

## **THE IMPACT OF THE DISAPPEARANCE OF A FAMILY MEMBER ON WOMEN IN NEPAL**

Part of a comprehensive report - compiled by a network of NGOs, Human Rights Organisations and community groups – submitted to a United Nations Delegation visiting Nepal December 2004.

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As the conflict between the Maoists and Government enters its ninth year, more and more people are disappearing and little, if any, progress has been made to curb this disturbing trend. While atrocities are being committed by both sides, the disappearance of people is predominantly being committed by the police and army. Women are disproportionately affected by war. In times of conflict, women are often raped and many are killed. They are arrested, tortured in custody and the incidence of widowhood has steadily increased.

Disappearance is perhaps the most significant form of torture in that it causes severe agony and untold suffering for the families left behind who live in hope and despair. A network of 20 NGO's, Human Rights Organizations and community groups, coordinated by HUDEP Nepal, has been formed to lobby the conflicting parties to make genuine efforts to uphold the human rights of people, as outlined under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other international conventions. This paper aims to highlight the impact of these disappearances at the family level, an aspect of the conflict that receives insufficient attention. It follows a micro-level analysis into the social, psychological, physical and financial impact of the disappearance of a relative on the, predominantly, women and children who are left behind.

The paper follows interviews conducted with 11 women, living in various parts of Nepal, whose husband or son has disappeared. Questions focused on the social, psychological, financial and physical impact of the disappearances. For these women, it is the social isolation and loss of hope for their children that is the hardest to cope with. Following are just two of the hundreds of stories of women who endure extensive trauma in the search for their family members. Their demand is simple – make public the whereabouts of their relatives.

### **Krishna Beti Prajapati**

Krishna Beti Prajapati lives in Bhaktapur. She has 5 daughters and 1 son and cares for her 79-year-old mother-in-law. Her husband disappeared 3 years ago. The agony she endures on a daily basis is visible as she describes the impact of his disappearance on her life and that of her children.

*"My husband worked in a lawyer's office. In November 2001 he went to the doctor and on his way he was arrested. People told me that they saw him being forced into an army van and taken away. I did not know about it until three days later and went immediately to the army office to request a visit. At first they refused permission but after I returned everyday for about one month they finally allowed me to see him. He had been badly beaten, many of his teeth were missing and he had wounds all over his body. He said he was hungry so I gave him some biscuits, but he was too weak to eat them. The army laughed at me and said that I should have brought enough biscuits for everybody inside. They spoke very poorly to me and it hurt me very much. I was allowed one more visit with him and then when I returned to visit him again the army denied arresting him and told me that he was not there. They knew that I had seen him there but they said that they had never arrested him. They told me to go to another army office, and when I got there those officers told me to go to another and so it continued. Everyday my children ask me why their father does not come home and where he is, and it hurts me very much that I have no answers to their questions.*

*My parents-in-law became very sick after my husband was arrested. He was their only son. My father-in-law has since died, and I now have to care for my mother-in-law who is suffering from severe depression. She can't even get up in the morning to work. For me, the biggest pain is not being able to celebrate Nepali festivals in accordance with our custom. I can't afford to buy the food and clothes that are required for festivals and my children can't understand why this is so. It hurts me so that my children can't celebrate*

*festivals like the others. Last year my youngest son said to me "Mommy, dad used to buy us clothes for the festivals didn't he? Can we buy some?" This causes the biggest pain for me. (Krishna Pedi breaks down in tears at this point and her oldest daughter moves next to her immediately and rests her hand on her mother's shoulder).*

*When the army took my husband, they took my life away and destroyed my children's future. My neighbors don't want to talk to me because they are afraid that they will also be arrested. They accuse me of being from a terrorist family and this hurts me very much. I am illiterate and have no idea about politics. All day I work on other people's fields trying to get enough food for my children. I try to do the work that two of us used to do and the community says that I do not spend enough time caring for my children. What can I do? They are now three years behind in their schooling and I can't afford school expenses. Sister, please help me to send my children to school.*

*I did not take my case to court because I have seen from many others that they will say the same thing as the army. The courts have told others that there is no proof of the arrest and therefore it did not happen. I have proof that he was arrested, I saw him at the army station but they say this is not true. I cannot trust the courts and prefer to spend my money feeding my children rather than wasting it on the courts. The army are not just torturing my husband, they are torturing my whole family. They speak so badly to me and make me feel like I am not worth anything. Please help me to find my husband so that I can see if he is okay and so I can tell my children what happened to him."*

### **Purna Kumari Sasha**

Bijaya Kumar Sasha, a teacher in far western Nepal and member of Red Cross, has 3 sons and 2 daughters. He was taken by Maoists on the night of 22 Asmin 2061 (Nepali date) and his family has heard no word from him since.

*"I cannot do anything to find out where my husband is. I am afraid to go to the police because I fear that this will increase the torture my family is experiencing at the hands of the Maoists. I cannot go to the court because the Maoists do not recognize the court and so there will be no progress. The only thing I could do is to go to the National Human Rights Commission and ICRC (Red Cross). I asked them to inquire at the police on our behalf.*

*I feel helpless. I am very worried about him, and hope that he is alive. I cannot talk to the Maoists because I don't know where they are and I don't know who they are. They have no office, so where can I find them? Also I am afraid that if I talk to them the police might think that I am Maoist. What can we do? We ask that they tell us where he is so we can see if he is okay and maybe take him some food. He is a good man, he dedicated his life to teaching and now our family's future is gone. All the people in our community offer us support and pray that the Maoists will return my husband safely."*

### **Sita Thapaliya**

Sita Thapaliya works as a clerk at the District Development Committee (Government) office in Kathmandu. She is married (an intercaste marriage) to Sailendra Maske, and they have a four-year-old son. Her husband disappeared on 19 June 2004 and she has no information as to his whereabouts.

*"My husband was collecting names of families whose relatives had disappeared. The army heard about this and on 19 June 2004 they arrested him. I did not know it had happened and heard about it on HBC FM Radio news. When I heard the news I rushed to*

*Kantipur Press to inform them so that they could publish his name in the newspaper. I hoped that somebody might know where he was taken. I went to the army headquarters and they denied the arrest. I have been to the National Human Rights Commission, ICRC (Red Cross), Police Headquarters and District Administration Office but I have no information about where he is. I even wrote a letter to the Prime Minister asking for information about where he is and got no response. I don't know if he is alive or dead and I all I ask is to be able to see him. I lodged my case (Habeus Corpus petition) at the Supreme Court demanding to know why he was arrested and where he is but there has not been any progress yet.*

*Previously I worked for the CPN – UML Political Party and went there to ask my former colleagues to help me find my husband. They told me not to involve them in my problems because they might also be accused of being Maoist. I don't know if my husband supported the Maoists and I am not asking for his release. I am just asking to know where he is and to see him. The behaviour of my family and friends towards me is the hardest part to deal with. I am from an intercaste marriage, my family did not support the marriage and so already I have faced discrimination from the community. Following my husband's arrest, the treatment by my friends and family has worsened. Why won't they help me? I am not asking for his release.*

*My son can't sleep at night and he says to me: "Mommy, can we break into the army camp because daddy is inside." I don't know how to help my son. What can I say to him? He has lost his father, I have lost my husband, and we have lost our future. I have thought many times that I would like to die, but then I think of my son and wonder what would happen to him. I know I am luckier than others because I still have a job but my colleagues do not understand my suffering. They always expect me to be on time and they don't understand how difficult it is to raise my son alone. They don't want to talk about my husband and they tell me that it is my problem and not theirs. My parents-in-law expect me to provide financial support to them, but I can't.*

*I have started to meet other people who have relatives that have disappeared. Talking to them makes me feel better because I know that they understand. I participated in the hunger strikes at Ratna Park in October 2004 which pressured the government to release the names of those arrested but they always publish very few names and my husband's is not one of them. Why can't they tell us where our relatives are? I will continue my search. I do not fear my own safety because I know that the worst that can happen is that they can kill me. I worry only for the safety of my husband and for my son's future. How can he grow up without knowing his father? How can I help him to sleep at night, and what should I tell him about where his father is?*

*I want to tell the government that arresting people without giving the family information about where they are is not a solution. I do not support the Maoists but I am worried that what the army and police are doing will anger the people and might cause support for the Maoists to increase. I am very angry with the army and police and cannot trust them. I have lost everything. On 19 June they took away everything I have ever had. Why are they allowed to arrest people without giving us the chance to see them or know where they are? I have done everything I can."*

Women are the most vulnerable to victimization during conflict. Their well-being is directly related to the well-being of their children. Children are our future, what type of future are we creating for our world through such actions?

The network appeals to the International Community to play a greater role in pressuring the Government and Maoists to be sincere in their efforts to uphold the international conventions on the protection of people's human rights. We call for the establishment of

independent mechanisms, equipped with sufficient powers and resources to be able to be effective in ensuring that all arrests comply with international conventions. The humanitarian crisis in Nepal cannot be allowed to continue. The hundreds of families whose futures have been stolen from them provide sufficient cause for action. The agony of not knowing where loved ones are is an experience that no family should have to endure.