

## ‘Nothing is impossible’

The Raising Her Voice programme in Nepal



*Community discussion class participants in Bardiya village talk about their plans for building a community clinic. Photo: Adrienne Hopkins/Oxfam*

**Women in Nepal experience discrimination in all areas of their lives. The goal of Oxfam’s Raising Her Voice programme is to ensure that public policy making reflects the interests of poor and marginalized women in the country, especially by increasing their participation and influence in community decision-making bodies that have a particular impact on their lives. This paper shows the remarkable success of the programme in Nepal in building women’s confidence, knowledge, and skills, so that they could bring about changes that have had a practical impact on the lives of all the people – and especially the women – in their communities.**

## Introduction



*The programme is being implemented in three districts in western Nepal – Dailekh, Surkhet, and Bardiya – where women are particularly marginalized.*

*'Though I had never ventured out of my village, I agreed to become the treasurer of the committee when my name was proposed. I no longer wished to remain in the dark. I didn't know much about what I needed to do as a treasurer at that time. I felt like nothing is impossible. We can always learn new things if we are serious about it.'* – Ganga Shahi, treasurer, Construction Committee, Baraha Village Development Committee, Dailekh.

'Gender-based discrimination is rampant in Nepali society. It affects all women, whatever their economic status, caste, ethnicity, or regional affiliation,' notes the Nepal Human Development report.<sup>1</sup> While male literacy stands at 81 per cent, women's is only 54.5 per cent, and in some lower-caste groups fewer than a quarter of women can read and write. Only 6 per cent of women own their own house and 11 per cent their own land.<sup>2</sup> As Priti Bhakta Giri, Village Development Committee secretary in Chhinchu, says: 'Men take better care of their animals than their wives. They can get another wife, but they can't get another buffalo.'<sup>3</sup>

It is not surprising then that it is difficult for women to speak out, let alone hold positions of authority. For example, in 1991 women held only 3.4 per cent of parliamentary seats. But things are slowly beginning to change. At national level, women now hold a third of seats in the interim Constitutional Assembly.<sup>4</sup> And as the Nepal Human Development Report notes: 'Broadening representation and participation has the potential to change power relations.' It was this change that Oxfam's Raising Her Voice programme wanted to support.

## The political situation in Nepal

During the past 20 years, Nepal has undergone major political changes. It has moved from being an absolute monarchy to a republic, from having an

authoritarian regime to a more participatory governance system, from a religious state to a secular one, and from a centralized system to a more decentralized one.

Parliamentary politics was reintroduced in 1991. However, poverty and inequality persist, caused by the concentration of power and resources within a small ruling elite built on systematic exclusion by caste, ethnicity, and gender. This situation led, in 1996, to a Maoist-inspired insurgency with an agenda of redistribution of wealth, development, and removal of discrimination. The conflict lasted for ten years and claimed 13,000 lives.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement in November 2006 paved the way for the Maoists to join the mainstream political process and to participate in the Constituent Assembly elections held in April 2008. But despite sweeping political changes, not much has changed for poor Nepalis since then, and the reach of government to remote areas is minimal. The process of decentralization that started with much fanfare a decade ago has remained stunted. There have been no elections to local government bodies for the past 14 years, so most decisions are taken by committees at local level – which are dominated by men.

Underlying all this is the lack of settled democracy and political stability. Nepal is in transition, with no clear road map. The initial enthusiasm that accompanied transition is being replaced by frustration as the completion of the national Constitution, upon which elections are dependent, continues to be postponed.

# The Raising Her Voice programme

*'We learned a lot in implementing this programme. Not only the partners but staff members were also very committed. I learned a lot from the process and from the women themselves.'* – Sandhya Shrestha, Programme Officer, Oxfam GB, Nepal.

Raising Her Voice is a global programme, launched in August 2008 and running until March 2013, which promotes the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels. Oxfam is working with local partners in 17 countries to influence public policy, decision making, and expenditure to reflect the interests of poor women and to overcome women's exclusion from political, social, and economic life.

In Nepal, Raising Her Voice is being implemented in three districts in the west of the country: Dailekh, Surkhet, and Bardiya. In these three districts, women are particularly marginalized. For example, a history of bonded labour in Bardiya contributes to the shaping of power relations, while women in Dailekh are subject to discriminatory traditions – such as being expected to sleep in the cattle shed during menstruation – which are only practised in the hill districts of mid- and far-western Nepal.

The goal of the programme in Nepal is to ensure that public policy making reflects the interests of poor and marginalized women. Although the country has no elected layer of local government, management of many areas of service delivery has been devolved to community level. The programme therefore has aimed to increase women's participation in four community decision-making bodies which have a strong impact on women's lives: Community Forest User Groups, School Management Committees, Sub/Health Post Management Committees, and Drinking Water and Sanitation User Groups.

## Working in partnership

Raising Her Voice has worked in partnership with three local NGOs and three national NGOs, which complement and reinforce each others' work. They have all been involved from the beginning of the programme and have jointly developed the strategies used.

The work at national level has aimed to create an enabling environment for women's leadership through capacity building, influencing quotas for women's participation in decision-making structures, and influencing public opinion via the media. The national partners are the Women's Security Pressure Group (WSPG), the Women's Skills Creation Centre (WOSCC), and Radio Sagarmatha.

At local level, from the beginning, Oxfam took the decision to look for community-based partners with a particular commitment to promoting women's rights. This involved an additional commitment to building capacity. The women in these organizations have often experienced gender-based violence and discrimination themselves. The three partners that were eventually chosen were:

- The Women's Empowerment Action Forum, Dialekh<sup>5</sup>;
- The Women's Association for Marginalised Women, Surkhet;
- The Tharu Women's Upliftment Centre, Bardiya.

## Building confidence – community discussion classes

*'At first I had no confidence. I didn't think I could be able to manage the accounts. I was always shy. But you can do anything if you come forward and make the effort.'* – Ishwori Ghale, Bharleni Gumi village, Surket<sup>6</sup>

The main activity of the programme at local level has been setting up and running community discussion classes (CDCs). There are now 81 of these across the three districts and around 2,000 women have taken part. The classes, which are based on the REFLECT methodology,<sup>7</sup> have been a crucial means of raising poor women's awareness of their rights and building their confidence and skills to participate in decision making.

The women meet daily for two hours. The classes are run by facilitators who have been recruited from within the community; participants learn about and discuss the issues that affect their lives, and are encouraged to air their views and devise action plans to tackle specific problems in their communities, such as alcohol abuse and domestic violence. They also learn how community decision-making bodies function and how to apply for positions, as well as developing the leadership skills they will need to be active participants. Partner staff have run a number of training sessions for women on themes such as advocacy and leadership skills. They support women to organize meetings and events, to meet with influential community members and key stakeholders, and to publicize success stories through local media.

### **Box 1: 'Becoming unnecessarily audacious' – Muli's story**

'Muli, you are not educated and you cannot even speak Nepali well, so why are you becoming so unnecessarily audacious?' This was a question posed to Muli Chaudhari, a housewife from the marginalized Tharu community and a participant in community discussion classes in Sorahawa village, Bardiya. She had decided to stand for election to the seat reserved for women on the local Secondary School Management Committee. Empowered and inspired by the classes, Muli, 45, says, 'The question first shook me a bit, but at the same time it emboldened me rather than dissuading me from my resolve, as perhaps was expected by the questioner.'

Muli's detractors were dismayed by the audacity of a housewife from a poor and suppressed community, as she was challenging a much better-off non-Tharu contestant, who enjoyed influence in the community. Muli did not budge. She mobilized the support of men and women from her own community, including fellow CDC participants, who also helped her collect the sum of money that was needed to officially register her nomination. They launched an election campaign to support her. She won by 350 votes.

Asked why she thinks her election to the School Management Committee is important, Muli says, 'Children from the Tharu community are discriminated against by teachers and other students and are not even allowed to sit on the front rows in class. So as a committee member I'll first of all work to end the discrimination between Tharu and other children.'

Asked whether her husband, who owns a small village shop, was happy with her leaving the household chores and starting to play an active role in public affairs, Muli replies, 'After he heard about my election victory, he served free soft drinks to villagers.'

She says that she will continue to participate in the classes, which, she expects, will give her ideas about how to make the management committee more effective and improve the quality of education in the school. Muli is currently encouraging other women in the community to be part of decision-making structures.

## ‘No longer shaking with fear’

*‘We were largely invisible because we could not speak our mind. We were never encouraged to speak by our family and society. We have realized that it is not as difficult as we thought to break this barrier. Now we don’t hide our faces and shake with fear when we have to speak with people who come from Kathmandu.’* – Woman from Baraha Village Development Committee, Dailekh

As a result of the programme, many women now have the confidence and skills to speak out, voice their opinions, form arguments, and negotiate solutions. This is a huge step. They have also learned how community decision-making bodies function, about the roles played by representatives, and how to apply for a position on committees.

The community discussion classes have laid down a firm foundation for women to increase their participation in decision making. Since Raising Her Voice started in Nepal, women’s participation in the four targeted committees has increased from 28 per cent to 48 per cent. They have also taken leadership roles in other community-level committees, such as Parent-Teacher Associations, Financial Mismanagement Investigation Committees, and Road Construction Committees.

There have been many achievements as a result of women’s participation. For example, they have made sure that water pumps are operating around meal times, when water is most needed. In terms of health, they have lobbied for longer opening hours for health posts, more medicines, regular access to antenatal and delivery services, and incentives for women to give birth at the health post. At schools, they have lobbied for more transparent school management and information about children’s education, scholarships for Dalit children (formerly ‘untouchable’ in the Hindu caste system), and more regular classes.

They have also claimed money from Village Development Committee budgets. ‘A few years back, even the specific budget allocated for women’s development projects remained unused because no one went to claim it. Now it is different. Women not only claim this special budget, but also apply for financial assistance from the overall budget. This is largely due to the classes, where they learn about local resources’, says Farse Kumar Tiwari, Maintada and Chhinchu Village Development Committee secretary, Surkhet.

The women have organized ward meetings that bring together men and women from across the community, including teachers, political party representatives, and local government officials. This has contributed to a greater understanding of the issues that women face and appreciation of, and respect for, women as leaders.

Partners have also supported women to interact with district-level service providers. This has helped draw the latter’s attention to the specific needs of women. In some cases, immediate decisions have been made in response to women’s demands, such as in Bardiya, where women went to the health

post management committee to ask for adequate stocks of free medicines and for clear information to be given to community members about their availability, as well as other suggestions to improve the service. The head of the health service has noticed a marked increase in the number of women coming for treatment since these measures were implemented. Other achievements have included:

- Putting a strong focus on **improving accountability and financial management**, and **reducing corruption** in many community structures. For example, two participants were elected as secretary and vice chair of the Community Forest User Group in Chhinchu Village Development Committee, Surkhet. They found that 171,000 rupees (about \$2,150) was missing from the account. With the help of group members, they reported this to the Forest Office and recovered the entire amount.
- Lobbying and raising money for much needed facilities in the village. For example, in Sorahawa Village Development Committee, Bardiya, the women in the classes identified the lack of space for delivery of basic public health services as a major problem. The community health worker was offering health services in her own home, but the women recognized that this was not sustainable. If she stopped, women would have to walk long distances to reach the health post – a particularly difficult journey carrying small children on muddy roads. They identified a suitable public space, but needed money to build a health facility. They had learned about Village Development Committee budgets and were able to claim money by explaining how the project would benefit the whole community. They raised additional funds from the community by collecting donations of rice, and selling these at the market. They are now constructing a building to run a community clinic.
- **Influencing decisions** in the heavily male-dominated community structures, and representing women's interests. For example, the 450 agenda items discussed in meetings in the three districts between 2009 and 2011 included 163 recommended by women, of which 111 were implemented. 'We are individuals with an identity of our own and have every right to make decisions that affect our lives', the women said.

## ‘Fighting for our rights’ – challenges

*‘Before, women did not know that they had a right to be part of the committee. The discussion classes taught us that we could do this. We realized that we shouldn’t simply wait for men to offer us posts. Sometimes we need to fight for our rights.’ – Devi Sunar, chair of the School Management Committee at Deuti primary school, Surket<sup>8</sup>*

Women have such low status in Nepal that it was inevitable that this programme would face challenges. Building women’s confidence and skills is not easy, but the women were so keen to learn that this happened amazingly quickly. They have also been prepared to confront resistance from family members and practical difficulties in attending the classes. They remained engaged even before the positive effects of the project were felt. For example, many women got up early in the morning to complete their household chores so that they were able to attend classes.

There was, and continues to be, some resistance from men to women playing a role outside the home. In the worst cases, men have tried to undermine women and obstruct their participation in committees, often citing their lack of formal education as a barrier to greater participation. Narbda Oli, from Chhinchu in Surkhet district, explains what happened when she first became treasurer: ‘The men warned us that the person responsible for the duty would be accountable for any error or damage. They probably thought this would deter us from accepting the position. But the women said, “Of course we can do it, why not?” Even after this, the men considered assigning someone else for the post. But we, the women, insisted that we could do it. Thus I was finally chosen as the treasurer.’<sup>9</sup>

The women have slowly made inroads and built community support. One tactic has been to invite the local Village Development Committee secretary<sup>10</sup> to the classes to talk about how the budget works, including the fact that all Village Development Committees have ring-fenced funds available for women’s development projects. This has the dual benefit of the committee secretary feeling more involved and being able to directly observe women’s new skills and capacity, and at the same time the women receiving valuable information at first hand, so that they can later hold him to account.

In addition, staff of partner organizations spend a lot of time meeting with, and encouraging, influential community members and power holders to support the aims of the programme. They found that engaging the support of one or two influential men could have a snowball effect throughout the community. For example, in Dailekh, a health post chief spoke out in favour of the programme after observing how the women’s actions helped to reduce infant and maternal mortality.

While the project has had some notable successes, it has had a variable impact on men’s attitudes and beliefs: some men have become strong advocates for the programme and for women’s rights; others have been convinced by instrumental arguments, i.e. that women’s participation in decision making benefits the whole community; some are resigned to their wives’ continued participation in the classes; while others are still resistant. The key lesson is that gender relations are not transformed overnight and sustained effort is needed.



## **‘Now I am capable of doing anything’ – future plans**

*‘If we women are united, nothing can threaten or challenge us and we will grow stronger and stronger.’ – Janaki Chaudary, Community Forests User Group, Bardiya<sup>11</sup>*

The Raising Her Voice programme in Nepal has enabled women to start making real changes in their communities. But the programme has also shown that it is not enough just to get women into decision-making positions: they also need support if they are to make a difference. Women have identified a number of areas where they continue to need this support: ongoing skills development in areas such as public speaking; deeper knowledge of what is expected of them once they have taken on roles; and greater knowledge of relevant policies and procedures related to the committees’ areas of focus – for example, hiring teachers. What is evident, however, is that although women have identified gaps, they have a strong desire to learn.

In the short term, there is an opportunity for women to participate in the Ward Citizen Forums that are being gradually implemented under the Ministry of Local Development’s Local Governance and Community Development Programme. These are intended to facilitate participatory planning processes at village and ward levels, and also espouse accountability and transparency in local governance until local elections are held. They present an opportunity for women to link the voices and interests of poor and marginalized women to the local governance system. Women from the community discussion classes are already taking part in many forums.

There have also been some tentative steps towards planning for local government elections, but democratically elected Village Development Committees will not become a reality until the constitutional reform process is complete and national elections have taken place. The timeframe for this remains uncertain but it is unlikely to be soon, and so preparing for local elections has not yet been a focus of the programme.

It would be a logical next step to shift the focus towards getting women into elected positions when this happens, and one that Raising Her Voice can begin working towards. Some women have already said that they are keen to do this. It will involve the added complexities of needing to engage with political parties, and of women needing political party affiliations and support in order to stand for positions. So in order to prepare for the future, women need to learn about how political parties operate, and develop the capacity to hold political leaders to account.

However, with the skills and experience they have built during the course of the programme, they have already made real progress. One participant expressed the feelings of many women when she said, ‘Now I am capable of doing anything!’<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Development Programme (2009) 'Nepal Human Development Report 2009: State transformation and human development'.

<sup>2</sup> Department for International Development (UK) and the World Bank (2005) 'Citizens With(out) Rights. Nepal Gender and Social Exclusion Assessment', Kathmandu, Nepal.

<sup>3</sup> Oxfam (2011) 'Raising her Voice in Nepal'.

<sup>4</sup> UNDP (2009) 'Nepal Human Development Report 2009', *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Women Empowerment Nepal, see [http://newcommunityproject.org/nepal\\_we.shtml](http://newcommunityproject.org/nepal_we.shtml)

<sup>6</sup> 'Women's Power', video for Raising her Voice project, Nepal.

<sup>7</sup> REFLECT is an approach to adult learning, based on the work of Paulo Freire, that links education with wider issues of development and social change.

<sup>8</sup> 'Women's Power', video *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Video: 'Changing Perceptions and Getting Results in Rural Nepal', Raising Her Voice project, <http://raisinghervoice.ning.com/video/changing-perceptions-and>

<sup>10</sup> The Village Development Committee is the lowest administrative level of the Nepal local government system, and has responsibility for essential service delivery. The secretary is a salaried government employee.

<sup>11</sup> Video: Janaki Chaudhary, Nepal, Raising Her Voice project, <http://raisinghervoice.ning.com/video/janaki-chaudhary-bardiya-nepal>

<sup>12</sup> <http://raisinghervoice.ning.com/video/changing-perceptions-and>

© Oxfam GB, May 2012

This paper was written by Adrienne Hopkins and Sandhya Shrestha. Nikki van der Gaag edited the paper and Caitlin Burbridge provided research assistance.

This is one of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues. The text may be freely used for the purposes of campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full.

For further information please email [policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk)

ISBN: 978-1-78077-104-5

## Oxfam GB

Oxfam GB is a development, relief, and campaigning organization that works with others to find lasting solutions to poverty and suffering around the world. Oxfam GB is a member of Oxfam International.

Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY  
Tel: +44.(0)1865.473727, E-mail: [enquiries@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@oxfam.org.uk)

