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HIV infected women inspiration for others

People not only did not touch HIV infected women but also had the wrong notion that the disease would also spread through smoke emitted from the house of a patient, and hence never went near such women. But after HIV infected women got together, there has been some change in the society's attitude.

➤ Ram Kumar Elan

For the first time four years ago, HIV positive women set up a stall at Chitwan Festival to initiate an awareness campaign about HIV/AIDS. Prior to it, the women did not speak about AIDS openly. The women were cruelly mistreated and scorned at by the society. People had the wrong notion that the disease would even spread through the smoke emitted from the house of a patient, and so they never went near such patients. It was in protest against this kind of inhuman treatment that Radhika Chaulagain, together with seven other HIV infected women, introduced the concept of women's group.

Established with the demand that HIV positive women should also be able to live with dignity, the group is now a popular organization in Makwanpur. But establishing the group was no cakewalk. It took nearly a year to get the group registered with the administration. Says president Chaulagain, "When we went to register the group, people ran away from us." They faced a lot of needless hassles. Not only ordinary citizens of society, but also the educated class viewed HIV infected women negatively, recalls Chaulagain.

Chaulagain is not only the president of the group but is also a leader trying to bring all

such women into the mainstream. Nowadays she gives speeches at public functions in favor of HIV-positive and affected women. Over the past two years the Chaulagain-led Makwanpur Women's Group that has been fighting against social contempt has taken great strides.

Currently 21 HIV infected women are affiliated with the group, which has been taking patients to Dancuni in India for blood tests. All of them contracted the virus from their husbands, many of whom were drivers, and have already died of AIDS. Some of the women were sold to Indian brothels by agents. Women affiliated with the group share multiple tragedies: being a widow, being HIV positive, and giving birth to infected children. Cases of children contracting the virus are all too common.

These tragedies are compounded by social contempt and accusations that the infected women were responsible for their husbands' death, says the group's secretary Rita Neupane.

Women are forced to keep their status a secret for fear of being forsaken by their families and husbands. Many live with the secret, fearing that disclosure would invite social ostracism,

The loss of husband, children's desolate future and their own lives with the disease are just part of their suffering. It is compounded by the contempt and scorn by society and accusations that they were responsible for their husbands' death.

says Laxmi Tamang, the group's vice-president. Social ostracism and the practice of taking infected women to witchdoctors and sorcerers claimed Sanukanchi Rumba's mental balance and then her life.

Their husbands dead, infected women are worried about how to rear their children normally in the society. If blood test itself cannot be afforded then buying medicine is out of question, says Manahari Putali Lama, who has come to the group worried about how to provide for her 13-year-old daughter. She is trying to be self-employed by making envelopes and files in the group, but her products have failed to find a market.

After four years of struggle the group has contributed a lot to womenfolk. According to Chaulagain, the group has been conducting self-employment-oriented income-generating programs with the support of Action Aid in seven VDCs of Makwanpur: Manhari, Basamadi Gadhi, Churiyamai, Padampokhari, Ambhanjyang and Handikhola, and Hetauda municipality. It not only escorts women who approach it to Dancuni for blood tests and provides medicine for regular treatment, but also distributes purchased rice among the poor and the hungry. Currently, eight women in the group are availing this service, says Chaulagain.

The group is also into spice business. But women who have entered it for self-employment have reached a point where they will have to shut their business. For spice has failed to secure a market, says vice-president Tamang, who is more worried about her six-year-old son's future than her own and who fervently wants to educate her son. But like doctors who are reluctant to measure a HIV

patient's fever there is no school that would admit students with HIV. Her son Pasang's education was disrupted when he was not taken in by any children's home.

Keeping the infected children's future in mind, the group has also started a program targeting them. These children have not been able to study with the district's boarding and community schools which have refused to enroll them. Seven children from Bastipur, Handikhola, Churiyamai and Kamaneka are with the group, which will be arranging their enrolment and education from next year. The group has taken the responsibility of educating such children with Action Aid's support. It intends to urge schools located at a convenient place to admit the children and, if they refuse, to take the matter to the District Education Officer. The group will meet tuition fees, expenses on school uniforms and stationery.

The HIV infected women's group was established with a vow to campaign against the humiliation, contempt and social ostracism they face and bring about social change.

Thus an organization that was set up to end the humiliation suffered by women with AIDS is providing infrastructure

necessary for mothers and their children during their lives. Programs such as sheep rearing and community savings have also helped remove depression among AIDS patients. "This happiness will make the rest of our life satisfying," says president Chaulagain. This initiative by HIV infected people for their fellow sufferers has proved to be really effective and inspiring for others. The program for the targeted group by the targeted group has been effective, says Arjun Dahal, president of District NGO Makwanpur.

Courtesy by -
Sancharika Lekhmala /
Sancharika Samuha

A society follows women-made regulation

It may sound unbelievable that a regulation made by women is abided by the society. But if the work is noble, gender is not an issue. The sisters' and mothers' groups of Gulmi district have proved that the society will definitely implement women-made conventions if they are beneficial. If anyone dies in Hardineta village every household has to compulsorily contribute firewood and Rs 200 in cash.

➤ Jayaprakash Tripathi

When financial difficulties prevented him from observing a traditional practice, Lahurekanchha of Choyaga village, Hardineta VDC-7, Gulmi district was really hurt. He could not perform the last rites of his beloved daughter as per the Vedic rituals due to lack of money.

But even before that, his daughter's is a long-suffering story at the hands of her husband and in-laws because he could not afford a grand wedding and the dowry demanded by the groom's side. Unable to bear the suffering of the apple of his eye, Lahurekanchha called her back to his house. Although the informal marriage break-up was always a subject of pain for him, he somehow consoled himself thinking that at least in his house she was not suffering the pain she went through in her husband's house.

But Lahurekanchha's heart was torn asunder when his young daughter suddenly fell ill and died. He did not have money to buy firewood and meet other expenses to perform her last rites. He was forced to dig a pitch and bury her by a local *ghat* (funeral platform by a riverbank for Hindus). Lahurekanchha's plight in Choyaga village is not the only example.

There are many other cases where locals have not been able to perform age-old rites and rituals and customs due to sheer lack of even the most minimum financial resources.

However, the womenfolk of Choyaga have rolled up their sleeves to end this kind of suffering and have ushered in reforms. Earlier, men used to play a decisive role in any issue concerning the entire society. Even among them a few so-called bigwigs of the village enjoyed the real power of decision-making. Traditionally, men have been at the helm of social affairs but they have not succeeded in solving society's

problems. Conflict has forced many young men to flee the village whereas older men while away their time playing cards and gambling and engaging in useless chats. As a result even minor social problems assume great and complex proportions in any such village. Choyaga is no exception.

Currently, Choyaga Mothers' Group and Choyaga Sisters' Group are the two women groups doing social work in the village. President of the mothers' group Rita Tandon claims that the group formed two years ago is tackling the village's problems head-on.

"Previously, only the well-to-do used to perform last rites at the banks of Kaligandaki at Ridhi which is considered a pilgrimage site. But now the poor can also cremate bodies carrying them on a vehicle. Perhaps no one will have to face Lahurekanchha's fate."

This created an opportune environment for women to take on a more active role. In the course of time, the mothers' group, together with the sisters' group, started making important decisions and their combined initiatives have spread across the society, says president of Choyaga Sisters' Group, Indira Tandon.

The sisters' group secretary Shova Midun claims that currently 70 families abide by the custom of the two organizations, that is paying Rs 200 in cash along with some firewood. Since the custom entitles each bereaved family to Rs 14,000 in cash and adequate quantity of logwood, people are able to perform last rites of their near ones without any economic and mental strain. According to a member of the mothers' group, Basanta Karki, this novel custom also mandates that no family, however rich, can reject the assistance, while poor families too must contribute specified assistance as far as possible. This ends discrimination between rich and poor people in the village and gives rise to the feeling of equality, fosters rural unity and leads to social advancement and development, opines social activist Major Sher Bahadur Tandon.

All the locals are happy and satisfied with the convention introduced by the local women from Shrawan (June/July) this year. "Previously, only the well-to-do used to perform last rites at the banks of Kaligandaki at Ridhi which is considered a pilgrimage site. But now the poor can also cremate bodies

carrying them on a vehicle. "Perhaps no one will have to face Lahurekanchha's fate," says a visibly satisfied Indira, president of Choyaga Sisters' Group. On her part, president of the mothers' group, Rita is enthusiastic about conducting many reform-oriented programs in the village. In fact determined women like Rita and Indira have been encouraged by the realization that they will get praises from all quarters if they are able to identify the real problem and find an appropriate solution to it.

In this context, secretary of the sisters' group Sita Karki narrates the new works done by her

As per the convention recently introduced by the mothers' group, if someone dies in any house, every household in the village has to compulsorily give firewood and Rs 200 in cash to the bereaved family.

organization, "Villagers have stopped using *duna-tapari* (leaf plates). The sisters' group has started providing all essential

utensils like steel plates and bowls to villagers during festivals." She adds that a campaign to abolish alcohol and gambling in the village will be launched soon. Local women leaders enthusiastically say that they are pushing for skill-oriented vocational training specifically for poor women. These works that women of Choyaga are doing and plan to do may appear ordinary but seeing the wave of awakening among them to make their society happy and prosperous, one is bound to think thus: If all the women in the country were to become actively involved in social reforms for better life as have their brethren in Choyaga, perhaps we would not have to wait long to see women truly emancipated.

Courtesy by -
Sancharika Lekhmala /
Sancharika Samuha

Even drivers don't pull over at places convenient for female passengers

Due to embarrassment women keep many of their problems a secret. It may sound trivial, but it is concerned with a bodily function that must be performed but is too embarrassing to be openly discussed. Why is it that only women face difficulties in performing as natural an act as urination or defecation?

➤ Amika Rajthala

She is a female officer of Woman Development Division and as someone working for development and empowerment of women, she has to travel to different districts. Moreover, her husband's as well as parental home being in Kathmandu, she has to travel long distances. But as far as possible she does not travel during the day. The reason: drivers of buses in long routes pull over at an

open place for passengers to answer the call of nature. Says the government officer, "Men can urinate at open places by simply turning their backs but we feel embarrassed to do

the same. At night, though, there isn't much problem if we go a little further from the place where the vehicles are parked. That is why I avoid traveling on long distance buses during the day as far as possible." However, with night buses far and between these days due to worsening security situation, there is no respite.

Working for the Dalit Women's Association, Kala Swarnakar, a resident of Dang district, also says it is really embarrassing to urinate when drivers pull over by an open area. As far as possible she tries to use the toilets of hotels where they eat but the toilets are not always adequate. So she reduces the amount of food and water she eats and drinks while traveling long distances. She still remembers an instance where, unable to bear the heat, she

drank more than the usual quantity of water, and had to suffer.

Likewise, Sajana, who works for Step, an NGO, and hails from Achham, says drivers ignore requests by women to park the vehicle at a place convenient for the latter. Even Dipak Khadka, a bus driver along Kathmandu-Pokhara route, acknowledges that long

distance bus drivers and operators should pay special attention to the comfort and security of passengers, especially women. However, he argues that he stops the bus when the conductor

tells him to do so, but does not know whether the passenger who made the request was a man or a woman. He also adds that requests by women cannot be rejected in jest.

In addition to the lack of public toilets along long distance routes, female passengers' ordeal is compounded by hours-long traffic jams caused by security checks. But driver Khadka says in lighter vein, "These days you don't have to stop the bus anywhere for passengers to urinate. Security personnel have made toilets at every security check points and passengers use them."

Makeshift latrines made by security forces using tents and fenced by grass and wood have provided some relief to some passengers besides protecting the locality from foul smell.

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Although security personnel have made separate toilets for men and women, the majority of woman passengers say they do not use them. Advocate Basanti Shrestha, whose profession takes her to different districts frequently, says she has never used such kind of toilets and has also not seen any woman entering them, either. She thinks that women are reluctant to use such makeshift toilets because they are unable to ensure their privacy.

Similarly, Swarnakar adds that going to the toilet while the bus is stationed carries the risk of missing the vehicle; on the other hand, it is not possible to carry one's luggage for security checks while going to the toilet. She points out the need for comfortable toilets for women at regular intervals, adding that drivers too should stop their vehicles only where proper toilets are available.

In some places drivers pull over in front of hotels with which they have prior arrangement for free food for bus staffers. In such cases, no matter how filthy the toilets are, women are left with no option other than to use them.

The fact that women do use a properly-built toilet at the security checkpoint in Nepalgunj indicates that they generally avoid the makeshift tent-toilets made by security personnel due to embarrassment, points out Regional manager of Nepal Water for Health (NEWAH) Saraswati Khanal. She suggests that toilets for passengers should be such that many can use them at a time, and that they are in a safe and secure location.

Men can urinate at open places by simply turning their backs but we feel embarrassed to do the same. At night, though, there isn't much problem if we go a little further from the place where the vehicles are parked. That is why I avoid traveling on long distance buses during the day as far as possible.

Between 1991-1994 NEWAH built seven public toilets to provide relief to long distance travelers. Some of the toilets built in Damauli, Dhulikhel, Khairnital, Abukhairni, Dulegaunda, Saurahachowk and Pokhara-Baglung bus-parks are functioning properly while some are in need of reconstruction. The toilet in Dhulikhel was damaged during road construction.

With financial assistance from WATERAID, an INGO, NEWAH, in cooperation with Kathmandu Metropolitan City, has completed a study on public toilet

management in the city while its Biratnagar regional office is conducting a study on public toilets.

Thus public toilets should be built along the way so that women can avoid such conditions. That women do not use toilets made by security personnel proves that they cannot urinate/defecate just about anywhere, and that they require privacy. And male passengers' use of toilets of security personnel also points to the need of secure toilets for women as well.

Experts feel that since hygiene is a symbol of civilization and so necessary for good health, local residents should push for toilet construction with the help of local bodies, as filth and stench affect not passengers but locals.

Courtesy by -
Sancharika Lekhmala /
Sancharika Samuha

Why not abolish kanyadan?

Advocates of women rights have tried to amend laws that discriminate against women.

And some of such laws have been changed but the practice of kanyadan in one's daughter's wedding continues to this day. Why isn't any attention being paid to the fact that marriage is not simply kanyadan?

➤ **Kulchandra Neupane**

A bachelor's degree holder, Kanchan Dhakal of Chitwan is an unmarried woman. She intends to go for an arranged marriage after a couple of years. But she is already filled with revulsion against the custom of *kanyadan*, which literally equates marrying off daughters with charity. Though she considers arranged marriage with the consent of both man and woman to be better than other kinds of marriage, she vehemently opposes that one particular custom. "First I want to bring about change through my own marriage. I will try to convince my father and mother about my belief. But if they don't agree I can't force it on them," she shrugs.

Religious scriptures and Manusmriti have depicted women as "goods and means". Kanyadan is just an example of such an attitude. It dates back to ancient times and continues to this day as tradition.

Likewise, five years ago, protesting against the word *kanyadan* Harikala Bhattarai of Damauli got married in an unconventional way, tying the nuptial knots at a public forum. She had given a message that daughters should not be made an object to be given away as gift and that the dowry system should be abolished. But her lone effort was unable to change the entire society. "The society can't be changed unless there is awareness among all its members. The whole society itself has to take collective step to uproot a conservative practice that has flourished in the name of religion," she says.

Times have changed, laws have become better. But traditions rooted in religion remain unchanged. Even in the 21st century customs

dating back to ancient times continue to hold sway. Religious scriptures and *Manusmriti* have also depicted women as "goods and means." And *kanyadan* is just one example of such an attitude. Advocates of freedom for women themselves are, perhaps unwittingly, giving continuity to the practice. Agniraj Baral, 70, of Pokhara thinks this tradition is worthless because the meaning and definition of *kanyadan* in religious scriptures are not relevant today. "It is not a religion in itself but only a custom made by society. It can be changed if the society wakes up against it," he argues.

It has been mentioned in Vedic scriptures – *Dharma Sindhu* and *Manusmriti* – that the *kanyadan* of a daughter below seven would be as much holily rewarding as donating 7800 cows. Thus it is evident that the practice has been observed since the age when gods dwelt in the earth. Legend has it that back then Manu performed *kanyadan* to marry off his seven-year-old daughter, Devbhuti, to a hermit, Kardam. As Devbhuti was completely loyal to her husband, *kanyadan* began to be considered as the best form of marriage.

Later erudite women initiated the practice of marriage after battling it out in a contest in religious scriptures. This practice was, however, disrupted during Muslim rule in India in Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's period.

When Muslim kings forcibly married beautiful Brahmin women, Brahmins protested vociferously. They were forced to change their marriage rules. As a result girls were married as Gauri if they were eight, Rohini if nine and Kanya if ten. Another new custom was introduced: while marriage among *Sahabarnas* was allowed, it was prohibited among *Sahagotras*.

In those times it was believed that failure to marry off daughters before she starts menstruating amounted to a grave sin. But now attitudes have changed. There is a general acceptance of the view that girls should be married only after they come of age. Remembering how he had married off her two daughters before they starting having periods 30 years ago, Bishwanath Bastola of Pokhara, who is educated, says, “This practice prevailed as late as 20-25 years ago.” Although a trend to marry girls after they mature has been established, child marriages still occur in some places. But why hasn’t the custom of *kanyadan* been done away with? Says women rights activist Gita Poudel, “It existed in Brahmin, Chhetri and Vaishya societies only. It did not and does not exist among Shudras, the so-called low caste people. Even now the custom of *kanyadan* is prevalent among some Brahmins and Chhetri families.”

The very word *kanyadan* means donating a daughter as if she were merely a commodity. The Nepali Brihat Shabdakosh, a Nepali language dictionary, defines *kanyadan* thus: “A social ritual of entrusting your own or someone’s else’s daughter in the hands of the groom as per Vedic rites.” The definition makes it clear that *kanyadan* is not linked with religion but is a social ritual practiced since time immemorial. “It is a social ritual. It should have disappeared the way child

marriage did, but it still exists. Social enlightenment is necessary for its removal,” points out Poudel.

Scriptures and tradition say one thing but their practice is different. Says Baral, “In those days the practice was called *kanyadan* only because girls under seven were donated. But now it is believed that girls should get married only after they are at least 20, so *kanyadan* is meaningless.” Moreover, the very concept that

It is mentioned in Vedic scriptures - Dharma Sindhu and Manusmriti - that the kanyadan of a daughter below seven would be as much rewarding as donating 7800 cows. Thus it is clear that the practice has been observed since the age when gods dwelt in the earth.

marrying off a daughter is akin to donating her is height of superstition. The so-called educated families of the society have not been able to speak out against it.

Instead, the time of *kanyadan* is proudly mentioned on the invitation card. Parents, uncles and aunts and brothers stay hungry until the *kanyadan* ceremony is over. When the groom says “May you stay in my house as fixed as Dhruvatarā,” the bride replies “I will stay as fixed” and the marriage is thus solemnized. Her parents then “donate” her to the groom. After *kanyadan* even the girl’s *gotra* is changed.

“People in the olden days thought that there is no charity as great as *kanyadan*. That’s why we were married at the age of seven,” says Dewaka Sharma, 84, of Tanahun. “Back then we stayed in our parents’ house till we grew up. Only later did we go to our husband’s home.”

The 21st century world is undergoing rapid changes in terms of physical development and science. But our society is still entangled in centuries-old customs and practices. Even at this age women are forced to become commodities to be given away in charity. Says women rights activist Poudel, “At least I won’t be marrying off my two daughters through *kanyadan*. After all, change should

begin from one's home." Indeed, the superstition that marriage is donating a daughter should not be allowed to continue.

Courtesy by -
Sancharika Lekhmala /
Sancharika Samuha

Unparalleled contribution but little recognition

The mothers that we see on the television screen are so clean and cheerful. But can you imagine how hard it is to be a mother? The houses seen on screen appear so picture perfect. But television should also have shown how much time and energy was expended to achieve that perfection.

➤ **Dipa Gautam**

"Television simplifies the work women do," say gender experts. The meaning of simplification of work here (it should be understood) is not any of these three: not having to work, having to do an easy work or doing work with ease. The mothers that we see on the television screen are so clean and cheerful. But can you imagine how hard it is to be a mother? The houses seen on screen appear so picture perfect. But so much time and energy was expended to achieve that perfection. Clothes that have dried after being washed look so bright but a lot of calorie has to be burnt cleaning them. And the child in the mother's arms is not healthy and active without any reason; the mother looks after it day and night. But on television all these hard work and labor and effort are not shown. Only the clean and cheerful mother, picture perfect house, bright clothes, and healthy and active child are shown.

This simple presentation of a difficult work is what "simplification" means. True, the media also simplifies the work of men, such as those engaged in risky occupations, working in factories and, to some extent, managing household affairs as well. But because the

responsibilities of women are so many, so diverse and of a different nature, they are more victimized by simplification on TV.

Managers of media houses argue in unison that television programs and movies cannot resemble reality in toto; they should have glamour, showmanship and to some extent commercialization. Television cannot accept bare, raw reality. A television channel or a movie cannot offer a footage containing details as does a home video.

Television has its own compulsions and hence cannot show everything to the minutest detail. But gender experts are not insisting that every detail be shown, either. Says Associate Dean of School of Communications (University Science Malaysia) and gender expert Shanti Balraj, "Television hides the problems, pain and suffering of women. Difficult chores are presented in such a way that they appear easy, and negative things are presented prominently. That's why real women of the society, their problems and sufferings get little or no space on television."

And the child in the cradle of the mother's arms and legs is not healthy and active without any reason; the mother looks after it day and night. But on television all these hard work and labor and effort are not shown.

It's true that many women are housewives. But the real-life housewife and the reel-life housewife are poles apart. In real life if a woman is working in the kitchen she neither is as "smart" as the woman depicted in television ads nor has a kitchen as squeaky clean as the one shown on the screen. If a woman is really undergoing labor pain it will be difficult to watch her convulsions. She doesn't need artificial sweat, nor will just thirty seconds of lip biting, feigned facial contortions and clutching the bed sheet result in the birth of a baby. Thus, however difficult the work is in reality, it is almost reduced to a cup of tea on the screen. If a woman's work is tough in real life, presenting it as a light one by the media amounts to exploitation of women. This kind of lie mongering in the name of commercialization is akin to undervaluing women's contribution.

In some nations, after watching real scenes of women undergoing labor pain, viewers have felt the pain themselves, and husbands have vowed not to have another child after witnessing their wives' suffering at the hospital.

A question may arise: "So that means there should be a live telecast of labor pain and delivery so that all are able to reach the depths of pain of women?" It may not be possible in some nations. Families and women may refuse or viewers may not be ready to watch such scenes. But wherever possible it should be carried out. We have read and heard that, after watching real scenes of women undergoing labor pain, viewers have felt the pain themselves, and that husbands have vowed not to have another child after witnessing their wives' suffering at the hospital. However, it does not mean that women should not bear children at all.

Take this scene. Rural women are resting at a *chowtari* after walking seven miles carrying wood or grass. Or they are collecting water after walking a difficult terrain throughout the day. The woman taking a rest or the one collecting water is asked, "From where did

your bring the grass?" or "How far is your house?" Such questions and answers to them do not represent the woman's actual work and hardship. Neither is the conversation with them effective. While it is not possible and necessary to show the complete work done by women, they become victims of simplification because even a minimum and just amount of "insert" is not used. Says journalist associated with Finnish Broadcasting Service and gender expert Umayya Abu, "Our first demand is that televisions should not always show women involved in household chores. If that is not possible, the media should at least show respect to the work done by women, not belittle it through simplification."

Director of films, advertisements and television dramas, Rajendra Shalav, has a different view.

"Women-related presentations on television are neither exaggerated nor divorced from reality. The main point is that viewers always want to identify themselves with nice and easy things. They are easily attracted to nice scenes. Thus their interest is kept in mind while presenting scenes involving women just as any other scene. I don't think that is simplification."

For director Sharita Lamichhane, though, actors and models are the viewers' role models. "Viewers want to feel happy watching them act. And definitely, negative images, pain and suffering cannot provide the happiness that they are seeking. But as a director I feel that things should be presented exactly the way they are."

A 1995 UNDP report focussing on gender says if the work women do at home is given economic recognition, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would increase by 30 percent. During the period the report was prepared, women alone had done work worth US\$ 11

trillion (around 820 trillion rupees) or, equivalently, that amount was saved due to women. However, although household chores have been recognized as economic activities since 2001 Census, that intangible right has not made any perceptible difference in the condition of Nepalese women.

It is because women since the time of Plato have taken the responsibility of household

chores that men are able to become leaders. The gender-based division of labor between formal income-generating employment and household chores has confined women to houses and lifted men to public positions.

Courtesy by -
Sancharika Lekhmala /
Sancharika Samuha

Women trapped in conflict

Although the Maoist insurgency has claimed the lives of men in huge numbers, it has directly affected women and children much more. But neither the government nor the rebels have felt the need for women's role in the peace process.

➤ Babita Basnet

There was a time when it was a taboo for women to climb to the pinnacle of a house. The prevailing superstition was that if they do so it would invite misfortune. Thus in case of houses with thatched roofs men became indispensable for covering the roofs. If a household did not have men, male neighbors had to be beseeched for help. Similarly, plowing was another work women were forbidden to do. The reason was the same: doing so was an invitation to misfortune.

However acute the need for an extra hand at the fields, women were not allowed to use the plow. But now the responsibility for the once banned works has fallen on the shoulders of women, especially in Maoist-affected areas. For most insurgency-hit villages are devoid of able-bodied men, with some having gone underground after joining the rebel outfit and

some having gone abroad. The scanty male population that has remained behind consists of the elderly, the disabled and children. When someone dies in a village there are no men to carry the dead body in a funeral procession. In many places, circumstances have forced women to carry dead bodies themselves, although before the armed insurgency began that was another restricted job for women.

Neither the state nor the rebels had included a single woman in peace talks, with one sole exception once by the state. Nor has the issue of adverse consequences of the conflict on women been raised as an agenda.

The Maoist insurgency in the past nine years has imposed additional burden in terms of duties on women, who also have to cope with the grief caused by loss of their husbands, fathers and children. Enforced disappearance of or injuries to family members are another source of grief. A large number of women have lost their lives in the conflict, thousands have been widowed while many others have been raped.

When an armed conflict starts in any country it will affect every person and community. But the fact remains that women and children are two groups most severely hit by such conflicts. Even women without any association with either side of the conflict are victimized. Incidents of violence against women that have come to light range from abduction of women without any reason to their rape while in detention.

There have been efforts to restore peace in the past nine years but women were not given due space in such endeavors. No woman has ever been part of peace process, with the sole exception being Anuradha Koirala, an assistant minister in the Lokendra Bahadur Chand government between October 2002 and April 2003, who was part of government negotiating team for two rounds of talks with the rebels during the period. Nor has the issue of adverse consequences of conflict on women been raised as an agenda.

Many human rights organizations have been voicing the need for participation of women in the peace process. UNIFEM is one such organization. It was at its initiative that a UN Security Council meeting in October 2000 passed Resolution 1325 with special emphasis on women and peace and security. The 18-point resolution, considered to be a historical achievement in women's rights movement, recognized the need for respect and protection of rights of women and children, active role of women in restoring peace, and training on gender sensitivities for everyone working to bring about peace. It has urged all parties involved in armed conflicts to devise and implement ways to protect women and girls from violence, especially rape and sexual exploitation. The very first point of Resolution 1325 has requested all nations to increase the representation of women in decision-making

A Security Council meeting has passed Resolution 1325 with special emphasis on women and peace and security. The 18-point resolution recognizes the need for respect and protection of rights of women and children, active role of women in restoring peace, and training on gender sensitivities for everyone working to bring about peace.

levels at national, regional and international organizations working in the area of conflict management. The decision is extremely important because UN members are obliged to implement a Security Council decision.

Women rights activist Dr. Arzoo Rana Deuba believes that women have taken a united stand on the issue of

women participation in the peace process. "If we look at the history of countries once hit by armed conflict, we find that while

men started violence it was women who made efforts for peace," she says. She adds that the armed conflict has created a psychological terror among women. Mothers who have lost children due to the conflict undergo severe trauma.

President of People's Front Nepal Amik Sherchan agrees that women are the ones who bear the greatest brunt of the conflict. "Women have been directly and severely affected by conflict. Already they have not been able to free themselves from various discriminations. Now inhuman torture is meted out to a woman just because she fed someone, even though she did not have any ulterior motive," says Shrechan.

In this context there is an urgent need to make gender-related training compulsory in the Royal Nepalese Army and Nepal Police.

Civil society members that are involved in conflict management and peace process should also take such training so as to be able to look at any issue or situation from gender perspective. Says Chief of UNIFEM Nepal Sangita Thapa, who regards women participation in conflict management or peace process a mandatory provision, "The gender

perspective in the peace process should not be an issue concerning women only but should be something that concerns the entire human community.” According to INSEC, as of Jestha, 2061, 7800 women have lost their lives due to the armed conflict, while still more have been injured and displaced. Likewise, according to CWIN, which works in the sector of child rights, the conflict has claimed the lives of 150 children, rendered 2000 children orphans and forced more than 4000 to leave home.

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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.

λ Sancharika Samuha Nepal

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