

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

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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