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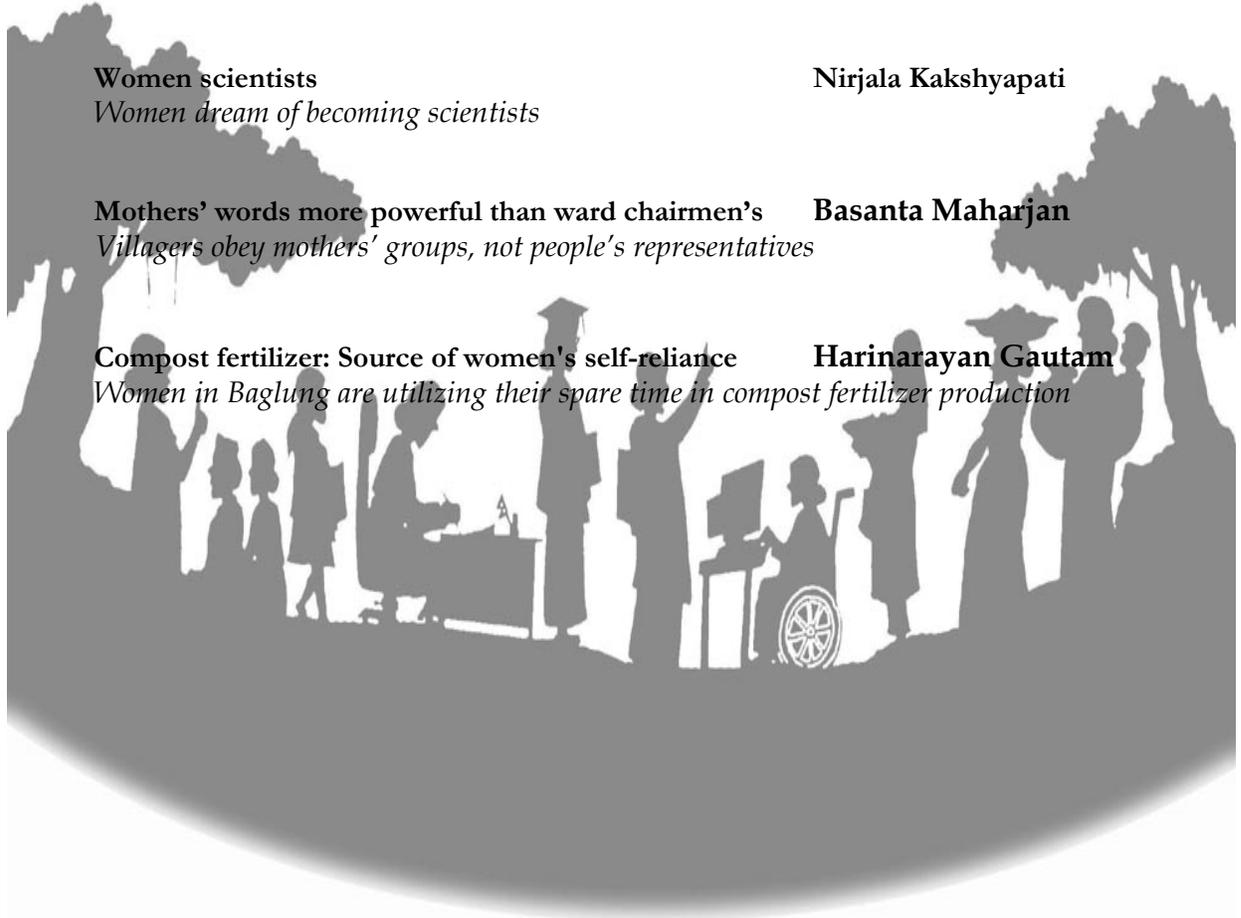
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Teenage girls with price tags

➤ *By Raghunath Lamichhane*

Although the law says that the Kamaiya (bonded labor) system has been abolished, in practice it continues to survive in its offshoot--the Kamalari system.

Thaganu Chaudhari, a resident of Sonpur VDC-9 of Dang district, worked as a domestic helper in the house of one Saphatulla Manihar Audhi in a nearby village. For the past two years she had been working in other people's houses. She worked in Audhi's house on condition that she would be sent to school on scholarship. There was a school near Adudhi's house.

In Tharu society menstruation does not draw much attention, as it would in other societies. On top of that Thaganu did not even know what menstruation really was. Only three to four months after the intercourse did she realize, from others, that she was pregnant. According to Thaganu, her master forced her to have intercourse with him regularly.

Audhi, who is in his 50s, lived alone in his house. As a peripatetic trader, he was out of the house most of the time. Thaganu's parents had hoped that their daughter would get fatherly love from Audhi on account of his maturity and his business taking him out of the house frequently. In fact, they had even hoped that she would get better treatment at Audhi's than she did at home.

Recently, the country's Tharu community celebrated Maghi [a festival that falls on Magh 1 of the Nepali calendar] with much fanfare. The greatest festival of Tharus, Maghi is celebrated for one whole week with much revelry. Like in the past, this Maghi was characterized by informal contractual agreements for sending children off to work as domestic helpers or Kamalaris.

But their high expectations proved utterly misplaced. Audhi started proposing sexual intercourse to 13-year-old Thaganu within a few days of her working in his house. After repeated rejections from Thaganu, he raped her. Consequently, she gave birth to a baby on Mangsir 16, 2061 BS.

In the beginning, even Thaganu's parents refused to believe that Audhi, who himself had grandchildren, would commit such a misdeed. Later, when Thaganu told them her ordeal herself they had to believe her. But even after knowing about her suffering,

neither her parents nor her elder brother sought any legal recourse against Audhi.

Even after perpetrating such a horrible crime, Audhi continued to roam freely in the village. No one dared to raise a finger against him. When a case was filed against him recently at the District Police Office at the initiative of Friends of Helpless Children, Audhi had already absconded. Says Man Bahadur Chhetri of the organization: "As soon as he found out that we were initiating action against him, he [Audhi] took to his heels."

Chhetri adds that the possibility of nabbing Audhi is remote, as he is an Indian citizen.

Recently, the country's Tharu community celebrated *Maghi* [a festival that falls on Magh 1 of the Nepali calendar] with much fanfare. The greatest festival of the Tharus, *Maghi* is celebrated for one whole week with much revelry. Like in the past, this *Maghi* was characterized by informal contractual agreements for sending children off to work as domestic helpers or *Kamalaris*.

In the midst of festivities, outsiders were as busy as ever searching for domestic helpers in Tharu settlements. Teenage Tharu girls, who were sent to work in other people's houses a year ago, return home for the festival. On the occasion of *Maghi*, the "masters" jostle with one another and haggle with the Tharus to get the choicest servant for their money's worth.

The decision to take in or send a *Kamalari* is taken only on *Maghi*. Generally, once the two parties enter an oral contract for one year, neither can the girl's guardians withdraw her from the service nor can the master expel the girl from his house. However, the girl in question has no inkling about how much she is paid for her work. For teenage Tharu girls this *Maghi* was no different from others in the past in terms of pain of separation from their families and an uncertain future ahead.

Due to poverty it is considered normal in Tharu communities to send teenage daughters to work in other people's houses with the hope of getting some money in return. Poverty was the main factor that forced Thaganu to work as a *Kamalari*. Her 10-member family has no other source of income. As they have only a small piece of land just enough to build a house, she and her family members have no choice but to work as *Kamalari* or do other menial labor. Currently, hundreds of *Kamalaris* are living in servitude.

They generally have to sleep under the staircase, eat low quality rice and yet have to do any amount and type of work without any complaint. Worse, the tendency to regard sexual exploitation of *Kamalari* girls as normal is steadily taking root. Says Sita Chaudhari, 17, of Sohanpur, Dang: "Had I not screamed, a master in Butwal would have looted my chastity."

"It is illegal to keep Kamalari; action will be taken against anyone engaging in it," says Mankumar Shrestha, spokesperson for the Ministry of Land Reforms. But even as Shrestha made such a reassuring statement, this year's Maghi saw hundreds of cars being put on stand-by in hundreds of Tharu settlements in Banke, Bardia, Kailali, Kanchanpur and Dang in west Nepal to take away the Kamalaris.

Despite all these ordeals, the girls get only "a few hundred rupees per year" for their work. There are also cases where girls work as domestic helpers just for food for themselves. According to a survey done in a few VDCs of Dang by Sathi, an organization working for the helpless, 28 *Kamalaris* were found to be working without any remuneration. Even then, parents who send their daughters to work as *Kamalaris* are yet to seriously take cognizance of the injustice their daughters are suffering and speak out against it. Chhetri of the Friends of

Helpless Children opines that their way of rationalizing the malpractice as a tradition compounds the problem.

Generally, Tharu settlements in west Nepal send their girls to work as *Kamalari*. But the places range from big cities like Kathmandu, Biratnagar and Pokhara to villages. Moreover, in recent years Indians have also begun to take away teenage Tharu girls by offering more money. Many of them have landed in red light areas of Mumbai, says Chhetri.

Middlemen play an important role in working out deals between guardians and "masters." They have great influence over the parents' decision whether to send their daughters to work for others or not, and if yes for how much. For their service, the middlemen get some amount from the "masters."

The country's law clearly states that it's illegal to keep *Kamalaris*. The *Kamaiya* Labor Act introduced to ban *Kamaiya* (bonded labor) system specifies that *Kamalari* is a form of bonded labor. Which means that *Kamalari* practice should have been abolished along with *Kamaiya* system on Shrawan 2, 2057 BS. But even though *Kamaiyas* have been emancipated, the *Kamalari* continues to be practiced openly. The bargain for girls seen in the Tharu settlements this *Maghi* attests to it.

"It is illegal to keep *Kamalari*; action will be taken against anyone engaging in it," says Mankumar Shrestha, spokesperson for the Ministry of Land Reforms. But even as Shrestha made such a reassuring statement, this year's *Maghi* saw hundreds of cars being put on stand-by in hundreds of Tharu settlements in Banke, Bardia, Kailali, Kanchanpur and Dang in west Nepal to take away the *Kamalaris*.

Now women patrol the jungle

➤ *By Bharat Bikram Dhakal*

Women of Latikoili of Surkhet district patrol the jungle throughout the day and take action against those destroying it. For that, they have formed a group.

Quite a few people would be surprised upon hearing that women patrol the jungle for its conservation. But it is a fact that women have rolled up their sleeves to protect the historically and archaeologically important Kankrebihar jungle.

From dawn to dusk, womenfolk of Latikoili VDC of Surkhet district patrol the jungle to preserve it along with the Kankrebihar ruins that lie in it. Everyone--from teenage girls to elderly women--is actively participating in the endeavor.

These women say deforestation and cattle let loose in the jungle for grazing necessitated jungle patrolling. Although Tara Shrestha of Latikoili-8 is in her 60s, she joins others in patrolling the jungle. Tara, who uses a walking stick for support, says as her asthma aggravates during winter her family members go on patrol in her stead. Sixty-four-year-old Kaldevi Dhamala is also involved in forest conservation despite her frail health. As someone who considers Kankrebihar jungle as her own property and offspring, Kaldevi feels hurt when people scold her, asking: "Is this your father's jungle?" Says Kaldevi: "Sometimes we come across people cutting Daleghans [grass] and trees. Our

women group has been arresting such people. There have been instances when they [those caught destroying the forest] attempted to attack an old woman like me, but I am not afraid."

These women not only arrest those who fell trees but also confiscate the culprits' sickles and axes and take legal action against them with the help of the District Forest Office. However, they only confiscate the sickles of those caught while cutting grass and go for persuasion.

Says Khadga Kumari Bhattarai, a group member: "Most of the people who are caught destroying the jungle are women,

Sixty-four-year-old Kaldevi Dhamala is also involved in forest conservation despite her frail health. As someone who considers Kankrebihar jungle as her own property and offspring, Kaldevi feels hurt when people scold her, asking: "Is this your father's jungle?"

although some men are found to be doing so, too."

The women patrollers fear that they might be manhandled while patrolling the jungle. But it seems courage got the better of them. Bhattarai says they go out on patrol in as large a group as possible. However, so far there has not been any untoward incident. These women take turns to patrol the jungle in two or three groups. Although they are usually seen in the jungle in the mornings and the evenings, they also carry out surprise checks in daytime. They have slapped fines on those who engage in deforestation. Says another member of

the group Dev Kumari Thapa: "Individuals who commit mistakes for the second time have to pay Rs 501 to the group. But if any member of the group makes a mistake the fine will be Rs 1001." After the enforcement of fines, there has been a significant decline in illegal entry into the forest and irregularities thereof. At times these women run into difficulty while trying to convince people about the consequences of deforestation. These women do not have a proper dwelling, yet they are full of enthusiasm. They are in dire financial straits. Thapa, who is of a poor family, is optimistic about her future in Kankrebihar. "In the coming days, tourists will visit this place and our businesses and living standard will improve. That is why we are conserving our heritage," she says. Although illiterate, she is among those women who are 'aware.'

Women living around Kankrebihar area established the Bhagnawashesh Women's Group in early 2001. Since then they have been patrolling the jungle and punishing the culprits. These women say so far they have confiscated more than 600 sickles and axes.

Women living around Kankrebihar area established the Bhagnawashesh Women's Group in early 2001. Since then they have been patrolling the jungle and punishing the culprits. These women say so far they have confiscated more than 600 sickles and axes. Many of the confiscated tools have been auctioned off. Says the group's manager Bimala Rokaya: "We are now much stronger than in the past. We have been punishing those who perform irregularities in the jungle and encouraging those who are doing a good job."

A variety of birds, and small animals and deer are found in the Kankrebihar jungle. The deer, which number around three

dozen, occasionally venture outside the jungle in search of food.

Says President of the Women's Group Bindu Karki: "In the absence of protection in the jungle, there was a shortage of food and water for its deer population. But because of the conservation efforts the shortage has been gradually removed. Our another duty involves tree plantation, preservation of food and water for the jungle's birds and animals and protection of natural biodiversity. For this purpose we patrol the jungle."

The group's women have realized the need for legal aid to take action against those who misuse the jungle. The District Forest Office says it has been helping them. Forest officer Naresh Thakur

reveals that the Kankrebihar area was declared a protected jungle three years ago, and that tree felling there is banned. "Women have been arresting miscreants and handing them over to us. The Forest Office has been helping the Women's Group whenever the need arises," says Thakur.

According to Thakur, 10-12 civil employees at the forest office are being deployed for forest protection. Since the employees and the group began joint patrolling, jungle conservation has improved.

For nearly four years the Kankrebihar Bio-Diversity and Culture Conservation Project and a local NGO Sustainable

Development Fund have been conducting various programs. The Fund's program coordinator Narayan Sapkota says various poverty reduction programs have been launched to give continuity to the group's initiative for jungle conservation and to assist them in their daily lives. As a result, women of poor families have also been able to give some time to conservation efforts.

Local Development Officer Shankar Prasad Poudel says the role of women in the conservation of Kankrebihar is invaluable, and strengthening the campaign further will bring success in bio-diversity protection as well. The Kankrebihar ruins have over 2000 historical stone sculptures, some of which are claimed by archaeologists as the best in South Asia.

Women Scientists

➤ *By Nirjala Kakshyapati*

When the number of women in every sector is low it is not surprising for their number to be low in the technological sector as well. The size of woman scientists is increasing slowly but surely.

Scientist Kayodevi Yami is the head of the science department at RONAST (Royal Nepal Academy for Science and Technology). She has been working at RONAST since long. Along with Yami there are 12 other woman scientists doing scientific research at RONAST. These women, who took up research after acquiring Master's degree in Science, are full of confidence and enthusiasm. According to the statistics, Nepal has about 2,2000 scientists, out of which 2500 are women.

The number of Nepalese who have done Ph.D. in the country is more than 50. But in RONAST there are only four female scientists who have done Ph.D. Other female scientists hold a Master's degree in Science. Most of the woman scientists at RONAST have been carrying out studies on subjects like ways to control insects that attack plants and the amount of dust each plant can absorb.

RONAST has some technical infrastructures for scientists to conduct research on new subjects but they are inadequate. However, the problem facing woman scientists at the academy arises not so much from lack of necessary research materials as from inability to give much time for research. They have a bitter experience of having to juggle their

family responsibilities and the demands for research on new, more challenging subjects. A majority of woman scientists, who have completed formal Science education, have a common complaint: "The dual responsibility makes it extremely difficult to do perform both jobs." They further complain that although women's participation can be noticed in every scientific field, they are

only included in the name of ensuring gender balance and are not given any position or work entailing responsibility.

Despite these problems, the situation is not that depressing. Says Tista Prasain, who works at

RONAST's environmental laboratory: "As I have acquired specialization in the subject of water, I get more satisfaction working in water-related areas in RONAST."

But Yami says: "In Nepal becoming a scientist is a sad thing." She complains that scientists do not receive respect from anywhere. In terms of salary they are in no way better off than government office employees. As the society is still conservative it is not possible to engross oneself in work, ignoring one's family duties. While men engage in research work even after office hours, women find

Of the 22,000 scientists in Nepal, only 2500 are women. Likewise, 274 women are registered with Nepal Engineering Association as against 7000 men. But in the health sector almost all nurses are women.

it very difficult to do so. Yami adds: "Daughters are not encouraged to study this subject [Science] on the ground that they have to go to somebody else's house [after marriage]." Even if some of them manage to get a Master's degree in Science battling all odds, they do not get a conducive environment to work. Just as women who have studied Science and are engaged in research are small in number, so are their counterparts in other technical posts.

Going by the membership of Nepal Engineering Association, there are 254 female engineers as against 7000 male engineers in Nepal. Even at colleges, there are only 2-3 girls among 60-70 science students. Women's participation in the medical field is also extremely low. Although their participation in their capacity as nurses is quite encouraging, the number of woman doctors is very small. On top of that most woman doctors are gynecologists. Being women they are encouraged by their families to study gynecology. Likewise, they are given priority while recruiting nurses because of the general belief that they can serve. In most hospitals doctors are men while nurses are women.

Sadhana KC of Thapathali Engineering Campus is competing with 48 male students in electronics engineering. In her group there are only three girls taking the subject. Says Sadhana: "The subject is not tough. Women do not prefer this subject thinking that they will have to do tough jobs in this field. But the reality happens to be different."

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There is still no clear definition of a scientist. In Nepal not only people who have done Ph.D. in Science are called scientists, but also those who have done Master's in Science and are engaged in research. But most scientists seem to be only translating theories that they studied into practice rather than discovering anything new. Still, a student's first wish after passing the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam is to study Science. Students enroll in other subjects only after they do not get enrolment in Science. In the past students had to work really hard to study Science. They had to score high marks in SLC. Now with an increase in the number of 10+2 campuses and private colleges throughout the kingdom, getting enrolment in the Science faculty is no longer a struggle.

The post-1990 period saw a tide of students studying technical subjects like computer science. The number of girls taking up such subjects also rose significantly. But now students of computer science are staring at unemployment just like their counterparts in the field of engineering. Says Sunita Maharjan who has completed computer science education: "Generally women get a job of a computer operator but even if they have done post-graduate in computer science they do not get priority in the decision-making posts."

Presently, the number of female students in computer science and environmental management has increased significantly. Says Dipak Raj Subedi, an environmental management science student: "As this

subject is useful in daily life more and more girls are studying it.”

In sum, women are way behind men in the field of science. Parents, who dream of making sons doctors and engineers as soon as they are born, do not cherish the same dream in the case of daughters. Their view of daughters as beings, who have to go to somebody else’s house after

marriage, is largely responsible for low participation of women in the field.

In the technical field, the misconception that women cannot meet its demands is a major obstacle. However, the presence of woman scientists like Dr Kanti Shrestha and Kayodevi Yami at RONAST is enough to disprove the misconception.

Mothers' words more powerful than ward chairmen's

➤ By Basanta Maharjan

The mothers' groups of Pokhara assemble as soon as an incident occurs in the village. They pass a judgement on the incident in front of villagers, not before the police or the local administration.

The mothers of Pokhara have proved that mothers can actively play an influential and effective role in society. The 'credit' or respect that mothers command in society has become a legend of sorts in Pokhara. Town dwellers here may not abide by the orders or decisions of ward chairmen or members in many a situation, but they accept the verdict of mothers' groups without any complaint. It may be hard to believe, but even people's representatives here do not deny this phenomenon.

If one seeks the help of the police or administration for even a small problem, it takes months to get it solved. But if the majority finds the opinion of a mothers' group satisfactory, decisions will be taken instantly.

In Pokhara Sub-Metropolitan City alone, there are over five dozen mothers' groups distributed among its *toles* [the smallest unit of a local body]. It would not be wrong to say that mothers' groups have become an indispensable part of ordinary life in Pokhara. If one goes to any part of the city and asks any inhabitant—child, elderly person or youth—about the whereabouts of the members of the mothers' group, chances are that the respondent's family members belong to the mothers' group in question or the respondent herself is a member. Such groups exist in every *tole*. Each group has, on an average, 60 members.

Says Gauri Shahi, president of the Bhairabh Tole Mothers' Groups, one of

the oldest of its kind: "We established the group nine years ago. Back then there were only two or three such groups. Inspired by our good work, others started to form such groups in their *toles*. If a group in a *tole* discusses any new issue, others are enthusiastic about doing the same thing. At times we also conduct programs jointly."

Many works in villages are done through mothers' groups. If one seeks the help of the police

or administration for even a small problem, it takes months to get it solved. But if the majority finds the opinion of a mothers' group satisfactory, decisions are taken instantly. The cost is negligible and justice prompt. In this way, these mothers' groups have been able to win the hearts of many villagers.

According to Nepal's Citizenship Act, people cannot get citizenship certificates without the recommendation and approval of their father. Says Shubhadra Koirala, president of the Woman Jagriti Mothers' Group: "Girls who have grown in front of our eyes get married and pregnant and then the husband absconds. Some husbands even disown their wives. What is the fault of the mother and the child in such cases? But children born in such circumstances do not get citizenship.

We do not want any such child to be deprived of Nepali citizenship. But we are not trying to provide citizenship to foreigners.”

One of those, who got a citizenship certificate on the recommendation of Koirala’s group, is a girl from a Shrestha family. She has passed SLC from the local Barahi Secondary School. Says Koirala: “A boy fell in love with a girl in our neighborhood and impregnated her. But later, he refused to marry her and fled. After giving birth to a baby the mother also ran away. Her grandmother and we reared the baby girl. It was very difficult to provide the girl with citizenship. But if you have the will, the impossible can become possible.”

She further adds: “The Woman Jagriti Mothers’ Group, the Paropakar Mothers’ Group and the Jalpadevi Mothers’ Group got together and convinced a cousin of the boy and provided the girl with citizenship. There are still five such children who need citizenship. Some elderly women are yet to receive it. So we are trying to provide citizenship to all.”

A daughter of an Acharya family in Gharmi (Pokhara) was threatened, humiliated and mistreated by her husband and his family because she had not brought adequate dowry. Married on Mangsir 24, 2061 BS, she was accused of carrying the baby of somebody else’s and beaten by her husband and in-laws, who then threw her in the jungle at night. Upon hearing the incident, the Woman Jagriti Mothers’ Group and human rights organizations lobbied for action against the perpetrators. The husband was put in

police custody while the woman was admitted to hospital at the initiative of the mothers’ group, says President Koirala.

These mothers’ groups do not confine their activities to solving the problems of women. They are at the forefront of construction or renovation of temples in their respective *toles*, and also make necessary arrangements for daily *pujas*. Likewise, they participate in constructing water tanks and providing shelter for people in mourning. Such activities are done in partnership with men as well. In co-ordination with men, the Woman

Jagriti Mothers’ Group has built a bridge that cost Rs 1.7 million to link Ward 4 with Ward 5.

President of the Paropakar Mothers’ Group

Gomadevi Godar says her group has made economic transactions to the tune of Rs 1.7 million. The economic success of these mothers’ groups can be easily gleaned from the ability of the Maidan Mothers’ Group to provide steady economic support to a local secondary school.

A common feature of the mothers’ groups of Pokhara is that their members are only mothers, who consider their daughter-in-laws as their successors.

Anthropologist Suresh Dhakal of Tribhuvan University says the initiatives of mothers’ groups serves as an example for development in society. He opines that these activities, which are based on local resources, could form a firm basis for long-term development. “It is in itself a great achievement that these mothers’

Says President of the Woman Jagriti Mothers’ Group Shubhadra Koirala proudly: “We are also involved in providing citizenship to children whose father’s whereabouts is unknown. We have already provided some with citizenship.”

groups have been able to mobilize local resources and engage in transactions worth Rs 1-1.2 million. Such activities should be gradually carried out elsewhere too."

A regular source of the groups' revenue is the levy raised from members every month. Money raised from playing Bhailo [during the Tihar festival], donation, financial assistance from local bodies and fees from training programs also contribute to their coffers. Some mothers' groups have their own building. Such groups have rented out some rooms. Some individuals, who return home from abroad, are known to have made donations worth Rs 4000-5000 to the

mothers' groups of their respective *toles*. Says President of the Maidan Mothers' Group Laxmi Basnet: "If there is a marriage ceremony in the village, we attend it to sing and dance and contribute the money we thus receive to the groups' fund."

Members regard their groups' fund as their own earnings. Their initiative, dedication and effectiveness have begun to draw the attention of INGOs. Such organizations are attracted to the work of mothers' groups because they have realized that projects run by donor countries are not sustainable, says Laxmi Basnet, president of the Maidan Mothers' Group.

Compost fertilizer: Source of women's self-reliance

➤ *By Harinarayan Gautam*

After the women of Baglung district began to make and sell compost fertilizer, their confidence has soared and they are on their way towards economic independence.

When weeds that had begun to spread a decade ago covered her homestead and field, Saraswati Kandel of Bihun-3, Baglung became extremely worried.

She was fed up with the spread of the deadly weeds and the declining productivity in her field. A few years ago,

she took training in compost fertilizer production in the district. During the training period she learned that she can earn a handsome income from compost fertilizer production.

Immediately after returning home upon the

completion of the training, she started commercial production of compost fertilizer. "Through the sale of compost fertilizer not only have I earned money, but there has also been an increase in my grain and vegetable production," says Saraswati.

She had begun producing compost fertilizer by decomposing weeds like Banmara, Banso, Titepati, Khirro and Asuro--the mortal enemies of food production--in a pit. Saraswati says that compost fertilizer will be ready in 40 days. Urine of cows and buffaloes is used to decompose weeds and foliage.

Compost fertilizer of 200-250 kilograms can be produced in a pit at a time. The output fetches Rs 7 in the village and Rs 8 in the market. This occupation has become a source of Saraswati's income in recent times. She says she has been meeting her household expenses and financing her children's education with

the help of the income.

Not only Saraswati, over five dozen women of Bihun, Malika, Bhukunde and Tityang VDCs are engaged in

commercial production of compost fertilizer.

They utilize their

spare time in the occupation. Maya Sharma of Malika-5 says she started producing compost fertilizer because she could utilize her spare time, make use of unnecessary weeds and foliage of her field, her house's compound would be clean, and above all she could earn a tidy income. She sells 100-120 kg of compost fertilizer at a time. She has to devote three days to the production and sale of fertilizer while on other days she enjoys her leisure time.

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She has not only met her family's expenses with the income earned from the venture, but has also set up a fund where she deposits Rs 500 every month. For women, who have to depend on their husbands' mood to ask for money even for petty expenses, commercial production of compost fertilizer has become a sure means of achieving self-reliance.

where she deposits Rs 500 every month. For women who have to depend on their husbands' mood to ask for money even for petty expenses, commercial production of compost fertilizer has become a sure means of achieving self-reliance.

After women began to make money utilizing their spare time, there has been a lot of happiness in their families. Husbands, who used to scorn their wives for their complete dependence on them, have started to respect their better halves. Says Maya: "After I started earning income, my husband's behavior has changed."

There is a great demand for powdered and packaged compost fertilizer. It is bought especially by traders at Baglung bazaar, the district headquarters. Such packaged fertilizer is ideal for vegetable cultivation and fruit production, says Sahadev Rajbhandari, former president of Nepal Chamber of Commerce. He is of the opinion that the demand for such fertilizer is high because it is light, of high quality and more useful than chemical fertilizer.

Compost fertilizer's production and use have increased because it contains all the 16 elements, including Nitrogen and Potash, required for plants, says Rajesh Gurung, officer at District Agriculture Development Office. Women have seen increased productivity of their fields as a direct result of the use of compost fertilizer. According to Chandrakala Thapa of Bhakunde-2, the production of

potatoes after using compost fertilizer has doubled.

Vegetable production has risen substantially. Village farmers have stopped buying chemical fertilizer even for spinach, cauliflower, radish and potato cultivation and are demanding compost fertilizer from women producers.

Women of extremely poor families are also involved in the production of compost fertilizer. Pabitra Bishwokarma, who lives on public land in Malika-8,

used to sell the manure of cow dung for Rs 30 per *doko* [traditional bamboo basket]. "Nowadays I get Rs 200 for a single *doko* in the village itself," she says. Finding compost fertilizer

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production more lucrative than selling cow dung manure, Pabitra engages in it whenever she has spare time from other menial labor. "This [fertilizer production] has not disturbed my work. It is a source of my leisurely earning," she says.

Inspired by the success of women, who have become self-reliant through commercial compost fertilizer production, men in the villages are slowly taking up the occupation. Ram Prasad Sharma of Tityang-9 says he started compost fertilizer production five months ago. "In the beginning, I teased women about the futility of their work. Seeing the change brought about in families by their incomes, I am now engaged in the same occupation," says Sharma. Women of the district took up the occupation more than one and a half years ago.

Besides acquiring self-reliance through their new occupation, women have also been able to challenge the belief that one has to go to another village or abroad for employment. They have also succeeded in presenting compost fertilizer as an alternative to chemical fertilizer. With money readily available in their hands, their self-confidence has soared. Says Saraswati: "Earlier I had to ask my husband for even Rs 5. I was afraid to ask for it, but now there is no dearth of

money in my hands. I don't have to fear anybody if I have to spend some money. Now I am thinking of opening a bank account and depositing the money that I have saved in it." Many women in the villages like Saraswati work almost 24 hours but do not have cash in their hands. If others too follow in Saraswati's footsteps, their self-confidence would rise. That's why local leading farmers say others should also learn from the occupation of these women.

Sancharika Samuha was established by a group of women communicator's in April 1996, with the primary aim of promotion of gender equality in Nepal. The Sancharika Feature Service incorporates monthly articles/features on the grave situation of women and children in our country, the social outlook towards them, the pain and agony that they have faced and the courageous steps that women have taken in this regard. We hope to fulfill the lack of news and articles on women and children to some extent through this feature service and we look forward to your kind support in publishing these articles in your respective newspapers. We would also like to request you to send us a copy of the published article and to mention 'Sancharika Feature Service' below the published article.

● Sancharika Samuha Nepal

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