



ROARING VOICES, WINDS OF CHANGE

A COMPILATION OF CASE STUDIES OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION UNDER THE PROJECT

**I HAVE A VOICE:
WOMEN ADVOCATING FOR DEVELOPMENT IN NEPAL**

Date of Publication

November 2014

Published by

Mission East Nepal

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This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the CISU – Civil Society in Development. The views expressed herein should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the CISU – Civil Society in Development.

PREFACE

Mission East, in association with Karnali Integrated Rural Development and Research Centre (KIRDARC) and Women Welfare Service (WWS) Humla, have implemented a Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI) project entitled 'I Have a Voice: Women Advocating for Development in Nepal' in six village development committees in two remote districts of the Himalayan foothills. This project aims to reach the poorest and most marginalised communities living in the most isolated areas of Nepal. The project participants are marginalised women who are made vulnerable due to long imbedded caste and ill-gendered social construct, live in the poorest segment of society in one of the least developed countries of the world, and are a challenging group to reach in terms of their locale and habitats. Realising all these factors,

the 'I Have a Voice' project set out to raise awareness among female members of the communities so that they educate themselves, educate others, join hands for collective action to realise their rights, and advocate against the malpractices of untouchability and gender and caste-based discrimination, violence, ultimately creating agencies to counter them.

Despite unbelievable poverty, high rates of illiteracy, poor sanitation, and remote access, the project has managed to create awareness and to mobilise women to enjoy their rights. Women who never knew the alphabets now can read and write. They have realised the meaning of education in their lives. They have motivated and persuaded villagers to clean up village paths, restrict people from open defecation, encourage

all children to attend schools, and prohibit drinking, gambling, and violence in their communities. Women who had never gone out of their households now speak in public meetings, demanding shares of development, which are entitled to them. Access to and control over community resources are greater than before. They have set up the rules for gender and social inclusion (GESI) by creating alignments with like-minded networks. They regularly meet and share 'women matters' and save small amount on monthly basis to use for a common cause. More importantly, they practice *mahila khedne* (gathering women) for their rights, an unexpected events not before the project interventions. Overall, the project has facilitated the emergence of the suppressed voices of women in Karnali.

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This compilation is a brief of case studies of ten women project participants interviewed in depth, with some revisits, during a period of three and a half weeks, including travel time via air from Kathmandu and treks. Out of them, five lost their parents in childhood and had the most difficult upbringing by stepmothers. One of them is physically challenged, and another has a long-term ailment. Four of them are Dalits (so-called untouchables).

Each participant's story is unique because of the circumstances of her upbringing, the emotions she gathered, the path she travelled,

and the developmental roles she has performed in her household and community. Each of them portrays the plight of women and the struggle against the practices in the entire Karnali region. Each of them brings hope to the reader and makes us think about the future of Karnali society. I felt heavy each time I interviewed someone; in some, I became still and speechless. All respondents names, citations and photographs are 'as it is' and presented with their consent.

Uddhav Rai

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAED Centre for Agro-ecology and Development

DLAs district line agencies

FM frequency modulation

NGOs non-governmental organisations

Rs. Nepalese currency in Rupees (the current conversion rate is equivalent to Rs. 126 against 1 Euro)

VDC Village Development Committee

WDAG Women Development Advocacy Group

WWS Women Welfare Service

GLOSSARY

<i>Bari</i>	Dry upland, mostly used for maize, millet, and barley cultivation.
<i>Chhoi chhito halne</i>	Practice of purifying high caste people against the touches of low caste people (Shudras). Purification is done by sprinkling three times with gold-dipped, pure water and holy grasses.
<i>Chhau or chhui</i>	Menstrual pollution, a form of untouchability mostly practiced in Western hills of Nepal. Women are considered impure and untouchable for seven days during <i>chhui</i> and for 11 days after childbirth. During this period, women are required to stay in a cowshed or a separate house. <i>Chhui</i> also refers to untouchability of low-caste people, practiced by those of high castes.
<i>Deuda</i>	Popular duet folk song, sung between two groups of people, usually of opposite sex, at fairs, festivals, wedding ceremonies, farms, forests, or wherever they get opportunities. The duet has competitive lyrical questions and answers that go on for hours, sometimes for up to two or three days. <i>Deuda</i> songs are mostly about love and romance and are occasionally sung for tracing out histories, for prayers, and for awareness raising. Boys and girls often come close, fall in love, and get married during <i>Deuda</i> singing. <i>Deuda</i> is an important part of life in the region.
<i>Ghatta</i>	A traditional rural mill, set up in the side of stream and operated by the current of water.
<i>Hal</i>	Area of land in terms of draught power tilling. A 2- <i>hal</i> area of land is equivalent to one <i>ropani</i> or 508.75 square metres.
<i>Jari</i>	Monetary compensation paid to the former husband of a woman by her latter husband. The amount varies depending on the expenses incurred in the previous marriage and also on the health, beauty, and skills of the woman. The higher the <i>jari</i> , the more precious the woman is considered.
<i>Khet</i>	Wet lowland, mostly used for rice cultivation.

FROM REBEL TO SOCIAL WORKER



Bhaura Baniya (Rokaya), 24, was born in Bratu, a village in the remote Shrikot Village Development Committee (VDC), Mugu district. As a young child, Bhaura was abandoned by her mother who fled the village with another man after allegations that she was involved in her son's death. Bhaura then lived with her stepmother, who was violent and

abusive. When her maternal uncle died, Bhaura became completely isolated from her maternal home and all her relatives. In the wake of such pain and loneliness, Bhaura joined the Maoist movement² and served as a singer and full-time political worker for six years.

After the war, Bhaura met Shivachan, whom she married. They now live in the isolated mountain village Murma, 3,100 metres above sea level and a four-hour uphill walk

The women say that their husbands are beginning to listen to them more and have stopped gambling and drinking in public places.

from Mugu district headquarters. Although Bhaura shares all the domestic and farming work with her husband, life is not easy. The wheat crop, which Bhaura's family produces, takes about a year to ripen. Scanty barley, beans, and potatoes are also produced, and her farmland is small, only about 4 *hals* (about 1,017 square metres) of *bari* (dry upland), which barely produces enough food for four months of the year.

In 2011, when *didis* (elder sisters) from the 'I Have a Voice' project arrived in her village and organised a meeting to run a literacy class, Bhaura eagerly joined the group. She began attending the evening literacy class while her husband was away in India for work. She took her infant with her to class and started learning *ka-kha-ga* (Devnagari alphabets) in a congested, poorly lit room. Soon after, her classmates decided to form the

2. Maoist movement was an armed conflict ignited by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) from 1996 to 2006 against the monarchy and feudal society, claiming more than 18,000 lives, which ultimately overthrew the monarchy and re-established democracy in Nepal.





Rara Women Development Advocacy Group (RWDAG), and being popular in the class, Bhaura was unanimously nominated for the post of secretary.

Much has changed in the community since Bhaura joined the RWDAG. For instance, the women say that their husbands are beginning to listen to them more and have stopped gambling and drinking in public places. *Chhau* has been reduced from seven days to three. Moreover, like other women, Bhaura also says she now feels entitled to her own finances and is able to spend money as she sees appropriate; for example buying clothes she wants or medicines for her daughter. The group has also managed to collect and save money by donating twenty rupees per month per person. They now have Rs. 13,000 saved and have collected Rs. 25,000 from the VDC treasury. In the past, women's mobility was

restricted to the village, but now their movement has increased as far as the district headquarters. In another achievement, Bhaura led the village *Deuda* team and her group came first, winning the cash prize of Rs. 10,000, half of which was kept in the bank account and the other half spent on proposal development to set up a museum with a sales outlet of local products.

After talking to Bhaura, it appears that women in the community have created a space to strengthen their position in the community. Gender roles are changing: men and women are sharing household chores, are working in the field together equally, and are attending community meetings. People of the most marginalised groups are being trained and are on a path of improvement. And finally, Bhaura, has left her rebel past behind and has a safe and

stable life, a lovely daughter, and a supportive husband.



ROARING VOICES



Forty-year old Gaugora Labad, a so-called 'untouchable', is the chair of the Himali Women Development Advocacy Group (HWDAG). She lives in the steep mountain village of Kalai, just above the Mugu Karnali River. Gaugora lost her parents when she was only ten and married a boy from a nearby village. However, she did not stay with her first husband and was later remarried to Gore Labad, her

***Bidesh dekhi Nepal samma, Nari Diwas aayo
Mahilako adhikara, Deuda launa payo***

*(Women's Day came to Nepal all the way from abroad,
We can sing Deuda for women's rights.)*

**- From a poem written and recited by Gaugora Labad, recalling the
naulo³ -touching event.**

She later led a team of Dalit women in a procession on Elimination of Any Forms of Racial Discrimination Day and also initiated the practice of staying within the house, instead of going to a cowshed, during chhui. Gaugora also challenged tradition and touched the water from naulo.

current husband. As per custom, Gore paid Rs. 50,000 as *jari*⁴ to the first husband, and worked in India for two years to pay this debt.

Gaugora took in her sister's children after their parents' death and thus her family is very large. Out of ten children, three girls are married and the rest go to school. Family income is difficult as they have only three *hals* of *khet* and three *hals* of *bari* that produce food for only three months. The remainder of the time they sell livestock and are currently raising twenty goats, a

3. *Naulo* is a spring water pond. In caste hierarchy, there are different drinking water sources for high caste and low caste people. Touching a water source used by higher castes is prohibited and often punishable.

4. Monetary compensation paid to the former husband of a woman by her latter husband.



buffalo, and a cow. In the winter, her husband goes to India for work.

Gaugora joined the 'I Have a Voice' project after KIRDARC and WWS staff came to the area to enumerate marginalised groups. Gaugora participated in trainings on issues of rights, gender equality, *chhau* (menstrual pollution), and untouchability. She later led a team of Dalit women in a procession on Elimination of Any Forms of Racial Discrimination Day and also initiated the practice of staying within the house, instead of going to a cowshed, during *chhui*. Gaugora also challenged tradition and touched the water from *naulo*. In the village there was a belief that if a low caste person touched the *naulo* there would be a draught, and

she was consequently warned to take responsibility for a possible draught in the village. Following Gaugora's lead, other people began using the water from the *naulo* but no draught came. Now, everyone uses the same source of water for drinking.

The HWDAG is very active and has set up community fines including Rs. 300 for drinking alcohol and quarrelling, Rs. 500 for gambling, and up to Rs. 5,000 for conjugal conflict/violence. With funds from the DADO, the group was also able to construct a small irrigation canal that benefits 20 households. By the time of the interview, the newly constructed canal was operating and rice was planted with the water. Now, HWDAG is constructing a community hall in

the middle of the village with help from the VDC, 'I Have a Voice' project, and donations.

Gaugora describes the changes for women: 'Initially, we were like shoes, used and thrown; now we have changed. Now we have started to use for ourselves, not for others.' Clearly, things in Gaugora's village are changing due to the group's activities, strong advocacy and support from community networks. The women have challenged an age-old power structure and broken one of the boundaries of untouchability. As it appears, there are hardly any barriers strong enough to block their roaring voices.

A TOWERING FIGURE



Gaugora Rokaya, 50, lives two days' walk from the headquarters of Mugu district in the village Siddy, one of the remotest clusters of Kalai VDC. The cluster comprises of 32 households inhabited by Rokayas and Budas. She has two sons and five daughters, out of which three are married and four are in school. She also has five

grandchildren from her eldest son. Her major sources of income are agriculture, with two *hals* of *khet* and four *hals* of *bari*, which supports her for three months. For additional sources of income, Gaugora and her family rely on fares from mules—the main mode of transportation in the area—a small shop, selling livestock, and selling herbs.

Gaugora remembers earlier days in the village when women used to hide themselves away from visitors; now women can easily face strangers. She says that previously, women used to be defined by their male counterparts, but now this has changed.

Gaugora first joined the group when she began attending the literacy class. The programme excited her because finally her remote village was reached for development activities: '*Rajale patta nalagayeko thau*' (even the king had not identified this place), she says. She was then chosen to act as chair of Siddy Women Development Advocacy Group (SWDAG) because she was a *naachi*⁵. SWDAG has set many community rules. Now, a person can be imprisoned for two months and fined up to Rs. 3,000 as a penalty for violence against women. Fines against ill actions are also set: for example, for cutting grass in another's farm, consuming alcohol, and gambling in public places, a person is charged Rs. 20, Rs. 500, and Rs. 800 respectively.

Since joining the group, there have been many changes in Gaugora's life. For instance, her mobility has

5. *A forward thinking and understanding gentle lady.*



significantly increased. Before, Gaugora had never travelled beyond Sipa, about ten kilometres east of the village cluster. Now, twice a month she treks for two days to the district headquarters: '*Jilla pugyau, bolna sakyu*' (I reached the district headquarters and could speak). She feels now she can travel anywhere in the district her work calls for. Her home life has also improved since her husband no longer beats her and has started to share the workload.

Gaugora remembers earlier days in the village when women used to hide themselves away from visitors; now women can easily face strangers. She says that previously, women used to be defined by their male counterparts, but now this has changed. Women in Siddy are always visible in the district headquarters, demanding development in their village. She hears the people of Khariya (another village) commenting on the women being active and talkative and says

some people wonder why this is so: *Bito dinchha ki ke ho?* (Are they getting cash?) Some people feel *samanti bhandyo* (old ways are challenged!), as people are mobilising against the feudal system. While listening to her, I commented, 'You have become the king of a place unidentified by the king', and she just smiled.

Gaugora is extremely happy to be part of SWDAG and says, 'it is an opportunity to raise awareness, teach, and speak up for our rights.' She was a respected lady before joining the programme, but now she is respected even more, and says she feels powerful because most of her ideas are followed. She vows to work against societal malpractices and is committed to gender equality and inclusion. Gaugora is happy to share her experiences so that such programmes can be initiated in the adjoining villages in the future. She says that a tower of good things never falls apart.

DHAINAKI AINA (MIRROR OF DHAINA)



Thirty-six year old Aina Devi Acharya lives with her husband, two sons, and daughter-in-law in Dhainakot, a two days' walk from the district headquarters Gumgadhi. The village is at the western end of Mugu district bordering Humla and rests in a

Ekai sriman lyapche laudahan, Hami sahi gardau...

(My husband puts his thumbprint, but we can sign...)

-Aina says with a proud smile, referring to herself, her son and daughter-in law.

beautiful sloped terrace above Mugu Karnali River, facing the Himalayas. Her land supports the family for eight months, and for the rest of the year they buy food from the remittance

They banned chhui and advocated chhui as a natural happening of living beings. If not, they questioned, 'why do the goats have chhui but are offered to the god? The god accepts goats but why not women?' Aina says such advocacy was very effective in the community.

earned by her husband and sons who migrate to Northern India for wage labour. In her language, *Aina* literally means 'a mirror', and Aina Devi Acharya is indeed like a mirror to her community: frank, straightforward, and vocal.

Aina is the treasurer of Janachetana Women Development Advocacy Group (JWDAG). After attending literacy classes, her group initiated toilet construction, community sanitation, and village path improvement. They





banned *chhui* and advocated *chhui* as a natural happening of living beings. If not, they questioned, ‘why do the goats have *chhui* but are offered to the god? The god accepts goats but why not women?’ Aina says such advocacy was very effective in the community.

After Aina joined JWDAG, she witnessed many things happening in her village within a short span of time. She feels that the village is transforming from primitive to modern. When I asked about the changes, she says that so many things have changed that her lungs will explode (*fokso futchha*) if she begins to describe them all. For instance, the mobility and status of women have risen. Earlier, women from one household would not visit another due to the superstition that women who thus move are considered *paters* (bad) and even *besyas* (whores). But now, they go wherever they want. Many people in the village used to think that women were commodities. The dignity of a woman was associated with the *jari*⁶ price, and men used to scold or look down upon their wives, saying she was worth this much of jari payment or was worth this amount of expense in the

wedding. Now the women are advocating that they are not commodities for sale.

‘We are so overwhelmed by the support from WWS and KIRDARC that we cannot express it in words,’ says Aina. She adds, ‘we are able to consume vegetables all year round. We know about sanitation, *chhui*, and cleaning utensils, which we learned from the literacy classes.’ Before all this, Aina’s world was limited to Dhainakot and Vie, a village across the Mugu Karnali River. She now visits the district headquarters. Aina also now manages all the family resources and owns three pieces of land. She keeps an account book of vegetable sales and income. She is also now aware that women are entitled to citizenship certificates, marriage certificates, and property ownership certificates.

The project has made a positive impact in the community, but there is still work to be done. Aina assesses that men are barriers to the project because they are sceptical about women’s mobilisation. Men do not want to see their supremacy degrading. But Aina does not worry, saying, ‘*Kag karaudai garha, Pina hukdai garha*’ (Crow keeps crowing, but mustard cake keeps drying up).

6. Monetary compensation paid to the former husband of a woman by her latter husband.

LOVE INSPIRES ME TO LIVE



Relkala Nepali is twenty-six years old and was born as the fourth child in a Dalit family in Juwaldanda, a village in Natarphu VDC of Soru area. Her father died when she was four years old, and her mother followed six years later. After the demise of both parents, her elder sisters married

off, and her elder brother wandered around the village and sometimes went to India for work. Poverty and lack of parental care made Relkala's life difficult and she married at the

Relkala joined the Srijanshil Women Development Advocacy Group (SWDAG) at the prompting of project staff. Literacy classes have enabled Relkala to learn what she missed as a child.

age of 13 in grand ceremony with *Hudke*⁷ dances and *Deuda* duets, hoping for a comfortable life with a loving husband. But things did not turn out as she hoped. After the birth of two children, her husband turned

physically abusive and then married another woman, who eventually left. The family has a small house and only a patch of land left for a kitchen garden. Relkala supports her family by buying rice with a small income generated from selling vegetables.

Relkala joined the Srijanshil Women Development Advocacy Group (SWDAG) at the prompting of project staff. Literacy classes have enabled Relkala to learn what she missed as a child. When I asked her whether she had ever been to school, Relkala replied: *Kathai, Kasari banchyun, Ke bipattale hurkyun, Kasari janu school?* (Poor us! There was no hope of life, how did we grow up! How could we go to school?) She learned the alphabet for the first time when she was twenty-three. From the classes she has also learned about the rights

7. A popular folk dance in the Karnali region.

of the people; social evils such as untouchability (*chhui, chhaupadi*) and child marriage; state of nutrition, health, and sanitation; and community and personal household planning. She has put her learning and understanding of her society in a Deuda composition below:

Chhaupatha bhayaki bela alko pani pyuda; Dherai biram huna lagyo, goth pudi syauda Dharakuwa patipauwa, bhanda chhoindochha; Mahilako dukhpira samjhya hridaya rudachha Kohi bhanda magh lagya, Kohi pusai chhan; Gaugharaka daju bhailai, yo nitee usai chha (We drink poured⁸ water in the course of chhau; we fall sick while resting in the cowshed Taps, ponds, guesthouse all barred to touch; thinking all these women's plight, my heart tears Some say it's

turned January, some say December; this dilemma exists among the male folk)

Relkala Nepali herself now feels confident to speak up about the rights of women and marginalised people and advocates against the malpractices in the community.

Since joining the group, Relkala has noticed many changes. Particularly, the women's confidence levels and awareness has increased significantly. She herself now feels confident to speak up about the rights of women and marginalised people and

advocates against the malpractices in the community.

Despite all the positive changes, Relkala still feels a deep pain: 'I married him when I was in misery, thinking I would be prosperous and happy, but I was plunged into more misery. I would have left had it not been for my children. I wanted to die several times, but the love of my children and husband does not let me die,' she confided. Relkala has no one to share her struggles with, as her siblings are out of contact and her only maternal uncle's family, a place of honour and love in this society, does not even know whether Relkala is alive. However, despite her sadness, she finds happiness while teaching and helping other Dalit women in her community.

8. Water is not given hand to hand to a chhau woman. Instead, it is poured from a pot, avoiding physical touch between the giver and taker.

FROM THUMBPRINT TO SIGNATURE



Lalparu Sunar, 25, was born in a poor Dalit family in Rokayabada, Shreenagar VDC, a remote area in southern Humla. She is married to Hari Sunar and has two daughters and a son. Lalparu's family lives in a densely clustered settlement. Farming feeds the family for two months a year, and her husband's work at the Food Corporation Depot

Janne ta tanguli tara, Najanne bawat chha; Paran janja paraudh padhnya, Ma sanga awaj chha.

(Those who have skills can cross the rivers via rope, but the unskilled have difficulties; even though I could die I attend the adult literacy class, because I have a voice.)

in Bajhura provides the remainder. Lalparu also works as a wage labourer in the Food for Work programme. The family used to have a small shop but it was not profitable.

Lalparu joined the Shreenagar Women Development Advocacy Group (SWDAG) after project staff encouraged her to participate. She is now the treasurer of the group. Lalparu's desire to learn sparked when she was not allowed to open a bank account without being able to write her name, as the bank did not accept cheques with a thumbprint. At the time, she desperately wanted

a bank account for transactions from her shop. She has since learned her alphabet in the evening literacy classes and also learned about many issues including women and development, social inclusion, sanitation, toilet construction, and sending children to school. 'The project also took me to Simkot, which I never imagined in my life,' says Lalparu. She has even taught her husband to sign and do basic reading and writing.

SWDAG has been very successful in Lalparu's community, and has run literacy classes, saved funds regularly, prepared action plans,

and rallied against practices such as gambling, alcoholism, *chhui*, and caste discrimination. There are rules and fines for drinking, quarrelling, gambling, open defecation, illegal tree cutting, animal grazing in crop fields, and polygamy. When I asked about the status of polygamy in the group, Lalparu told me that seven of the women's husbands have second wives. '*Hami aimai nai aimaima jane daman ho, sir*' (We women invading women is a suppression), they say.

Since joining the group, Lalparu has witnessed many changes both personally and in her community. In the community, there are no more practices of *chhau* and people no longer practice *chhui chhito halne* (untouchability) among different caste groups. Moreover, in the past, women never ventured outside of the community; now all can go without

hesitation. According to Lalparu, none of the men believed that women could lead groups, but now women have demonstrated that they can do it. Lalparu has also noticed increased awareness on vital registration (birth, marriage, and death), which makes claiming rights and benefits possible. Furthermore, wages between women and men are now the same. Lalparu feels proud about the move towards equality and sees that men and women now divide work equally, all castes now eat together, and everyone is paid equally by members in the public.

Personally, Lalparu says her confidence has increased considerably. She used to fear, shiver, and even cry while talking in front of people. Now, she not only talks, but also delivers speeches to large groups. She expresses what she has learned by saying that in

her opinion, the project is greater than her parents: 'our parents never taught us how to read and write, but the project did,' she says proudly.

Those who have skills can cross the rivers via rope, but the unskilled have difficulties; even though I could die I attend the adult literacy class, because I have a voice.



A NEW BEGINNING



Aisa Rokaya is thirty year old and lives with her quiet and cheerful husband in Bigauthi cluster of Shreenagar VDC in southern Humla. As an infant, she lost her mother to illness in the *chhau* house. Her father married another woman, and Aisa had difficulty adjusting to life with her step-mother because her stepmother would scold and beat her, calling her *toke* (orphan,

literally meaning ‘parent biter’). Due to these hardships, her grandparents raised her. At thirteen, she married an orphan boy who worked as a servant in another house. Aisa and her husband had eight children, but unfortunately, her only two boys and a girl died. Now, Aisa says she is under pressure to bear another boy. Food produced from the family land is sufficient only for six months. Her husband used to work in India as a labourer but now stays at home and often goes to collect herbs in the forest.

Aisa Rokaya was surprised to learn letters for the first time in her life, but also comments that the women in the class ‘understood the subjects rather than learned how to read and write.’

Aisa is the chair of Lagansil Women Development Advocacy (LWDAG) group. Asia initially joined the group because the men in her cluster nominated her and the other women. Two months after being nominated, the literacy classes began. When asked about what she learned in the class, Aisa points to her children and says with a smile, ‘these are the people who did not let me study effectively.’ She then goes on to say she was surprised to learn letters for the first time in her life, but also comments that the women in the class ‘understood the subjects rather than learned how to read and write.’ Effectiveness of the literacy class depended on the physical state of participants: some were blind, and some were old with hearing problems, so their capacities varied. Aisa liked the story of Sunita and Binita most because of their contrasting characters: Binita, an introvert girl, does not share her





problems with anyone and finally commits suicide; in contrast, Sunita shares her problem with her brother and overcomes parental hurdles.

many officers, including Women Development Officer, and even gave an interview on the local FM radio.

Aisa is happy because she opened a bank account in Simkot, the district headquarters of Humla. Although the three-day walk made her feet sore, and she was anxious about leaving her small daughter at home with her father, she was proud to go on the trip. In Simkot, she and other women claimed the allocated budget for women in their village, met

In her interview, she explained all of LWDAG's activities and demanded a health camp for women, improved stoves, and toilets for the community. When I asked about the interview, she says with a smile, '*Kunako kothama dalla dallama bolyau*' (We spoke in the balls [mikes] in a corner of a closed room).

Aisa did not say much about the impact the LWDAG has had on the area, but she did say that the project has spread positive messages to the community and even to the male members of their village.

She equally appreciates the cooperation and help of her husband because he lets her participate and go to Simkot. He responsibly looks after the family matters when she is away. She says she is very thankful to WWS and KIRDARC for opening up her eyes.

AN ACTIVE ICON OF CHANGE



Basmati was born into a hill family in Madana VDC, and married a man from Palsa village, Kalika, of Humla district. Her marriage took place after love developed during *Deuda* singing. She lives with her husband, his parents and two brothers, and two young children. Basmati's farm feeds the family for two months and other sources of income include fares

'The way by led a woman or goat is uncertain'.

from a local *ghatta* (water mill), herb collection, livestock raising, vegetable sales, and brewing local alcohol.

It is evident that women can change their society if given the tools. Many women now understand the root causes of discrimination, and that change can happen by empowering marginalised members of the community.

Basmati, now the secretary of PWDAG, was self-motivated to join the group and upon hearing about the project, she invited the project staff to her home to learn more about the programme. Afterwards, she was motivated to form a women's group in her village so she and a few friends formed PWDAG and literacy classes. The group is comprised of eleven indigenous women, eleven Dalits, one disabled, and one single woman. Basmati nominated herself to be the secretary because she was relatively literate among her group members. They save twenty rupees per month, which has accumulated to Rs. 11,000, and with additional funds from the

VDC, they now have Rs. 49,000 in their bank account.

When asked about the status of women in her community, Basmati recanted a saying: '*Baikini mukhyani bakhri bataalo...Bhanchhan hamilai*' meaning 'the way by led a woman or goat is uncertain'. It is considered inauspicious if women lead the way in a journey, as they are considered 'useless', like a 'startled goat'. The comparison of women with goats also suggests that women are

commodities for trade, like domestic animals. Furthermore, women could never go outside their house without the consent of a man and mobility was confined within the household and farm fields. Basmati says that nobody cares about their voices; instead they are treated as servants and have to act as men wish. Their value is determined by the price of *jari*—the higher the prices paid, the precious the woman is. The meaning of *jari* is also that a rich man can buy as many women as he wants and affords.

However, Basmati thinks that now things have changed due to education and group mobilisation. Women are allied and are advocating to ensure that their rights are addressed. They now

can speak up and have even delivered speeches among large groups of people. Basmati acknowledges that since the participation in Pragatishil Women Development Advocacy Group (PWDAG, things are changing in the village gradually. She herself has become more mobile. Apart from Kolti, a market of three days' walk south to buy rice, she had never gone to other places, but the programme took her to the district headquarters in Simikot to open a bank account.

From the conversation with Basmati Buda, it is evident that women can change their society if given the tools. Many women now understand the root causes of discrimination, and that change can happen by empowering marginalised members of the community. Self-motivating actors like Basmati are the icons of development in the communities of Humla.



A SECOND LIFE



Dhaulti was born in Neher, a village in Fotu VDC, and one of the most remote villages of the Mugu district. She was born the second child among three male siblings. She is married to Gyansing Nepali, an educated fellow who had studied up to grade 12. The Nepali family holds a small patch of land (one *hal*), which produces enough food for four months.

When she was younger, Dhaulti was involved in a tragic accident. While collecting firewood, she took refuge from an approaching thunderstorm under a nearby tree. Two friends who were with her died during the thunderstorm, though Dhaulti only suffered some ailment inside her chest and feet, known as *akase rog*. Despite all local treatments, she still has swelling and pus in the feet.

In the community, chhui has been almost abolished and untouchability does not exist anymore. Drinking and gambling in public have stopped.

When she was sixteen, she married Gyansing of Jaira, Humla. Jaira is the

remotest village of the 'I Have a Voice' project, and reaching the village is challenging because of steep ascends and descends via narrow footpaths from 1000 to 3000 meters above sea level.

Dhaulti, who never went to school, joined the literacy class at the prompting of group members and her husband. The classes ran in the morning during leisure seasons and in the evening during busy seasons after all household chores were over. The women studied by sprinkling water over their faces to keep them from falling asleep after a long day's work, and even managed to study in the dark: '*Jharo balera pani padhyau, Mukhama torch balera pani padhyau*' (We studied by firing pine twigs, and also hanging torch in the mouth'), says Dhaulti. 'I feel proud I joined the class, and I know the value of paper and pen now,' she adds.



Dhali joined the Sundar Women Development Advocacy Group (SWDAG) and actively participates in activities such as paying membership fees, taking part in rallies and maintaining peace in the community. Monthly savings is Rs. 100, and the total amount accumulated is about Rs. 16,500 to date. The group has been able to set up rules in the village, targeting *chhui*, gambling, and drinking.

Before she joined the class, Dhali says it was difficult for her to face men because nobody wanted to talk to a woman. 'We were shy, scared, and camouflaged under the scarf. People used to say what kind of woman is this? How dare she show her face in front of men? A shameless lady!' Now things have changed: 'We can speak up, put our voices out, and argue on relevant subjects', Dhali asserts. She adds: *Dharko tanchhau, Dharko bata*

jiwan tando bhaya (We draw lines, and from the lines, we draw life).

'So many things have changed,' she remarks. In the community, *chhui* has been almost abolished and untouchability does not exist

This old saying means that sons and daughters can rest safely in the corner, but daughters-in-law must remain at a risky place with frequent demands of work. Dhali continues to explain the preference for sons in society by using her own family as an example.

anymore. Drinking and gambling in public have stopped. SWDAG

has been playing a mediating role in ascertaining the rights of the women, children, and elderly people. However, there is still a long road to travel. Dhali describes the position of women in society as: *Chhora chhori kuna, Buhari dhoka* (Sons and daughters in the corner, daughter-in-laws at the door). This old saying means that sons and daughters can rest safely in the corner, but daughters-in-law must remain at a risky place with frequent demands of work. Dhali continues to explain the preference for sons in society by using her own family as an example. She says that when her mother delivered boy children, she was loved and cared for by all. Although Dhali is illiterate, she has deep insights about her society and a will to develop her community. She well understands the situation and analyses the root causes of discrimination prevailing in the community.

RAYS OF HOPE



Fifteen-year-old **Ramjeeta Rokaya** is a member of Gurunath Women Development Advocacy Group (GWDAG) of Jaira VDC in Humla. Ramjeeta was born with visual, verbal and physical impairments, which severely impede her abilities. Despite her limitations, she has a determined spirit. When I asked her how she managed to come to our meeting,

she said, 'I could not wait to see you so I just came,' and then elaborates saying, '*Thorai jhilimili dekhnya, Napa napa sunnya, Bistarai hidnya*' (I can see a little bit, I can hear a little bit, and I can walk very slowly).

Ramjeeta has three brothers, two sisters, parents, a grandmother, and a great grandmother. She was born with her disabilities and before joining the classes, she had never been to school. After joining the

From the project Ramjeeta has gained a taste for learning and a level of awareness about her community. She aspires to continue her education and hopes to attend a school for children with disability.

literacy class, she was able to show us the letters and speak, although with some difficulty. Ramjeeta is resourceful and was able to express herself and communicate in various ways including drawing pictures and writing letters.

In her short life, Ramjeeta has faced considerable discrimination. As a child, she was often beaten with stinging nettles and called *kano* (blind). Her family, community members, and even people from other villages abused her. Her family treated her as a less important member of the family and often fed her only table scraps or small leftovers. Since joining the group, some of the women met with Ramjeeta's family and have asked them to stop abusing her.

Ramjeeta knows many things about the 'I Have a Voice' project. She explains that they attended literacy class where she learned how to read



and write and is grateful to the project that she was included. She tells me that the other members all helped her to learn reading and writing and about her rights, though she was often scolded for arriving late to the class.

She has travelled to Simikot twice with her father to apply for a disability allowance of a thousand rupees per month, and has been receiving it for the past two years. Once she receives

it, Ramjeeta keeps some of it to buy some clothes and cosmetics, and the rest she hands over to her father. Last year, he bought a solar panel for light with the allowance.

Since the project began, there have been significant changes in her community. For instance, Ramjeeta says the female members

in her family now stay in their house during *chhau*, although the person having *chhau* does not cook. She adds that women in the village also do not stay in cowsheds during *chhau*.

From the project, Ramjeeta has gained a taste for learning and a level of awareness about her community. She aspires to continue her education and

hopes to attend a school for disabled people. During our meeting, I kept wondering how many such disabled persons are in the area and whether there is any way that the project can enumerate them and arrange to send them to a school in the region. The group says Ramjeeta is a role model because despite all the hardships in her life, she is determined to continue learning.



	<p>CISU – Civil Society in Development is an independent association of 270+ small and medium-sized Danish Civil Society Organisations. All its members are engaged in development work in Asia, Africa or Latin America- either as their main focus or as part of their activities. CISU backs Danish organisations’ national and global efforts for a just and sustainable world and serves as a platform for exchanging experiences and sharing knowledge. It builds capacity, promotes mutual learning and innovative thinking, and strengthens popular participation in development cooperation.</p> <p>www.cisu.dk/eng</p>
	<p>Mission East (ME) is a Danish non-profit international relief and development organization that works with the most vulnerable communities in Eastern Europe and Asia, making no political, racial, or religious distinction among those in need. ME’s mission is to help the vulnerable people through humanitarian relief aid, development assistance, the linking of relief, rehabilitation and development, and supporting communities’ capacities to organize and assist themselves. ME’s ‘Values in Action’ are honesty, integrity, compassion, respect for all people and valuing the individual. In Nepal, Mission East started working since 2007.</p> <p>www.miseast.org</p>
	<p>Karnali Integrated Rural Development and Research Centre (KIRDARC Nepal), which is an NGO established in 1999, is an initiation of youths from Karnali zone with a vision of just and prosperous Karnali region with people having access to and ownership over resources. KIRDARC’s mission is to enable Karnali people to claim and exercise their human rights, including the right against poverty and neglect by way of educating, organizing and mobilizing people themselves in actions that promote human rights ; research and evidence-based policy advocacy; and just and judicious resource mobilization in the region.</p> <p>www.kirdarc.org</p>
	<p>Women Welfare Service (WWS) is a pioneer women-led NGO in Karnali that was established in 1993 in Humla district with an aim of empowering women and initiating community development. Currently, it is works in three districts of Karnali region in the areas of livelihood, education, health and empowerment of women and people with disabilities.</p> <p>www.wws.org.np</p>

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