



# The Sari Soldiers

A film by Julie Bridgham



“Gives new meaning to the words courage and resilience.”

- Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*

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## SYNOPSIS

Filmed over three years during the most historic and pivotal time in Nepal's modern history, **THE SARI SOLDIERS** is an extraordinary story of six women's courageous efforts to shape Nepal's future in the midst of an escalating civil war against Maoist insurgents, and the King's crackdown on civil liberties. When Devi, mother of a 15-year-old girl, witnesses her niece being tortured and murdered by the Royal Nepal Army, she speaks publicly about the atrocity. The army abducts her daughter in retaliation, and Devi embarks on a three-year struggle to uncover her daughter's fate and see justice done. **THE SARI SOLDIERS** follows her and five other brave women, including Maoist Commander Kranti; Royal Nepal Army Officer Rajani; Krishna, a monarchist from a rural community who leads a rebellion against the Maoists; Mandira, a human rights lawyer; and Ram Kumari, a young student activist shaping the protests to reclaim democracy. **THE SARI SOLDIERS** intimately delves into the extraordinary journey of these women on opposing sides of the conflict, through the democratic revolution that reshapes the country's future.

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## **CREDITS**

2008, 90 minutes, Color  
English/Nepali Subtitled (English)

Director & Producer  
**Julie Bridgham**

Co-producer  
**Ramyata Limbu**

Editing  
**Mona Davis**

Cinematography  
**Julie Bridgham**  
**Dinesh Deokota**  
**Kumar Shrestha**

Assistant Editors  
**Manaslu Gurung**  
**Gary Labao**

Music  
**Christopher James Thomas**  
**Manose Newa**

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## DIRECTOR/PRODUCER BIO



**Julie Bridgham** is a Sundance Institute Documentary Fellow, and is the Director and Producer of the award winning documentary "*The Sari Soldiers*" for which she received the 2008 Nestor Almendros Prize for courage and commitment in human rights filmmaking. Over the past six years, she has lived for extended periods in Nepal where she produced and directed numerous documentaries including several documentaries for the United Nations and the films "*Indentured Daughters*," a documentary on Nepali girls sent into bonded labor, as well as the films "*Hope in the Himalayas*" and "*Children of Hope*" for the Nepalese Youth Opportunity Foundation. She has produced and directed numerous documentary series that have taken her around the globe, including "*Exotic Islands*", and the series "*Royal Families of the World*" as well as documentary series for the BBC, the Discovery Channel and TLC. Before working in documentary television, she worked in Costa Rica as a Project Officer for an environmental project with the United Nations, and in Bolivia as a researcher for a human rights organization.

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## FESTIVAL SCREENINGS & AWARDS



### Awards:

- Human Rights Watch Film Festival, New York; Nestor Almendros Prize
- WATCH DOCS Human Rights in Film Int'l Film Festival, Feature Length Competition Special Mention
- Tri-Continental Film Festival, India; Grand Jury Prize
- Rencontres International Film Festival, Camera as Activist Award, Best Socio-Political Film
- Brooklyn International Film Festival, Spirit Award
- One World Film Festival, Prague, Special Jury Mention

### Screenings:

- DOC NZ International Film Festival, New Zealand
- Boulder International Film Festival
- The Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival
- Olympia Film Festival
- India International Women's Film Festival
- 16 Days of Activism Film Festival
- The Female Eye Film Festival
- Pravo Ljudski Human Rights Festival, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Santa Fe Film Festival
- Human Rights Watch Film Festival, Buenos Aires
- Human Rights Film Festival, London
- Seattle Human Rights Film Festival
- Keswick Film Festival
- The Himalayan Film Festival, Amsterdam
- The Paris Human Rights Film Festival
- Toronto Human Rights Watch Film Festival

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## WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT THE SARI SOLDIERS



**“Tough, multilayered.... inspiring, infuriating, and sometimes hard-to-watch... underscores the old but still noteworthy point that the female body is one of the great casualties of war and political strife.”**

- Ernest Hardy, *The Village Voice*

**“Impressive... give[s] credence to the old feminist saw that if women were given power, they would speedily put an end to war.”**

- *Variety*

**“Balanced, moving and comprehensive... it also shows how circumstances can radicalize even the most middle-of-the-road people. Something we should pay more heed to given the current state of world affairs.”**

- *Eye for Film*

**“Bridgham's overarching portrait of political upheaval is compassionate and insightful, ...the director discovers a**

**symbol of both inspirational human rights advocacy, and the terrible tragedy of tyranny.”**

- Nick Schager, *Slant Magazine*

**“Intimate and engrossing, the film gives us six commitments and hopes.”**

- Stanley Kauffman, *The New Republic*

**“Near perfect. It accomplishes the tenuous balance that only the best documentaries can provide.”**

- Katherine Don, *Feminist Review*

## MORE INFO

**For press and exhibition booking requests please contact:**

Julie Whang, Sales & Marketing Manager  
jwhang@wmm.com | 212.925.0606 x320

Hi-res photos are available for download on this film's web catalog page at [www.wmm.com](http://www.wmm.com).

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## The Sari Soldiers

By RONNIE SCHEIB

**Julie Bridgham's impressive "The Sari Soldiers," shot in Nepal over the tumultuous three-year period following King Gyanendra's dissolution of parliament and seizure of absolute power, profiles six women enmeshed in their country's political and social struggle. One of several recent docus that give credence to the old feminist saw that if women were given power, they would speedily put an end to war, "Soldiers," which won the Nestor Almendros Prize at New York's Human Rights Watch Film Festival and was picked up for distribution by Women Make Movies, could enjoy a limited theatrical run before wider exposure in niche markets.**

Within a clearly established context of ongoing civil strife between Maoist guerrillas and repressive monarchist militia, Bridgham first centers her docu on the courageous call for justice of an "untouchable" single woman, Devi Sunuwar, who insistently comes forward to testify about her niece's rape, torture and murder by Royal Nepalese troops. In retaliation, government forces, not finding Devi at home, instead "disappears" her 15-year-old daughter Marina.

Devi's search for her daughter continues throughout the docu, becoming front-page New York Times news and a landmark court case, thanks to the continued support of Nepalese human-rights activist Mandira, the second of pic's strong femme protagonists.

Meanwhile, out in the countryside, feisty, elderly matriarch and fervent monarchist Krishna mobilizes her village to successfully defend against occupying Maoists.

Among the Maoists, whose forces are 40% women, Bridgham singles out the equally dedicated Kranti, brigade commissar and mother of two, whose earnest analyses of the monarchy's exploitation of the people are enlivened by a decidedly feminist slant.

Soon the government, imitating the Maoists' successful incorporation of women into all cadres of the rebel army, begins accepting female officers. Rajani, whose room at home still sports stuffed animals, decides to swap her medical studies for military training, partly out of deference to her brother, who was killed in combat.

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*("The Sari Soldiers," Variety cont. )*

Finally, back in Kathmandu, pro-democracy student activist Ram Kumari watches hundreds, thousands and finally millions of civilian protestors fill the streets, as Maoists and political parties form a coalition against the monarchy.

Given the eminently sensible sextet of women Bridgham has chosen as a representative snapshot of the Nepalese people, the resulting armistice is hardly surprising -- but one wonders how long the peace will last. Skeptics include Krishna, who, along with other village women, berates the male politicians who come out of the woodwork to rally once the serious fighting is over.

Pic is uniformly well shot, edited and scored.

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## “DocuWeeks” Allows Screentime for—Gasp—Complex Women

By Ernest Hardy

July 28, 2009

.... Similarly tough, multilayered engagement with subject matter is the strength of **Julie Bridgham's Sari Soldiers**.... set in Nepal, where the deadly battle between the Royal Army and Maoists is largely told through the story of one woman's search for her missing daughter, who was arrested and "disappeared" as a way of punishing the mother for speaking to the press about a niece's brutal rape and murder. Bridgham's inspiring, infuriating, and sometimes hard-to-watch film underscores the old but still noteworthy point that the female body is one of the great casualties of war and political strife; the fact that both the Royal Army and the Maoists employ huge numbers of female soldiers to wage their battles adds irony, but not always real equality, to the situation.

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*The Sari Soldiers*  
Directed by Julie Bridgham  
Produced by Julie Bridgham and Ramyata Limbu  
Distributed by Women Make Movies  
By Marie Lo

Julie Bridgham's *The Sari Soldiers* presents Nepal's civil war through the eyes of six women as they are swept up by the conflict between the Royal Nepal Army, Maoist rebels, and pro-democracy activists. "Women are oppressed by both the government and by society's view of them," says Kanti, a Maoist rebel. No more so than during times of war.

*The Sari Soldiers* powerfully documents the heightened brutality against women during war and their strength and resilience in fighting back. Large numbers of women participated in the armed struggle: Forty percent of the Maoist rebels were female, and the National Army created a women's division to fight them.

Shot during a three-year period, the documentary exposes the human-rights abuses of the 10-year war that left more than 12,000 people dead and 100,000 displaced. In 2005, Nepal had the highest number of recorded disappearances.

In contrast to the ubiquitous images of Nepal — the majestic Himalayas and Mount Everest — viewers encounter empty courtyards, skeletal bombed-out buildings, and busy streets packed with protesters. Against this backdrop, six women from different castes and on opposite sides of the struggle are followed: Devi, an "untouchable" who speaks out against the rape, torture, and murder of her niece by the National Army only to have her 15-year old daughter, Maina, kidnapped as retaliation; Kranti, who joined the Maoists to fight the oppression of her people, but whose heart breaks every time she must leave her children to go underground; Krishna, a village leader and monarchist who successfully leads her fellow women villagers against the Maoists rebels; Rajani, a cadet in the Royal Nepal Army who joins to serve in her brother's stead after he is killed in combat; Mandira, a human-rights lawyer who helps Devi in her search for justice; and Ram Kumari, a student political activist who remains defiant despite violent police crackdowns.

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*(“The Sari Soldiers,” The Asian Reporter cont. )*

What haunts the film is Devi's daughter, Maina, whose grainy photos reveal a gentle face and solemn eyes, and it is Devi's search for her daughter that propels the film's narrative trajectory. We see her empty bed. We watch her father caress a purse she made. Her absence is palpable and everywhere. Maina's disappearance becomes representative of the many unnamed people who disappeared during the civil war. Devi's refusal to be silenced is a testament to sacrifice and the transformative power of witnessing and speaking out.

Often women are shown as simply victims of war and violence. *The Sari Soldiers* presents them as active participants in the fight for justice and human rights. Though these women are on opposite sides of the conflict, Bridgham's even hand allows each woman to tell her story on her own terms. The result is a moving portrait of women during war and their struggles as mothers, daughters, sisters, and soldiers.

*The Sari Soldiers* is part of the Northwest Film Center's Global Concerns and Human Rights film series. The documentary will screen Thursday, October 23 at 7:00pm at the Northwest Film Center's Whitsell

Auditorium at the Portland Art Museum, located at 1219 S.W. Park Avenue. To learn more, call

(503) 221-1156 or visit <[www.nwfilm.org](http://www.nwfilm.org)>. To learn more, visit <[www.sarisoldiers.com](http://www.sarisoldiers.com)>.

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## HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH: THE SARI SOLDIERS

By: [Nick Schager](#) On: 06/18/2008

Six diverse women attempt to shape their country's future in *The Sari Soldiers*, Julie Bridgham's affecting documentary, shot over three years, about Nepal's tumultuous civil war. At the center of the film is Devi, an "untouchable" who publicly speaks out about the Royal Nepal Army's rape and murder of her young niece, which leads authorities to kidnap her 15-year-old daughter in retaliation. Devi's three-year crusade to uncover her child's fate is the gut-wrenching emotional axis of this multipronged nonfiction tale, which otherwise concentrates on the plights of women on various sides of the conflict between authoritarian King Gyandara (who assumed absolute power in February 2005) and both Maoist insurgents and democratic activists. Bridgham treats her subjects with equal respect, whether it be elderly village leader and strict monarchist Krishna, who resents the Maoists' violence against rural non-supporters, or Kranti, a wife and mother who holds a high position in the Maoist forces (whose makeup is estimated to be 40% female). Though they hold differing opinions about what rule best serves the nation, the women are bound by a common desire for stability and safety, as well as an underlying belief—evidenced by the fact that none have reservations about females' active role in the civil war—that women deserve better than the subservient status they currently hold in Nepal's caste-based society. A predictable downside to *Sari Soldiers*'s fractured focus is that a couple of the women receive undernourished attention, most troublingly Rajani, a Royal Nepal Army recruit following in her killed-in-action brother's footsteps whose personal justifications for backing the ruling regime—and the female-second culture it upholds—goes unexplored. Even at its spottiest, however, Bridgham's overarching portrait of political upheaval is compassionate and insightful, and in courageous Devi's quest for maternal and social justice, the director discovers a symbol of both inspirational human rights advocacy, and the terrible tragedy of tyranny.

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www.filref.com  
June 26, 2008

The national unrest and confusion following the massacre of King Birendra and the Nepalese royal family by his son, Crown Prince Dipendra in 2001, and the subsequent dissolution of parliament by the ascended king, Gyanendra in response to an escalating Maoist insurgency, set the tone for Julie Bridgham's compelling and incisive portrait of a broad spectrum of women who collectively embody the country's cross-cultural struggle for peace, justice, freedom, representation, and accountability. In Kathmandu, a poor, uneducated, middle-aged woman from the province named Devi lives in self-imposed exile from her village after speaking out publicly against the rape and execution of her teenaged niece by royal army soldiers and, in the process, also becomes a victim when her daughter is taken away by soldiers in retaliation for her outspoken criticism. Having worked with representatives from international organizations such as human rights lawyer, Mandira to document the atrocities committed by the government in their campaign to root out Maoist insurgents from their strongholds in the countryside, Devi's traumatic experience only galvanizes her resolve in exposing the truth at all cost.

However, the face of the royal army is also changing in response to the Maoists' large number of women recruits, a transformation towards a more disciplined, regimented (and implicitly, more humane) one that Officer Rajani represents, as motivated equally by a desire for peace as she is to commemorating her brother who died fighting the decade-long insurgency. For a Maoist insurgent commander who assumed the pseudonym Kranti ("Revolution"), true humanity lies in dismantling the socially entrenched caste system, and the deep-rooted discrimination, arbitrary privilege, and oppression that it engenders. Nevertheless, despite the egalitarian values espoused by the Maoists, their ideological radicalism still proves to be a source of friction within the villages that they seek to convert, often using strong-arm tactics to recruit people into their campaign, and resorting to intimidation, brutality, and even assassinations against those who refuse to take up their cause. In one community, village elder and monarchist, Krishna defies the insurgents and stages her own rebellion to successfully drive away the Maoist agitators. In contrast, for nursing student turned activist Ram Kumari, the only way to move the country forward beyond the cycle of violence is by joining the daily, street level demonstrations organized by the pro-democracy movement. Interweaving the stories of these women into an intimate cultural mosaic of national struggle, *Sari Soldiers* is also an indelible image of national and personal transformation, the renewed hope of a figurative rebirth that Devi's husband eloquently expresses in their mutual grief: the idea that people are born twice, once when they enter the world, and again when they make a difference in it.

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