

New Rural Poverty in Nepal: A Critical Issue in the 21st Century

Nepal, a predominantly agrarian country, has experienced a drastic transformation in rural poverty over recent decades. The majority of the population continues to rely on agriculture for their livelihood, but the rise of what can be termed "new poverty" has devastated many of the nation's rural areas. Despite the country's natural beauty, especially in the foothills of the Himalayas and the rocky mountainous regions, the reality for most families living in these regions is grim. Fragmented land ownership, limited modern technology, and a lack of investment has made the struggle for survival increasingly difficult.

Traditional Struggles in Rural Nepal

For centuries, Nepal's rural economy has revolved around small-scale, subsistence farming. In many remote areas, plough and bullock remain the primary tools used to prepare the land for cultivation. Every other tasks: planting, weeding, and harvesting—continue to be carried out by hand, a process mostly done by women, that requires tremendous physical labour and yields minimal profit.

The government has remained indifferent and very little has been done to alleviate these conditions. In the absence of subsidies or agricultural support programs, farmers are left to fend for themselves. Poor infrastructure, limited access to markets, and a lethargic bureaucracy only exacerbate their plight. As a result, these rural communities, which always formed the backbone of Nepal's population, have been neglected, leading to severe economic injustice and exploitation. The greatest victims of this neglect are mostly women and girls, who bear the brunt of social and economic marginalization.

The tourism industry to some extent has compensated for the loss of agricultural revenues. But here too, the rich are getting richer, and the poor are being exploited. The employees are receiving "hunger-salaries" and the working hours are up to 16 hours daily and this, seven days a week. Legislation requires a minimum salary for all workers and a contract in which the working conditions are stipulated. But like so many other laws put in place to protect the workers, these laws are simply being ignored by the employers and the authorities who are in charge to uphold the laws are indifferent and lethargic.

"Ke garne" ? (What to do?) is the common response to this collective exploitation.

The Modern Challenges: Inflation and Exodus

Over the past two decades, new factors have contributed to this growing rural poverty, worsening the already difficult circumstances. Key among these factors is rampant inflation. The prices of essential goods and services have risen sharply, while incomes have remained stagnant. For rural families living on a subsistence level, inflation is crippling. Their meagre earnings are insufficient to cover basic needs, pushing many deeper into poverty.

Another major issue is the mass exodus of Nepal's youth. Tens of thousands of young people leave the country each year, primarily for jobs in the Middle East. The government, seeing remittances as a major source of foreign currency, encourages this migration, despite the long-term negative impacts on the nation's workforce and economy. While remittances provide vital income for families, they are also a band-aid solution that fails to address the root cause of poverty. The exodus has hollowed out rural communities, leaving behind an aging population with few resources and little support.

The Aging Population and Healthcare Crisis

With the youth migrating abroad, rural Nepal is now home to an increasing number of elderly people, who often require medical care that is inaccessible in their villages. To receive treatment, they must travel to city hospitals, an expense that many families simply cannot afford. In the absence of social security or universal healthcare, the cost of medical treatment becomes an overwhelming financial burden.

To cope with these expenses, and to pay for the hefty fees charged by man-hunt-agencies and the travel expenses for the youth heading abroad, families often resort to borrowing money. Loan sharks, who charge exorbitant interest rates of up to 25% per year, are their primary source of credit. These high-interest loans drive families into deeper debt. Those who are going abroad, husbands and sons, are facing harsh working and living conditions in the middle east countries. Many

are falling seriously ill, many are dying. In Kathmandu Airport, coffins with the deceased husbands and sons are arriving almost on a daily base. The only hope for a better future is returning in a coffin—a tragedy without precedent.

With the vital remittance's ending, many end up losing their land—their most valuable and often only asset—when they are unable to repay their loans. Land loss plunges families: the widows, their children and the elderly into a cycle of extreme poverty, with no safety net to help them recover.

Thus "loan-sharks" are eating the small fish, yet another example of how the rich are getting richer and the poor are being ruined.

The Impact on Women and Girls

As families lose their land and only source of revenue women and children are left behind to fend for themselves. Many of these women, with no education or employment opportunities in the village, are forced to migrate to urban centres in search of work. Lacking skills and financial security, they frequently end up in slums, where they are vulnerable to exploitation.

The proliferation of "Dance-Restaurants & Massage parlours" in urban Nepal, particularly in cities like Kathmandu, Pokhara and Biratnagar has created a dangerous environment for these young women. Promising jobs but delivering exploitation, many of these establishments are fronts for sex trafficking and prostitution. Women and girls, desperate for income, become entangled in a web of abuse and exploitation, with little hope of escape.

Conclusion: A Humanitarian Crisis Demanding Urgent Action

The "new rural poverty" of Nepal is not just an economic problem—it is a human tragedy. As poverty deepens and rural areas become increasingly marginalized, the suffering of women and children, in particular, becomes intolerable. Without significant intervention, the cycle of poverty will continue, driving more youths out of the country and more families into destitution.

According to statistics from the WHO, around 15000 young women and adolescents are trafficked to India, China and the Middle-East every year. This

does not include the thousand helpless women and girls who are coerced into prostitution within Nepal.

To address this crisis, it would require a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach by the Government, but literally nothing has been achieved in the past decades to stop this tragical downward spiral that has engulfed the rural communities. This is not the Government's priority. **"But it definitely is ours!!!"**

"BEF's" comprehensive and direct approach, is tackling the consequences of this tragic and the vast majority of our target groups are belonging to the above mentioned victims of extreme poverty.

Currently we are caring for **50 widows/single mothers and their children and we are supporting them to live a life in security and dignity. Protecting them from exploitation, we nurture them and provide them with education and employment opportunities that will help them to break free of the vicious cycle of poverty.**

But many more are desperately waiting for help and we are determined to expand our project and establish **"BEF 2 in the year 2025"**. We have decided to establish our second branch in the **Tanahun-District** around 20 Kms from Pokhara: a rural area with a number of slum-like settlements.

We are now gradually preparing for our next big step forward and we trust that our **Donor-Community** will follow suit and support us in this challenging endeavour.

Thank you all for your strong commitment, your trust and your belief in our common cause.

This report was established by Raymond Lindinger