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Where women are kidnapped for marriage

➤ Bhoj Raj Bhat

The 21st century has already dawned. At a time when women are increasingly asserting and demanding their rights, the fact that women in some places are still not able to choose their husbands may be hard to believe. But in some areas of remote Mustang men continue to marry by kidnapping women.

Every family in the rugged Mustang district has at least one member living abroad. Some are US green card holders while others are working in Japan, Germany and other countries. No wonder all the families are well off and run their own businesses. On the face of it, it looks as if people here are also culturally advanced.

But the reality is exactly the opposite. No matter how rich they are, the inhabitants of Mustang's Muktinath, Kagbeni and Jhong areas still follow an obsolete marriage custom. Whether the girl likes the proposed match or not is immaterial; if a boy happens to take a fancy to a particular girl, he is entitled to force her into wedlock. Even to this day.

Kunga Gurung, 35, of Purang forcibly brought 18-year old Doma of Jhong to his home on September 28. The girl refused to marry a man old enough to be her father, and later returned to her parents' house. There is no dearth of women in Mustang who have had an experience similar to Doma's. But none have an option other than to suffer silently. It is a deeply rooted culture that is to blame, something they can't rebel against.

As per the local custom, if a man likes a particular woman he "snatches" her. In other words, the woman is kidnapped from her

house by the man along with 5-10 of his acquaintances, and taken to the house of the village's *mukhiya* (chief) or of a family belonging to a high caste Gurung or Thakuri. The couple is locked up in a room for three days. If within that period the girl accepts the boy their marriage becomes a certainty; otherwise she returns to her parents' house. The boy could pressurize the girl into having sex with him while living in the same room for three days. In the event he succeeds the girl is forced to marry him regardless of what she feels about him.

Whether the girl likes the boy or not is immaterial; if a boy happens to take a fancy to a particular girl, he is entitled to force her into wedlock. Even to this day.

Even if the girl is "kidnapped" from her home in the middle of the night her family does not start searching for her immediately. Only on the next day do her relatives

visit the boy's house, where they "fight" and threaten to take the girl back, come what may. The boy's family, on its part, "apologizes", calling its action a mistake that cannot be undone. Whether the marriage will take place or not will not be known for sure until the girl gives her opinion after spending three days with the boy.

If the girl gives her acquiescence, the boy's family will organize an engagement, but marriage does not follow immediately. The boy and the girl start living together before their marriage is solemnized, with the result that many couples bear children out of wedlock. Then selecting a time that is both

convenient and auspicious, they tie the nuptial knot grandly, with friends and relatives treated to a feast.

The "girl snatching" tradition is not always coercive in nature. Boys and girls already in love with each other follow it all the same in order to formally become husband and wife. Nimasatuk Gurung, 23, of Muktinath Ranipauwa had fallen in love before "kidnapping" his beloved for marriage last year. He also happens to be the *mukhiya* (chief) of his village for this year. His brother is in the US while his father is a businessman. There are instances in the village of girls' abduction being vetted by the boys' parents. That does not mean, however, that the girl's families always approve of it.

A *mukhiya* is a village leader whose duty it is to ensure smooth operation of social activities in the village. He holds sway over the village, whether VDC chairman is there or not. Every problem faced by the society is usually solved by the *mukhiya*. The tenure of Mustang's *mukhiya* is only for a year, so every person has a chance of leading his village. But the tradition that allows only men to become *mukhiya* continues to this day.

So why are *mukhiyas*, supposed to be the leaders of their societies and agents of change, silent on the primitive marriage practice?

Explains *mukhiya* Angya Gurung of Jharkot, "As this is a traditional practice, we cannot oppose it outright. But we also don't force girls who don't want to marry." He is supported by *mukhiya* of Kagbeni, Tenjin Serup Thakuri, who says, "A *mukhiya* cannot abolish a custom that has been practiced for ages."

In-charge of Area Police Office Muktinath Ganesh Lama puts the blame squarely on locals for the prevalence of such an outdated practice in a society that is educated and affluent. "In the 21st century it is not appropriate to force a girl to share a room with a boy for three days so as to force a prospective groom on her. When told to forsake the practice, they say it is their custom. The girls' families also never lodge complaints. It's difficult to take action in the absence of complaints," says Lama.

The hilly regions in the far west also observe the marriage custom prevalent in Mustang, but fear of the Maoists has reduced the extent of the practice over there. On top of that, in the far west only girls from poor families are victimized by the practice. But in Muktinath area it pervades every caste, religion and society in the name of giving continuity to the patriarchal attitude that a woman doesn't have any say in choosing her life partner.

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Courtesy by -
Sancharika Lekhmala /
Sancharika Samuha

Durgas and Mayas are searching for their missing husbands

➤ Shree Bhakta Khanal

Disappearances of citizens by the state and the Maoists who are fighting what they call the “people’s war” are on the rise. Although most of the disappeared are men it is the women who suffer the most.

On the day of *tika* last *Dashain* a woman along with her son and daughter arrived at Bhairbnath barracks at Maharajgunj in search of her husband. She went there with the hope of receiving *tika* from her husband who had gone missing for a long time. But that day her grief became too intense to bear when, as on many occasions before, security personnel in the barracks told her that her husband was not in their custody. She cried and begged with them to allow her to meet her husband who she believed was kept hidden somewhere in the barracks.

Although the army maintained that her husband was not in their custody, the woman kept on insisting that he was kept there and demanded that he be shown to her. But her pleas were to no avail. She could neither meet her husband nor receive *tika*. “This year’s *Dashain* failed to generate any enthusiasm in me,” remembers Durga KC, 29, who runs a small restaurant in an alley in Bagbazaar and is doggedly searching for her husband, Krishna KC, who went missing at the hands of security forces 14 months ago. Krishna KC is an active member of All Nepal National Independent Student Union-Revolutionary (ANNISU-R), the student wing of CPN (Maoist).

“After my husband was arrested I became almost crazy. But eight months ago when I

learned that he was alive I was able to heave a sigh of relief. Even though the government denies that he is in their detention he is alive. At least I know about his condition although I’m not allowed to meet him. I am taking solace in the fact that I am, in a way, better off than many women whose husbands have gone missing but who are in the dark about their condition,” she says. According to National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), as of the third week of Kartik 2061 BS, 1191 people have gone missing at the hands of the state,

405 by the Maoists and 69 at the hands of unidentified groups, taking the total number of disappearance cases to 1665.

Besides financial problems, the disappearance of their husbands has also caused them psychological trauma, resulting from character assassination. Mere talking with a man is enough to invite nasty suspicions.

The majority of people gone missing at the hands of both the state and the Maoists are men. In a patriarchal society as ours a man is head of the family and also its breadwinner. So women whose husbands have been arrested suffer much economic, political and social hardship. A case in point is Durga KC. “After my husband’s arrest people stopped coming to my restaurant to eat. Friends with whom I went to buy vegetables began distancing themselves from me. I also had a misunderstanding with my landlord for some time,” she says.

Likewise, Sita Thapaliya of Phutung VDC-6, Kathmandu is in search of her missing husband, Shailendra Kumar Maskey, for the past five months. Maskey, coordinator of *Newa Khal*, a sister organization of CPN (Maoist), was arrested while preparing to give a list of Maoists "disappeared" by security forces to the government. The government has yet to admit to Maskey's detention, but Sita, who works at District Development Committee, Kathmandu, claims that he is being kept at an army barrack.

She says, "The entire family should not be tortured because of the husband. I do support my husband's political views. I oppose violent politics. The state should treat him in accordance with the law or send him to jail but should not keep his whereabouts secret. If the government does not make public his whereabouts I will also be forced to take up arms."

Devi and Maya's stories are more heartrending than that of Durga's and Sita's. Devi and Maya (names changed) are characters of a true story.

Hailing from Dolakha, area number 2, Devi can usually be found in the office of the Maoist Victims' Association. It is not without reason that she is afraid of telling even the name of her VDC and ward number and is reluctant to talk with the media. She has been twice evicted from her rented residence by her landlords after newspapers and TV published and broadcast news about her. Her husband (whose name she does not want to be published) was kidnapped by Maoists three years ago and she has not heard of him since. As she could not continue staying in her village for fear of the Maoists and thinking that it might be easier to search for her husband from Kathmandu, Devi came to the capital immediately after her husband's abduction. But there was no one in Kathmandu to help her. "Whenever news (about us) is published in newspapers I am

frightened that Maoists might kill (him). People won't give you work if they find out that you are a Maoist victim," she says.

Devi has a five-year-old daughter and is struggling to make two ends meet. "I wash dishes in two households and earn a thousand rupees. When I was with my husband in the village we sold food grains but now in Kathmandu it has become difficult to even pay for gruel. I don't believe God has cursed anyone as severely as me," she says, tears streaming down her face.

Maya's condition is even more pathetic. She comes from the same place as Devi. She and her family came to Kathmandu two years ago, unable to pay the ransom of Rs 50,000 demanded by the Maoists. Her husband, who drove taxi in the capital, was kidnapped by the Maoists a year ago while on his way to Dolakha. No one has heard of him since then. Maya is living with her one-year-old daughter

Following her husband's abduction, friends started to distance themselves from her, landlords are reluctant to rent out rooms to her.

in a rented room at Koteshwor. At the time of her husband's abduction she was six months into her pregnancy. Thanks to a bad experience she has had, she trusts and speaks to few people. A few months ago, she says, a man took her to a human rights organization with the promise of locating her husband. Suspicious of his motive she started inquiring about his background. Only later did she find out that he was an agent involved in trafficking girls to Mumbai. "Those who scorn at us socially make comments against us behind our backs. It is not only my case, many others are suffering this kind of mental trauma," she says.

Durga KC's experience tells her that such a stigma haunts all women, young or old, rich or poor, literate or illiterate. On the one hand is the grief caused by one's husband's forced disappearance, while on the other is the tension over how to protect oneself while leading a lonely life from ill-intentioned

advances of men. She cannot afford to mull over things like her profession and career advancement.

According to the Protection Division of NHRC, it is more difficult to search for citizens gone missing at the hands of the Maoists than those kept in secret detention by the state. Says Yagya Prasad Adhikari of the Division, "Correspondence and dialogue with the government is possible but regular dialogue with the Maoists is not possible except during field visits for monitoring." Maoists do not pay much heed to appeals

made by human rights activists for immediate release of people they have abducted, whereas it has become a routine for the government to claim that people known to be in military detention have not been arrested in the first place. Thus, lots of women whose husbands have been abducted are forced to live in grief for years due to fear of the party involved in the abduction, face financial problem and lack legal help.

Courtesy by -
Sancharika Lekhmala /
Sancharika Samuha

Why is everything linked with sex?

These days the success of most professional women is viewed by linking it with names of men. This parochial skepticism about a woman's ability to achieve anything on her own must be dispensed with, once and for all.

➤ Sachchi Mainali

You're going alone? Who will be accompanying you? And how many days will you be gone for? These questions are faced by women working in various sectors every time their job takes them out of their home. Many a time such questions, which never cease following them, result in loss of opportunities. And women professionals are especially victimized by the questions.

Subhadra Belbasey is one such person who has paid the price of being a woman on

several occasions in her career. Opportunities that came by while working for an NGO proved costly for her. Her colleagues used to link her every success with sex. Whether she was selected for training or entrusted with a project, her name was somehow linked with those of her male superiors. No one said a word about her aptitude or competence.

"In my field I was not weaker than any man, instead I was always ahead. Despite that, my colleagues thought every opportunity that I got

and my every success was a result of my illicit relationship with men,” says Belbasey. “Many times I worried so much that I suffered different diseases. Due to mental stress, my hair started graying and coming off. Being entangled in such problems at a time when I had to prove my capacity and move ahead adversely affected my personality development.

Now Director of Biswa Paridrishya Nepal, Subhadra Belbasey has worked as director, and senior media and legal advisor in various projects in different countries including Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. She was also the first woman regional director of Plan International (Resa), Nairobi in Kenya, Africa.

It is said behind every successful man there is a woman. Conversely, a successful woman may also have a man behind her. That is but normal. The man may be her brother, father, husband or a good friend. But all activities of women, who have been oppressed in the name of tradition for centuries, are looked at through the prism of sex. Many people misconstrue a woman’s good relation with a man as sexual relationship.

Not only social workers, woman politicians also find their names linked with men. CPN (UML) central member Bidya Bhandari’s name has been linked with senior male members in the party from time to time. But a majority of UML rank and file disapproves of such attempt. “Allegations made against her are only an attempt to discredit her capacity,” they say. Bhandari herself says, “Politics is not a field where you achieve something on someone’s protection. It depends completely on individual capacity. So it is illogical to say that women involved in politics have become leaders by virtue of patronage.”

If a woman goes out with a man for but a single day her name is associated with the individual, even if her job necessitated it or he happens to an intimate friend or, for that matter, a relative.

Notwithstanding her birth to a rich family, Minister of State for Science and Technology Pratibha Rana knows well the disadvantages of being a daughter. “My childhood and youth passed behind the *parda* (veil). I have been active since my childhood, came forward to do any work. But an assistant accompanied me everywhere, from school to campus to tutorial classes. I was never able to walk freely. Only after I tied my hand with social sector did I feel slightly free,” says Rana.

A woman is forever dependent, so goes the attitude. Her male colleagues have an ingrained belief that she simply cannot be a colleague with professional capacity. Perhaps that is the reason why her opportunity and

success in every sector is attributed to things with sexual connotation. Interestingly, her name is invariably linked with her boss, colleagues or other superiors, as if her every achievement

depends on the blessing of other people.

If a woman goes out with a man for but a single day her name is associated with the individual, even if her job necessitated it or he happens to an intimate friend or, for that matter, a relative. Take, for example, journalism where there is no certainty as to what kind of individuals she has to deal with, and where. In the course of collecting news she has to explore every nook and cranny of her city and should not desist from visiting seedy pubs. But even those aware of this reality comment, “...that girl is characterless.” These words mostly come from men, but some women professionals also try to cast aspersions on woman colleagues.

“I had made a proposal to do a risky reporting to the editor, it was approved and as I had expected the report became a hit,” says a woman journalist, preferring anonymity. “But unfortunately, instead of congratulation, all I got from my colleagues was accusation of

immoral relationship with the editor. No one bothered to find out the reality. Malicious allegations were leveled at me one after another, and all the opportunities that I got were ascribed to the preferential treatment I supposedly got from the editor. In a period when I should have proved my mettle, I wasted time giving clarifications. For months I suffered from mental tension. My eyesight became weak because I cried too much. The doctor attributed it to drying up of tears in the eyes.”

At the root of the mistrust and suspicion women encounter every day lies the society’s attitude that a woman has to remain bonded throughout her life, to father and in his absence, brother during childhood, husband after her marriage, son during old age, and male colleagues at office.

Courtesy by -
Sancharika Lekhmala /
Sancharika Samuha

School, not marriage, is their priority

With the goal of bringing the numbers of boys and girls in classes to parity by 2005, the government and NGOs have launched many programs aimed at promoting girls’ education. But the programs have not been effective in all places.

➤ Bhupraj Khadka

It’s noon, and under the blazing sun 70-75 students, forming a circle, are studying in the school’s field. The middle-aged female teacher is busy taking class carrying a stick in her hand. In the same place seven to eight girls old enough to be teachers are huddled together in a corner, also studying. Any visitor is bound to greet them with “*namaste madam,*” but the girls would keep silent and lower their heads in embarrassment.

Satanlal, says he enrolled her in the school after she showed interest in going to school upon completing primary education conducted in the village.

These young women have been saved from the superstition prevalent in Terai societies that girls must be married before they start menstruating. Until recently confined to household chores, they completed the primary education in the village run by Rural Women Uplift Center, and enthusiastically enrolled in the village’s primary school in Kauwaghari from this academic session.

Members of five households of Goltakuri VDC in Dang district have set an example by enrolling their 21-26-year-old

There are scholarships for girls and also programs that provide them with oil and clothes. So long as they receive such facilities classrooms are packed with girls, but as soon as the sops are discontinued they tend to quit school.

daughters in the village’s primary school. The teacher takes classes in the open due to lack of space in the classroom. Residents of Goltakuri have begun saying that age is no bar to education. Sapana Chowdhari’s father,

Taking up formal education belatedly are Sabitri Chowdhari, Dhankumari Chowdhari, Kamala Chowdhari, Bermati Chowdhari, Sapana Chowdhari, Radha Chowdhari, Rapti

Chowdhari and Premlata Khadka. Studying in standard five amongst 75 students, they look like teachers. They still feel shy to ask questions about things they do not understand to younger classmates. While it was really embarrassing in the beginning, they say, they have now begun to feel more at ease in the class. While the school they are studying in admits students regardless of their age, other schools in the village deny admission to students who have crossed the normal age, says Krishna Chowdhari of Society Welfare Education Nepal. Indeed, Kauwaghari Primary School has become an example against such a practice. "Parents brought their daughters for admission, we admitted them without any regard to their age," says the school's principal Rowarsingh Dhakal.

With the goal of bringing the numbers of boys and girls in classes to parity by 2005, the government and NGOs have launched many programs aimed at promoting girls' education. But the programs have not been effective in all places. The government's goal, however, has been achieved in the school in Goltakuri, which is yet to see such programs. The Department of Education and District Education Office are not in a position to state the number of schools that have met the target set by the government. The District Education Officer of Dang, Chudamani Poudel, admits that the statistics could not be shown because it falls short of the target. The reason for the failure of the campaign initiated by the government is its failure to enlist the participation of teachers, argues President of Teachers' Association Keshab Bhattarai.

A conference held in Dakar, Senegal (Africa), in 2000 passed a resolution of bringing girls' access to education at par with boys'. It had set a target of ending gender discrimination by

2005 through primary and secondary education, besides Implementing 'education for all' by 2015. In Nepal too, the resolution was a much-talked topic at the beginning, but even when the deadline is only a year away, the government is yet to seriously consider bringing about gender parity in classrooms. It seems to have forgotten the need altogether. Still, the primary school in a remote village, Goltakuri of Dang, is putting in its efforts to end gender discrimination.

But it is by no means the only one. Even in Kapilvastu where schools are fewer than in Dang, Suryakumari Sherchan Primary School, located in the bordering VDC of Hathihawa, admitted 114 girls out of a total enrolment of 228 students in standard one alone in this academic session. Its principal, Writer Prasad Yadav, says villagers have become aware of the importance of education. He attributes the

increase in the number of girls in the school to willingness among parents to send their daughters to school.

Under the Basic and Primary Education Program, the girls' education program involved granting

scholarships to girls, promoting gender awareness and packages for targeted groups. Though the program's achievement was below expectations, the number of girl students in primary schools has increased, says Director of the Department of Education (DoE) Janardan Nepal. According to the department's latest statistics, 380,000 children in Nepal do not attend school. Girls belonging to poor and socially backward communities account for a majority of such children.

The trend of increase in girls' enrollment is not exclusive to the 34 VDCs of 17 districts where the girls' education program has been running for the past four years; other districts are also witnessing it. DoE statistics indicate that the net primary school enrollment rate in

These young women have been saved from the superstition prevalent in Terai societies that girls must be married before they start menstruating. Until recently confined to household chores, they completed the primary education in the village run by Rural Women Uplift Center.

Nepal is 86.9 percent while among girls the rate stands at 75.1 percent. But gender disparity in secondary level is much higher. The major reasons for it are: parents in a hurry to marry off their daughters before they start having periods, schools not tailored to girls' needs, and girls preferred over boys for household chores.

UNICEF's recently unveiled report "The State of the World's Children 2004" has concluded that without the foundation of gender equality in education, achievement of other goals cannot be a sustainable one. It has suggested that girls' education should be incorporated in development effort as its integral component, and made a national slogan, and that no additional charge should be imposed in the name of school fees.

Even as the government expresses its commitment to ending gender disparity in schools, it turns a blind eye to the reality in its schools. On the other hand, the program aimed at encouraging girls' education has not been effective. Sporadic increments in girls' population in classrooms seem enough for the concerned authorities to be satisfied. It has become utterly necessary that the Education Ministry abolish the practice of admitting students on the basis of age, region, caste and gender.

Courtesy by -
Sancharika Lekhmala /
Sancharika Samuha

Answering the call of nature: Women suffer again

The practice of giving a newly married woman small amount of food for fear of her having to answer nature's call in the open during the day continues to this day in many parts of Terai.

➤ **Madhu Rai**

"Before it used to be difficult, now I have got used to it," says Manju Bhandari of Biratnagar-5, Ekrahi about her experience of defecating in the open. Having used a toilet at her parents' home, Bhandari faced great discomfort at her new home after marriage. Her neighbor Rama Bhattarai also agrees that it is more embarrassing for women than for men to answer the call of nature in the open. "We can defecate in comfort only if we wake up earlier than men," says Bhattarai. Like Bhandari and Bhattarai, Pushpa Bhandari, a teacher at Janaki English School, also does the act outside the toilet. Her experience is no different from the duo's. While defecating in the open can be taken

as a normal practice among communities of Terai origin in city areas of Biratnagar sub-metropolitan city, the majority of the residents of Ward No. 5, some five kilometers west of the city, are forced to adopt it because they lack toilets.

"Two years ago a girl, of surname Sahani, studying in grade six at Janpath Secondary School in Biratnagar-1, was raped while going to a nearby field in the morning for defecation."

Lest they should defecate during the day, newly wed women are given just a little food, says Jaleshwori Yadav of the ward. "Not only the daughter-in-law, the son-in-law also faces difficulties," adds Ramdevi Rajbanshi. Though adults use the open areas by the bamboo thicket and the canal of Ekrahi, kids and sick people defecate near their houses or on the road. "We know that this kind of undisciplined defecation causes diseases but

we have no other option,” says Daisydevi Yadav.

The majority of the people, however, are ignorant about the hazards of the practice. Children and women have suffered most due to the absence of toilets. Many women of communities that do not have toilets defecate either early in the morning or after dusk.

In this wait for dawn and darkness most women start suffering from diseases related with organs associated with the defecation process. Ignorance and illiteracy are disrupting a normal bodily process. Communities that do not fully grasp the importance of toilets also do not take seriously the problems faced by women. The practice puts women at risk of sexual misconduct or, worse, rape. The physical and psychological trauma they undergo in that eventuality is beyond imagination.

A Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation study under its five-year work plan, conducted in 1999, attributed the lack of enthusiasm in building toilets to people simply not realizing the need of toilets.

Thus residents of most wards of Biratnagar sub-metropolitan city are deprived of the minimum basic facility they are entitled to. To be sure, the municipality every year gives hundreds of thousand of rupees to the wards for physical development and works. But the priority accorded by the municipality to physical works over social development has resulted in lack of awareness about the need to use toilets among the residents of underdeveloped and developed wards like Ward No. 5.

Former Ward Chairman Balakram Chowdhari is one such individual who is making an effort to solve the daily problem faced by the people of Ward No. 5. He says the municipality this year has allocated Rs 1.5 million for development and construction works in his ward that would

benefit its 7,500 residents. As all the wards were obliged to continue last year’s proposed programs, they could not provide financial assistance to the residents to build toilets, says Chowdhari. Since the municipality did not provide any direct support for social development activities, Nepal Water for Health (NEWAH), an NGO, introduced a sanitation program in the village last year.

NEWAH, which has been conducting a health program in Ekrahi since last year, has also started a program that encourages building toilets in the last few months. It has pledged partial assistance in construction of toilets by 219 households of the ward. Every household can get the assistance by submitting a minimum of Rs 500 to Rs 800 initially, says Sushila Rai, health teacher with NEWAH. Rai points out that despite her organization’s offer, the families of the ward do not seem interested in building toilets due to poverty and lack of education,.

As they search for a secluded place women at times face sudden attacks by wild animals. Especially in many places in Terai women suffer sexual exploitation while emptying their bowels in the open.

Likewise, a NEWAH study done in 2003 showed every morning 10.7 million people in Nepal sit under the open sky in villages and towns to answer the call of nature. A gram of human feces could contain 10 million viruses, 1 million bacteria, 12,000 parasites and 100 eggs of stomach worms, according to an UNICEF study done in 2000. Furthermore, 80 percent of diseases in underdeveloped and developing countries are caused by poor sanitation. The government, however, has not been able to implement its policy of educating people about the basics of hygiene and environmental education.

Courtesy by -
Sancharika Lekhmala /
Sancharika Samuha

10 years of fight for pension, yet no end in sight

➤ Bimala Tumkhewa

Even as ex-British Gorkha soldiers, demanding equal rights for equal work, are locked in a court battle with the British government over the past two and a half years, widows in Nepal are forced to fight day and night to get unequal pension due them.

About 70 percent of widows of Nepali soldiers who fought for the British in the Second World War but were sent home empty-handed by the British government are yet to receive the pension it is distributing.

As per a British government-made rule ex-soldiers and their widows in possession of a red book dating back to the time of service are still eligible to receive pension. But 80 percent of ex-servicemen are living in extremely remote areas, while 40 percent of widows entitled to pension are in dire financial straits.

Sukamaya, 58, hailing from Tehrathum's Akhre and now a permanent resident of Pathari, has not received charity pension despite running from pillar to post for many years. Due to economic problem she is living as *sukumbasi* (landless squatter) in Pathari. Her husband, Khadga Bahadur Limbu, is dead. Sukamaya has been continuously petitioning the British Welfare Center for pension for the past 10 years, but her hopes for it have begun to turn into despair in tandem with her graying hair. Her husband was sent home without pension after having served the British Army for 10 years, even though there is a provision of pension for natives in the British Army who have served for at least four years. Because of her abject financial condition, Sukamaya is still hankering after her pension. Struggling to make ends meet from an ordinary

business, Sukamaya has only one son. Two other sons died long ago.

She has all the documents the British government demands from pension applicants. But when will she get her pension? No one knows for sure. Why has she not received it yet? The Welfare Center itself does not have an answer to it. Although since 1997 the British government has shown some flexibility in addressing the demands of its Gurkha soldiers and their families, many soldiers who were sent home after the Second World War and around the time of India's independence from Britain are deprived of pension to this day and so are their widows.

Dhankumari Rai still hopes that her husband will return home from abroad. Having left for Malaya during the Second World War 15 days after marrying her, he has not returned since. The British government has also not given any information as to whether he is alive or dead.

Most of the widows are just about literate. They are unable to arrange documents necessary to obtain pension, one reason why they have been denied their right to pension. Moreover, as some soldiers were sent home without discharge certificates, they lack a legal weapon to stake their claim. The British Welfare Center was opened with the support of the British government, with the aim of conveniently providing pension to nearly 40 percent of ex-soldiers and their widows who have been deprived of it. But absence of easy procedures to get pension has hit widows the hardest. Lacking clear policies, the center which was ostensibly opened to help the helpless, has become an eyewash. Dereliction of duty among

the center's employees has been identified as a chief reason for its ineptitude.

Says Sukamaya, "Earlier they used to tell me that high ranking officials were deliberating on my case, now they tell me to come after I turn 65." This shows that the Welfare Center is not clear about its policy. According to the center based in Kathmandu, the number of recipients of charity pension currently stands at 11,000.

The charity fund receives billions of dollars annually from different countries. The Gurkha Soldiers' Association alleges that the Welfare Center does not have the exact figure of the amount received. Those who have received pension from the center had people to lobby for them, but most of the widows have no powerful force behind them, although wives of late ex-soldiers have started championing their cause. Representatives of the center have repeatedly paid calls on Sukamaya to assess her economic condition, but no action has been initiated on her pension claim.

Most of the widows denied pension are living in remote areas as landless squatters. The center has been maintaining that to be eligible for pension one has to furnish citizenship certificate issued on the basis of one's husband; marriage registration certificate; recommendation of local security authority; and an application attested by district administration. Instead of simplifying these impractical requirements, the center is relentlessly insisting that they be met.

"So it means I really won't get my pension at this old age? How will I live?" asks Sukamaya. Nepal presently has nearly 27,000 citizens entitled to pension from the British government. Hopes of widows among them, in particular, are dashed every time they do the rounds of the welfare office, only to return empty-handed.

As marriage registration was not in practice in Nepal in the past, many widows do not have marriage registration certificates. This has also deprived them of their rights.

Dhankumari Rai, 75, of Bhojpur, Somwang still hopes that her husband will return home from abroad. Having left for Malaya during the

Second World War 15 days after marrying her, he has not returned since. The British government has also not given any information as to whether he is alive or dead.

Likewise, with no documents to support her claim Dhanmaya, also of Bhojpur, has been denied pension. She lives with her son in Bhojpur and suffers from asthma. Making a four-point demand related to equal rights for equal work, ex- British Gurkha soldiers have been locked in a court battle with the British government for the past two and a half years. But widows in Nepal are forced to fight day and night to get unequal pension. It is unfortunate that various NGOs that have been fighting for women rights in the past few years have overlooked this issue, with the result that thousands of widows of ex-soldiers like her continue to be deprived of their rights.

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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.

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