

## **Convention on Girl Trafficking : When will it be Implemented ?**

Sushil Bhattarai

In the present context, the saying 'something is better than nothing' is rife among Nepal's civil society, especially among women activists. Women working in this sector have a new ray of hope after the SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu on January 2002 passed a convention against girl trafficking which has been a huge social issue for a long time. Durga Ghimire, President of ABC – an organisation working against girl trafficking, expressed her excitement at the commitment made by the 7 SAARC countries of an issue which had been neglected by the SAARC nations for a long time.

The 14 point convention passed by the SAARC nations tries to perceive the issue of girl trafficking very closely. For the first time, the 7 nations have acknowledged girl trafficking as a serious crime and the Summit has attempted to incorporate the following main points: exchange of support between nations to control illegal girl trafficking for prostitution; rehabilitation of trafficked girls; handover of criminals of girl trafficking. Expressing his fear, President of Child Development Society Sharad Sharma claims that there are many suspicions on the implementation of the Convention. He adds, "Nepal has already ratified approximately 2 dozen international conventions after the restoration of democracy. Since the implementation part of these conventions have been very weak, it is very doubtful that the convention on girl trafficking will get implemented effectively. According to an informal data, 5000 girls are trafficked from Nepal to India and other places annually. The same number is trafficked from Bangladesh to Pakistan and Sri Lanka to India. Among the SAARC nations, besides Bhutan and Maldives, all the other 5 nations have faced this problem since a long time."

The convention has identified sexual exploitation as the main cause for girl trafficking among SAARC nations. Contrary to this, Durga Ghimire President of ABC feels that the above identification is not complete. She adds, "Besides sexual exploitation, girls have also been trafficked for the sale of kidney, marriage, domestic worker, etc. According to a study conducted on girl trafficking, 97% of the trafficked girls are illiterate and they are easily taken across the border in the pretext of finding them jobs." Finance Minister Dr. Ram Sharan Mahat points out the need to have exchange of much coordination and support between the sending nations and the receiving nations. He added that the General Secretary of SAARC will be notified about the need to form a special task force for the purpose.

According to spokesperson of the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare Pratap Pathak, the convention could be a possible solution to the emerging problem. He pointed out the importance of education and awareness targeting the places where there is highest number of trafficking. He also stressed on the need for support from the police department, local administration, community organisations, etc, for effective implementation of the convention.

In this context, an agreement was signed between UNIFEM and SAARC on 31 December prior to the SAARC Summit. In the agreement, the two organisations have committed to implement activities on priority basis and having the same objectives highlighting gender equality. The agreement was prepared based on the need for human rights, gender equality, gender justice and women empowerment for the social and economical development of the nation. According to UNIFEM Project Manager Aruna Thapa, UNIFEM has been implementing various activities comparing men and women in the SAARC region since more than a decade. She expressed her hope that the agreement between the two organisations would help bring about empowerment based gender equality.

Nepal has already ratified Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Delhi Declaration, SAARC level Rawalpindi Declaration concerning children and dozens of other international conventions. In the context of Nepal not being able to implement these commitments effectively, it has to be seen how it deals with the present commitment.

## **Catering Service run by Women**

Surya Thapa

In the Nepali context, the economical state of women is very low in comparison to that of men. Traditionally, women were only limited to household chores such as cooking, fetching water, etc., which still remains the same in the present context. On an average, women spend about 11 hours working and in spite of this there have been no significant changes in their lives. Very few women have understood that the main reason behind this is the patriarchal social values, exploitation and discrimination. But, they have started recognising the exploitations and discriminations against them.

Provided the right opportunity and encouragement, women are able to successfully implement any work that men are doing. There are many examples of this even in very conservative societies. There are ample examples in Nepal as well where women have taken up the challenges of working alongside men.

A group of women of Gophal Tole, Kathmandu have organised themselves to run a catering service which was virtually the dominion of men. Women who attended the adult literacy classes implemented by Youth Corn Club, Gophle established a mother's group among themselves and formed a catering service business. The aim of the business is not only to make profit but, also to productively use their spare time, generate income and increase the feelings of working unitedly. The business was started in 1994 and it has slowly gained momentum as people started knowing about it. According to the President of Ma Puch, Nanisobha, the group was established with the aim of having close contact among women who attended the classes and to generate income through group attempts and the catering service is the first example of this.

In the year 2000/2001, the catering service yielded a profit of Rs. 1,43,554 out of which 50% was taken by the group members as profit and the other 50% was deposited in the bank for emergency use. According to President of Corner Club, Shree Krishna Maharjan, the main fund has an amount of Rs. 50,000.

A cash fund of Rs. 5000 is separated for buying materials for the catering service. The Pucha office has one telephone and one employee. According to Nanisobha Dangol, the organisation has 32 members and the members are given a pink sari every year from the profits as a dress of the organisation. Gujeswori Shreshtha has played a great role in supporting and encouraging the women members to forge ahead with the catering service and at present the profits are more or less average.

At present, the organisation is providing services to a maximum of 30 persons and a minimum of 20 persons. Other catering services cater to bigger parties whereas Ma Puch is gaining popularity in serving to lesser number of people. Ma Puch has been able to establish a different identity especially for Newari dishes. Women members themselves take turns in cooking, serving and washing dishes and they get wages for the days that they work. Thus, they have been able to generate income for themselves as well as retain their ownership to the service. They have become self dependent through the wages they earn from the service. According to President Maharjan, most of the women save their earnings for emergency use.

The catering service run by women of Gophal Tole has been able to make its impact in workshops, seminars, marriage parties, other ceremonies and in traditional Newari parties. Besides this, Ma Puch has also been providing services in picnic spots such as Kakani, Nagarkot, Tribhuvan Park, Godavari, Dakshinkali, and Balaju. The presence of women members of Ma Puch at these picnic outings where people come to relax has lent a more respectful and more disciplined atmosphere. According to one person who had taken the services of Ma Puch at one picnic outing, the women members of the organisation are very well behaved and they act as mothers and sisters. President Nanisobha says that many people praise the food as delicious.

Ma Puch has not provided any formal or commercial trainings to the members of the organisation. According to one active member Chameli, whatever they do at the catering service are the same things that they have been doing at home from a long time. Therefore, there is no need for special skill or training.

Ma Puch is the first catering service run by women in Nepal. The organisation which started with a new identity for traditional parties can give a message to women all over Nepal. It proves that if women have the will to work, they can become successful even through traditional businesses using the opportunities provided by the urban environment. According to Chameli Dangol, some of the times they have to face dissatisfaction at home because it gets late by the time they return back.

Women members of this group have unitedly forged ahead and presented a very good example to the society. But, they have not been able to get ample job opportunities since the members take turns in working for the catering service. One member gets to work approximately 15 to 16 times in a year which is not a lot of work. In the initial stages, women used to make some excuses not to come to work even when their turn arrived. But, at present they show more eagerness to go to work and are always questioning about their turn. Therefore, the catering service is definitely in a profit but the women are not getting as much work as they would want maybe due to lack of publicity or because of conservative society.

There are thousands of NGOs which organise workshops, seminars, interactions and discussions on women empowerment on a daily basis. President Nanisobha is confused why these organisations do not recognise Ma Puch as an attempt towards women empowerment. If these organisations catered to the services of Ma Puch, more women would get the opportunity to earn income as well as work longer time. Ma Puch could be a positive example of women empowerment for women all over the country.

### **Women are forced to fast in the hope of giving birth to a son**

- Chandrakishore

A person should have an independent right to fast for religious beliefs or for health reasons. But, when a woman is forced to fast due to superstitious beliefs than it is torture. Most of the women living in Terai are forced to fast because of superstitious beliefs.

Three years ago, Arati Jha (name changed) of Balara Sarlahi was married to a man residing in Matsari VDC of Rautahat District. She was unable to give birth to any child during this period. Therefore, her mother-in-law pressured her to fast every Thursday on the advice of an astrologer. Arati is not allowed to eat or drink anything on the day of fasting and she is forced to remain hungry for 24 hours. Because of this, she has lost weight.

In the Terai, there are many other women like Arati who are forced to fast in the hope of either giving birth or for employment of the husband or even for finding a good husband. Arati complains that she does have the desire to give birth to a child but she thinks that forcing someone to fast for that reason is wrong. But, no one listens to her complaint. Instead, the villagers think that she is doing the right thing by fasting.

Saraswoti Choudhary, a social activist living in Janakpur feels that forceful fasting is torture and the society should be made aware of this. On the other hand, Mina Jha of Bathanaha, Mahottari feels that it is natural for women to fast for the sake of their husbands or children since their whole world revolves around them.

The society accepts forceful fasting of daughters and daughter-in-laws by their mother or mother-in-laws as a natural social value. Because of these traditions and belief, women are forced to fast on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday or Saturday in the Terai region. Women either fast themselves selecting a certain day or are forced to fast after consulting an astrologer. Some women fast only on special occasions. Most of the women fast on Tuesdays and Thursday.

According to Advocate Dipak Rajbhandari, President of Amnesty International Birganj, no one should be forced to fast because it is their independent right. Pressuring someone to fast is a crime.

According to Sociologist Dr. Kulananda Lal, this stigma should be ended through the society itself. Hoping to achieve things by fasting is a superstitious belief. But, even the literate people of the society believe in this superstition.

Kalikant Trishit, President of Maithili Literary Council opines that the importance of fasting has been mentioned in the astrology but too much fasting is against the norm. He believes that voluntary fasting or forceful fasting of women in the Terai region is superstitious and it should be stopped through the implementation of awareness raising programmes. According to Bhojpuri writer Gajal Jha, the trend of fasting has affected women mentally and physically.

According to Dr. Sushil Kumar Chaudhary of Birganj Hospital, women who fast too much are affected by low blood pressure, pain in hands and feet, headaches and gastric. Another doctor Shyam Sunder Das adds that many women in the Terai region suffer from gastric due to fasting. On one hand, women in the Terai region do not get to eat nutritious food and on the other hand, they fast for number of days which brings an imbalance in their health.

In most of the cases, mothers or mother-in-laws are the ones who force women to fast. According to Parliamentarian Dr. Bansidhar Mishra, fasting is accepted as very normal due to the tradition but forceful fasting affects the mental and physical health of a woman.

Shalini Choudhary gives an example of a girl who became physically weak after her family forced her to fast since her husband did not come to perform the ceremony of 'Gauna'.

According to Ramrajya Yadav of Parsa, the trend of fasting is usually seen in the well to do families. It is not common in smaller communities.

Most people express surprise why they are told that women are oppressed by this practice because they have the belief that women will do anything for their husbands and children and that women are the ones who willingly do fasting. Rambharoshe analyses it in a different way by saying that women may be more attracted towards prayers, fasting, etc., because of the feeling of insecurity among them. Although a few women social workers accept that forceful fasting is oppression on women and the trend is due to superstition, they feel that people should accept it easily if it is done for the benefit of someone.

**Being addressed as wife number 3..... not as Ward Member**  
- Baburam Dhakal

"From which party did you win the elections ?" Before the question is complete, Sabitri Choudhary answers, "Surya party."

"There is no party called 'Surya' in Nepal. Isn't that the symbol provided by your party for the elections ?" Now Sabitri is in a dilemma. She thinks for a long time and after she cannot come up with an answer, she turns towards her friend Chamelidevi Choudhary and asks, "Why don't you tell him what my party is ?" Answering this question, Chameli retorts back, "How do I know what your party is ? Our party is tree."

Both Sabitri and Chameli are representatives of Ward No. 7, Bangai VDC, Rupandehi District. The only difference is that Sabitri is the elected representative of Nepal Communist Party UML and Chameli is the nominated representative of Nepali Congress. The VDC is actually dominated by the Nepali Congress but all the other elected representatives besides Chameli represent the Nepal Communist Party UML.

Ordinarily, the voice of the party which dominates the Parliament or its local departments has much impact and the voice of the opposition is not heard. This is true not only in the context of Nepal but the whole world. Therefore, it is not strange to see the same thing happening in Bangai VDC. But, if one problem faced by both the representatives is reviewed then it could be a lesson to those who believe that there is politics only between the ruling party and the opposition. Both the representatives speak out together, "Whenever we try to speak, the other party members stop us by saying that being a woman, we should not try to act too wise. The other party friends also treat us as women, not as representatives."

These two representatives are as much worried about not being recognised as representatives as they are worried about not being able to control the corruption in the VDC. In the previous years, the budget of other wards were curtailed in order to provide electricity to Ward Nos. 3, 4 and 9. But, neither did electricity reach there these wards nor was the money spent on anything else. When they enquired about where the money was spent, they were told not to be too wise being a woman.

If the upcoming elections is held in the designated time than there are only a few months left for these local representatives to serve their term. The last 5 years play a very important role in the history of Nepal keeping in view gender equality. The government implemented a rule to include at least one woman representative out of 5 representatives of each municipality, VDC and the wards after feeling that women need to be included in local development and to develop leadership capabilities among women in the political level. Accordingly, there are 36,000 women representatives in the local level in the present system which is a historical record.

According to Rukmani Gyawali Chairperson of Ward No. 10 of Butwal Municipality, she has not been discriminated so much but many of her friends have been discriminated by male representatives only because they are women. This trend has not been able to be addressed properly. Rukmani adds that in the initial stages, there was an environment of mistrust but, at present no one is able to point to her and say that things did not happen because she was a woman. She feels that women's voices have not been heard because of the lack of education and the lack of political awareness among women representatives.

She cites one unforgettable incident which occurred when she was attending a meeting of Asia Pacific women representatives in Philippines. According to her, the meeting was supposedly for women mayors and deputy mayors. But, since Nepal does not have any women mayor or deputy mayor, she was deputed to attend the meeting. When the other participants heard this, they felt very sorry for Nepal being such a backward country.

Rupandehi is just one example of women discrimination. There are thousands of women representatives in various levels of the society who face these kinds of discrimination only because they are women. If the women representatives of Rupandehi, which is a highly developed district, cannot say their party's name after serving 5 years of term than what could be the state of women representatives in remote districts such as Dolpa, Mugu? Is this the only limitation of women upliftment that the government and the political parties committed to ? Secretary of UML Lumbini Zone, Ramnath Dhakal claims that the UML party is more sensitised than any other parties in developing women leadership in all levels. The party's local central committee organises a meeting of all women representative every year to identify the problems faced by them and to find the solutions. The 22-point mandate that the party has forwarded also mentions that women reservation in the local level should be 35% which proves how serious the party is for women upliftment. When he was questioned as to how his party representative could not even name her party even after 5 years of serving her term, he replied that if that was true than the party should be serious about this.

Similarly, local leader of Nepali Congress Ram Prasad Khanal claims that the Nepali Congress is committed to improve the situation of women representatives than any other parties. He added that reality would come out if a comparison was made between UML and the Nepali Congress.

This clearly indicates that political parties raise the issue of women equality only to compare themselves with other parties and limit their actions to slogans. If the political parties were serious and committed about the issue of women equality, thousands of women such as Chameli and Sabitri would not have been discriminated for being a woman. Therefore, although numbers of women representatives have increased in the local level, these parties have not been able to develop leadership among these women members due to their mentality of gaining support of women only for election votes. At a time when the election is drawing near and when there is much talk on women participation in the political level, it is very important to analyse the agonies faced by women such as Sabitris and Chamelis in the society.

Women Participation in the Economical Level

- Bijay Ghimire

Every year, the world celebrates March 8th as International Women's Day. This celebration may not hold much meaning to the women of the developed world since there is hardly any discrimination between men and women in that part of the world. But, it does hold great importance to women in the under developed countries. According to United Nations, women are the most affected by poverty. In Nepal, women do not have any reach to education, health, loans, etc. According to a recently published report on Nepal's human development, 40% of girl child are beyond the reach of education.

In recent times, there have been some changes in the economical and social situation of poor families living in Marchawar area of Rupandehi District. Due to the enthusiasm of the local people in income generating and economical activities, there has been decrease in malnutrition of children, increase in school attendance, increase in the reach of health facilities and decrease in other social malpractices. These changes have been brought about by women. The women in the area themselves create a savings fund and use the fund for income generating activities. They have been able to improve their lives through small amounts. There are other rural areas as well where women have been implementing savings and loan institutions. At a time when big financial institutions linked to central bank and the government are failing, women's saving institutions seem to be doing fairly well. The only hope of development in Nepal is such long term loan programmes run by women and increased women participation in income generating activities.

The planners of Nepal have finally realised the reality that success in eradicating poverty cannot be achieved without bringing women into the mainstream of economic development. According to Prithvi Raj Legal, Vice Chairman of the National Planning Commission, women will be mainly targeted in the upcoming 10th Plan of Action in bringing changes in the economic development of the country. The main objective of the plan is to bring women forward through empowerment. Although, the 9th plan had the objective of eradicating poverty, it was not as successful as expected. According to the National Planning Commission, the 9th plan targeted to decrease the poverty rate from 42% to 32% but it was only successful in decreasing 4%. Women are the most affected by poverty. The planners have become more sensitive in involving women after the 9th plan became unsuccessful. Member of National Planning Commission, Dr. Shankar Sharma points out that there is more stress on women's participation since the backward areas need to be brought forward for poverty eradication. Since not much importance is given in the implementation of all the plans in Nepal, there can be no definite predictions. But, one thing that is definite is that women will get more importance in economic activities in the days to come.

Although there are no estimations on women's role in the gross domestic production, they have definitely contributed to it. Women's indirect participation in agriculture, which is the highest contributor to the GDP, is very high. In the far west, women have contributed more towards agriculture in comparison to men. Even in most of the other underdeveloped countries, women participate more actively in agriculture as well as providing education and shelter to their children. But, they have very limited reach to education. According to a recent report on South Asia Human Development, only one fourth of the women population is literate in Nepal. According to Dr. Sharma, if a child is provided one year of education, he contributes to 4% of the family income. Whereas, if a girl child is educated for the same period, she contributes 20% in decreasing infant death. If a girl is educated upto the secondary level, the percentage will rise to 40%.

The first important thing to stress on is women education if they are to be brought forward in the mainstream of economic development. Fifty percent of the observers of the CAN Information Technology, which concluded recently, were women. The main reason for this is education and not because of any government programmes. Since there has been an increase of literate women in Kathmandu, they have built enthusiasm to learn new things. Therefore, it is very clear that educating women should be the first priority. This will make it easier to involve them into economical activities. If the government's plans and policies can capture the enthusiasm shown by women in information technology than there will be great economical development. A report on gender development published by World Bank mentions that if countries of South Asia and Africa had followed the same kind of women education pattern given by South Korea, Japan, Indonesia in the 1960's than their would have been increase in the per capita income and the GDP of the country. Women

participation is the main reason behind the success of the Asian countries located towards the East. In these countries, women contribute a lot to the GDP as well as information technology and in technical fields.

According to Chairman of the World Bank, James Ulfenson increased women participation is the only main issue for effective development. Therefore, the World Bank has spent much on girl child education, long term loans, safe motherhood, etc.

Another report stresses on the need to provide education to women in increasing agricultural products. Quoting a report, the 'Economist' published in London states that if women of Cameroon and Kenya got the same kind of education and opportunities as men, the agriculture production of these countries would increase 5 times. Therefore, it is essential to increase women participation in agriculture in Nepal as well. In Nepal, there are more women staff in all the well established banks. There are many successful examples of women who have established financial institutions.

The present state of women who represent 50% of the population is not very desirable. There is huge discrimination between men and women and women are paid less wages for the same work that men do. Women participation is almost nil in small and cottage industries as well as in modern services. There is only 8.55% of women participation in civil service. Women participation has not been able to come in the mainstream economic development. The Planning Commission does not have any women members. The attempt of the Tenth Plan to bring women into the mainstream economic development is definitely positive. At a time when women are being attracted to income generating activities, information technology and other challenging activities, they require all the support that they can get. In this manner, women participation in economic development can be increased.