

## **People's Representatives Themselves Recommend Brothels**

*- Shankar Kharel*

One more time they were willing to go to India with renewed enthusiasm due to the persuasion of other people. They knew very well where they were going. After all they had already been in the clutches of brokers and the brothel madams who earned their income through the exploitation of their bodies. It was difficult to cross the border to India once again. But, the clever brokers had already arranged recommendation letters from the Village Development Committee to fool the police and the volunteers in the border area. Seema, Ramana and Meena (names changed) had no idea about this. Padam Bahadur Ghale, Chairman of Rautahat, Pauhari Village Development Committee wrote a recommendation letter stating that the girls were going for employment to India knowing that they were being sent to brothels. The recommendation letter number 402 of Pauhari VDC mentions that all three girls are married whereas they have never been married at all. The fact that they were being taken to brothels under the VDC recommendation became clear after the police and the volunteers stationed in the border started cross-questioning them. The three girls had come back for a few weeks to visit their homes in Rautahat. Since they heard that the police would be suspicious of one or two girls traveling by themselves in the border area, they believed that the VDC recommendation would be solid. Seema points out that the VDC Chairman knowingly or unknowingly wrote them a recommendation letter that they would be working in building number twelve in Mumbai. She adds that their plans were fouled due to the active role of the police and the volunteers. She mentioned that she did not want to go but she had to feed herself and she was only going on the condition of returning soon.

When they got arrested, they sacrificed their dreams of going to Mumbai brothels. They started crying and expressing their agony on why they had to go to the brothels and about the brokers. At present, they are under the protection of Maiti Nepal where they are acquiring skilful trainings for a better future forgetting the bitter past that they had had. The above example is not the first of its kind. President of Maiti Nepal Anuradha Koirala takes out a stack of such recommendation letters and comments that the police also have many letters and so many women may have crossed the border on these VDC recommendations.

Although a number of women may already have been taken across the border by the use of these letters, at present it has come under control. But, the VDC recommendation letters have not stopped. Senior police officer Kalyan Timsina says that he had returned more than 100 girls carrying such recommendation letters in coordination with District Development Committee (DDC) to Khotang, Sankhuwasabha and Bhojpur while he was stationed in Morang. But, he has no idea whether the returned girls really went back to their districts or chose another border to go to India. He adds that the police give them the return bus ticket and advise them not to go across the border but they cannot do more than that.

Ramita Rai of Khotang is one of the victims who was saved by Mr. Timsina. She had been taken by brokers with a recommendation letter from the VDC mentioning that she was going to India for treatment. She had been very happy when she was rescued. Ms. Koirala of Maiti Nepal says that these people even take the support of handicapped people and children to cross the border. The administration has to follow the rule that they have to let the people with VDC recommendation go across the border. If the police had not controlled this trend, there may have been many more Nepali girls working as commercial sex workers in India.

Twenty one districts of Nepal borders India and there is 1065 kms of open border. There is no security check along these borders and police presume that the brokers take advantage of this situation to take girls across the border through these routes. According to Pradumna Karki, a police officer who had been stationed in Morang, the police do not take heed of such recommendation letters otherwise many girls would have been sent across the border. The VDC representatives defend themselves by saying that they write recommendation letters to those whose family are poor. But, there should be a thorough research before writing such letters.

But, the trend has not stopped even after the police sent circulars to the concerned districts. According to Timsina, if the VDC representatives are writing letters knowingly then some action should be taken against them and NGOs and other concerned organisations should generate awareness as well. According to organisations working in this sector, very few complaints are registered with the police on such recommendation letters. A large number of recommendations come from Birganj, Biratnagar, Rautahat, Bhairawa, Kakadvitta, Saptari, Siraha and Nawalparasi. According to a VDC Association representative, the association is preparing a list of 4,000 VDCs ordering them not to write letters of recommendation for foreign service for women. A large number of women have already been trafficked through these recommendation letters. Most of the villages which have sent recommendation letters are located in the eastern region where poverty is rampant. Organisations working in this sector must generate awareness in these areas.

### **Can the Law Restrict the Natural Rule of Childbirth ?**

**- Lochana Sharma**

The patriarchal society of Nepal is trying to bind the natural phenomenon of pregnancy and childbirth through the law. Most may be surprised to hear that the law states that a woman must give childbirth within the designated date.

Nita Subba of Jhapa gave birth to a daughter one year or 43 weeks after her husband left for Hongkong. But, Nita did not get any love or affection during her pregnancy just because the society and the law blamed her for giving late birth. A question was raised on her purity and the pain of this hurt her more than the labour pain.

An article had come out in the papers last year that Jhuma Yadav of Saptari had been kicked out of her husband's home after she gave birth to a son 10 months after her husband's death.

The above problems are faced by women in our society because of giving childbirth later than the designated time. Similarly, women who give early childbirth also face the same kind of agony and pain.

Harka Limbu of Jhapa divorced his wife Rupa after she gave birth to a child 7 months and 13 days after marriage. The above incident was supported by the literate circle.

All the three victims are ready to go through any kind of tests to prove their purity. They themselves do not know how it happened.

Due to the negative thoughts of the society and the harsh legal arrangements, many such incidents can be found in our society and in the files of the court. These women are barely surviving and they live because of their love for the newborn.

A child who is born after seven months of pregnancy hardly survives and some societies believe that those who survive become very lucky in future.

The society believes that a woman gives childbirth after completing 9 months of pregnancy. Any birth before or after this designated time is looked upon suspiciously even by the literate circle. The legal system of Nepal also preserves this feeling. The new Country Code 2020 mentions that a child will be legally a husband's only if the wife gives birth 272 days or 38 weeks and 2 days after the separation from her husband. If the wife gives birth on 273rd day of separation than the child is not believed to be her husband's. Advocate Munakiran Koirala believes that the law totally supports the husband. The law also states that if the husband has lost his sexual prowess any time before the 272nd day than even if the wife gives birth on the 272nd day, than the child is

considered not to be his. The law strongly states that only the child who is born on the 272nd day will be legally the husband's.

Doctors feel that the whole legal system and the society's belief acts against the nature and human rights activists feel that the law must be amended. Dr. Aruna Upreti is totally against the clause stated in the law. According to her, safe childbirth can be given from 210 days or 7 months to 40 weeks or 290 days. Dr. Shanakar Prasad Hujdar also feels that the law discriminates against women by mentioning 272 days. According to him, childbirth can be early if there is lot of bleeding or if the mother is small. In the same manner, childbirth can be late due to various other reasons.

Also the mother may not know exactly when she conceived. Therefore, the number of days may not always be correct. In the previous year, in Italy a woman gave birth to 4 sons and 2 daughters after 31 months or 3 years which the doctors point out is an exceptional case. Advocate Dr. Shanta Thapaliya says that the above incident could be a good example in the context of Nepal. The government of Italy had said that the above incident was the fourth of its kind in Italy. Journalists had paid huge amounts of money to take photographs of the mother and children. Dr. Thapaliya adds that it is pitiful that the law discriminates even in such issues as health and pregnancy. She believes that the law needs to be amended. According to her, the victims of such discrimination have never sought legal aid.

The Nepali legal system challenges the natural happening of the world. Childbirth does not happen exactly within the days mentioned by the court. Many examples can be seen nationally and internationally. The law must be abolished as early as possible.

## **Exemplary Lifestyle of Women in the Annapurna Region**

### **- Yubaraj Gautam**

Harimaya Gurung of Ghandrung does not have any spare time. She is the President of the main committee formed from among 21 *Aama Samuha's* (Mother's Group). Harimaya remains busy in conducting the household chores, in greeting and feeding the guests, in maintaining the roads, in entertaining tourists by dancing, etc. She gets up around 4 in the morning and works till 10 at night. This has proved to be a blessing in disguise to many women in that area. They do not have to depend upon anyone for 3 - 4 thousand rupees. The lifestyle of most of the women of Ghandruk, Chomrong, Plandruk, Lumle and the hilly districts of Annapurna region has become exemplary far and wide.

According to social activist of Ghandruk Jagan Gurung, people started becoming aware 14 years ago after the Annapurna Conservation Project started its activities. The project is called ACAP and till then most of the women in the area were illiterate. Women started joining adult literacy classes and doing productive work after the ACAP opened childcare centers for children whose mother's were busy. It is worth mentioning the active participation of women in developing the tourism industry in the area.

In the beginning, the men resisted and ridiculed the attempts of women to do some creative work. Later, when they saw the end product, they started helping the women. The area has also been a good example of gender integration.

Fifty five year old Lila Kumari Gurung of Komrong mentions that the women collected money during festival and lit the village with electricity. At present 15 households of Komrong have

electricity from donations. She adds that the village is lit by peltric set in the Mudi river. But, the set has to be taken to Butwal for any kind of repairs. She further adds that she did not attend school since at those times daughters were hardly sent to school. But, now a young girl of the village conducts adult literacy classes where 10-15 mothers attend classes. Even the *Dalit* women have started becoming aware.

Tourism industrialist of Chomrong, Bhuvaneshwore Gurung confirms the active participation of women in the Annapurna region where yearly approximately 70,000 tourists visit the area. He adds that the women in the area do not have any spare time but this does not mean that they are not happy.

The Annapurna Conservation Area spreads over 7,629 sq. kms and includes 56 VDCs within its project area. The project directly and indirectly benefits 1,12,000 people living in the area. There are more than 50,000 women in the area and they are play a very important role in tourism and small industry which even amazes the tourists. American student of environmental science Caroline Roy mentions that the women working for environmental protection and tourism with the support of ACAP is exemplary.

There are about two dozen hotels in Ghandruk which is a prime location to watch Annapurna Range and the Fishtail Mountain. The hoteliers have allocated a fixed price for lodging and fooding so that the tourists do not get cheated. The village which has been an example of rural tourism does not have any hoodlums creating scenes at night after drinking. If anyone disturbs the society, the *Aama Samuha* takes action against them.

According to Project Chief of Annapurna Conservation Area of Ghandruk, Yam Bahadur Gurung they do not disturb the villagers in any issues. The project has from time to time raised awareness on how to coordinate between development and environment. Therefore, the villagers do not fell trees without prior consent. Instead they use gas and kerosene which is carried from Pokhara. This area is an example of how development can be achieved without disturbing the environment, culture or the respect of people. Active women in this area complain that women NGOs in the cities are only limited to organising workshops and seminars.

Seventy year old Min Bahadur Gurung is very satisfied with the progress in Ghandruk during the recent years. He adds that even the women have started becoming aware of the importance of education and developing the village by themselves. People have become more understanding.

According to President of *Aama Samuha*, Harimaya Gurung, there is a need to increase the electricity power by 50 kilowatts which could then help open a bakery, machines for water filter and support small industries. The women of Ghandruk have managed to collect Rs. 8,00,000 by raising Rs. 5 from each household and they feel very proud of it.

Former teacher and social activist Shankar Man Gurung mentions the important role that ACAP has played in environmental protection, education, employment, local development, tourism and gender equality. He adds that the people in the area would be more encouraged if the media and the NGOs working in the cities would highlight their activities.

### **Uma - An Example of Empowerment**

- ***Lekhnath Bhandari***

Uma Pokhrel has been an example of courage and perseverance among the people of Gitanagar, Chitwan District. Most of the women of the area are encouraged by her deeds.

The activities done by women's groups of Gitanagar is worth mentioning. The groups were formed through an NGO known as 'Helper' but, the donor agencies have not provided any important support. But, the progress made by women through the coordination and encouragement of the organisation has been outstanding. In the beginning, the organisation had trained women facilitators to gather women in groups and had provided one lamb each to the first group of 25 women. These women had to give the women of other group a lamb each after reproduction.

Through this, the women have had the opportunity to interact amongst each other, collect savings through membership fees and garner self respect in the society. Uma is one of the members of this group.

A total number of 19 groups have been formed since the year 2048. Among them, 325 women members of 13 groups are highly active. Sita Poudyal, one of the members has already received an international award and Parvati Bhattarai and Gyandhari Basel have received national level awards.

Uma is one of the members who had taken the highest amount of loan but she has not fallen back on payments. An example of courage and perseverance, 43 year old Uma who had taken a loan of more than 1,25,00 rupees has only 3,000 rupees remaining to be paid.

Things came upon her unexpectedly and she had to bear the pain of repaying a loan of more than 1,00,000 rupees or lose her home. Her husband had two wives including her but all of them lived happily. One day her husband married a third woman and started living in Pokhara. There, he took a loan to start a business but the business did not flourish and he left without repaying the loan. The person who had given the loan started searching for her husband's family and finally landed in Chitwan. He filed a case in court and the court stated that the payment had to be made even if the house had to be taken. Uma took this problem to her group. Her husband's second wife also had the same problem. If they could not come up with 48,000 rupees each, their house would be sold.

Uma took out a loan from the group and asked for support from other members as well. She paid the loan together with her husband's second wife. She was able to repay her group loan by farming and animal husbandry. Uma, who had studied till the eighth grade, is also a volunteer of the Family Planning Association. She also gained skills in sewing and tailoring. Finally, she managed to pay her medical expenditure, education expenses of her daughter, household expenditures and the loan payment. Uma has been suffering from heart ailment since the past 9 years.

Uma's husband does not live in Pokhara anymore. Among his four wives, one has already left him for another man and one has started living separately. Her husband is living with his second wife at present. Uma gives full credit to women's groups in order for her to manage paying the loan. The women's groups provided her courage and encouragement to achieve what she did. Women of Gitanagar have proved that they can also do something without the help or support of any man.

### **Women who became self dependent after skill development**

- *Laba Dev Dhungana*

Three years ago, when Mamata Rai of Paanchthar started her own tailoring business, she had to become a victim of lot of ridicule by the villagers. Since tailors are considered to be outcasts, the villagers even threatened her that they would not drink water at her home. Mamata, who hailed from a poor family background took her tailoring training from cottage and small trade industry, Paanchthar.

She started her own tailoring business after taking a loan of 5000 rupees. At present, she earns more than 5000 rupees a month. Moreover, the villagers have started respecting her and they have even started encouraging their daughters and sisters to join the business.

Mamata's father had married a second wife and left home when she was 6 years old. She was forced to marry at the age of 14 and she became a widow when she was 18 years old. She gained interest in tailoring when she saw her aunt from Jhapa doing the same business. At present, she is not only an entrepreneur but she also trains others in tailoring.

Similarly, Sita Aryal who had been left by her husband in Gighat, Udaypur is at present running a Dhaka weave business and she earns more than 200 rupees a day. She has her own niche in the society. When she started her business 8 years back, she had a difficult time even feeding herself. But, through her business, she was not only able to save her land by repaying a loan, she also takes care of her two children's education.

Many women have found changes in their lives after gaining skills in certain sector. This has encouraged many women to join skill development training. Sita Aryal advises anyone who seeks her help to join skill development training. But, according to Mamata Rai, women themselves retreat from gaining new experiences.

Sita Aryal, whose husband was an alcoholic and abusive, had to go without any food right after her husband left her. She has not undergone any training. She gained skill through her own initiative and now she is well respected as a successful entrepreneur.

Women of Paanchthar have proved that women can also stand on their own feet through skill development training and earn self respect in the society.

Bimala Tumbapo of the same village started working in Dhaka factory after her husband brought in a second wife. A mother of one child, at present she has a net income of more than 2000 rupees.

Women Awareness Group of Nagi-1 have started a commercial Dhaka industry from a loan of 50,000 rupees taken from Agriculture Development Bank. According to President Januka Adhikari, the industry was established to provide skills to disadvantaged women and at present it trains 40/50 women annually.

Similarly, 25 women have been employed by Sailing Dhaka Industry in Phidim. Sita Sailing who has been in the business for a long time has already transferred her skills to 50 women. Sita who has had training inside the country and abroad is doing millions of business at present.

Member of District Development Committee, Paanchthar Asharatna believes that skill development training can bring a whole lot of changes in a woman's life. According to her women should also be provided leadership development and empowerment along with skill development in order to make them self confident.

Cottage and small industries development committee Paanchthar provides many skillful trainings to women in various places. According to Jivnath Dahal, disadvantaged women are given the first priority and many women have taken advantage of this.