

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.

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