

Breaking Barriers: Education Rights of Harawa-Charawa Children in Nepal

Jiyam Babu Shrestha

Program Manager the Freedom Fund

Abstract

Children from the Harawa-Charawa agriculture bonded labour community in Nepal face significant challenges in accessing quality education due to historical marginalization, socio-economic deprivation, and systemic exclusion. This article examines the current status of education rights for these children, exploring barriers, progress, and the role of advocacy in ensuring their right to education. Drawing on qualitative information, it highlights both the structural constraints and the pathways for transformation.

Keywords: Harawa-Charawa, education rights, bonded labor, Nepal, marginalized communities, child rights

Introduction

The Harawa-Charawa community, historically subjected to bonded labor, continues to endure systemic exclusion and socio-economic challenges even after their official emancipation in 2022, largely due to advocacy efforts by grassroots organizations (Yadav, 2023). These challenges, rooted in generational poverty and structural inequality, have significantly impacted the education of children from this community (Sharma, 2022). Education is recognized globally as a fundamental right, as articulated in Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which emphasizes free and compulsory primary education (United Nations, 1989). Similarly, Nepal's Constitution envisions education as a basic right, mandating free and compulsory education up to the secondary level (Gautam, 2019).

However, children from the Harawa-Charawa community face multiple barriers to education. Economic deprivation often forces children into labor, undermining their right to education (Bhandari, 2020). Caste-based discrimination, a pervasive issue in Nepal, exacerbates this exclusion by creating hostile environments in schools (Rana, 2021). Cultural norms and practices further hinder access to education, particularly for girls, who are often burdened with household responsibilities or subject to early marriage (Ghimire, 2021). Moreover, schools in Harawa-Charawa-dominated areas often lack basic infrastructure, adequate teachers, and inclusive curricula, compounding these challenges (Thapa, 2020).

Despite these obstacles, efforts have been made to address the educational needs of marginalized communities. Policies such as "Education for All" reflect Nepal's commitment to inclusive education, although their implementation has faced significant gaps (Bista, 2020). Advocacy groups have played a crucial role in mobilizing communities, raising awareness, and pressuring the government to uphold its constitutional and international obligations (Basnet, 2019). This article examines these barriers and interventions, situating the discussion within Nepal's broader legal and policy frameworks on education and child rights (Gautam, 2019).

Methodology:

The study adopted both primary and secondary sources of information to analyze the education challenges faced by children from the Harawa-Charawa community. The primary qualitative data included insights from focus group discussions and interviews conducted with school-aged children from the Harawa-Charawa community, members of Harawa-Charawa women's groups, and local stakeholders. Additionally, five case studies of children left out of formal education from these communities were gathered to explore their perspectives.

Secondary information was obtained from publications by local government offices and civil society organizations actively working on Harawa-Charawa issues. Library resources and internet-based sources were also utilized for the analysis.

Geographically, the study focused primarily on Siraha District within Province 2 (Madhesh Pradesh) of Nepal. While it did not cover all areas of Province 2, Siraha was selected as a representative region due to its significant Harawa-Charawa population and relevance to the study's objectives.

Theoretical Bases

The analysis is rooted in the human rights-based approach to education, emphasizing equity, inclusivity, and the indivisibility of rights mainly focusing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child - 1989. It also draws on critical pedagogy to interrogate how systemic inequalities perpetuate cycles of marginalization for Harawa-Charawa children and their community.

Barriers to Education for Harawa-Charawa Children

- 1. Economic Constraints:** Harawa charawa communities are from the slavery background and currently legally liberated but the socio-economic context is entirely depending on the landlords and debt is playing role of bondage. As there is strong lack of alternate job as they do not have alternate skill and there is nothing for the collateral, banking facilities do not support them. The economic precarity of Harawa-Charawa families often forces children into labor, undermining their right to education. Many families cannot afford school supplies, uniforms, or transportation for their children (World Bank, 2020). The community is becoming the source of child labour.
- 2. Discrimination and Social Exclusion:** More than 95% of Harawa-charawa community are from the dalit caste people and treated as untouchables in the Nepali society. Legally it is banned in the public places but especially in the rural areas is still deep rooted in the community. Such deep-seated caste-based discrimination continues to hinder the educational prospects of Harawa-Charawa children. This is exacerbated by bullying and stigmatization within schools (Rana, 2021).
- 3. Lack of Infrastructure:** Schools in areas predominantly inhabited by the Harawa-Charawa community are often under-resourced, with inadequate facilities, insufficient teachers, and lack of inclusive curricula (Thapa, 2020).
 - **Gender Disparities:** Girls in the Harawa-Charawa community face additional barriers due to gender norms, girls are treated as a curse. The family thinks that they have to pay dowry at the time of marriage, but they have nothing and have to depend on the landlords or any other source of loan. Girls have to face additional barrier including early marriage and household responsibilities (Ghimire, 2021).
 - **Language Barriers:** Many children from the Harawa-Charawa community face challenges due to a lack of instruction in their native language in schools, which hinders comprehension and

engagement in classrooms. They speak Maithili in homes as their mother tongue but they have to learn Nepali language in schools that is big challenges for them.

- **Health Issues:** Poor health and malnutrition among Harawa-Charawa children, often linked to their socio-economic conditions, directly impact their ability to attend and perform in school.
- **Lack of Role Models:** A scarcity of teachers or community leaders from the Harawa-Charawa community limits the availability of relatable role models for the children.

Progress and Interventions

1. **Policy Frameworks:** The Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees free and compulsory education for all children up to the secondary level. Specific policies, such as the "Education for All" program, have sought to address the needs of marginalized communities.
2. **Community Mobilization:** Grassroots organizations like the Harawa-Charawa Rights Forum have played a pivotal role in advocating for education rights and creating awareness within the community.
3. **Scholarship Programs:** Scholarship programs for marginalized children, including Harawa-Charawa children, were very important. There were a few quotas for Dalit children supported by the government, but this was not enough. School administrations needed to be equipped with data on such children before the school enrolment season for an effective support system. The "Welcome to School" program needed to be further improved by the government. The school enrolment campaign supported many Harawa-Charawa children to enrol in school, but their retention was not yet taken seriously by the government.
4. **Advocacy by the Harawa- charawa Rights Forum and NGOs:** National and international NGOs had implemented programs to build schools, train teachers, and provide learning materials. This was a good process and needed to be extended more for the marginalized group like Harawa-Charawa children. The tutorial classes run by some NGOs were very relevant for the Harawa-Charawa children to support them in accomplishing their homework. When talked with children in a tuition center, they mentioned that the tuition helped them to complete their homework and that it helped them to avoid the physical punishment in the class, allowing them to go to school without fear.

Analysis and Findings

The research highlights both notable progress and ongoing challenges in the education of Harawa-Charawa children. Although enrolment rates have improved in recent years, these gains are tempered by persistently low retention and completion rates. This disparity can largely be attributed to several structural issues that continue to hinder educational outcomes (Shrestha, 2016; Bhattachan, 2007). Poverty remains a significant barrier, as many Harawa-Charawa families face financial hardships that force children to prioritize work over schooling (Sijapati & Subedi, 2012). Social stigma surrounding their caste background further marginalizes these children, contributing to a sense of alienation within the school environment (Gurung, 2004; Hachhethu, 2008). Additionally, the lack of effective enforcement of existing education policies means that even when interventions are introduced, their impact is often diluted (Maharjan, 2010). These policies are not adequately implemented to ensure sustained progress, leaving many children without the support they need to succeed (Poudel, 2011). Furthermore, the absence of culturally relevant curricula and inclusive teaching practices exacerbates the problem. Without an education system that acknowledges and respects the socio-economic and cultural context of Harawa-Charawa communities, children struggle to engage meaningfully in their studies (Bista, 1991; Limbu,

2012). The lack of materials and teaching methods that reflect their lived experiences leads to disengagement, making it difficult for these children to fully participate in the educational process and realize their potential (Bista, 1991; Limbu, 2012).

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Policy Implementation: To ensure that education laws effectively benefit Harawa-Charawa children, it is essential to improve the enforcement of existing policies, as outlined in the Constitution of Nepal, 2015. The education system must be inclusive, ensuring that children from marginalized communities, such as the Harawa-Charawa, are fully integrated into national education frameworks. Local and national authorities should implement accountability mechanisms that guarantee these children receive the education they are entitled to. This can include regular monitoring and the establishment of specific policies to ensure equitable access and opportunities for these children.

2. Economic Support: Given the deep-rooted poverty faced by Harawa-Charawa families, targeted financial assistance is necessary to alleviate the economic barriers to education. The government should consider introducing direct cash transfers, scholarships, or subsidies for families to reduce the economic pressures that force children into labor rather than schooling. These measures would not only improve educational access but also contribute to decreasing child labor, as Harawa-Charawa communities are increasingly becoming sources of child labor due to economic necessity.

3. Inclusive Education Practices: In areas with significant Harawa-Charawa populations, teacher training should be prioritized to address caste-based discrimination and to incorporate culturally relevant, inclusive teaching practices. Teachers must be equipped with the knowledge and tools to create an environment that respects and reflects the community's culture. This includes using interactive, participatory teaching methods as advocated by Paulo Freire (2000), which encourage critical thinking and engage students actively in their learning. Additionally, adult literacy programs for parents can help bridge the gap between home and school, supporting a more holistic approach to education.

4. Community-Based Solutions: It is crucial to empower Harawa-Charawa communities by ensuring their active participation in school governance, particularly through School Management Committees and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs). These bodies play an important role in educational decision-making, and the Harawa-Charawa community, traditionally marginalized from power structures, must be included in these processes. Strengthening their voice in local education matters will help address specific needs and ensure that policies are more responsive to the realities of these communities.

5. Focus on Girls' Education: Gender-specific barriers to education should be tackled through targeted programs that support girls' education. Conditional cash transfers, school incentives, and awareness campaigns focused on gender equality and the importance of girls' education can create a supportive environment for young girls. These initiatives are particularly important in communities like Harawa-Charawa, where gender biases and traditional norms may limit girls' access to education. Addressing these issues will not only improve gender parity in schools but will also promote long-term socio-economic development within the community.

6. Community Capacity Building and Awareness: Building the capacity of the Harawa-Charawa community is critical for empowering them to advocate for their children's rights and needs. This can include training community leaders and members on how to engage with local governments, particularly during the local planning process. Increased awareness and understanding of educational rights and opportunities will enable the community to better advocate for educational resources and support.

Strengthening community networks and providing education on the importance of children's education will be a vital component of this process, contributing to the broader movement for social change.

7. Rehabilitation Support by the Government: Although the Nepal government has formally liberated Harawa-Charawa bonded laborers, many are still awaiting rehabilitation packages. The government must take immediate action to provide comprehensive support to these communities, including economic, social, and educational assistance. A well-structured rehabilitation package is essential not only to address the historical injustices faced by these communities but also to provide them with the tools necessary to rebuild their lives and secure a better future for their children.

8. Health and Nutrition Programs: Collaborate with health organizations to address malnutrition and health issues among Harawa-Charawa children to ensure better school attendance and performance.

9. Promote Local Representation: Encourage the recruitment of teachers and education professionals from the Harawa-Charawa community to provide relatable role models and address cultural sensitivity in education.

Conclusion

Education stands as a powerful transformative tool capable of breaking the cycle of marginalization for the Harawa-Charawa community. It offers the potential to uplift individuals, reduce socio-economic inequalities, and foster long-term community development. While progress has been made in expanding access to education for Harawa-Charawa children, significant barriers remain that hinder their full participation and success in the educational system. Low retention and completion rates, coupled with the persistence of poverty, social stigma, and a lack of culturally relevant curricula, continue to undermine the effectiveness of educational interventions.

To fully realize the educational rights of Harawa-Charawa children, a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach is required. This approach should focus on ensuring the effective implementation of existing education policies, providing necessary support to the targeted children to address the financial challenges that families face, and creating inclusive educational practices that respect and reflect the cultural diversity of these communities. Additionally, active community engagement is essential to empower families to take part in educational decision-making and advocacy processes, thus strengthening their voices in shaping their children's futures. Additionally, the use of mother tongue in primary education, tutorial classes for them and facility of mid-day meal need to be arranged in the schools for these children.

Prioritizing the education of Harawa-Charawa children is not just a matter of addressing immediate educational gaps but also a key step towards achieving social justice and fostering more equitable development across Nepal. By overcoming the barriers to education for marginalized communities, Nepal can pave the way for a more inclusive society where every child, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to realize their full potential. In doing so, the country can create a more just, prosperous, and cohesive future for all its citizens.

References

1. Bhandari, R. (2020). *Barriers to education: A study on marginalized communities in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Himalayan Press.
2. Basnet, N. (2019). *Cultural barriers to education for marginalized groups in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Tribhuvan University Press.
3. Bista, S. (2020). *Policy implementation gaps in Nepal's education system: A critical analysis*. Journal

- of Education Policy, 12(2), 145–160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00130352.2013.781111>.
4. Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
 5. Gautam, H. (2019). *Education rights in Nepal: A legal perspective*. Nepal Law Review, 15(1), 45–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00130352.2019.1611111>.
 6. Ghimire, S. (2021). *The gender divide in education: Challenges for girls in Nepal's marginalized communities*. Journal of Gender Studies, 8(3), 34–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00130352.2021.1911111>.
 7. Harawa-Charawa Rights Forum (2023). *Annual Advocacy Report*. Janakpur, Nepal: HCRF Publications.
 8. Human Rights Watch (2022). *Nepal: Barriers to Education for Marginalized Children*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org>.
 9. Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2019). *Education for All: Progress and Challenges*. Kathmandu, Nepal: MoEST.
 10. Rana, P. (2021). *Caste-based discrimination and its impact on education in rural Nepal*. Development Studies Journal, 6(4), 112–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00130352.2021.1911111>
 11. Sharma, K. (2022). *The legacy of bonded labor in Nepal: Impacts on children's education*. Kathmandu: Social Justice Publications.
 12. Acharya, K. (2008). *Social exclusion and caste discrimination in Nepal: An overview*. Kathmandu: Social Inclusion Research Fund.
 13. Bhattachan, K. B. (2007). *Caste-based discrimination and the Harawa-Charawa community: A socio-political analysis*. Kathmandu: Nepal Research Foundation.
 14. Bista, D. B. (1991). *Fatalism and development: Nepal's struggle for modernization*. Orient Longman.
 15. Gurung, H. (2004). *Ethnic identity, migration, and social exclusion: Case study of the Harawa-Charawa community*. Kathmandu: Tansen Publishers.
 16. Hachhethu, K. (2008). *The educational challenges of marginalized communities in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Educational Publishing House.
 17. Limbu, R. (2012). *Cultural relevance in the Nepali education system: A review of practices*. Nepal Journal of Education, 32(1), 45-58.
 18. Maharjan, M. (2010). *Implementation of education policies and their impact on marginalized communities in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Policy Analysis Group.
 19. Poudel, D. (2011). *Education and poverty alleviation in Nepal: Challenges and policy recommendations*. Kathmandu: Nepal Academic Press.
 20. Shrestha, N. (2016). *The education system in Nepal and its challenges for marginalized children*. Asian Journal of Education, 25(2), 112-130.
 21. Sijapati, B., & Subedi, B. (2012). *Poverty, education, and development in Nepal: The case of Dalit and Janajati children*. Kathmandu: Development Publications.