



# CHALLENGING THE CUSTOMARY DIVIDE

STRENGTHENING IMPLEMENTATION OF THE  
WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA IN NEPAL



Ministry for Foreign  
Affairs of Finland





# UN WOMEN'S MANDATE AND NETWORK

UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs world wide.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting.

UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality. UN Women works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls.



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# Preface



Nepal's Comprehensive Peace Accord, which ended ten years of armed conflict in the country, created avenues for the foundation of sustainable peace. Within this backdrop, the Government of Finland and UN Women-Nepal, together with local partners, international development organizations and UN agencies committed to collaborate and support the Government of Nepal (GoN) in the effective implementation of its first National Action Plan (NAP) for United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, which was adopted in 2011.

Thus, in 2013, the Government of Finland supported UN Women-Nepal in implementing the project, Strengthening Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Nepal (SIWPSAN): Towards Implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCRs 1325 and 1820. The project emphasized women's participation and the inclusion of gender perspective in all aspects of peace building; ensuring that the special needs and priorities of conflict-affected women were considered in the state building

process; recognizing sexual violence as a component of the crimes committed during the conflict; and upholding international obligations to end impunity. It was implemented by UN Women-Nepal and the aforementioned partners in the the districts of Bajhang, Doti and Kailali in the Far Western Development Region of Nepal.

The implementation of the SIWPSAN project demonstrated that transformative changes in the lives of women and their families are achievable when broad, multi-pronged approaches focusing on both women's agency and structural factors simultaneously. It showed that enhancement of women's capacity to exercise their active agency through economic and social empowerment and promotion of their leadership and participation in decision-making structures - combined with an enabling environment for their participation in peace building to address their protection, prevention, relief and recovery rights – deliver life-changing results that are enduring.

Given these, it is possible to learn from the experiences of women whose lives have been transformed and who are now transforming the peace and security agenda in the country. It is for these reasons that the Government of Finland and UN Women-Nepal decided to document and publish true stories of women that inspire, provide evidence to their worth as change agents and enlighten duty bearers on how to engage women as effective partners. Along this line, the Government of Finland and UN Women-Nepal sincerely acknowledge the contributions of the project partners, especially the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction; Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare; Department of Women and Children; Local Development Training Academy; Training Centre Nepal; Dalit Help Society (Bajhang); Creative Development Society Nepal (Doti); Backward Society Education (Kailali); Saathi; Search for Common Ground; Krishna Consultancy Pvt. Ltd; 1325 Action Group; Story Kitchen; United Nations Development Programme; International Organization for Migration; Peace Support Working Group; UN Taskforce on Conflict Related Sexual

Violence; and Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Working Group of the International Development Partners' Group. Special gratitude goes to the five women whose stories of change are shared in this book.

Sustainable peace can be achieved when women and girls have access to the pathway of recovery and rehabilitation and can effectively act as leaders and inspiration for the work ahead. Much work remains to be done and UN Women-Nepal will sustain its work with the GoN and other partners to ensure that women and girls continue to play a key role in peace, security and governance processes. Given the endorsement of a gender-responsive Constitution, the adoption of the second NAP on UNSCRs 1325 and 1820, and the positioning of more women in local administrative entities as a result of the recent subnational elections, women now have greater space and agency to participate in all aspects of conflict resolution and peace building.





# Introduction

'Challenging the Customary Divide' puts together the stories of five women whose economic and social well-being were improved and later became leaders in their respective fields through their participation in the post-conflict rebuilding of Nepal under the project Strengthening Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Nepal (SIWPSAN): Towards Implementation of the National Action Plan on UNSCRs 1325 and 1820. Like the SIWPSAN project, the book is an initiative of UN Women-Nepal with the support of the Finland Government.

The book provides a glance at how the aforementioned transformation happened in the lives of the women and how their individual transformations affected their lives and those of their families and communities. Together, the stories provide a 'human face' to the vision of change that gender equality advocates endeavor to achieve through the incorporation of gender perspectives in the post-conflict peace and security agenda of Nepal. The stories also share insights on the challenges women usually face and how they may maneuver the positioning of gender equality and women's empowerment concerns into the mainstream agenda of peace and security in their respective localities.

The book captures the women's memories of exclusion, struggle, loss and fear and how they found empowerment through the interventions of the SIWPSAN project. Ultimately, it is a book about women's true stories of courage, hope and reconciliation, and of building the foundation for a better and safer Nepal.

The SIWPSAN project was implemented from 2013 to 2016 by UN Women-Nepal with funding support of the Government of Finland and the cooperation of the Government of Nepal (GoN), local partners, international development organizations and UN agencies. One year after the closure of the project, women and girls have been visibly at the forefront of peace building, re-integration and conflict resolution efforts of Nepal. Through the SIWPSAN project, the participation of women in youth networks, women's

groups, mothers' groups, local committees and political parties have significantly increased from 20 to 74 per cent in the project districts. A total of 269 conflict-affected women and former women combatants benefitted from entrepreneurial capacity development trainings, 94 per cent of whom reported that their economic and social conditions consequently improved. Prior to the 2017 local elections, Inter-party women's alliances were established in 17 Village Development Committee (VDC) of the three districts of Province Seven to advance women's leadership in local political structures. Similarly, 44 per cent of women beneficiaries of the SIWPSAN project held key decision-making positions in such structures and 88 per cent of VDC women leaders have been actively participating and guiding local decision-making on women, peace and security.

The SIWPSAN project has created a robust foundation for meaningful and sustainable local implementation of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda in Nepal through creative engagement of multiple stakeholders, especially groups of marginalized women. Being one of the first projects to have been implemented based on Nepal's first NAP on UNSCRs 1325 and 1820, the project facilitated accelerated and sustained progress on WPS initiatives in the country, especially at the local level. It brought about economic and social improvements in the lives of the women beneficiaries; demonstrated effective approaches to achieving such change; enabled government, communities, non-government and civil society organizations (NGOs/CSOs), and women's groups to engage in productive partnerships around WPS; and produced knowledge products, including this publication, that will help to further advance initiatives and decision making on WPS beyond the completion of the SIWPSAN project.

May the experiences and insights shared by the women in this book continue to illuminate and expand pathways to sustain the inclusion of gender perspectives in the peace and security efforts of the country.







1

## WALKING TALL

Kalpana Kathayat, Bajhang

Kalpana Kathayat, 26, starts her day by grazing the cattle at her house in Chainpur, a village in the Bajhang district in Nepal's Far-Western region. Kalpana leads a normal village life with her family in this remote part of the Himalayan country. However, one thing stands out.



“MY HUSBAND USED TO SPEAK PASSIONATELY ABOUT THE MAOISTS AND THEIR IDEOLOGY. I WAS MIGHTY IMPRESSED BY HIS DEDICATION TO THE PARTY.”

“My husband used to speak passionately about the Maoists, and their ideology. I was mighty impressed by his dedication to the party,” says Kalpana, “But our support to the rebel army came at a cost; it became a reason for state scrutiny and social exclusion.”

The Kathayat family were blamed for the Maoist activity in their village, including the destruction and looting of one of the houses belonging to Uttara Kuikel, a neighbour and a loyal follower of the right-wing Congress party. Kalpana’s efforts to try to improve the relationship between the two families went in vain for many years.













However, after the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) was signed in 2006 between the Government of Nepal and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), things slowly started to change for the better. After meeting a social facilitator of the Dalit Help Society (DHS), UN Women's SIWPSAN project partner in the Bajhang district, Kalpana started working with the Conflict Affected Women's Group (CAWG).

Kalpana started to regularly attend the meetings of the CAWG. Through her involvement in the group, she got the opportunity to participate in trainings organized around UNSCRs 1325 and 1820 on women, peace and security, as well as conflict-related sexual violence. Further, she enrolled in a three-month training on off-season vegetable farming, conducted by the Training Center Nepal (TCN) with support from UN Women.

Attending these trainings slowly added to Kalpana's sense of empowerment. She took on a leadership role as chairperson of the CAWG and gradually started to increase her independent income as a result of improved sales generated by the new farming methods she learned.











“ SIWPSAN made me realize that when women are provided a platform to share, we should use the platform to its maximum.”

What started with involvement in the CAWG has led Kalpana to actively participate in different local level decision-making structures. Today, she is an active member of a local savings group, a mothers' group, a consumer group and the ward citizen forum.

Kalpana and her family are once again accepted members of their community, and more.

“The CAWG not only helped me reconcile with my neighbours and the community. It also helped us address many of our shared problems in a collaborative manner, instead of in isolation as we used to during the conflict.”

Today, Kalpana enjoys working on her farm. Her off-season vegetables are popular in the village and with the increasing revenue, she is thinking about opening a canteen near the local school.







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## A 'CHELI' WITH CHOICES

Purnima B.K., Bajhang

"I regretted being born a girl. I looked at my husband and he had choices, he could ask for things. But as a girl, I was always told to keep quiet and to not demand anything," says Purnima B.K. She is 23 years old and has now, after years filled with struggle, reached a relatively stable life. Looking back, she thinks part of her struggle was a consequence of her family name that categorized her as a 'Dalit' (lower caste) for her entire life.









The first part of her daily routine is fetching water from the Seti River. She balances the water pot on her head and walks with ease through the green fields of Jayaprithibhi Municipality in Bajhang District, her home. Six years ago, at the age of 17, she was a young bride, shy and fearful of her life ahead. The household chores defined her life and to try to go beyond them felt like a sin. After all, she was a 'cheli' (woman). Purnima was taught not to have

dreams, not to define herself, and not to speak her mind. Perhaps, her belief in these norms grew stronger because she never got the opportunity to complete her education. Even when she was in school, she was discriminated against and rejected by her classmates because of her caste. She was an outsider who was led to believe that she had no right to live her life the way she wanted to.



After getting married, Purnima left her family and friends behind and began her new journey with her partner and his family. At the same time that she got pregnant, her husband had to leave for Dhangadi to complete his studies. She was an obedient daughter-in-law who followed every decision her in-laws made for her. She believed that silence was the way forward. She did not question her life ahead.

Curiosity cannot be denied forever. It keeps whispering even when you want to silence it. Every afternoon, Purnima used to watch a group of women gather around the nearby ward office, listening to them talking about budgets and participating in local decision making. Slowly, listening to the conversations that she overheard, it began to dawn on her that what she had always been taught about her role in life, to remain quiet and obedient, could be wrong.







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The conversations that Purnima had overheard, supported by UN Women within the framework of the SIWPSAN project, informed the participants about UN Resolutions 1325 and 1820, local gender-responsive budgeting, the role of women in decision-making processes, and laws related to sexual and gender-based violence. “For the first time in my life, I realized

that I, too, have rights,” states Purnima with a twinkle in her eyes. For two years, the group gathered every month to discuss domestic violence, capacity-building and the rights of children and women. The facilitators continuously encouraged the participating women to think analytically and critically.

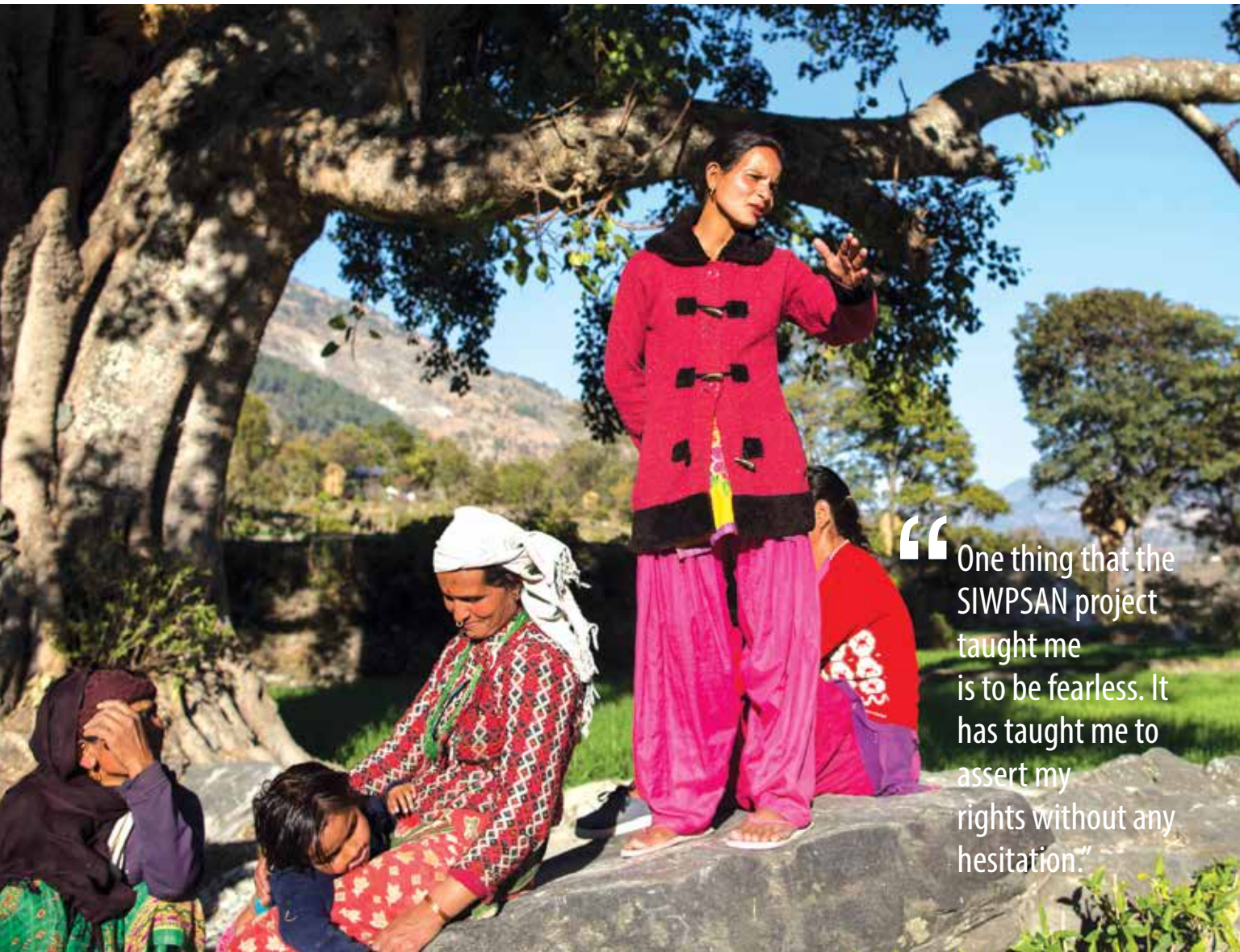




“At first, I felt that I could not participate like the others. As my parents gave me away in marriage when I was still a child, I could not integrate myself with this type of society.” But after the capacity-building trainings, she started speaking up and contributing valuable ideas during and after the sessions. As soon as the training was

over, she joined a consumer group network and was later nominated as the secretary of the consumer road construction committee. Not long after, she became the President of the Inter-Party Women’s Alliance of Subeda Jayapriithbhi Municipality.





“One thing that the SIWPSAN project taught me is to be fearless. It has taught me to assert my rights without any hesitation.”

Today, Purnima B.K. is not only active in her networks, she participates in activities ranging from polio eradication drives to ending open defecation campaigns. Purnima has been working to bring about a positive change in the

lives of women and girls. “My family is amazed to see such a drastic change in my personality. One thing that the SIWPSAN project taught me is to be fearless. It has taught me to assert my rights without any hesitation.”



Purnima has realized that there is no shame in talking about one's rights. "Chelis can make their own decisions and can demand the change they want to see," says Purnima as she plays with her child.

In her family picture, Purnima stands out as a self-assured woman beaming with happiness and confidence. Her story is a reminder that many women have yet to realize that they, too, can break free from the confinements imposed by society's norms.











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## THE PINK BICYCLE

Rita Devi Chaudhary, Kailali

On a winter morning, Rita Devi Chaudhary, 37, looks at the passers-by while riding through the yellow mustard fields on her pink bicycle. She is on the way to her small farm to nurture the vegetables that have made her a popular face among locals in the village.







Today, Rita stands out as a successful entrepreneur. Her crops include tomatoes, potatoes, chillies, spinach, mushrooms, cucumbers, gourds and watermelons. Her pink bicycle is an appropriate symbol of the silent revolution that she started three years ago.

Rita got married at the age of 13, but the

family that she had longed for left her with bruised memories that still haunt her to this day. While her husband had an extramarital affair, her in-laws mistreated and abused her verbally and treated her like a housemaid in her own home for several years.











In a final attempt to seek support from her in-laws, Rita asked for a piece of land for herself and her son to start a new life, but once again she was denied support. Instead, she ended up living with her sister. By this time, she knew that her life would be filled with struggles.

Then, one day, she heard about a training provided by the TCN under the SIWPSAN project. For the first three months, she worked hard as a trainee, learning about the methods and benefits of growing off-season vegetables. The training not only provided her with the vital skill of cultivating the crops, it

also improved her confidence and enabled her to start her own agricultural business. With financial support from SIWPSAN project, TCN provided Rita with seeds and equipment worth NPR 22,000 (USD 215). She planted the seeds and enjoyed a good harvest.

“People think that only men can be breadwinners, but I have proven them wrong. Women need the right kind of skills and support to bring about a positive change in their lives,” says Rita. Her earnings have enabled her to buy a couple of farm animals, and she plans to open a poultry farm in the future.





In the evening, while stirring the vegetable stew on the slowly blazing firewood stove, Rita and her sister look back at the past years' developments with smiles on their faces. The air is filled with an appeasing flavour as the sisters traverse Rita's journey from a broken home to being a self-sustaining farmer.



“PEOPLE THINK THAT ONLY MEN CAN BE BREADWINNERS, BUT I HAVE PROVEN THEM WRONG.”

Today, she earns enough to support her nineteen-year-old son to study hotel management in a nearby town. In addition to the financial improvements, Rita's inspiring journey has also empowered her and brought a new-found sense of respect among her fellow villagers.







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## PICTURE PERFECT OUTCAST

Sabitra Acharya, Kailali

Dressed in pink, Sabitra Acharya, 23, zooms forward on her motorcycle in Sukhad, her home village in the Kailali district of Nepal's Far-Western region. She rides at full speed, with her husband on the pillion. She looks determined and liberated.



Sabitra Acharya is married to a former Maoist combatant. She truly loves her husband. However, his political affiliation resulted in a life full of struggle for Sabitra and her family, both during and after the long armed conflict. When her husband was away during the years of the conflict, Sabitra was left alone raising her daughter and managing the household. The villagers always treated her as a social outcast.

During the lonely years in a hostile environment, Sabitra often regretted many of her life choices, including not completing her studies on time. Sabitra's life began to improve when she enrolled in a training for conflict-affected women, organized by the TCN under SIWPSAN project, with the support of UN Women. Through the center, she received a three-month long beautician training and with the help of a project contribution of NPR 22,000 (USD 215) worth of products, she was able to set up her own beauty parlour after completing the training.









Today, her beauty parlour Nishma, and the accompanying cosmetics shop, are the only sources of income for her family. Sabitra's husband helps her run the shop and cleans the parlour while Sabitra provides beauty services, such as facial treatments, waxing and haircuts, to women in the village. During wedding seasons, Sabitra's parlour is filled with customers from morning to evening, all eager to make use of her make-up and styling skills.



At first, not many people visited her parlour, but slowly the clientele grew. Today, Sabitra runs the largest beauty parlour in the village. The villagers have started looking past her background, and they now accept her for who she is, regardless of her husband's political past. Monthly earnings are in the range of NPR 30-40,000 (USD 284 to 392), more than the family could have ever dreamed of in the past. Sabitra, now a proud entrepreneur and source of inspiration for others with similarly troubled pasts, is happy that her husband supports her endeavours and cherishes her successes.





“ I WOULD STILL BE STRUGGLING IF IT WASN'T FOR THE TRAINING PROVIDED BY THE TCN AND UN WOMEN. IT MADE ME MORE POSITIVE AND DETERMINED TO MAKE A LIVING INDEPENDENTLY.”





Today, Sabitra moves easily between household chores and business transactions.

“I would still be struggling if it wasn’t for the training provided by the TCN and UN Women. I have come to realize that I am not weak and that I have the potential to change the way people see me,” says Sabitra as she smiles for the camera together with her family.

With the earnings from her successful business, Sabitra has not only managed to buy a motorcycle, the family has also acquired a piece of land in the village and dream about building a house and being able to move out of the room they are currently renting.

Sabitra Acharya is a vibrant example of an empowered, modern woman. With the support of the TCN and UN Women, she has managed to rise from her conflict-ridden past and is now the sole provider of her family. She contested the local election in 2017 but did not win her constituency. With pride and resourcefulness, she has managed to break the chains that once held her back.





A woman in a red sari is filling a metal pot from a river. The scene is captured at dawn, with the water reflecting the sky and the woman's figure. The number '5' is prominently displayed in a white circle on an orange background in the upper center of the image.

5

## THE OUTLIER AFTER THE INSURGENCY

Sita Sodhari, Kailali

As dawn breaks, Sita Sodhari takes a walk to the Karnali River to fetch water as part of her daily household chores. Sita, 30, lives in the Kailali district of Nepal's Far-Western region. On her way to the river, passers-by greet her with a warm smile.





When she was only 16, Sita joined the People's Liberation Army (PLA). She dreamed of bringing change to her people, a dream that led her to leave behind her education, family and society. During the decade-long

insurgency, Sita met her husband. After the Comprehensive Peace Accord was signed in 2006, they left the army together, seeking a peaceful future assisted by a government rehabilitation package.



However, things did not develop as Sita and her husband had planned. To sustain the family, her husband decided to migrate to Malaysia in search of work. At the same time, the fact that Sita and her husband had fought for the PLA, and not the Royal Nepalese Army, was increasingly met with aversion by villagers. Sita's dream of bringing change to her society had backfired.





For several years, life in the village was characterized by social exclusion and hardship. It was at this difficult juncture that Sita heard about the opportunity to receive skill training from the TCN. She enrolled immediately, and with the financial support of UN Women, TCN provided Sita with both a three-month beautician training and NPR 22,000 (USD 215) worth of products to open a small beauty parlour in her house.

As Sita had joined the army at a young age, she was never able to finish her education and had no concrete skills to improve the situation of herself and her family. The training from TCN helped Sita find a new way to provide for herself and her family.





Initially, the villagers refused to visit her beauty parlour. “People thought that I was violent, corrupt and had no moral values,” says Sita. “But then, as time passed, more and more people started visiting me.” People in the village also started including Sita in local activities and decision-making conversations. Sita believes that she is not one hundred percent integrated into society; however, there has been a landmark shift in people’s mindsets.

Today, Sita is a successful entrepreneur earning approximately NPR 15,000 (USD 147) per month. She has never been ashamed of her experiences as a Maoist combatant. She keeps a trunk full of memories in her house, including framed photographs of herself and her husband in combatant uniforms. She often shares her past photos with her children to make them understand her difficult journey.

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<sup>1</sup>USD 1 = NPR 102









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