

# Women—Losing Even More in War

*Editor's Note: In many societies, women continue to be marginalised, and have lesser opportunities than men for improving their lives and their self-worth, for upholding their dignity. In times of conflict and war, women have to suffer even more, being forcibly drawn into the cruelties, abuses, violence of war. Women get caught in the middle of despair and hopelessness, not knowing how, where, or when to find themselves again. The following two articles tell us of such women in Nepal, and the impact on them of the ongoing conflict in their country. "Women Now Swelling the Ranks of Maoists" tells of how young women are increasing the ranks of the People's Liberation Army yet their issues are rarely taken up by the party, and programmes developed by women's mass fronts are not implemented.*

*The adjoining article "Women Trapped in Conflict" dwells on the impact on women of the Maoist-government conflict but, in particular, highlights the issue of how women are missing in the peace-making process. These two articles address the important point that whether or not women are armed with guns, they are the most affected by conflict and, by the same token, the least with power as they are not part of the important processes, whether in deciding what is best for themselves or in peace-making processes.*

## Women now swelling the ranks of Maoists

By Rita Manchanda

Striking images of young women in fatigues, rifles hoisted on their shoulders and purposefully marching forward—these stare back at you when you click on the official website of the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-Maoist).

The Maoists claim that a third of their "People's Liberation Army" is made up of women. Within eight years, the Maoist revolution had spread from two districts in Nepal to almost two-thirds of the country. Women cadres are visible everywhere, in almost all of the country's 75 districts, as

propaganda activists, agricultural production team members, and guerrillas.

Comrade Parvati (an alias), the head of the women's department of the Central Committee, states that women have become battalion vice commanders and political commissars.

### Women in War

The so-called "People's War" was launched by the CPN-Maoist in 1996 to abolish the monarchy and install a communist republic. Clashes between the Maoists and security forces of Nepal have seen over 10,000 killed.

CPN-Maoists' Chair Comrade Prachanda admitted that the party was overwhelmed by the unexpected response of women to join the armed struggle. The party propaganda machinery has capitalised on this and frequently eulogises on the exploits of women guerrillas.

Top Maoist woman leader Hsila Yami has exalted the emancipatory potential of the movement for women. Before going underground, she said, "The women have more to gain than men from the People's War. That is why the women, especially the Tibeto-Burman and non-Aryan women (from the lower castes) constitute such an important part

of the movement.” Yami is the wife of the second highest ranking Maoist in Nepal, Baburam Bhattarai.

“In a woman-run subsistence agro-economy, where one in every two households is involved in seasonal migration, women form the majority of the rural community,” she said. “With *de facto* female-headed households, there can be no agrarian revolution without mobilising women and putting them in guerrilla fatigues,” explained Yami.

#### Sufferings in War

But the daily round of news briefs of the Maoist insurgency routinely lists women Maoists raped, abducted, disappeared and killed, largely by the security forces.

In the notorious Doramba execution-style killing that broke up the 2003 peace talks, security forces shot dead 19 unarmed members of the district “people’s government.” Six of those killed were women. Days later, 44-year-old Relimaya Moktan, a female rural health worker in the village—suspected of being an informer—was shot dead by the Maoists in retaliatory killings.

Evidence of the growing number of women in the Maoist movement can be gauged by the rising casualties each time there is a skirmish with the Nepali authorities. The death toll of women killed in the first two years

of the insurgency was six. By 2003, according to the human rights organisation INSEC, women made up at least 159 of the 1308 killed by the security forces.

Nepal is seeing a mass outflow of particularly young men and boys fleeing the pincer of the security forces and the Maoists. Estimates of the internally displaced are more than 200,000. Maoist restrictions on movement in and

Women associated with propaganda work and located much closer to the home seem to have less opportunities for transcending gender specific roles than women in the fighting units.

out of the villages are dictated not only by security concerns but also by efforts to stem migration overseas. The mass outflow of the males leads to the phenomenon of villages “where there are no men,” which is now widespread. It is the women who become the targets of the raids of the Royal Nepal Army and are also vulnerable to Maoist recruiters.

#### What is the Choice?

But why are girls, who are a high-risk group, not leaving their villages?

A brigadier-general of the Royal Nepal Army informally told the Inter Press Service (IPS): “The boys can go across the border and find jobs in India or Malaysia. Where can the girls go? If they come to Kathmandu or go to India, they run the risk of being trafficked or getting entrapped in sexually exploitative jobs.”

Insurgency apart, some 5000 Nepali girls are trafficked annually to India.

In Kathmandu, through the Maoists Victims Association, this correspondent met with two girls: 19-year-old Sharmila Gatri and 17-year-old Sangeeta Chettri (not their real names). They said they had left their villages in eastern Nepal to escape forceful recruitment by the Maoists and were now working in a Kathmandu bar where sexual exploitation is common.

According to Bishnu Sharma of the daily “Rajdhani” in Lamjung district—where Maoist recruitments are large—when the rebels called for one in every family to join, families were more inclined to send daughters rather than sons. Nepali writer Manjushree Thapa’s encounters with Maoist girls in western Nepal also reinforced this impression. She recalls her meeting with “Comrade Binita” who worked in a team of “political-motivators” in Surkhet district. “This Maoist woman cadre had three older brothers. She was

the only daughter. And she was the only one to leave her studies and join the Maoists," Thapa told IPS. "For many poor, semi-literate girls, it (joining the Maoists) seemed the best option available to them to escape a life of drudgery," added Thapa.

Thapa quotes a young Maoist girl telling her this: "You see, there used to only be sickles and grass in the hands of girls like us. Now there are automatic rifles."

Maoist women leaders argue that it is the material basis of Nepali women's downtrodden status in the feudal patriarchal order that has drawn these women to the party.

Yami, writing in the daily "Kantipur" states, "They (women)

are denied parental property although they run rural households on their own when their husbands are away earning money. When the men return they marry other women and the wives are forced to leave. If the women marry someone else, they become outcasts. The CPN-Maoist is reversing this feudal practice through its People's War."

#### Women's Issues and the Party

But behind the rhetoric is Comrade Parvati's own criticism of the party. "Rarely are women's issues taken up as a central theme, and the party neglects to implement programmes developed by women's mass fronts," she told IPS.

"Women associated with propaganda work and located much closer to the home seem to

have less opportunities for transcending gender specific roles than women in the fighting units," she added. Nevertheless, Comrade Parvati acknowledges the difficulty of women emerging as leaders in the ongoing "war."

"The pressure of marriage and the reproductive cycle obliges them to quit active participation (in the Maoist movement) after 25 years of age," she said.

Maoist women, Comrade Parvati complained, face internal party pressure to get married. "The uncertainty of life makes the men insist on early pregnancy."

Source: Inter Press Service, 3 November 2004, <<http://www.ipsnews.net>>

## Women trapped in conflict

By Babita Basnet

*Although the Maoist insurgency [in Nepal] 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.*

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 the 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 tasks has fallen on the shoulders of women, especially in Maoist-affected areas. The reason for this is that most insurgency-hit villages are now devoid of able-bodied men, with some having gone underground after joining the rebel outfit and others having left for abroad. The scanty male population that has remained in the villages consist 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, women themselves have to carry dead bodies although that was another restricted job for them before the armed insurgency began.

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 the 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 victimised. Incidents of violence against women that have come to be known range from abduction 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 the peace process, with the sole exception being Anuradha Koirala, an assistant minister in the Lokendra Bahadur Chand government between October 2002 and April 2003. She was part of a 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 organisations have been voicing the need for participation of women in the peace process. UNIFEM is one such organisation. It was at its initiative that a UN Security Council meeting in October 2000 passed Resolution 1325, with special em-

phasis on women and peace and security. The 18-point resolution, considered to be a historical achievement in the women's rights movement, recognised the need for respect and protection of rights of women and children, the active role of women in restoring peace, and the training on gender sensitivities for everyone working to bring about peace. The resolution 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 levels at national, regional and international organisations 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 who 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 a 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 the human rights group INSEC, as of Jestha 2061 (June 2004), 7,800 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 2,000 children orphans, and forced more than 4,000 to leave home.

Courtesy of Sancharika Lekhmala / Sancharika Samuha

source: Sancharika Feature Service, December 2004, Vol 7, Issue 12

# Once Docile Women Flex Economic Muscle

By Suvendrini Kakuchi

Japanese women, long viewed as docile and entertaining “flowers” in the office, are bucking the trend to become “tigers” and “economic locomotives” that make key economic contributions these days, say analysts.

“More women are walking a new road, changing from office “flowers”—a term that describes their traditional role as decorations to please men—to becoming indispensable in the work place,” explains Mitsuko Yamaguchi, spokesperson for Ishikawa Fusae Memorial Association, one of Japan’s oldest feminist organisations.

This trend for women, according to analysts, has made Japan’s rising number of single women a key source of economic growth in the country.

Statistics indicate that unmarried women in their twenties and thirties now make up 40 percent of that group living in the big cities like Tokyo.

The importance of the single-women sector in Japan’s drive for long-term growth was documented

in a report on Japan’s 2005 economic outlook by Mizuho Securities, a leading financial organisation.

Respected economist Nobuyuki Saji, who says the Japanese economy has pulled out of the 10-year-long recession and

...more younger women are becoming decision-makers even after they start families, a huge contrast to the older generation where women played second fiddle to men.

has begun a sustainable recovery, includes the purchasing power of single women as one positive sign to support his forecast in the report. While the report points to the reduction of bank debt and the manufacture of high-technology machinery as factors that would help boost national product performance and economic recovery, Saji mentions higher female labour participation in consumer spending as another vital point. “Working women in their twenties and thirties have seen their income increase these

past two years as corporate restructuring shifts towards a meritocratic pay system that sees income distribution in favour of young people,” he explains. (Irene—I take it that Saji’s report appears in the Mizuho report? The writer is not clear on that but that is my sense in the way the article is written)

Real consumption spending among people below the age of 50 has increased to 52.6 percent from around 35 percent of all consumption between October 2003 to the same month, this year.

Saji says his research on consumption shows a rapid increase in the purchase of apartments as well as automobiles and stocks by single women, making them a key target for Japanese companies.

Indeed, data compiled by large real estate companies show that purchases by unmarried women in their twenties and thirties have risen to almost three-fourths of new sales this year, a dramatic trend compared to a decade ago when married men were the largest group.

Women owners of properties reported average annual incomes of between US\$60,000 to

US\$80,000 and bought homes that were priced around US\$300,000.

Women also account for 67 percent of sales of mini-vehicles priced at around US\$12,000 dollars, a record since 1999. Data on stock investing also show that women buying shares in their twenties and thirties have increased to 33.9 percent, higher than the 24 percent recorded for those in their forties and fifties.

The rise of the female spender is also seen as the key to the growth in Japan's service industry—annual growth rate of 3 percent or higher for companies that offer health—and beauty-related services, restaurants, travel and recreational outlets.

Hidehiko Yanagisawa, an analyst at Hakuhodo Research company, says more younger women are becoming decision-makers even after they start families. This is a huge contrast to the older generation where women played second fiddle to men. This social change is here to stay and is closely observed by companies as an important business opportunity from now on, he explains.

“Non Parasite Single Women,” a book released by author Kiyo Yamamoto in April, documents the lives of single women who live on their own because they do not want to lose their independence by getting married and settling down

to start families. Single and ambitious women in Japan have well-paid jobs, boyfriends, and enjoy themselves. Their goal is to live for themselves, writes Yamamoto in her book.

Single and energetic Akemi Ozaki, 37, cannot agree more. Ozaki launched her own aesthetic and hairdressing shop two years ago and says she does not even dream of marriage. “I am too busy with work and enjoying life to adjust to another human being in my life,” explains the slight woman, whose work schedule ends after midnight most weekdays. She caters to a growing number of working women who want to relax with a shampoo or facial after they leave office in the evenings.

Women are reporting inroads in the more conservative job market as well. Trenders Inc., a company offering placement services for women, says their single clients are now being snapped up as managers by companies that have begun to report a doubling of their sales in the past two years. “Women managers have an edge over men when it comes to handling consumer goods and other services for companies in that field,” notes Kahoko Tsunazawa, who runs the company.

Source: Inter Press Service, 28 December 2004, <<http://www.ipsnews.net>>

**Women in Action** promotes the empowerment of women through information sharing, communication, and networking. It is published by Isis International-Manila, an international non-government women's organisation, founded in 1974. Isis has sister offices in Santiago, Chile and Kampala, Uganda. Its network reaches over 50,000 individuals and organisations in 150 countries.

**Isis International-Manila** acknowledges the support and financial assistance of the following partner-donor organisations: Church Development Service (EED) (Germany), Communications Assistance Foundation (The Netherlands), Global Ministries-The United Methodist Church (USA), Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (The Netherlands), Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norway), Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Denmark), Swedish International Development Authority (Sweden), United Nations Development Fund for Women, and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (USA).

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Errata on Women in Action No. 2, 2004: photos on pages 14, 16, 34, 40 were taken by Susanna George Footnote No. 2 on page 33. The Babri Masjid mosque is located in city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh and not in Gujarat.



# A Society Follows Women-made Regulation

By Jayaprakash Tripathi

*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 proven 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.*

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

But even before that, his daughter had a long-suffering story at the hands of her husband and in-laws. All because Lahurekanchha 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 Lahurekanchha, he somehow consoled himself thinking that in his house, his daughter, at least, was not suffering the pain she had gone 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, 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 they 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 were at the helm of social affairs but they have not succeeded in solving their society's problems. Conflict had forced many young men to flee the village whereas older men whiled away their time playing cards, gambling, and engaging in useless chat. Thus, even minor social problems assumed great and complex proportions in any such village. Choyaga was no exception.

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

The groups have created an opportune environment for women to take on a more active role in the village. 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 Indira Tandon, president of Choyaga Sisters' Group.

Shova Midun, the sisters' group secretary, claims that currently 70 families abide by the custom of the two organisations, that is, paying Rs 200 in cash along with some firewood, which is used for cremation. Since the custom entitles each bereaved family to Rs 14,000 in cash and adequate quantity of firewood, people are able to perform last rites for their relatives without any economic and mental strain. According to Basanta Karki,

a member of the mothers' group, 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 custom thereby 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 performed 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

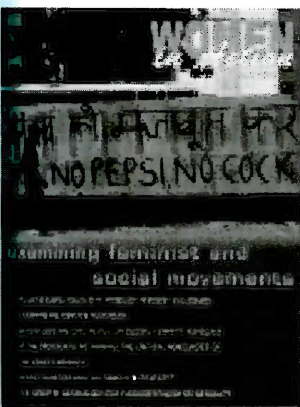
no one will have to face Lahurekanchha's fate," says a visibly satisfied Indira. On her part, Rita from the mothers' group is enthusiastic about conducting many reform-oriented programs in the village. In fact, determined women like Rita and Indira have been encouraged by the realization that they will 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 work done by her organisation. "Villagers have stopped using *duna-tapari* (leaf plates), Karki says. "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. The work that the 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: If all the women in the country were to become actively involved in social reforms for better life as have their sisters in Choyaga, perhaps we would not have to wait long to see women truly emancipated.

Courtesy of - Sancharika Lekhmala / Sancharika Samuha

source: Sancharika Feature Service, December 2004, Vol 7, Issue 12



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comes out in print form every four months of the year, and circulated worldwide.

Major articles are also posted onto the Isis Website.

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