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DEVELOPMENT-NEPAL: Women Everesters Talk Gender Equality

By Keya Acharya

KATHMANDU, Mar 2 (IPS) - Seven young women have started a seemingly commonplace programme of video presentations at schools in this mountainous Himalayan country. The programme's contents however are unique.

The video describes the achievements of a 10-member, all-women's team from Nepal, aged 17 - 30, that became, in May 2008, the first ever of its kind to successfully climb the world's highest peak, Mount Everest.

An expedition is termed as successful when all team members have been able to 'summit' or reach the peak. In this case they were all women.

The world's highest peak at 29,028 feet, Everest is called Chomolungma in Tibet and Sagarmatha in Nepal.

To its climbers it presents avalanches, crevasses, ferocious winds, sudden storms, deep freeze temperatures and low levels of oxygen.

Even when supported by bottled oxygen, climbers experience extreme fatigue, impaired judgment and coordination, headaches, nausea, double vision, and sometimes hallucinations.

Expeditions spend weeks, sometimes months, acclimatising, and usually attempt Everest only in May and October, avoiding the winter snows and the summer monsoons.

As a result of the expedition, Everest now sports the Millenium Development Goal (MDG) flag of Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women, planted on it by the young women's team.

The team employed women during all stages of the expedition, from co-ordination, to cooks, mule drivers and support staff.

Their feat prompted their first sponsor, the United Nation's World Food Programme (WFP) representative in Nepal, Richard Ragan, a mountaineer himself, to call the expedition a 'giant leap for Nepali women' while the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) UNDP's Anne-Isabel Degryse-Blateau termed their feat as 'extraordinarily impressive'.

Ragan also says the achievement "dispels the notion that adventure sports should be closed to certain groups".

The young 'Everest Women', ranging from a fashion model to one who supported her family and schooling by washing clothes, are Chunu Shrestha, Asha Singh, Nimdoma Sherpa, Maya Gurung, Pemadiki Sherpa, Nawang Sherpa, Shailee Basnet, Sushmita Maskey and Usha Bisht. Nimdoma Sherpa is now the youngest woman ever to have climbed Everest.

The team has now founded an NGO, Global Inclusive Adventures (GIA), which is travelling to Nepal's schools, talking of its expedition, achievements and lessons learned, in the hope of impressing young minds for future change.

Nepali society is divided on lines of caste, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic backgrounds, prompting the Everest team to name itself the First Inclusive Women's Sagarmatha Expedition.

The word 'inclusive' in their NGO too is for the promise of equal opportunities for women of all ethnicities.

"Our objective is to pass the message that success comes with hard work and education; that neither age, religion, caste or region matters if you really want to achieve something", says 24-year old team member, Shailee Basnett, who is a journalist with Nepal's Himalmedia.

"What matters is good teamwork and leadership," Shailee tells her young audiences.

Eight of the ten team-members were first-time mountaineers with just basic training under their belts.

The women narrate their experiences and backgrounds to their school audiences, underlining the tremendous hard work they have all had to put in. "We did our own work, including training in the morning and sweeping our one-room office thereafter, all wore similar T-shirts to look like a team and went uninvited to conferences, businessmen, politicians raising 10 million Nepali rupees (131,000 US dollars)," says Shailee.

Collecting funds proved a major challenge because people did not believe they would survive the attempt.

Sponsors included the UNDP, the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), the European Commission, the Nepalese government and NGOs.



Women on top - Everesters Shailee and Pemadiki now promote gender equality.

Credit:Global Inclusive Adventures



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The concept of an all-woman effort though came from a man, Pemba Dorje Sherpa who holds the world's record for climbing Everest in eight hours.

Dorje Sherpa believed it was a "sort of shame" that a mountain located in Nepal that attracted the world's mountaineers, has been climbed by over 3,000 people from 20 countries during 1922-2006 including 75 women, had only seven Nepali women climbers. In 2007, Dorje Sherpa broadcast over the country's radio frequencies, asking for interested women to join up, and together with Da Gombu Sherpa, founder president of the Nepal Mountaineering Association, led the women's team to Everest.

After several obstacles, the delayed team left Kathmandu on Apr. 17, 2008, spending days at each of the several camps to acclimatise, receiving great encouragement from the Nepal Army stationed there.

"Base camp to camp one on the Khumbu icefall is the most dangerous," says Shailee, "the ground is shifting and ice chunks crack off in summer, while camp 2 to 3 has a steep section of blue ice almost like a mirror where it's difficult to get your shoe crampons to hold on the ice."

In the 'death zone' above 25,000 feet, the last camp before the summit, the body starts deteriorating in the oxygen-deprived air, heightening risk of hypothermia, frostbite, high-altitude pulmonary edema (or lungs filling fatally with liquid).

Climbers hence attempt the climb without resting in the 'death zone'.

Shailee, who spent two hours waiting for help on the 'death zone' with a dead man from another expedition, says "nothing major" occurred on the climb, describing the summit of Everest, which she reached on May 23, 2008 as 'magical'.

"I could see the tips of all those seemingly impossible high peaks down below me. The summit has a gentle slope, with a cornice at one end; it looks as though Everest is still growing".

The Everest women are also very concerned about the impacts of global warming on the Himalayas, one of Nepal's greatest resources and on the Nepali people's livelihoods.

Part of their school programme deals with global warming and its impact on Nepal.

Sushmita Maskey, a mountaineer who had reached the last camp in 2005 but had been unable to 'summit', says the decrease in snow was significant since her last climb.

Shailee says the glaciers at the base camp are 'almost like a river' during daytime, something unthinkable just a decade ago .

The team encountered distressing litter like oxygen cylinders and chocolate covers on the way up.

Nepal has no training facilities, other than the Institute for Mountaineering, making it even more difficult for women to either train, or be professional guides in the field.

"Despite being home to eight of the 14 tallest mountains, and to legendary mountaineers, Nepal doesn't have a mountaineering school", says Shailee.

The GIA team is currently working with tourism organisations in a feasibility study to set up a mountaineering school in Nepal.

(END/2009)

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