



The head of the women farmers group in the village of Seri, Nepal explains how the women work together, and how women's rights have progressed since the project has started in 2012. © Audrey Lejeune/Oxfam

PROMOTING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP IN NEPAL

Women in rural Nepal face multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage. As a result of the labour gap created by migration to India by men in search of work, Nepali women are increasingly involved in agricultural work. However, there are few opportunities for women to access the assistance and training they need to support their farming businesses. Oxfam has been working with Nepali women to develop their business and leadership skills through targeted training and the development of women farmer organizations. This is coupled with action to ensure that rural women have greater awareness of their rights and entitlements, and that these are recognized by rural authorities. Based on Oxfam's experiences to date, this case study sets out some key programme learning and recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

Farmers in Nepal face many challenges in their struggle to produce enough food to support their families, including erratic rainfall, a lack of irrigation and insufficient farming knowledge and skills. Floods and landslides occur frequently. Many men from agricultural communities migrate to India as seasonal workers, leaving women to lead the agricultural work at home. However, women in Nepal face widespread discrimination, particularly in rural areas. This means that women often find it difficult to access the agricultural support and services they need to produce enough food. People go hungry for many months of the year.

Although the Government of Nepal has enshrined women's rights and non-discrimination in its interim constitution, few women in rural areas are aware of their rights and entitlements. In law, women have equal legal rights to own, inherit land and property, yet in practice women do not have land ownership certificates. Proof of land ownership is often the collateral that is needed to access credit and financial resources. Women who cannot prove their land ownership, or whose husbands have migrated for employment, face disproportionate challenges to develop their farming businesses.

ABOUT OXFAM'S PROJECT

In response to these challenges Oxfam has been implementing a project in three districts of Nepal since April 2012. This project aims to improve the livelihoods of rural families by developing the economic leadership opportunities for women farmers. Oxfam is supporting 2,500 women farmers, in 98 farmer groups from across 54 communities, providing them with the skills and resources they need to produce food, establish farming enterprises, and improve their status within the community. Oxfam does this by providing support in three key areas:

1. Developing women-led farmer groups linked to established cooperatives;
2. Working with women to improve their farming and business development practices; and
3. Empowering women through the development of women's empowerment groups (WEGs) to campaign on women's rights and social issues, and to campaign for greater government support in their communities.

The project focuses on developing farmer groups and cooperatives that can reach women who live in very remote area, and are unable to come frequently to market centres. The intention underlying the project was that the formation of cooperatives would provide women with market access, credit, a supply of inputs, and technical services supported by trained extension staff. Well-functioning and strengthened women's groups and cooperatives would have increased ability to coordinate with agencies and other market actors.

The aim of the project is to make the groups self-sustaining, so that they will be able continue even after the project support comes to an end. A focus on training women to understand their rights and to take leadership roles will also enhance the potential for the project to achieve longer-term change in policies and practices in support of gender equality.

The women farmer groups are linked with 12 agricultural cooperatives that provide the women farmers with access to markets and credit, and with inputs such as seeds and saplings. The project created posts for 12 female agricultural technicians within the cooperatives. The technicians provide extension services and training in improved farming practices to the farmer groups and their members.¹ They also facilitate the farmer group meetings; support the planning and marketing of the cooperatives; and support the women's access to credit and other financial services, markets, technology and information at the cooperative level.

The project trained 35 women from different communities so that they can provide support to other women farmers to develop their business plans and financial literacy. This in turn has supported women in some of the villages to start their own small-scale businesses.

80 low-caste women, primarily from the Dalit community, an extremely marginalised and poor group in Nepal, received training on safer remittance packages. Following the training, the women started to ask their husbands,

who had had to immigrate to India to find work, to use locally-available money transfer agencies instead of carrying all the money with them while returning home.

The project also trained 40 women's rights activists (WRAs) who facilitate 27 women's empowerment centres (WECs). Women are invited to the centres for regular discussions aimed at empowering them to claim and exercise their rights and entitlements. The activists have organised local radio and poster campaigns on issues such as women's land rights.

WHAT DID OXFAM LEARN?

Adopt an integrated approach

The project has adopted an 'integrated approach'. This means that the project tackles several aspects of women's empowerment in parallel – recognizing that it is not effective to work on just one aspect in isolation. The five pillars of the 'integrated approach' that Oxfam adopted were:

1. **Organizing**

The organization of women's groups that bring women together to develop collective solutions to their problems is a key part of the model.

2. **Awareness raising**

Building individual and community awareness around women's rights is essential. Supporting women's organizations is not enough when the wider context does not support women's empowerment. Oxfam's work on rights aims to create a more enabling context for the women's groups to achieve their goals.

3. **Capacity building**

Building the capacity of women farmers and leaders, to enhance their skills and confidence.

4. **Supporting existing infrastructure**

Supporting the development of existing cooperatives is more sustainable than creating completely new and parallel structures, and also generates benefits for the wider community as the links between the community and the governmental structures are strengthened and therefore more effective.

5. **Institutionalization**

Linking the project activities with local and national governmental and non-governmental agencies helps to ensure that local authorities can learn new approaches and support the changes beyond the lifetime of the project.

Oxfam found that the integrated approach was instrumental in building ownership of the project intervention amongst the participants, their communities and their local institutions. In the longer term, this integrated approach should support the sustainability of the project.

Work with existing community structures where possible

The project worked with existing cooperatives, linking them to the newly formed women's groups – rather than creating parallel initiatives. This reformation and revitalisation of already-registered cooperatives enabled a more efficient use of resources. It also had the advantage of building on communities' own initiatives. The challenge in working with existing cooperatives is to overcome and change prevailing interests and ways of working. For example, male members of cooperatives did not always fully support the project goals of women's empowerment and inclusion.

Formal registration of women's groups can increase access to services

Farmer organizations can benefit from better access to government services and better prices and supply of inputs than individual farmers. By creating registered women's farmer groups, the project was able to support women to access greater opportunities to receive government services and farming inputs.

Women benefit from female-led support services

Given the high levels of gender discrimination in rural Nepal, it was essential to have a female agriculture technician in each cooperative in order to facilitate and support the women farmers in their collective production and marketing. Social norms that govern the interactions of men and women in rural Nepal mean that women might have been prevented from attending training sessions and meetings led by men. In addition, the women farmers felt more comfortable interacting with female trainers.

Working in collaboration with development agencies can support project sustainability

Collaboration and coordination with development agencies at local and national levels was an important step to ensure the eventual government ownership and replication of the project. Working in collaboration with the Department for Agriculture and Livestock to support the cooperatives has increased the likelihood that the cooperative activities will be sustainable in the long term.

Using media to build awareness of rights

Reflecting on the work of the WEGs and the women activists, Oxfam has found that it is helpful to utilize local media, such as radio stations, and other public campaigning tools to foster greater awareness of women's rights in communities.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Based on the experience in this project, the Oxfam team recommends adopting an integrated approach in other projects aimed at ensuring women's economic empowerment and leadership, and their successful access in to agricultural markets. An integrated approach means that the project design should integrate organizing, awareness raising, capacity building, infrastructural support and institutionalization.

For women's empowerment projects to have good results, women should be in decision-making and active leadership roles, within the project and the project institutions.

Enabling women to earn their own income helps to improve their status in society and reduces their dependency on men and their vulnerability to domestic violence. However, it is important for economic empowerment projects like this to also integrate a focus on ending gender-based violence at household and community levels.

NOTES

¹ Training in improved farming practices focused on improved methods of compost making and the preparation of home-made organic pesticides using locally available plant materials.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail programme learning team at programmelearning@oxfam.org.uk

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