

Peace and Constitution: Women and Nation Building

(One-day national workshop jointly organized by Modern Kanya Multiple College and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Kathmandu on March 10, 2012)

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Coinciding with the International Women Day, the Modern Kanya Multiple College and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) jointly organized a one-day seminar on '*Peace and Constitution: Women and Nation Building*' on March 10, 2012 with the objective of highlighting the women's role in the ongoing peace building and constitution writing processes. The majority of the participants of the program consisted of young girls studying in higher secondary and bachelor levels from different parts of the country. Many of them, for the first time, also got exposed to the formal proceeding of national seminar. The seminar basically aimed at sensitizing the girls about women rights and their current status. It offered them fresh inputs about the gender discourse and encouraged them to play a proactive role to attain equality in the society dominated by patriarchal mindsets and traditions. The seminar was divided into two parts – inaugural and paper presentation. The speakers, experts and participants of the both sessions were unanimous that the women must enjoy equal rights at par with their male counterparts if they were to build an inclusive, democratic and equitable nation. One expert even suggested making women 'messengers of peace' to boost their confidence and get them involved in the post-conflict reconstruction activities.

Opening Session

New constitution will be gender friendly: CC chair Acharya

The inaugural sitting saw a host of speakers comprising politicians, lawmakers, bureaucrats and education experts, dwelling on the status of women and their role in the constitution making and promotion of sustainable peace. Constitutional Committee (CC) under the Constituent Assembly chairman Nilambar Acharya was the chief guest of the session. He appreciated the contribution of women in the various political changes in Nepal and assured that new constitution would be women friendly and eradicate all kinds of socio-economic structures that discriminate women. "It will lay the foundation for the women empowerment and equality."

"The new constitution will not be a constitution of a single party but will reflect the aspirations of all communities and groups that are demanding recognition of their identity and equal access to resources and opportunity," he said.

He noted that the discriminations against women formed the basis of all discriminations in the society so they must be rooted out.

Acharya said that the state needed to recognize women's role in the nation building and should take measures to establish an equal and equitable society.

"The prosperity of men is also invariably linked with the well-being of the women. If we fail to mobilize women, it is unlikely that we catch the pace of development attained by the developed nations," he said.

On the ongoing process of statute writing, the CC chair sounded a note of pessimism that the CA would be able to promulgate the new constitution within May 28.

"Even after four years since the creation of the Constituent Assembly, there is slim chance of promulgating the new constitution within the deadline," he said.

He said that crux of the matter did not lay with the time but with the tendency of the political leadership that failed to show its mettle to handle the transition.

"Despite the hectic dialogue among the major political forces, their parleys have failed to be result oriented," he said. However, Acharya said that the nation had no other alternative but to move ahead to accomplish historic tasks.

"There is the need of enhancing the understanding among the political parties," he added.

UCPN-Maoist lawmaker Renu Chanda called on young women to join politics and clear the mess besetting it.

Chanda said that the women needed to have economic, social and cultural rights.

"Except in the parliament, the constitutional provision that the women have 33 per cent participation in the all organs of the state has not been yet implemented," she said,

adding that they must brace for a big jolt for doing away with the all forms of social and cultural discriminations and barriers against them.

Chanda noted that the Nepalese women were living with contradiction. “On one hand, they have achieved significant gains in the several fronts, on the other, they continue to be the victim of heinous crimes – they are burnt alive on the charge of witchcraft and are forced to follow deep-rooted superstitious practices like *chhaupadi*.”

She was of the view that the males had equal role to provide rights to the women so the former needed to be convinced for the latter’s fair share in the society.

Binda Hada, secretary of Nepal government, said that the state needed to recognize women’s role in the nation building.

Hada said that the women have been unable to enjoy their rights in real sense.

She said that the constitution drafters should write ‘man’ and ‘women’ in the place of citizen.

She said that the women in the countries like the US and Thailand have shown little interest to mark March 8. “In Thailand, women hold around 57 per cent executive posts. When I asked some Thai women as to why they were not enthusiastic towards celebrating the international women day, they responded that they never saw works and opportunities from the perspective of man and women, and instead focused on the capacity building.”

“So, the capacity building is primary importance for the Nepalese women.”

Visiting professor from Benaras University Anju Saran Upadhyaya said that the struggle of women had not only national dimension but it was the international struggle and all women across the world were fighting for their rights.

She hailed the situation of the Nepalese stating that their position was better compared to their counterparts in other South Asian nations.

On the women’s participation in constitution writing, she said, “It is their inherent rights and they must commit to it because it is in the interest of the nation building.”

Ram Prasad Dahal, chief of Modern Kanya Multiple College, said that women should first educate themselves and raise the level of their awareness in the cities and urban areas alike.

Dahal said that many women had to bear the brunt of social stigmas in the absence of awareness.

Stating that a sense of ego, rooted in both males and females, was responsible for the gender disparity and the time had come to shun it.

Dahal said that women from different walks of life attended the workshop whose objective he said was to spread gender awareness across the country.

Sancharika Samuha chair person Babita Basnet said that the Nepalese women had gained a lot in the last six decades of their struggle and the time had come for the women to assert their role.

“Their consciousness has increased at unprecedented level in both urban and rural areas.”

She called for better understanding between male and female. Basnet advised plus two girls to devote for their better future. “It is the time for them to choose their career and kind of the life partners. They must be able to refrain themselves from the romantic affairs with boys.” She said that the Facebook, a social internet site, had also created problems for many girls.

Uma Koirala, Women Department Head, TU, emphasized that the women should focus on their capacity building. Koirala said that the government had to create an environment for the women so that they exercised their rights. She was of the view that family had a pivotal role to ensure women rights.

FES women department head Samira Poudel said that education, empowerment and self-confidence were essential for women to secure equal position in the society.

She said that the FES had been conducting different programs in Nepal to promote gender equality. She also put emphasize on the role of women to frame a pro-woman constitution and restore a lasting peace in the country. Salma Khatun, a student from Modern Kanya Multiple Campus, has welcomed the participants while Kalpana Khanal, principle of the college delivered vote of thank.

Experience is more important than education

Two women lawmakers from CPN-UML- Shanta Chaudhari and Ushakala Rai - also shared their views in the middle of the programme. Shanta Chaudhari, who is also chairperson of CA committee on Natural Resources and Means, delivered her emotional speech. Chaudhari, who never stepped into the ground of school and college, is an ex-Kamalari, a bonded female labourer.

“I often hesitate to attend a programme in a college as I never joined school because I had been a bonded labourer throughout my childhood and teenage. So, please don’t call me an *aunthachhap* (one, who is unable to write and read),” she said, adding that knowledge is not only acquired through learning, it is also gained through experiences.

Stating that education was a great weapon for women, she expressed her regret for being unable to study owing to her abject poverty and feudal social system.

She said that international women day meant for working women but a host of NGOs and INGOs were marking it, excluding the real women from the celebration.

Ushakala Rai made a fiery speech, urging to end patriarchal mindset and establish an equal society. Rai said that the women still suffered from myriad of social and cultural disparities.

“We are yet to obtain citizenship certificate in mother’s name. Citizenship is very important thing that gives national identity to its holder,” she added.

Discussion Session- I

Education key to women empowerment: Dahal

Constitution expert Kashi Raj Dahal presented his working paper entitled ‘**Peace and Constitution: Women and Nation Building**’. Professor Aabha Mishra commented his paper. Dahal’s paper could be divided into three parts from the thematic angle - background, the constitutional history of Nepal and women’s role in the nation building.

He said that constitution writing was itself a peaceful campaign to keep alive the rule of law and those nations, which had weak economy and lacked vibrant political culture, frequently witnessed conflicts and unstable constitutions.

Dahal said that Nepal’s past constitutions could not prolong as it lacked widespread participation of the people and, thereby, they did not own them. “The constitutions also fail to be alive as they attached more priorities to the desires of the rulers than that of the aspirations of the ruled.”

He said that nation building meant to enhance the capacity of the state organs, establish the strong ties between the state and the society and finally building a capability to deter the external intervention.

Noting that the nation has its own identities that include national flag, national anthem, national day, national airlines service, national language and the national rituals, he said, “Diversity in the national unity, social goodwill and guarantee of the opportunities of the participation of all classes and communities are some important aspects of nation building.”

He said that education should evoke a sense of love for one’s own civilization and nationalism.

“Constitution just provides guiding lines. It is the intellect and wisdom of the citizens that could only strengthens nations and nationalism.”

He called for involving the youth and women in the decision making level and processes for the consolidation of democracy and, thereby, tapping their energy and enthusiasm in the nation building. Dahal added that education was the key to give a lift to women in all spheres of life and added that economic development, science and technology, organization and far-sightedness were other prerequisites for the overall development of women.

Existing provisions in favour of women

(Interim Constitution and CA's proposals)

- A 33 per cent participation in all organs of states
- Affirmative discrimination, reservation and social security,
- Equal heritage rights, rights against gender disparity and exploitations,
- Right to reproductive health,
- Providing special opportunities on the basis of proportionate participation and other pro-gender policies

Dahal's paper said that around 20 per cent women had access to national legislatures in the world. In Nepal, 33 per cent women have representation in the Constituent Assembly that is also not in proportion of the men's participation. "For the equal participation, there requires the introduction of special provisions for the women empowerment such as focus on education, social justice and security. For the overall development of women, there should be the guarantee of the economic rights, the end of violence and exploitations, the provision of gender budget, special protection to the helpless and single women and the formulation of gender friendly laws to increase their participation in the politics."

In his concluding lines, Dahal said that the women participation and activeness was necessary in the post-conflict reconstruction for creating peaceful, just and equitable society. He put emphasis on the strong political commitment, incentive programmes and appropriate atmosphere for bringing women into the mainstream and their overall empowerment.

“In order to ensure durable peace and build a strong nation, the women need to change their transitional role and transform themselves into peace messengers of society and important fighters of nation building. For this, policy plans and programmes should be devised accordingly.”

Commenting his paper, Mishra put unilateral emphasis on education for women so that they could be self-confident, independent and empowered. “If they have education and are capable, they will have everything.”

“Stop blaming only males for the women’s plight. There is the need to change gender relations. Males are our children and husbands while women are the guardians of the family,” she said.

She was frank to admit that the women were responsible for the 80 per cent discriminations of female folks in the families. “It is mothers-in-law who discriminate her daughters-in-law. This must be stopped.” Saying that the men needed to be trained politically, she said women were the master of their own destiny. Mishra also said that knowledge gained from experiences were more important than that of acquired.

Discussion Session –II

‘Bring new education schemes for women’

Lectures Sharmila Koirala and Sabita Sapkota jointly presented their working paper entitled **‘Women Participation in Higher Education’**. Professor Dr Bina Poudel commented their paper. Koirala and Sapkota’s paper primarily made comparative study focusing on the overall situation of Nepalese women in the school and higher education. It discussed the history of the education in Nepal, the development of higher education, women’s place in the higher education and finally offered a bunch of recommendations to increase women participation in the higher education.

Casting a theoretical glance, they noted that the concept of higher education in the 20th century was about teaching and research but in the 21st century it is about learning and knowledge formation.

“Since education is not for present but for the future, higher education is by nature is optimistic and forward looking. In our context, higher education means the kind of education being imparted from universities, academics and higher teaching institutes,” they said.

Koirala and presented pointing out of females in compared to counterparts. 2001 census, behind in 22.7 per periodic data that of total about 60.90 per cent people is educated. Of them, 72.20 per cent are males and 51.4 per cent females.

Functions of universities

- Generation and transmission of ideology,
- Selection and formation of dominant elite,
- Production and application of knowledge,
- Training of the skilled labour force

Varsities' focus areas:

- Teaching
- Research
- Community service

Sapkota multiple data, the weak status the sector their male According to women lag education by cent. The of 2011 states population,

In teaching sector also, the situation of women is not satisfactory. There are 150,000 teachers working in the schools from preprimary to secondary levels but women teachers consists of a meager 24 per cent – only 37,000 out of total.

There are around 3,067 Higher Secondary Schools running under Higher Secondary Education Council. They have a total of 3,22,735 students in Class 11 and of them 1,48,616 are girls. In Class 12, there are 3,00,631 students and 1,42,824 are girls.

“Although the situation of women’s participation in higher education is encouraging, their position beyond it is not up to the mark,” they said.

They recommend following points:

- *Clearly specify qualitative standards and measures in higher education*
- *Conduct education programmes as calendar*
- *Follow teaching methods and processes in line with international practice and national need*
- *Adopt modern evaluation system, scrap the old one*
- *Make the attendance of teachers and students compulsory*
- *Revise curriculum and make it timely*
- *Stress on research-oriented activities*
- *Free education sector from political intervention*
- *Narrow down the gap between the secondary and higher secondary education*
- *Bring new programmes targeting women education*
- *Set up women varsity*

Commenting their paper, Professor Dr Bina Poudel said that it had encompassed many things about the higher education and further investigation could be carried out the basis of it.

However, it fails to mention consciousness and moral education, she said, adding, “Consciousness and education should go side by side. At the same time, education must be ethic-oriented and pragmatic.”

Poudel said that women were also partially responsible for falling behind men and must be able to seize opportunities.

Pointing out the need of protecting immaterial culture, she called for fusing cultural awareness in the women education. “Education is not just for oneself but it should be also for the wellbeing of others.”

From the floor

There were not many participants from the floor to question or suggest on their working papers. Dr. Manju Dahal enquired whether there were new education programmes for the women. Gyanendra Basnet asked Kashi Raj Dahal to distinguish between equality and equity. Basnet said that since the women consisted of a little over 50 per cent of total population, shouldn't they have 50 per cent share in everything on the basis of natural justice? Two women teachers asked to highlight the changes in the higher education following the *janaandolan II*.

Subhechchha Ghimire asked how the state could help those deprived people. She said that the state needed to guarantee the rights of the citizens.

Deepika Baral asked Dahal a personal question – did he implement equality in his family? Ranju Chhakuli enquired about the provision for the welfare of the senior citizens. Sonika Tamang said that Nepalese women had higher participation in the parliament than that of the US. Still Nepal is a backward nation and the US the richest. “Why?”

Responses

In his response, Dahal said that equity meant to enhance the position of the weak and the deprived people by providing them with special incentives and protections that include quota and reservation.

“By just writing the provisions of equality in the constitution, there should not be guarantee of equality in the society. So, there should be measures to strengthen the situation of poor and weak so that he or she could compete with other on equal footing.”

Dahal said that there was, in principle, an agreement for the proportionate representation of women on the basis of population but it had been a tough task to implement.

He said that the government had arranged gender budget to improve the women's situation and help those women deprived of formal education.

To Deepika Baral's personal question, Dahal said, "Yes, we share the burden of household chores equally as there is good understanding between my spouse and me."

Replying to another query, he said that to give equal status to the senior citizens meant to provide them with national identity.

To the enquiry of Sonika Tamang, he said that the Nepalese suffered from mental poverty and their thinking should be development-oriented.

Replying the queries of the participants, another paper presenter Sharmila Koirala said that women had lagged behind in education and their participation in education should be increased by categorizing regions into three parts – remote, medium and accessible and bringing the programmes accordingly.

She said that there was the need of opening women university and increase women participation in the vocational technical education.

She said that many changes had taken place in the education sector following the *janaandola-II*. "The state should take steps to promote women education," she added.

'Civic education transforms people into citizens'

FES Nepal head Dev Raj Dahal delivered his concluding remarks, highlighting the state-citizen relations and duty of citizen toward the state.

Dahal said that the Nepalese society saw the increasing cases of conflicts as the people only developed the culture of seeking their rights but forgetting their duty to the nation.

He called for spreading civic education as it transformed the people into citizens and nationalized all mini-identities. "Such a process bolsters nationality and enhances the people's loyalty towards the state."

He noted that right-oriented culture was relevant only in organized and strong states, not in the weak and transitional countries such as Nepal.

"Nepal is one of the 17 countries, which were never ruled by the foreigners and had vibrant practices of knowledge generation but it failed to uphold Enlightenment tradition and to have supremacy of knowledge over power," he said and added that if knowledge was shared with the wider masses, it would help bring more reforms in the society.

He listed four types of justices as the prerequisites to the creation of democratic, equal and inclusive society. They are – ecological justice, gender justice, social justice and intergenerational justice.