Kathmandu run by a women's rights organization. JMC

officials are pushing for the arrest of the attackers and calling on Nepal's elected officials, human rights groups, and civil society to demand justice for the victims.

Ms Kumari BK told her harrowing story to the press at the National Women's Commission, and has received coverage in newspapers, and on radio and television channels.

Her ordeal started, she said, when Bimala Lama, the headmistress of a local primary school, accused her of practicing witchcraft. Ms Lama and a group of villagers locked up Ms Kumari BK and her husband for two days, and tortured the couple until Ms Kumari BK "admitted" she was a witch.

Ms Kumari BK was kicked, punched, hit with stones, and forced to eat excrement while Ms Lama and other villagers told her that "Witches should be killed like this," according to a JMC report. The villagers also threatened to kill her husband if he spoke up in her defense.

Eventually, Ms Kumari BK gave in: "I accepted myself as a witch when they opted to chop my breasts using blades," she said.

Ms Kumari BK's case follows a disturbing pattern in villages across Nepal. JMC reported on a similar case in 2006, when a 52-year-old Dalit woman and her daughter were beaten and forced to eat feces in the village of Sunsari.

In a February report on human rights in Nepal, the US State Department noted that traditional beliefs about witchcraft still hold sway, and that shamans and local leaders commonly practice violence against suspected witches. The report described the case of Makharin Khatun, an elderly woman from Birgunj who was accused of witchcraft and fed excrement.

"Khatun lodged a report with the police, but in the absence of a law prohibiting such actions, the perpetrators were set free on bail," the report stated. "Similar incidents were seen in other parts of the country. There was no government mechanism to prevent such abuses or provide compensation to the abused."

Although Ms Kumari BK's case was also reported to police and widely covered in the media, the people responsible for her torture have not been apprehended. Police officials in Lalitpur District claim their attempts to find and arrest the culprits have been foiled by protesting villagers. On April 2, Nepal's acting Prime Minister and Home Minister, Bam Dev Gautam, said that the government will take stern action against those involved, and issue arrest warrants.

The JMC, National Women's Coalition, and Dalit civil society groups have formed a committee to put pressure on the police and local government, and to assist in resettling the family.

- Read the JMC Report
- Learn more about the Dalit journalists