

VI

WOMEN AND MEDIA



# Women's Writings

On 4 November 1997 a discussion on women's writings in the Nepali media was held as part of the weekly Tuesday forum at Martin Chautari in Thapathali. Eight women writers were present along with about 20 other people. In the absence of those who have, in the past, opposed the appearance of women's writings, the discussion focused not on whether or not women's columns/writings should be given space in print media, but more soon their contents and form. Some voiced their criticism against editors who expected them to dwell only on "tamed women's issues." This, they said, limited the possibilities of what they could write. Others pointed out that their writings were not confined to "women's issues" but included other subjects as well.

Some of those who took part in the discussion have picked up this issue in their writings. An article by journalist Shova Gautam appeared in *Aajako Samacarpatra* of 5 November. Writer Bhuwan Dhungana mentioned the discussion in passing in her

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weekly column in *Jana-Manch* on 6 November. In the context of reflecting upon her weekly columns for *Budhabar* published in the past two years, writer Sulochana Manandhar has discussed some issues mentioned at the Chautari (19 November). *Nepalipatra* (whose reporter Babita Basnet was a participant), reported about the discussion but erroneously quoted me as saying that instead of separate columns devoted to women's issues, such issues should be brought into mainstream reporting (an opinion expressed by newsreader and media consultant Bandana Rana).

Here I highlight some of the structural aspects of the issue for the case of print media. To begin with, I think of "women's writings" in the media in two separate but related ways: first as reportage and writings by women; second as writings on "women's issues" by women as well as men. Beginning with the first of the two themes, we must note that writings by women (on any subject) in the print media can come either as journalistic reporting or as researched or unresearched opinion pieces. In the journalism field alone we can think of the number of women journalists hired by any media organization as an indicator of that organization's commitment toward gender equality. The record on this count is abysmal. Even the leading private print media organization, *Kantipur Publications*, has only two women journalists working for *Kantipur* and four for *The Kathmandu Post* at the moment. Women journalists seldom have a say in editorial or managerial aspects of media publications. No media organization that I am aware of has instituted a commitment toward hiring more women journalists, nor have any demonstrated, through active on-the-job programs, the willingness to train young and able women in the field. This lacuna has been long recognized and apart from real work that begins to redress the situation, hardly anything else needs to be said.

Still on the first theme but on the subject of women writers who write opinion pieces in the Nepali language, we need to recognize a few columnists who have written regularly in recent months. These include (with apologies to those whose writings I have missed): Sulochana Manandhar (*Budhabar*), Bhuwan Dhungana (*Jana-Manch*), Amrita Banskota (*Dristi and Punarjagaran*), Banira Giri (*Punarjagaran*), Babita Basnet (*Nepalipatra*), Gyanu Pandey (*Himalaya Times*), Kamala Parajuli (*Sambodhan*), Manju Thapa (*Asmita*), Gaura Prasai (*Prakash*), Shova Chand (*Dristi*), and Komal Oli (*Samakalin*). Regular pieces have also come from the likes of Sita Pandey, Aruna Upreti and Shova Gautam in various newspapers. Bindhya Pradhan, a columnist for *Dristi* until two years ago, has written less frequently since. And there are a number of other women who write less frequently. As was pointed out at the Chautari, most of those listed above are well-recognized names and hence have been invited to write for various papers. But just as in the case of journalists, media organizations have done little to aggressively recruit younger women to write for them on different subjects. Also 'established' women and men writers and organizations who is in a position to help, need to do a lot more to facilitate the publication of writings by younger women.

With respect to the second aspect—writings on “women’s issues” in the media—a few points need to be recognized. First, since the so-called “women’s issues” are not hermetically separate from what might be called “men’s issues,” we should begin to think of them as “gendered social analysis”. By renaming it thus, we highlight the fact that women and men exist within a single society under socially constructed gendered power relations and thus a reading of the society from the usually subordinate position of women brings to fore one of the central ways in which power (defined broadly) operates in our society. Gendered social analysis

provides fundamental insights that add to and alter the understanding of our society obtained from modes of inquiry that take class, caste or ethnicity as their primary social unit. Defined this way, both men and women can write insightful pieces on what has been called “women’s issues.” However it is true that among the many male columnists writing today, Rajendra Prasad Adhikari (*Jana-Ekata*) is the only one who has a column on this theme, while a handful of other male writers have contributed an occasional piece or two.

Second, in the print media, gendered social analysis can appear either from the pens of journalists or other professionals who have acquired competence in this subject. Some journalists, mostly women who have self-trained themselves in the subject, have done a valiant effort in this regard (see especially the issues of *Asmita*). *Sancharika Samuha*, an organization of media women, has provided good feature articles to various newspapers. However journalism-training programs continue to neglect gender as an operative category of social reporting. Journalists who come fresh from Nepal’s campuses would have hardly had any exposure to this theme and hence neophyte journalists are hardly equipped to do gendered social reporting.

Third, the media is ill-served by Nepali gender ‘experts’ (both women and men) who remain, by and large, well-versed in the pre-packaged women-in-development discourses (and hence are darlings of the international donor community) but uncommitted to working toward the enhancement of journalistic abilities regarding gendered analysis. Flaunting their formal degrees as weapons of terror, these ‘experts’ have given many seminars on the theme of “media and gender” but none has committed any significant amount of time and energy toward the generation of actual copies of serious reporting. About 25 top-class journalists had an opportunity to learn about the ignorance regarding the

Nepali print media world on the part of one prominent gender 'expert' during a two-day workshop organized by the Nepal Institute of Mass Communication on 21-22 December 1996. Furthermore, little of the work these experts have produced in the form of project reports and analyses find their way to the media as appropriately written analytical essays.

To conclude then, we need to see a lot more initiative on the part of media organizations and people before "women's writings"—in both of the senses discussed above—can rise from the "columned" space given it at the moment to "mainstream" print media. Private media organizations should demonstrate their commitment to gender equality by vigorously recruiting more women journalists and columnists. Gendered analysis can not become mainstream reporting until we can raise the number of journalists who are capable of doing so. Media training programs ought to include lessons on gender as a fundamental category of social reporting in their curricula. Donor agencies pouring money into the media sector should stop funding useless seminars and should start funding specific organizations and individuals to generate copies of gendered reporting.

Are there any takers out there?

# Covering Violence against Women

In the late 1980s, *Asmita* magazine (No. 2) published articles on the problems associated with “eve teasing” and dowry. The write-ups identified the harassment faced by women in each of these cases but did not go so far to identify them as violence against women (VAW) but instead presented them as “social problems”. Five years later, in February 1994, *Asmita* (No. 21) carried an article on sexual harassment of women in public places in Kathmandu. It forcefully argued that such practice be seen as a VAW similar to rape, prostitution, and pornography. In September 1995, *Asmita* (No. 37) carried a cover story on dowry being one source of increasing incidents of domestic violence against women in Nepal. Within a short span of seven years, if writings in *Asmita* are taken as our evidence, the harassment faced by women in public and private spaces and the concomitant mental and physical tortures experienced by them were identified as incidents of VAW instead of just some generic “social problems”.

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This development gives us one way to map the history of the process through which VAW arrived in the Nepali national public sphere as an “issue” for those concerned about gender justice in our society. While it is difficult to exhaustively track this history here, we must note that many different I/NGOs, development activists and media personnel have played an active role in this process. One such organization, SAATHI, established in 1992, has produced several publications and reports on VAW in Nepal.

A 1997 study by SAATHI concludes that violence against women and girls (VAW & G) in Nepal cuts across “women and girls of all class, caste, age and ethnicity with 95 per cent of respondents attesting first hand knowledge of VAW & G incidents.” The study further stated, “In 77 per cent of the cases the perpetrators were reported to be members of the family.... In the case of domestic violence, nearly 58 per cent reported it as being a daily occurrence.” It is not clear how the results obtained from this study, based on samples from five districts of Nepal, can be extrapolated to the entire Nepali population. Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt that VAW is a severe problem in Nepali society.

When the Nepali government formed the National Action Plan for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in late 1997 (following initiatives created by the UN Women World Conference in Beijing in September 1995), it identified VAW as one of the twelve critical areas of concern. With reference to the role of the media, the Action Plan states that advertisements that debase women should be barred and the media should portray women in a “positive” role. It also states that some criteria should be established to censor or control writings and programs that might promote VAW. Under a five-year program schedule, it mentions that the public will be informed about VAW via the print media and programs that discourage VAW will be broadcast over Radio Nepal and Nepal TV. While the statements and plans

included in the Action Plan with respect to media advocacy against VAW are to be praised, very little evidence exists therein of an appreciation of the complexities that mark the field.

Content analysis: No thorough study of the print and electronic media archives have been done to analyze both the types and contents of various media reports on VAW in Nepal. Hence for the purposes of this discussion, I have resorted to a reading of the files of paper cuttings on reports on VAW kept at the offices of the Sancarika Samuha. These files, prepared by journalist Babita Basnet for the National Coalition against Violence against Women and Girls, cover the period from January to April 1998. Based on a reading of these files, we can state the following. VAW news for January focus on suicide by women (after failed relationships or marriages), rape, trafficking and prostitution, domestic violence (dowry, battery, sexual abuse), sexual harassment, murder, hijacking, sexual abuse of Nepali women who work abroad, and VAW on the basis of their political beliefs. In February, much news is about cases of Nepali women being sexually abused in work places outside of Nepal, mostly in the Mid-East. News about trafficking, prostitution, marriage of minors, marriage between people of large age differential, and dowry related abuse are also included. An editorial in *Kantipur* highlighted a dowry-related VAW.

In March, news reports focus on trafficking and prostitution, rape, harassment of women who married without parental approval, suicide, polygamy, and murder. There is also a report of VAW perpetrated by another woman. Several editorials were published in *Gorkhapatra* (on domestic violence), *Samacharpatra* (on the need for consistency between talk about gender equality and practice, and the need for strong legal action against rapists) and *Kantipur* (domestic violence against children). In April, news reports focus on sexual abuse of children, rape of

children, child prostitution, repatriated commercial sex workers, harassment of female political activists by the police, etc. Some reports about women who had murdered other women were also published. Editorials in *Kantipur* on two consecutive days focused on domestic violence and custodial rape.

Just focusing on the theme of domestic violence, the following could be derived from this reading:

- a. The reported incidents of VAW that can be categorized under domestic violence include: marriage of minors, marriage between two with a large age differential, dowry-related, battery, burns and other bodily harm, sexual abuse, incest, step-parental abuse, suicide caused by family tensions, and murder by relatives.
- b. Most reports are incident-oriented; they contain the bare minimum information and there is very little said about the process that might have led to the incident of domestic violence. Hence they are weak in style and substance.
- c. In most cases, the news source for the initial report is the police; there is almost never a follow-up report once the police has investigated the case.
- d. When large broadsheet dailies have carried editorials on this subject, they have usually been published after the respective newspaper has reported an incident of domestic violence. The editorials usually mention the rights of Nepali women guaranteed by the constitution of Nepal, and the work being done by various women-oriented NGOs and usually ask “why has not the situation of Nepali women improved despite all these efforts?”
- e. The number of photographs accompanying the reports of domestic violence in these files is so few that no statement regarding the appropriateness of their use can be made at this moment.

- f. There are some exceptionally good reports. An example of such in a broadsheet paper is a report filed by Shankar Kharel from Biratnagar in *Kantipur* in early February. Describing how Tarai communities are witnessing increasing incidents of domestic violence against women in relation to demands for dowry by the husband and his family, Kharel has presented details of actual cases and used a number of sources to highlight various aspects of this problem.

Also it was not easy to figure out the exact routes that the reports 'traversed' before appearing in print. While we can surmise that some news were NGO-supported and others were initiated by the reporters themselves, only a more thorough study can reveal more detailed information about this subject.

# Media and Trafficking in Women

As yet, media studies in Nepal are hardly a research discipline. While many analysts have made various observations on the state and the contents of the Nepali media, most of them can be characterized as ad hoc statements with no firm basis on empirical research. Hence the study entitled *Efforts to Prevent Trafficking in Women and Girls: A Pre-Study for Media Activism*, recently completed by Asmita, the Women's Publishing House and Media Resource Organization, must be welcomed.

The Asmita study looked at both the print and the electronic media to see how they had covered the issue of trafficking in Nepali women and girls for prostitution over the last decade. Some of the strong aspects of this study as well as its weaknesses have already been pointed out in a review by Seira Tamang (*The Kathmandu Post*, 12 July 1998). Here I draw the readers' attention to some of the conclusions reached by Asmita researchers in the hope that media training programs in TU and

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elsewhere will use this study as a reference for how media ‘works’ in Nepal and for planning of future media competence building programs.

After reading almost 1600 print media materials on this subject from about 100 publications (newspapers, magazines, and journals) over a ten year period ending in mid-1997, Saroj Pant reached, among others, the following conclusions: The media does not have a precise definition of trafficking and the increase in the number of media reports of this subject after 1990 is due to the increase in the number of print media publications after the *Jana Andolan*. In addition, the pattern of reportage has remained the same. Same information sources (police reports, victims’ statements, NGO activists and seminars) are used by all of the reporters who rarely question the vested interests of these sources in providing the information. Reporters have also shown the tendency to add exaggerated and speculative statements and assumptions to their reports for the sake of titillation. Thus media coverage of this issue has become both tedious and suspect.

Pant concludes that the print media has been able, however partially, to convey some of the changing dynamics of the trafficking business. For instance, with respect to the place of the origin of the victims, the media has now alerted us that women are being trafficked out of many districts in the Tarai. However, the coverage is victim-focused and not victimizer-focused. The legal complexities associated with trafficking as a crime are rarely the focus of these reports.

With respect to how the electronic media has covered this issue, *Asmita* researchers Anju Chhetri and Manju Thapa studied 22 different programs broadcast over Nepal TV, three feature films and about 100 *Chelibeti* programs broadcast over Radio Nepal. They reached, among others, the following conclusions: Telefilm scripts draw from the by-now familiar components of

the trafficking saga. The quality of these telefilms has varied a lot with some NGO-productions being of abysmal quality. However, documentaries produced by Nepal Police and broadcast over Nepal TV have been of good quality, both in terms of overall presentation and the information contained therein. The four TV talk programs that were reviewed lacked a strong structure and the respective anchors left a lot to be desired when it came to knowledge about the subject.

Chhetri and Thapa conclude that the three feature films reviewed failed to communicate the severity of trafficking as a crime in Nepal. On the other hand, the *Chelibeti* programs broadcast over Radio Nepal have generally been of good quality, both in terms of the information contained therein and in terms of content-genres. This is encouraging as the radio is still the most powerful media in Nepal.

Asmita study clearly reveals that the media has reported the issue of trafficking in Nepali women aplenty. The general readers, listeners and viewers have perhaps now reached a level of media fatigue regarding this issue. While the issue has managed to get attention in some national discourses, the problem seems to be growing in magnitude and an effective solution seems unlikely to materialize in the near future. This should force media trainers to think more seriously about the relationship between media-generated awareness and policy changes at the state level and changes in ground reality.

Much is said these days about the theoretical “role” of the media in any given society. We have, in the Asmita study, a concrete example to show both the strengths and limits of how media has actually worked in our own. In particular, the Asmita study should reveal that those who benefit from trafficking in Nepali women are more powerful and resourceful than the Nepali media and NGOs working on this issue. To say as much is to

recognize what the media by itself can do and can't do as a medium of intervention in our society with respect to finding solutions to social problems. Apart from helping to build more practical training programs to enhance our media competence, this kind of exercise also allows us to test the validity of fancy theories (about the role of the media) developed elsewhere. This is, of course, the first step toward building our own theories regarding the location of media in our society.

Instead of high-flying rhetoric regarding the rights and privileges of the so-called Fourth Estate, such self-reflection should reveal that without significant changes in reporting styles, contents and strategies that can challenge the complacency of the reader and the dominance of the trafficking mafia, media as an institution does not further enhance our understanding of the subject of trafficking and hence is really not part of the 'solution' finding process. Such changes can only come about if significant resources are invested in the long-term training of media people and not on expensive junkets as has become the trend with some media funding donor czars in Nepal.

Are media training centres listening?



## *Asmita* at 50: Feminist Agenda for Our Media

Just around the time the special issue of *Asmita*, marking its 50th appearance, arrived in the market in June, I along with Shova Gautam and Amrita Banskota – both of Sancarika Samuha Nepal (SSN) – had finished selecting content materials for a ‘women’s studies’ reader. To be published by the Nepal Press Institute (NPI) shortly, this reader contains reports, articles, editorials, and essays from various newspapers, magazines, and journals. The purpose of this reader is to make available in one convenient volume, writings in the media that have raised or addressed some of the most fundamental issues and questions regarding our society from perspectives that highlight gender equality. These perspectives, one can argue, all fall under the umbrella of a broad feminist agenda for social analysis. Such analysis, in turn, has been and is an important part of the women’s movement here and elsewhere.

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NPI and we hope that this volume will be useful not only to media trainees and teachers, its primary target audience, but also for all readers interested in gender analysis and equality in Nepal. As we see it, its main purpose is to inform readers what has already been achieved in critical gender analysis from women's perspectives in the Nepali language media. We hope that this reader will form the basis for further discussions, analysis and writings on the subject even within the world of *bikas* where "gender-orientation" training is quite popular.

Any work involving selection is not very easy. The final product will always seem incomplete or deficient to some veterans of the subject. While reading through hundreds of articles during the selection process, I was aware of this fact. At the same time, it struck me that the reader we were trying to put together could be made just through stuff published in *Asmita* No. 1 – 49. In its twelve years of existence, *Asmita* has set the standard for feminism-informed journalism in Nepal. It has reported on just about all of the important issues regarding gender equality in our context. In other words, despite the NPI reader, a serious researcher has to read all the previous issues of *Asmita* if she wants to have a good understanding of the terrain covered by feminist reporting and analysis in Nepal. In celebrating its 50th issue, this is no small tribute to pay to the magazine and its production team, even as it must be noted that in the past 3-4 years, the magazine has been highly irregular and thus almost invisible in the glitz-dominated print market.

The 50th issue is a collector's item: it contains significant articles on the status of alternate media in Nepal, women in politics, and violence against women. It contains separate pieces on women and education, the law, art, music, cinema, and sports. Also included is an interview with Dr Meena Acharya on the feminization of agriculture and poverty, a feminist reading of



Nepali literature, essays on gender discrimination & our religious traditions, and women’s health. A report on a roundtable held on the theme of “Locating Feminism in the Nepali Context” is also presented. I will not review the details contained in these pieces but instead use this occasion to reflect on the feminist agenda for our media for the next, say, five years.

Despite all the growth in both print and electronic media, the feminist agenda here primarily needs to address the same two issues identified by analysts working elsewhere on this theme in the 1970s. The agenda basically had two objectives. The first was to increase the number of women from various backgrounds (class, caste, ethnicity, and regions in our case) working in the media sector. It was then said that women’s physical presence must increase not only in the reporting and production sections of media organizations but also in management positions. This, it was then thought, would automatically make the media women-friendly.

But the world turned out to be more complicated than that. Based on the negative experience of several countries, where the rise in the number of women journalists did not necessarily make the media women-friendly, this expectation has now been revised. The rise in the number of women in the media is now desired simply because it represents a kind of social justice.

The second objective set in the 1970s was to decrease the number of anti-women reporting and advertising and simultaneously increase the pro-women content in reporting and analysis. Being pro-women did not necessarily mean highlighting only the positive aspects of women. Rather it meant doing reporting with the understanding that just about every issue that is reported is gendered; social events and processes involve and impact women as a category in ways that are decidedly different than in the case of men.

To my mind, we have been partially successful with respect to the second objective and not even that in the case of the first. When looking at the number of women in mainstream Nepali media, the record even today is quite abysmal. One wonders what the productive impact of all those workshops and trainings for potential women journalists has been. Where have they disappeared? To find the answer to this question we have to first understand that the management of media organizations continues to give *no* priority toward the recruitment of women, and do virtually nothing to encourage promising women journalists even when they have shown their mettle. In this front, even the record of *Kantipur Publications*, which claims for itself the first position among private media organizations, is quite depressing. Secondly, pro-women media training and promotion organizations including Asmita Women Publication House, SSN and NPI have done precious little to facilitate the conditions that would put more women reporters, broadcasters, producers and editors on the job.

With respect to the second objective, not only the successes of *Asmita* mentioned above but also those of The Women's Feature Service (WFS) of SSN and individual journalists and columnists must be noted. WFS of SSN is a monthly bulletin consisting of about five edited articles. The bulletin is mailed to more than 100 publications nationwide and its contents are widely reproduced by many newspapers and magazines. While the mostly male editors of these publications had not given much space to the contents of WFS when it began more than two years ago, they are now very visible even in otherwise conservative mainstream publications. Some journalists and columnists – both men and women – must also be praised for promoting pro-women's contents in media products. However, these partial successes have not been replicated in the case of advertising, which continues to be anti-women.

To build on these partial successes, it is high time that office bearers of media organizations such as *Asmita*, SSN, and NPI – who are sometimes not in talking terms – sit together and figure out pragmatic strategies that will help the objective of increasing women's presence in media organizations. Journalism training programs such as those in Tribhuvan University and NPI must encompass gender analysis modules in their curricula. The design and execution of these modules must be left in the experienced hands of members from the *Asmita* and SSN teams. An annual award must be given to the reporter who covers women's equality issues most extensively. Without more pragmatic and collective efforts, the feminist agenda for our media in 2010 will remain the same.