



Voices of Women

Making It Work For Women: The Mahila Network Project

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Foreword



Care work is important for the human existence and overall human development. But care work like cleaning, cooking, nurturing children, fetching water, washing clothes and utensils are taken as women's work and had been carried out through ages by the socialization process in patriarchy dominant society. The gender equality between men and women will not be obtained unless the transformation of gender roles is addressed. Recognition of unpaid care work by women themselves, family, society and country is also the prime step towards addressing its important value. Also, including unpaid care work in national account and calculation of GDP supports for the recognition as well as helps to incorporate the issue in development agendas.

ActionAid had been prioritizing the right of women in its core work and addressing unpaid care work is one of them. Unequal distribution of the unpaid care work made women left behind in all the development and empowerment process including capacity building, maintaining healthy life and engage in productive work. This has also created disparities between men and women in accessing resources, grabbing opportunities and mobility. Hence, with this motive, ActionAid had engaged in alternative model buildings which will support women to reduce, redistribute the unpaid care work burden along with the recognition. So, through The Mahila Network Project, ActionAid Nepal had conducted sensitizations, trainings, time diary survey, alternative model buildings like child care centers, establishing water taps, conducting policy level discourses and have introduced and supported for livelihood options.

This book is the collection of the stories and voices of women from the collectives of Bardiya and Doti Districts. With the support and facilitation of project these women came up as entrepreneurs, leaders and change agent of gender equalities. These stories are expected to motivate other and share the innovative work of the project in the wider circle.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Sujeeta Mathema'.

Sujeeta Mathema
Executive Director
ActionAid Nepal

Introduction

ActionAid Nepal is implementing the Mahila Network project in Bardiya and Doti district through the support of Giving circle. The project is implemented through its local partner Kamaiya Mahila Jagaran Samaj Nepal (KMJS) from 31st August, 2014 and Equity Development Center (EDC) from August 2017.

In the present context women are deprived to get equal opportunities in social and economic affairs. They lack access over resources and due to oppressive gender norms that reinforce women as secondary breadwinners and primary care givers dependent on the men in their households. So, Project had focused to promote the economic empowerment of poor rural women by addressing the prevailing discriminatory gender roles in Nepal.

The projects focused on women's collectives in three main ways. First, the action is about women fulfilling their social, economic and cultural rights by strengthening their leadership in the democratic governance of collectives, creating empowering spaces for women where they can express themselves freely and raise their demands to their communities and governments. Second, it places long-term sustainability at its core by using the women's existing knowledge as a starting point and by ensuring that women receive training on sustainable methods of production in geographical contexts that are increasingly prone to natural disasters. Third, it takes a holistic approach to women's work that integrates their unpaid care work in the home along with their paid work through the collective. It will therefore challenge deeply ingrained gender norms that see women primarily in the private sphere as secondary breadwinners. The action will clearly prioritize very poor, marginalized Dalit and indigenous communities of Nepal, addressing both practical and strategic needs for greater economic security.

WORKING AREAS OF PROJECT :

BARDIYA

Rajapur Municipality (1-4); Basgadi Municipality (4),
Geruwa Rural Municipality (5),
Badaiya Taal Rural Municipality (4-7)

DOTI

Dipayal Silgadi Municipality (4,5,7), Shikar
Municipality (1-4), KI Singh Rural Municipality (4,6,7)



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1

Providing invaluable service

How community child-care centre is supporting mother in reducing the burden of unpaid care work

The community child-care centre in Sangharsa Nagar, Bardiya, was established to help women share the burden of unpaid care work, taking care of their children alone, so that they could engage in various income-generation activities. The centre was established in 2015 with the support of ActionAid and was recently (on April 2018) handed over to the local government.

“The centre has eased up the burden of working women in great lengths,” says Balkumari Chaudhari, a member from the women cooperative of Sangharsa Nagar and also the caretaker of the child-care centre.

“Otherwise it was impossible for women to leave their kids alone when they had to go to the jungle or fields and other works.” Taking their kids to work consumed a lot of their time during work as they had to tend to them from time to time, and leaving their kids home was a difficult choice as they would be worried about their kids all the time during work and thus could also not commit to their work properly. So in most cases, many mothers had to quit working to take care of their children.

Since the establishment of the child-care centre, mothers have been able to move freely without worrying about the safety of their children. Many women in the village are involved in productive work, vegetable farming, animal husbandry, and so on, that require them to work in the fields, to graze their animals in the jungle, etc. So every morning at eight, mothers drop their children off at the centre before they begin their day's work.

“Before we had the facility of the child-care centre, I had to carry my son with me to everywhere I went, and I couldn't concentrate on my work at all,” says Aarati Tharu, a resident of Sangharasa Nagar. “Imagine carrying a

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bundle of firewood in one hand and your child in the other, and then chasing the goats with all that load.” She has a two-year-old son, who she leaves in the capable hands of the centre. She says she doesn't have to worry about anything when her son is in the centre. “I would be more concerned if I had to leave him back home—god knows, when he might crawl out to the streets and get himself into trouble. Aarati makes a living out of goat farming and vegetable farming.

The centre has made things much convenient especially for mothers who have no family members to take care of their kids in their absence. Rampyari Chaudhari is a member of the Hariyali Krishak Samuha, and is one of the mothers who has had to rely on



the centre's services as well. "My husband also leaves early in the morning for work, so when I had to work, I had to carry my son with me, because leaving him alone was not an option." But now while her son happily spends his day at the centres, Rampyari can finish her household chores without any distraction, go to the market to sell the vegetables, work in her vegetable farm, tend to her goats. The centre closes at four in the evening.

Even the kids are so fond of the centre that, guardians say, they themselves hurry the parents to take them to the centre every morning. The centre is a knowledge park where they learn new and exciting things. Parents beam with surprise and joy when their kids who cannot even utter full words, sing songs to them that they have learned during their time at the centre. "Children have learned many good manners and healthy habits as well," adds Reema Tharu, "things like how they should always wash hands with soap before eating and after using toilet. Whatever they've learned in the centre, they make it a point to tell us all about it when we're home." Parents have also noticed improvement in their

children's health due to such healthy habits, which has reduced health problems like diarrhoea. Her son is three years old now. And next year, he'll graduate from the centre and will enroll in the public school.

The centre has thus succeeded in becoming a sanctuary for these kids and a motivational factor for working mothers to devote their skills to become successful entrepreneurs. "We hope that the centre continues to extend its services to support mothers like us in days to come," says Rampyari.

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2

Cycling their way to the future

It's been couple of years since the initiative to empower women through collectives was launched in this quaint little village of Badaiya Taal rural municipality by KMJS and the Mahila Network Project. "The first couple of years was an important learning phase for us women—as we spent those years training ourselves and versing ourselves on everything we should know about farming practices and creating a successful business venture out of it," says Fulgendani, the president of the Chappalanala Women Agriculture Cooperative.

And how wonderfully those years in training have paid off for these women. "Also, the vegetable

farming business is such that you can gain high returns even from a small investment. For instance, a thousand rupees spent on seeds and seedlings guarantees at least a return of produces that will earn you five to six thousand rupees,” says Fulgendani. And it is because of their faith in the cooperative and their honest input, Chappalanala Women Agriculture Cooperative is one of the finest examples of women cooperative that has been able to empower and give these wonderful women a sustainable venture. It has not only made them capable but also financially stable and independent. The members are engaged in various income generating opportunities such as animal husbandry, shops, etc.

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However, most are still attracted to agriculture, and there are more than 10 families from the cooperative who've made a living through vegetable farming. And to lend them a helping hand various support agencies also send help in the form of vegetable crates, water tank, watering cans, etc.

THE WHEELS ARE TURNING

In a community where women were subjected to constricted rules and mindset of the orthodox society, the world of opportunities must have seemed negligible to these women. In addition to that, having led most of their lives as bonded labourers, making that leap to free themselves from the bonds of dependency was no ordinary challenge. “But then the training and knowledge we were given gave us a way to elevate ourselves from our past affairs. After understanding what we can achieve using our own strength, reverting to the old ways was not an option,” says Fulgendani.

“Although our embarrassment and shame did get the better of us when we first started out as vegetable vendors, but as you can see, that's not an issue



anymore,” says Fulgendani and fellow members laugh in agreement. “Seeing at least one or two women going off to the market must have sparked a bit of confidence in the others as well, and the rest is history,” she says. Hesitant about how to get good deals for their agro-produces in the market, they feared they’d be swindled right under their noses and they wouldn’t even know about it. “But we have our training programmes to thank for. After all we were taught to run a business here. And watching others get by satisfyingly well was a huge confidence booster for those who still had doubts.”

And once they started, these women were unstoppable. They say that never has there been a day where they’ve had to return home disappointed. They sure did know how to find the perfect market, and, in most cases, they’ve not even had to find one—the market has simply walks up to them instead. “There are occasions when the vegetables will get sold out even when you’re on your way to the market,” says Parvati Tharu, secretary of the Chappalanala cooperative. Parvati also owns a small store and when she can’t manage to go to the



market, she sells them in her store too. “I only have a small vegetable garden though, so it’s not as much as the other members’.” Regardless of which, she makes as much as Rs 10,000 from her store and to top it off, easily makes up to Rs 15,000 by selling vegetables per month.

On days when there are no customers in the vicinity, they

hop on their faithful bicycles, with crates of vegetables on either side of their bikes, and wheel themselves off to any corner where the customers lie in wait—to some nearby marketplace or to other (desi) villages, like Khajura, Urra and some days even as far as Nepalgunj. Even when for some reason, some may not be able to take their veggies out for the day, those who are will take

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them in their stead. Because the time of planting vegetables inevitably coincide with at least a couple of other farmers as well, their produces also become ready at the same time. So they make a group of four to five to head to the market together—the more the merrier. So there's always this unspoken pact between the members that binds them and their business together. And this way, the women also don't

have to go through the market hurdles alone. Regardless of their determination, the market is still filled with all kinds of nuisance, especially the ones who steal their scale weights. "We don't know who does it, and because it's so expensive, we cannot always keep buying them again and again," says Paniya Tharu, vice-president of the cooperative. So keeping things to a minimum, only a member in the group carries the

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weights and everybody shares it in the market all the more being wary of any possible thieves.

And the business has grown profitably indeed, obviously because of the good returns that they are able to get. And these women are masters when it comes to growing vegetables—seasonal and even off-seasonal ones. These women who started off by producing one or two kilos of vegetables now produce them by quintals. This year, they say, they made good profits especially on cucumber because of they had been growing them using tunnels since December and were able to sell them since February till late summer—and that means a continuous supply of cucumbers for almost five months or more.

UNDERSTANDING THE MARKET

Whatever maybe the implications of using fancy techniques, simply putting the word out there that they offer fresh vegetables for sale has worked its magic. “When we first started, it was all about letting people know what we were doing and where they can find fresh vegetables when they ever

need some,” says Parvati. And it has turned out pretty well for them to be honest. “Many of our customers themselves come over at our houses to buy vegetables from us. Maybe the idea of getting things fresh from the garden also appeals to them,” Vegetables like cauliflower, tomatoes, cucumber, etc can be plucked fresh from the garden. And these are customers that even come from surrounding villages as well.


Understanding one’s customers interests can also go a long way. That’s why when the customers started searching highs and lows for organic produces, the women were in for a treat. “Customers are very specific about what they want to buy and grill us with questions about chemicals and what not before they buy vegetables.” says Paniya. And the women here are known to strictly follow organic farming practices, only use their own concoction of natural fertilisers and completely avoid the use of harmful chemicals. And to make sure that no one has strayed from their path, there are JTAs who come for regular inspections to keep things organic. In time, their vegetables have earned such a good reputation that

they have customers waiting for them even before they reach the marketplace.

And sometimes if due to some circumstances, they cannot go to the market, usually around planting season and the like, everybody takes their produces to the vegetable collection centre in the village, which is some one and a half km away. However, this is a proposition that they would rather avoid because they say that using the centre is not profitable at all. “We have to incur huge losses when we have to depend on the centre because they offer us very low prices on our vegetables than we would normally get. The centre just doesn’t take into account the amount of work and investment we’ve put into growing these vegetables,” says Paniya. “Of course if only the centre gave us fair prices, then it would be much easier to use the collection centre, and we won’t have to worry about going to the market all the time.”

The progressive farmers now hope to install and build tunnels out of iron bars because they definitely last better than the bamboo ones and can also protect their precious vegetables from extreme weather

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problems. “The bamboo ones disintegrate and become useless within one or two seasons. With a sturdy one, we can hope to keep our vegetables safe from heavy rainfall and other pest problems.”

THE SUCCESS MANTRA

“It's not always about having vast areas of land; one can make enough in as much as a kattha

of land if they're determined to work diligently for it,” says Parvati. “We may not have much at our disposal but we make sure that every inch counts.” What they lack in terms of land they make up with their utter devotion to their vocation. And what they have achieved with their hard work and determination is indeed commendable and something we should all learn from.



3

An initiative that changes lives

“We had heard about various agencies and their programmes to help people like us, but we barely had any clue as to how to access those services. Until KMJS came to our community’s aid, we never believed that our lives could also change for good,” mentions Guleli Chaudhari (president of Karnali Mahila Krishi Samuha).

She and many other freed Kamaiya families who were then living in Murghawa were later resettled in Himalipur some 15 years ago—most clueless about what to do with their now “freed” lives. “Many organisations only taught us about creating funds

and rotating them and nothing more. And that didn't do anything to help us build a secure life at all," she says.

When they finally came to know about KMJS around 2013, she took the initiative of learning about the collectives supported by KMJS and the benefits of such groups and thus Karnali Mahila Krishi Samuha was formed.

The group didn't have a good following in its early days, but as word began to spread of the benefits that associating with the collective brought about, the interest naturally piqued. "People were mostly attracted by the fact that the collective offered loan at a surprisingly low interest rate (as low as one per cent) than any of the government institution then were offering," says Guleli.

The collective initially started operations by collecting a sum of Rs 10 every month from each member to create the collective's savings fund. The REFLECT Circle (kacheri class) was held every Saturday. "In each session, we learned something new, even something as simple as introducing ourselves, learning to write our and our village's

name, and also gradually learned to voice our opinions and speak our minds, which was in itself a huge development for us," says Guleli. The kacheri sessions thus became the platform where these women could discuss about their problems, prevailing issues of their community, how they can work to resolve them and what can be done to uplift the standard of their community.

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Having led most of their lives working in the fields of landlords, they instinctively turned to agriculture to invest their newfound enthusiasm. Since most of them didn't own a decent piece of land to farm, they decided to get some on lease and start commercial farming in groups. With the training, tools and information they had received through KMJS programmes, the diligent women started growing vegetables, even off-seasonal ones. They even went as far as to the District Agriculture Centre to request for a boring motor to irrigate their fields. When they finally started selling their produce, they were truly encouraged by the income they could earn by selling vegetables and were further motivated to expand their venture. Today, most women from the collective are engaged in successful vegetable farming business. Additionally, the agriculture extension service has also supported them by providing four more boring motors, a set of water pump, and other items such as water cans (hajari), plastic sheets for building tunnels for vegetables, and so on.

Also because of simple loan schemes in the collective, any

member can take loan at the lowest of interest rates. "When KMJS gave two lakh and forty thousand rupees for our rotational fund, that alone helped many women get loans to start a business venture of their choice," says Guleli. Many women have now been able to improve their income by commercially pursuing goat farming, pig farming, broiler poultry, and many have opened up general stores, clothing stores, eateries, hotels, and more. With the increasing returns that the women are gaining from their investments, the saving amount for the monthly savings fund is now also increased to Rs 100 per member. And on the 25th of every month, a meeting is held between

members to decide and discuss on various issues, and also about granting loans.

With all that they have come to achieve with whatever skills and knowledge they could borrow, among others, the only regret Guleli has is not having been able to receive education. "It was unfortunate but unavoidable," she says. "Our family's main concern then used to be able to make ends meet, which seemed a daunting task in itself; going to school, receiving education, that was such a luxury we couldn't afford." She takes pride in the fact that at least she is now able to educate her children, which was also unimaginable for her



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if she hadn't found a way to make a decent living through the collective.

Confined to the limits of their houses and bound to the relentlessness of unpaid care work, merely because they were “women”, Guleli and the fellow members of the collective could only watch their lives pass by in utter defeat. Stripped of their pride and rights as a woman and a human, regaining their self confidence did require a lot of courage and work. “The capacity-building and skill-development training, involvement in income generation activities, participating in court centre sessions, interaction programmes, information about women rights, helped boost our confidence and find our voices,” adds Guleli. The women now confidently represent themselves in any platform and also take part in interaction programmes conducted by other organisations.

“We would only be huddling together with one another and trembling with fear whenever we had to speak up in front of other people,” recalls Ujali Chaudhari, a member of the collective. “We've come a long way indeed.”

She sometimes thinks back to the days when her family didn't even have a place to call their own, living at the mercy of the landlords. After her involvement in the collective, Ujyali started to put her learned skills to practice. “I first used the loan I took from the collective and used it for sharecropping (bataiya).” But the extent to which the system could help was limited. It wasn't enough for them to just have enough to eat—income generation was still out of question. With much contemplation and suggestions from the officials of KMJS, she finally buckled up to start goat farming, along with vegetable farming. “As things began to look brighter, I gradually also started pig farming, and then I took out a loan of forty thousand rupees to start buffalo farming as well.” To add to all this, Ujyali has also recently started broiler poultry.

The women feel forever indebted to KMJS and the women collective for having their back when all was a lost cause. Even it weren't for the support and skills provided by KMJS, they say that they would have dismissed any possibility of making a living by actually farming vegetables or any other activities for that matter. The women are grateful of the fact that now they can comfortably manage a small business of their own, take care of their household expenses, pay for their children's schooling, and above all, that they do not have to depend on anyone else for any kind of financial matters.

Of course, the road to glory wasn't as easy as it reads for these brave women. When the collective didn't even have its own meeting hall, they could only use whoever's house was available to hold meetings. “No one approved of women who would

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step out of their defined role in the community. Even our families looked at us with disapproving glances,” says Guleli. “We’re glad we chose to stand our ground no matter what.” With financial support from various agencies, they were also able to build a hall for their collective. And there would always be those young men who would time and again vandalise the property just for the sake of their own amusement.

But it was only a matter of time before the community’s perception began to change. As people became more aware of KMJS’s reform activities and how they help empower women, they have

become more supportive as well. The women are evermore encouraged to contribute to the betterment of our community. “But our effort would not have succeeded if it weren’t for the support of our families as well,” she adds. Travelling to various places for seminars and training required them to stay away from their home, and it just created misunderstandings regarding their vocation. “So it was also important that they understood what we were trying to do.”

Today, these women have proven that they too can stand on equal footing with men. And those families that used to detest them

now believe that a family can only lead a fulfilling life if the men and women work together to earn and share each other’s burden. Because of the collective’s progress, now most families at least own 2-4 katthas of land to start commercial farming with the loan obtained through the collective. But the residents of Himalipur are now fighting for the ownership of their land. “There is only much we can do on our own. We have appealed to the concerned government officials to act on the matter as soon as possible, but as of now we can only wait.”







4

A platform of hope

The Mahila Adhikar Manch, at Mudhegaon, was formed in 2014, in close collaboration with The Mahila Network Project and EDC, to empower women and strengthen access to their rights and information. The project simultaneously started operation in five VDCs—Mudhegaon, Mudhbhaada, Kaparlekhi, Bhumiraj and Durgamandal—and Deepashree Municipality. Since its inception, the MAM has set its course to empower and mobilise women from rural and disadvantaged background by—informing them about their rights, identifying and eradicating prevailing problems and issues faced by women, creating awareness about unpaid care work,

domestic violence, child marriage, Chhaupadi, maternal health, and increasing their access to every sector, including social, education, economic, political, and more.

MOULDING TOMORROW'S LEADERS

Since long, various women support groups similar to Mahila Adhikar Manch and others such as Aama Samuha, have been

instrumental time and again in addressing and resolving issues faced by women. “Women are probably the most exploited ones in a society, no matter where they live. Many lived in fear of their own family members and had no one to rely on in their trying times. Such was the plight of rural women,” Kanta Devi Bhatt, a member of Women’s multipurpose cooperative and a health worker of the village, says. “But these are

changing times and any unjust behaviour towards women will not be tolerated at any cost.”

When they started raising their voices against the ills of their community, they had to face harsh criticism not only from the villagers, but also from their own families. But despite being deprecated by the community, the MAM has continued to raise issues regarding child marriage



practices, Chhaupadi, domestic violence, and so on.

According to the members of the MAM, the practice of child marriage has reduced to a good extent. Nowadays, the concerned candidates are consented to get married only after they've reached 20 years of age or above. Chhaupadi, a harmful practice, which was practically a grave issue, is as good as abolished from this community and many villages, including Mudhegaon, is today declared as Chhaupadi-free zone. Because women had to live like outcasts during menstruation period in a cowshed, the practice had very negative effect on mental and maternal health and at most times stirred fear among women as they also risked being attacked by wild animals, snake and even being raped. With raising awareness, women today are more conscious of their health issues during such times—maintaining personal hygiene, eating healthy diet, not stressing over heavy work, etc.

The atrocities spread by gambling and drinking alcohol usually amounts to husbands abusing their wives especially in rural communities. As the women



became more adamant about uprooting the cause of domestic violence, they led campaigns to close down gambling houses and places that manufactured and sold alcohol. A campaign to improve relations between mother- and daughter-in-laws (Sasu-buhari abhiyan) was also widely organised. As a result of such efforts, the community has experienced sharp decline in abuse and violation of women.

The MAM also advocates women's access to property rights and helps them acquire joint land titles of their property. So far, 19 women have already obtained joint land titles of their property.

But despite being deprecated by the community, the MAM has continued to raise issues regarding child marriage practices, Chhaupadi, domestic violence, and so on.

Other programmes conducted by the MAM include skill development training, leadership training, accounting, sexual and reproductive health awareness, interaction programmes about joint land titles, time diary exercise to redistribute the share of workload between men and women, understanding unpaid care work—also working with political parties to spread the word about it.

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SUPPORT FROM OTHER AGENCIES

“When I was first approached by EDC’s mobilisers to be part of such women empowerment groups, my body trembled with fear by just having to introduce myself. That was almost more than

a decade ago. Where I am today is only because of EDC’s support,” says Bishnu Nepali, president of the MAM. “I am not an educated person, but because I had access to information through support groups, I was able to understand and exercise my rights and teach

others about it too.” Bishnu Nepali won the recent local elections and represents the Dalit community. She believes that other women should also take a proactive approach to politics and hopes to inspire others to follow her example.

The other MAM members are equally grateful to agencies like EDC to have guided them to countless possibilities. Various programmes conducted in the agency’s support such as leadership development training, capacity building training, etc, has helped them become confident and financially independent.

Moreover, women are today more informed about their rights, budget allocation and can stand up to wrongdoers of the community. And even those who didn’t know how to write their name can proudly introduce and represent themselves in front of masses. “If it weren’t for continued support from agencies to groups like MAM, women would have never believed that they also had the power to reform their lives, they would’ve given up on the cause long ago,” says Radhika Shahi, secretary of the MAM.

The agency has timely supported the MAM whenever need

be—in terms of finance and infrastructure—like helping build office infrastructure and provisions to organise programmes and the like. The group has also not had to suffer financial problems to support themselves. “When we first started the group, the matter of saving a mere ten rupees per month was a topic of ridicule for the others who didn’t understand our motive. Today, we’ve been able to save up to ten to fifteen lakhs in our funds to much dismay of those who thought lightly of us. Such a development has only fortified our ambitions even more.” says Chandra Rawal, member of the MAM.

But the agency’s support works in curious ways for these women. “Somehow when people find out about the involvement of outside agencies in women group, it sort of commands fear, and respect, in the community, and the group is showed more leniency.” says Radhika. At most times, as Kanta Devi puts it, they just fear that these agencies might punish them or something if they don’t support their cause. Otherwise, Radhika explains, they will be seen as no more than a group of women bickering about whimsical stuff.



To further its objectives, the MAM has recently received a budget of Rs 2 lakh from the ward office and Rs 1 lakh from the municipal.

EMPOWERMENT IS POWER

The women involved in MAM are mostly active in agricultural sector, and many have made a successful living by receiving training and valued information regarding goat farming, buffalo farming, vegetable farming, marketing their produce and maintaining business relations. At the very least, they are relieved that they have not had to buy from or depend on others to adequately feed their family. Many have also taken up professions like tailoring, creating goods from bamboo, etc.

The MAM always prioritises participation of women who are widowed and from disadvantaged and marginalised communities during training programmes. The goal is to boost their morale through such interactive platforms.

But sometimes ensuring that all the community's women are on the same page becomes an issue in itself. "Women need to support other women if the reform activities are to

We aren't hoping for a miracle transformation overnight. We do understand it's a gradual process and it only motivates us to look forward to more than what we've achieved so far

succeed," says Bishnu. To ensure maximum support and participation of community's women, even those who are not involved in women groups, in awareness programmes and so as not to create any rifts between the administrative members and community members, the members take the matter to their respective community where the leader of any said campaign is discussed and chosen among the community people themselves rather than being appointed by the MAM authorities.

Various new training programmes have also recently been conducted where they have learned how to make dry snacks, potato chips, and so on, which means new business opportunities. But rather than just conducting training, Radhika hopes for concerned officials to regularly monitor the activities of

groups and evaluate the efficacy of such training.

Although many reforms have been made, the members still believe that there is much to be done before the debased perception towards women can be changed in the community. "Despite the progress we've made, women still are struggling to find ways to end their dependence on others." says a member. But as every cloud has a silver lining, even though not all men are supportive of these women's endeavours, there have been traces of increasing number of community's members who actively participate in various interaction programmes conducted and support the collective's cause. "We aren't hoping for a miracle transformation overnight. We do understand it's a gradual process and it only motivates us to look forward to more than what we've achieved so far," concludes Bishnu.



5

They've got the power

The women, once powerless and voiceless, have today become a driving force of their community

Namuna Mahila Samuha has today become an esteemed model of a women collective for many other communities to look up to. Advocating for women's rights and issues and working to uplift women's status has helped the collective change the perception on women in rural societies. And they're are grateful to everything that gave them the strength to open up to this possibility, not to mention what the practice of keeping a modest time diary helped them achieve.

Though household chores wouldn't exactly be termed as a regular "job" by anyone, even more so

in a rural society, one cannot deny it as the most prominent cause the role of women in society is taken for granted, thus also dismissing the possibility of them becoming successful contributors of economy. But what if a value or a price could be set on all those painstakingly repetitive chores (referred to as unpaid care work) that women are subjected to daily and that are not deemed worthy of being paid for? And what would you get if you relieve these diligent women of their household duties and gave them the time and skill to work for a business idea? And to realise this difference and possibility, the practice of time diary was put into action.

The time diary, distributed by The Mahila Network Project, was introduced to make people realise the extent of work that the women commit themselves to every single day. Because even if the women were to forge their



way to empowerment, it was impossible for them to disregard their familial and household duties. Thus it was crucial that their family members support them by sharing their load of unpaid care work and understanding their capabilities to become income producer. As the diary was filled

and the monetary value of work did by the women was measured, not only did it equal the value earned by men, but at times even surpassed theirs. The revelation was a shocking but a welcoming eye-opening experience. And the realisation did affect people's perception—though slow but steady.

Our newfound perspective on life gave us strength to persuade our families to understand what we had learned from the collective

“Being a member of the woman collective instilled the confidence in us that we were no less than the others. Our newfound perspective on life gave us strength to persuade our families to understand what we had

learned from the collective,” says a member of the collective. “Now we make it a point that everything from household chores to the financial matters of the house are shared equally between men and women.”

So even if there are people who speak of collectives as entities corrupting the minds of their simple-minded women, the women simply don't care.

EASING UP THE BURDEN OF UCW

Many development works brought about by the effort of the collective and the community itself has helped lessen the women's workload of domestic chores. The members share that having basic facilities like water tap, mill, etc in the village has lessened the burden of time-consuming works like having to thresh rice grains manually every morning, or walking long distances to get to the village well or water source to fetch water. Although there are still problems with drinking water scarcity, the collective and the community is working together to solve these issues. A sum of Rs 67,000 was also provided by EDC to build a drinking-water system for the village. As of now,



Now we make it a point that everything from household chores to the financial matters of the house are shared equally between men and women

the groundwork for the project has been laid, and everybody's making preparations to start the work as soon as possible.

And life certainly has become convenient in many other ways. "For instance, the time and effort that we had to spend looking for firewood is now replaced by the use of improved stoves and even gas stoves. And the food also cooks much faster," the members share. "We have even planted plants in our own fields for our cattle so that we won't have to go to the forests or anywhere else to find fodder for the livestock."

Also a significant contribution made by the collective is changing the attitude towards menstruation, locally termed as Chhaupadi. "Because women weren't allowed inside the house and had to live in a dingy cow shed during menstruation period, they were exposed to illness, weakness from lack of nutrition, and all kinds of heavy work outside the house," says the treasurer of the collective. "We were not even allowed to take a bath until the period was over." They're grateful that such a practice has been abolished for good from their community.

Moreover, the members have not wasted the opportunity and have efficiently used their managed and saved time to their benefit. "We were able to participate in all kinds of numerous trainings and programmes conducted by the collective, which were organised not only in the village, but also in distant villages and cities," they say. Putting their training to good use, many have started farming for commercial purposes, and ably manage a profitable business. They have become leaders of various reform campaigns in the community; have introduced good habits and health practices; are knowledgeable about their rights; and participate in any given development activity as active

For instance, the time and effort that we had to spend looking for firewood is now replaced by the use of improved stoves and even gas stoves. And the food also cooks much faster



members of various committees like drinking water committee, road management, cooperatives, and more. “Before, neither did we have any access to such information or knowledge about our rights, nor did we have the time to think about it,” says Parbati Bogati, president of the Namuna women collective. “We who feared being sneered at by other people now even have no qualms about holding our discussions out in the open like beneath this Peepal tree if need be.”

The discriminatory practice of paying less wages to women has also seen its end, which in itself is a huge feat for women working on equal footing with men. Otherwise, even for the same amount of work and time invested by both men and women, women were paid lesser than men.

SHARING THE BURDEN

Deusara Bogati, a member of the Namuna women collective, has never had to ask twice for help from her husband Tikaram Bogati. And Tikaram is never reluctant about lending a helping hand to his wife. “I have always been of the opinion

It's not some work that is only reserved for women; men are also equally responsible to fulfil their share of such work in the house

that there's no shame in doing the household chores,” says Tikaram. They are parents to two daughters and a son. “What is there is to be ashamed of about doing something as readying your children for school while your wife is busy in the kitchen? It's not some work that is only reserved for women; men are also equally responsible to fulfil their share of such work in the house.” But there's only much he can do to make his peers think the same. “Well, there will always be those who would mock people like me for helping around the house,” he adds. “But I have no reason to worry about their childish remarks and I can only hope that they realise their ignorance for the good of their

family.” Both the husband and wife duly fill their time diary together.

Though Deusara appears to be a shy person when approached, Tikaram is very proud of her and the things she has learned as a member of the collective. “Her life used to start and end within the house itself, but now she has many things to look forward to.” Deusara apart from farming, actively participates in all kinds of interaction programmes and development works, such as building roads, canals, and so on. “I feel fortunate to have an understanding partner like him,” she beams as she looks at her husband.





6

Entrepreneurs in the making

Sometimes Nosma Chaudhari looks back in utter disbelief to the kind of lives they used to live before opportunities came knocking on their door. “It is only because of the support and strength that women like me got from the KMJS that we are able to live dignified lives,” she adds gratefully. “Before we were introduced to such possibilities of leading a decent life, we lived in complete ignorance, I must say—ignorant to the ways of the world, unaware of our own abilities, utterly clueless about our own rights.”

“Everybody’s plight was the same; always worried about how to make ends meet, living a hand-to-



Every training and knowledge that they received from the collective became their tools to forge them into successful entrepreneurs. Nosma now holds the position of vice secretary of the Ward women's network.

mouth existence.” She herself used to do labour work in India for Rs 2,000 to Rs 2,500, which was barely enough to feed the family, let alone fulfil other necessities. Before KMJS came to their village, the community relied on high interest loan from other sources. But when KMJS came to them with the proposal of creating a collective and informed them of the benefits it can bring, they had no reason to refuse the offer. Since women had no source of income and had to rely on their husband’s earnings alone, it was very difficult for them to manage household

expenses. The Anantapur Krishi Mahila Samuha was thus formed with 25 members (now 30). It has almost been five years since the collective was formed, and today, says Nosma, it is evident just by observing the improved living standard of these women how the collective has made their life fulfilling and prosperous.

For Nosma, it was only fitting that women unite and support each other to better their lives and their families’. “I wouldn’t be lying if I say we were all just weak women who could never defend

themselves, endured everything that was flung at them, and dared not even speak back to those saying nothing but insults and nonsense about us.” Women had nowhere to go to talk about their domestic problems or anyone to confide in their woes. And eventually the collective became just that place for these women. And every training and knowledge that they received from the collective became their tools to forge them into successful entrepreneurs. Nosma now holds the position of vice secretary of the Ward women's network.



a loan of Rs 10,000 from the village's financial institution and set up a shop by Sano Ghumti. Although the sum wasn't enough to stock the shop, they somehow managed to get by. Due to her health reasons, Nosma also couldn't devote her effort to the business and in this manner, three years went by.

In 2014, KMJS announced business management training for anyone who had the earnest desire to be specifically trained. "I took up the challenge, and upon completion of the training,

ROAD TO EMPOWERMENT

Since the members of the collective started a savings fund, and also with the sum of Rs 2 lakh provided by the KMJS, they were eventually able to take loans and invest in their choice of business after receiving various training on agriculture, account management, and so on. Every member has found a suitable vocation for themselves—growing off-seasonal vegetables, basket weaving, tailoring, knitting, poultry farming, animal husbandry, beauty parlour and more.

There are members who are involved in a number of work. Geeta Chaudhari is involved in vegetable farming, and she also makes baskets and other stuff in her spare time. The demand for the products is such that customers come looking for their houses to buy the products.

Nosma herself has managed to turn her life around with the support of the collective. When Nosma first thought of opening up her own little general store, she had not even a thousand rupees to invest. She first took

Nosma herself has managed to turn her life around with the support of the collective. When Nosma first thought of opening up her own little general store, she had not even a thousand rupees to invest

finally opened this eatery here,” she says. “Before when we used to run the shop, we could hardly cash in a maximum of Rs 1,200 per day, whereas we earn Rs 3,000 to as much as Rs 9,000 per day in the hotel business.” And Nosma isn’t alone in her venture, her husband unquestionably favours and supports her decisions. In fact, he is the main cook of Nosma’s eatery. “I wouldn’t have been able to make it this far if it weren’t for his support.”

Nosma recently also took part in a month-long cook management

We are invited to attend seminars and programmes from other towns and villages as well,” she says. She, along with other members also timely monitor the activities of the collective so that the effort and investment are not wasted.

training conducted by the municipality.

HEADING TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE

These women have earned every bit of respect for the work they have put into changing their lives. Women, Nosma says, who were scared to step out of their household premises now fearlessly travel to various places for business purposes as well. Their social position has definitely uplifted and nowadays, the collective members are consulted for any kind of development work happening in the area—they recently built five water taps with the support of Rs 120,000 from

the ward office. “We are invited to attend seminars and programmes from other towns and villages as well,” she says. She, along with other members also timely monitor the activities of the collective so that the effort and investment are not wasted.

To this day, the only regret Nosma has is not being able to complete her studies. “I only studied up to grade 7, so when I see my peers becoming teachers, doctors, there is a part of me that feels a bit of remorse.” But she hopes she can allow her 10-year-old daughter to have what she couldn’t by offering her good schooling and better opportunities.





7

Driven to succeed

“I am a changed woman today,” This is what Paniya Tharu believes to be true. Ever since she has had the opportunity to gain various income-generating skills from the women cooperative in her community, she hasn’t had to look back on her days when she lived as a Kamlari. When the facilitators of KMJS came to her village informing them about collectives and cooperatives, the lives of the many Kamaiya women like Paniya took a turn for the better. “Until that time we knew nothing of earning a decent living for ourselves, far less about farming or animal husbandry or that we could even pursue such practices as a business.” Today, she represents her success as the

vice president of Chappalanaala Women Agriculture Cooperative.

After the initial training and other skill development programmes that the women cooperative offered the members, women effectively began putting their newfound knowledge into practice. Many started vegetable farming and other good husbandry practices. Paniya also took a loan of Rs 50,000 from the (collective's) rotation fund and bought a milking

buffalo. Though vegetable farming started late for her. "We were taught how to build a nursery and I picked it up from there. I could make as much as 10 to 12,000 seedlings in my vegetable garden by investing some five to six hundred rupees, and I managed to sell everything," she says. "But because I didn't have much land to grow vegetables on, it wasn't much of a viable option for me then," she adds. At first, she planted some vegetables

only to suffice the need for household meals, and only sold them whenever some remained. "But when the collective told me that if I could use even some 5-10 kathhas of land, I could get considerable returns from the venture," she adds. Paniya took the risk and started growing vegetables in 5 katthas of leased land, and needless to add, she has been one happy vegetable farmer ever since.



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“I make as much as Rs 7,000 per month by selling buffalo milk alone,” she proudly shares. Paniya is deemed one of the successful buffalo farmers in her village. And she is proud of the fact that she doesn’t have to rely on her husband to manage the expenses of the house or fulfil her children’s needs. When Paniya and her husband did labour work to support themselves, they were paid only Rs 500 per day. “Because we had very low income and no savings at all, we would have to think over a zillion times before we could buy the littlest of things,” she says. Now she earns as much as Rs 17-1,800 daily by selling vegetables alone. “Back in those days, there was never enough to cover our expenses no

matter how hard we worked. We couldn’t even send our kids to a good school.” Today her kids, she affirms, attend a boarding school in Krishnasaar.

“Life is always full of struggles, but that’s life and I have no complaints,” Paniya says. “I remember when I got married, my husband had nothing but a shabby hut to call his own.” She laughs about the time when her husband tried to forcefully put a new bed inside the hut and it got scratched because it couldn’t fit in properly. Her parents were against her living in those conditions, but she didn’t budge from her decision to support her husband. “We can only make a home out of a house if we care for our

things together,” she believes. “My husband has always been supportive of my decisions and helps me whatever way he can in all kinds of work whether in the house or in the fields. And my children also help us to take care of the farm animals whenever they can.”

Paniya never would have imagined that adopting a simple yet advantageous vocation could change her life, and constantly feels grateful to the collective and cooperative for presenting her with this life-changing opportunity. Today, she comfortably manages a sustainable and rewarding business venture through vegetable and farming animals. The demand for her organically grown vegetables are also impressively high in markets and she sends her produces (vegetables, goats) as far as Pokhara and even Kathmandu. Goats also fetch very good prices, she says. She recently sold two baby goats for Rs 15,000 each and the matured ones go for even higher prices, especially during festival seasons. “The more you understand the benefits of the work, the more confidence you get to start new things,” she says, and so she has also recently

We don't have to worry about how to pay off our loan now that we have a steady income or worry about our future." If everything goes well, in the days to come, she is planning to add a bigha of land to expand her farming by using her savings.

women cooperative. Not only this, she has also taken a life insurance policy of Rs 1 lakh.

But she wouldn't have made it this far if it weren't for the diligence and dedication she put into her work, adds Paniya. "People often ask me how my vegetable farming has flourished better than theirs, and I simply tell them that the hard work that you've put into your vocation is what pays you," she says. "You cannot expect these vegetables to grow by themselves if you're not willing to put in your hard work." If you miss a day's work in the fields, she adds, there's no knowing to what might have infested your crops already.

Paniya feels blessed to be the person she has become today. "Because of my recent operation (health issues), I cannot use my bicycle as much as I used to go and sell vegetables. But my husband helps send them to the vegetable market in Nepalgunj and most days I can just sell them from the comfort of my house." They've definitely moved far ahead from those days when they had to worry about having two meals a day and taking care of the family. "We don't have to worry about how to pay off our loan now that we have a steady income or worry about our future." If everything goes well, in the days to come, she is planning to add a bigha of land to expand her farming by using her savings.

started fish farming right behind her house in a land that she has leased for Rs 10,000 per year.

Additionally, her husband also works in a mill of the landlord, whose land they have leased for farming, for a monthly salary of Rs 15,000. "There are many occasions when I earn double the amount of my husband's salary," she adds proudly. She has opened her personal savings account in the village's local financial institution and another one in the





8

Union is strength

Collectives bettering the lives of women and their communities

“Honestly, there was a time in my life when I didn’t know what it felt like to earn money for myself—performing outside jobs and earning money was almost reserved as something that only men could do,” says Drupati Tharu, a share member of the women’s cooperative in Sangharsa Nagar, Bardiya. “If it were the old me, I wouldn’t even be here sharing my life experiences without my fear and nervousness getting the better of me,” she says. “The women collective allowed me to experience great many things and places that I thought impossible.”

And this probably sums up the stories of every Tharu woman in Sangharsa Nagar, a quaint village brought into existence by the struggles, or Sangharsa, faced by Kamaiyas. “Women could never have their say in any kind of financial matters of the

house, and we, the way we were, never knew to question anything that the men had decided; that was just not in our nature,” says Drupati. But by participating in the women collective formed by KMJS to empower disadvantaged women, many women like Drupati,

who knew nothing of income generation or entrepreneurship skills, today can go on forever about their successful vegetable farming or animal husbandry business with a professional flair. “We’ve lived through unforgiving times, but now things have



definitely changed for the better,” she adds and the other women from the cooperative undeniably agree with her. As they say, gone are the days when women had to meekly remain behind the scenes. When you see the person they have transformed into, what these

We’ve lived through unforgiving times, but now things have definitely changed for the better,” she adds and the other women from the cooperative undeniably agree with her.

women have achieved with their patience and diligence is indeed exemplary.

The benefits reaped from the women collectives is not a matter of privilege and every member involved in it has been able to enjoy them in great many ways. Each and every member has uplifted their living standard by engaging themselves in all kinds of income-generating activities—vegetable farming, animal husbandry, rearing goats, pigs, buffaloes, etc. Having displayed excellent managerial potential by the two collectives—Hariyali and Kopila, it was only natural for KMJS facilitators to approach them with a proposition to merge the two into a single cooperative, to which they willingly obliged. It’s only been a little over the year since the cooperative was registered and the members are forever hopeful of the

prospects of having a cooperative. For them, this merger serves to expand the collective’s boundaries, thus providing them with more opportunities to undertake relatively more project activities as well.

The membership fee stands at Rs 50, and if one wishes to become a share member, an additional amount of Rs 500 is required.

A NEW BEGINNING

Followers of change and new ideas are always met with disapprovements and so were these women. “Seeing us women unite and making a name for ourselves, we were taunted and criticised for going out of our prescribed ways of living and treated with contempt, but now that we had learned how to support ourselves and live a dignified life, such comments didn’t matter,” says Sadhana Tharu, president of the cooperative.





While the collective did allow its members to take small amount of loans, the increased fund size after the merger is definitely a bonus as far as getting bigger loan amount and the number of members who can benefit from it is concerned. While the interest rate is already minimal for any member, having the access and ease to extract bigger amount is a huge advantage for many who are looking forward to expand their business.

And in the cooperative, the members can also easily manage their personal savings while a separate account is maintained to collect funds for the implementation of cooperative's activities.

Most of the members who are already involved in commercial farming have also further invested in upscaling their business prospects.

“We certainly started small and now have come a long way—from those days when we started our savings fund by collecting Rs 5 in our collective (which has increased to Rs 50),” shares Balkumari Chaudhari, also a share member of the cooperative. With loan and support from the collective, today, she has been able to expand her farming in 5 katthas of land. Selling vegetables alone proved to be a profitable venture and later on she was also able to invest in animal husbandry—farming goats,

pigs. “No matter the scale of my business, I have been sufficiently able to secure a steady income and support my family.”

Drupati Tharu has recently expanded her farming land to 2 katthas with the loan she could get from the cooperative, and has also added a piglet, which cost her about Rs 7,000, to her roster. Ujeli Tharu, treasurer of the cooperative, is also a successful pig farmer. “A well brought up pig will fetch a good price.” She recently sold a 10-month old pig weighing 109 kg for the market rate of Rs 230 per kilo. She has been investing in pig farming since her initial days as a member of the collective and is very happy with the returns she's been able to get.

ONE FOR ALL, ALL FOR ONE

For now, the collective is concentrated on their new business project—manufacturing turmeric powder. The grinding machine for spices, set up with the help of the KMJS, commands a great business potential for the cooperative. They plan to take the products to the markets in Gulariya, Nepalgunj, for starters, and gradually to bigger market areas. The surplus amount can

For now, the collective is concentrated on their new business project— manufacturing turmeric powder. The grinding machine for spices, set up with the help of the KMJS, commands a great business potential for the cooperative.

then be further invested to buy or produce seedlings for vegetables and crops such as paddies, maize, wheat so that they can furnish anyone with the necessary supplies from the cooperative itself when someone wants to start their venture.

The cooperative has finished preparations of the storehouse

for packaging the product and has also hired a machine operator to maintain and manage the grinding machine. They're also planning to bring a computerised weighing scale. And if this business proposition shows any promise, they're hoping to add other products to the list, such as ginger, cumin, coriander. "But before trying anything else, we

have to know how this will fare in the market first, so we should learn to be patient just in case," says Sadhana. If worst comes to worst, KMJS has thus offered to take their products to other potential market areas.

TAKING IT A STEP AT A TIME

Every management and skill development training that these women have undertaken on their path to empowerment has relatively helped them become better judge of things in organisational matters. Having the confidence to invest in a business, understanding the customers and the market, keeping record of their investment, understanding price cycle analysis and calculating their profits and losses, and so on, has made an entrepreneur out of every hard working member. And the cooperative is there to guide them to the best possible way to gain better results. "When someone wishes to invest in agro business, they will have to consider if the produces they're focusing on will cater to the market demand. Understanding the market and meeting the consumer demands can only prove to be profitable, otherwise the seller will not get expected return from the



The cooperative should thus weigh the prospects of the investment being proposed and advise the proposer accordingly.

business,” says Sadhana. “The cooperative should thus weigh the prospects of the investment being proposed and advise the proposer accordingly.”

To maximise the impact of the cooperative, the management committee is looking to invest the funds of the cooperative in various fields. But the cooperative has yet to formulate a decent plan to

spread its investment areas. And Sadhana is especially concerned about the management training they have received in terms of managing a cooperative. Although a five-day management training provided a guideline to operate the cooperative which was provided to 15 members from each of the collectives, she feels the need for some more elaborate training regarding the subject.

“Some days I am overwhelmed by the number of the members (65 as of now) and am invariably at a loss whenever some new issue comes up.” According to Sadhana, matters concerning the policies of the cooperative, formulating rules and regulations, finalising investment areas, how to pass loans on various circumstances and on what basis, when to charge different interest rate, allotment of shares, advantages of being a share member, managing different accounts, etc, still need to be clarified but is also positive that it’s nothing that cannot be overcome. And they hope to resolve such issues by gaining more information on the matter and further training.





9

Time diary— taking charge

If a man works for eight hours a day, a woman devotes her time working for her family from early morning to late night hours—and that's probably more than 15 hours a day. But such is the scenario in rural communities that even when women spent their time engaged in all kinds of unpaid care work, nobody recognised their hard work. The women themselves were unaware of the value of the work they did, basically because they were not paid jobs. So even when you ask a woman who's worked an entire day doing all kinds of chores, how they spent their day, their instant response, almost habitual, would be, "Nothing". And the practice of filling time



diary brought to light the cruelty of this fact.

Women from Mainapokhar were surprised at the amount of work they did every single day when they were first taught to use time diary to record their daily activities. They started by recording every minor detail into their diary—like when they woke up, what kind of chores did they do thereafter, how long they spent doing chores, when they had time to rest, how they managed to do other kind of jobs, and so on. When the work they did was measured and valued, they say that the notion that only men worked harder and more than any women was proven to be completely flawed. As they continued the time diary training, it eventually showed them, and

that too with proof, that it was the women who spent more of their daily hours working compared to the time that men spent. After this realisation when the woman protested that the men help them in their daily jobs because much of the time that they could invest on various income-generating options was taken up by household chores, their protest were immediately dismissed and taken very lightly. “They even mocked us saying that if the men wouldn’t perform all kinds of heavy jobs for them, who are they going to turn to for support so the work that men and women do are beyond compare,” a member of Chappalanala cooperative told us. But the women weren’t the ones to give up easily. Eventually when they started earning a good share

by growing and selling vegetables, doing animal husbandry, and other stuff, their husbands realised their effort and started helping them. “They would be shy about performing household duties at first, but now they have no qualms about it,” another member shares. They helped with curating their vegetable farms whenever they had the time, and whenever women went to the market to sell their produce, men would deftly take care of the house in their absence. “They’ll even help us load and secure the vegetable crates in our bicycle before we set off to the market. And at times when we won’t be able to go, they themselves will take the produce to the market as well,” another happy member adds.

Because of this shared support, women have been able to devote more time to expand their farm business, open up general stores, and more.

A significant change brought about by the time diary can also be relayed with this case from Anantapur. When the merits of the diary was realised and accepted, by using the diary, women here started challenging men to measure and tally the monetary value of the work they both did if

Because of this shared support, women have been able to devote more time to expand their farm business, open up general stores, and more

the men showed them any hostility regarding the matter. A member of Anantapur Mahila Samuha shares how using the diary actually helped them mitigate cases of domestic violence in the community. Such was the case that the husband for no apparent reason always used to beat his wife and violate her. The root of the aggression would

usually stem from the baseless reason that the wife was useless and did nothing to support the family. So when the woman came to the collective for help, the members invited the husband in question to a kacheri center and challenged him to measure the value of the work his wife and compare it to his, and also asked

him to take into account the work he couldn't do without his wife's support. Gradually, the collective was thus able to make the man understand the value of his wife's effort, after which he apologised to his wife, and the issue was resolved without having to resort to any other measures.

Who would've believed that a simple tool like a time diary could help these women bring such life-altering changes. If you still have second opinion about it, you better follow these wonder women of rural communities who in its true sense made a weapon out of a flimsy diary to take charge of their lives.







10

Resolving differences

How realising the unfairness of unpaid care work and working to reduce it has helped women rise above the standards

Geeta Tharu looks back on those days when the world of the women in her village extended as far as the boundaries of their village in Sangharsa Nagar. “Every day would pass the same—cook food, clean the house, take care of children, look after the cattle, do the dishes, then laundry, and so on,” she says. To her, the pride of being the breadwinners of the family, indulging in whatever they felt like, seemed like a privilege reserved by men alone. “After all, no one cares about we women feel or want.”

The discrimination extended to such extent that, Geeta explains, even though there were occasions

where men and women were involved in the same labour work, at most cases, women were not paid at all—only the men received wages. Why was this difference created, we can only wonder.

But when KMJS created women collectives in villages to support and empower women, the women were given an opportunity to understand their rights, develop income-generating skills and be financially independent. And more importantly, they came to realise the differences created by their undivided devotion to unpaid care work. The practice of keeping a time diary played significant role in making the men realise the fact that they cannot belittle women

because they don't earn money. When a tentative monetary value was given to the work women did everyday, the worth was thus seen clearly through the diary. It's a no brainer how the retaliation would have sounded like—"Men aren't born to cook or wash clothes; performing household chores are a woman's responsibility; why should men have to share the housework when they have to go outside and earn money, etc".

It was only a matter of time before women would take their lead in what they set themselves out to do. The leadership development training, skill development and capacity building training were not just for show. With every session,

The leadership development training, skill development and capacity building training were not just for show. With every session, the women came out stronger and better. "As we gained more confidence, we were more able to speak our mind freely, voice our concerns on any pertaining matter and even fight for our right," says Sadhana Tharu



the women came out stronger and better. “As we gained more confidence, we were more able to speak our mind freely, voice our concerns on any pertaining matter and even fight for our right,” says Sadhana Tharu, president of Sangharsa Nagar’s women cooperative. “When the women started generating income through skills and knowledge they received through the cooperative, then only they were started to be taken

seriously, I believe.” The gender equality campaigns and interaction programmes also contributed in making the community realise how women are also capable of managing financial affairs profitably and effectively. “And so women have also become smarter and know better so as to not to let anyone outsmart them instead,” adds Geeta, who also holds the position of vice president in the women cooperative.

Today, all the members are engaged in all kinds of business, especially vegetable farming, animal husbandry, basket weaving, etc. The men of the house have realised the potential in their wives and support them in their endeavours. This realisation has relieved many women of much of the burden of their unpaid care work. If the women have to attend some meetings or go to the market to sell their produce, their



family members will take care of the housework and kids. In case both the parent need to go to work, they can leave their children under the care of community child care centres so that they can complete their work without worry.

So Geeta does feel fortunate in many ways, especially because her husband has always been a supportive and understanding figure in her life. Although he works in India and manages to come home twice a year, whenever he's home, he hasn't ever let Geeta down. If for any reason Geeta needs to be on any business of the cooperative, attending seminars, meetings or anything else for that matter, she doesn't have to worry about getting back home early or get stressed over the pending chores. Whenever her husband is around, he will have taken care of all things necessary—whether it be cooking, washing, cleaning the yard, feeding the cattle, and so on. “I'm sure by the time I get home today, he will have finished the laundry on his own,” she laughs. “We've been through life's many ups and

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downs, but why fret about things that have long past. Since I also earn a decent income by selling vegetables, I can efficiently take

care of household affairs when he's not home, and for other matters, he will always be there for us.” Her children are already grown up, a girl of 11 and a boy of 16, so a helping hand is always there when she needs it, she says.

Sadhana is in awe of this inspiring couple. “The situation has definitely changed from how it used to be, and Geeta madam is indeed a fortunate one in this case. But there are many here who still lack a basic understanding of these things,” she adds. She says that many women still tend to shy away from such activities and thus are unable to grasp the advantages of the training that the cooperative provides. Because many women are worried about what their community or family might think of them when they spend days and nights away from their houses. Although such notions are gradually dissolving by establishing mutual understanding and transparency of the activities between the community and the cooperative, one can only patiently wait for the others to understand their motives and objectives.



11

When women lead

Dhaulti Devi Parki was quietly going about her ordinary life when a whirlwind of project initiatives started shooting at her with various information she was undeniably clueless about till then. She remembers when the officials of EDC and The Mahila Network Project asked her to join the REFLECT circle, bringing together a group of disadvantaged women, especially Dalits. Dhaulti Devi has always had this innate desire in her to be a leader and work for the welfare of her community. She was always driven to learn about new ideas and was motivated to work for the development of her village and community. "It made me happy to help my community in any way

that I could,” says Dhauli Devi. So when the REFLECT circle came into being, it became the medium for her way to give back to the community she cared for.

“We were scared of stepping out of our houses, and never dared to talk to other men, let alone strangers. The REFLECT circle thus gradually changed how our thinking process worked and the way we perceived things,” says Dhauli Devi, who’s been heading the circle for the past two years now. The support group provided the members with techniques and tools to enhance their farming culture and make a living out of it. “We received seeds and seedlings, plastic tripal to build tunnels for vegetables to initiate our farming business, and the members have all successfully grown and sold vegetables and have been able to secure a steady source of income for themselves.” Dhauli Devi herself devotes her skills to agriculture and is happy with how her vegetable business is faring. “We didn’t even have the brains to keep the chicken safe from the claws of cats and jackals. It is now we know to build chicken sheds to keep them locked up and safe,” she says as humbly points out the folly in her old ways.

“Now I have learned to grow different kinds of vegetables. I even sold fresh coriander worth Rs 3,000 this season! We are farmers by nature after all, if not for farming what else would we do.” But Dhauli Devi is more than a humble farmer. Because of her continued contribution in the community’s development, currently she is also appointed as the vice president of Nahar Bikas Samiti, vice president of Garibi Niwaran Kosh and treasurer of Nagar Swasthya Bhawan Nirman Samiti. She has also taken the contract of managing the labour force required for the construction of the health post. “I have ensured that the women workers be given equal opportunity and equal wages for their service so that there is no discrimination based on gender when both the parties have invested equal effort in their work.” This is a reform Dhauli Devi is proud of as before this men and women were never paid equally.

LEADING CHANGE

Dhauli Devi has been instrumental in organising campaigns against domestic violence on women, the ill practices of Chhaupadi (menstruation period), which are some of the grave issues



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that women in her community have had to face since long. “Women were subjected to such extremities during menstruation period that exposed them to serious health issues. Having nutritious food, like milk, ghee, and so on was considered a taboo, and they weren’t allowed to keep themselves clean until the period was over.” Continually raising awareness on the topic and conducting interaction programmes in the community has contributed to a significant decline in such ill practices, according to Dhauli Devi.

The community has seen vast improvements in maintaining health and hygiene of the surroundings as well. “The social mobilisers from EDC taught us about the importance of having toilets in every home, creating a clean and separate space for washing the dishes, and maintaining an elevated space (chaang) to dry the washed dishes,” says Dhauli Devi. “This made me understand the very reason why people used to fall sick very often before.” Dhauli Devi has also worked as a member of other organisational support group that focused on ways to maintain healthy and hygienic lifestyle, like using only clean drinking water,



adopting good manners like washing hands with soap before doing anything, and so on. She feels that one of the reasons Dalit community was viewed with scorn by others was also because of their negligence to maintain a clean, healthy lifestyle. “When the officials told me about keeping my house and surroundings clean, eating and drinking clean and healthy, the perception of other people will also change accordingly,” she adds. “And I believe they were right. A conscious act as such on our part contributed to uplift our living standards, end discrimination and bring people from all backgrounds closer.” With all these knowledge and information under her belt, she now oversees that the other members of the community also do the same to keep themselves and their community clean and healthy.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

“It wasn’t easy at all to convince other women to be a part of the REFLECT circle. Many didn’t even want to listen to us, perhaps because they were too scared,” Dhauli Devi talks about the initial days of the circle. Making them realise the potential and opportunity they can exploit through the circle was a huge challenge for her, but nothing that couldn’t be overcome. “When women were given respectable positions and responsibilities, they felt empowered by the new identity and the others attracted by the idea gradually followed suit.”

When there were people who always demeaned the circle’s activities, Dhauli Devi also won them over with patience and perseverance. “I am also grateful that I have not had to face

These days they have finally come to accept the fact that women should never lag behind the shadows of men, and are keen on performing any kind of task that are at par with men

objections from my husband. He is very understanding of what I do and respects my work.” While there are women who have achieved the position of ministers and presidents, Dhauli Devi feels women at her level still think very lowly of themselves and do not take pride in being women. “Women here do not have access to their rights, because many don’t know how to ask for it, and many don’t care as they are more concerned about taking care of their children and family,” she adds. But she also feels that this trait of a woman’s is what makes her empathetic and understanding of others’ problems and troubles.

But she believes that this submissiveness is also because of lack of education. If women could make an honest effort to educate themselves, there’s nothing they won’t be able to comprehend. “Just by being able to read and write even at a basic level has helped boost our confidence

tenfold. Women have now been capable of financially supporting their families with their hard earned skills and knowledge.” Dhauli Devi has attended adult learning classes along with many other women in her community.

BRINGING WOMEN TO THE FORE

Dhaulti Devi has forever emphasised women participation in every kind of community works and sees no reason why any women should feel inferior to anyone. When Dhaulti Devi asked women to work together with men, the offer would be

immediately dismissed. “These days they have finally come to accept the fact that women should never lag behind the shadows of men, and are keen on performing any kind of task that are at par with men.”

Now women are also aware about property rights and many have succeeded in getting sole or joint ownership of their house and land. Dhaulti Devi also has land title of her house and fields. Since her husband lives and works in India, she solely and deftly takes care of every household affair.

“Long gone are the days when people would try to obstruct the development of women,” she says. “When others see what one has been able to achieve, then they will also develop interest to learn what the other has learned about. It’s also about getting inspired and then inspiring others as well.”





12

Building a secure future for all

Rita Tharu's life as a Kamaiya to support her family started from a tender age of 13. Because of the degrading economic condition of the Tharu families, this (now-abolished) system of bonded labour was the only way these families knew to support themselves. However, Rita always saw herself to be more than just a slave to her situation. Even though education was a far-fetched dream for girls like her, she never gave up on trying to better her life and also of those around her. "If only I was educated, maybe I wouldn't have had to go through the hardships that I had to endure," says Rita. "But I never let that fact bring me down and always searched for better

opportunities.” She hopes that her children will be able to achieve far more than what she has been able to by educating themselves. Her young daughter currently studies in grade 9.

After the Kamaiyas were freed, many agencies and organisation came to the region to help rehabilitate them. And among them was the KMJS. “In 2013, when KMJS approached our collective, they briefed us about even better ways of leading a collective and how it can help change our ways for good.” Rita and the fellow members had no reason to not take up the initiative. “And with new goals on our mind, we registered our group—the Hariyali Mahila Krishi Samuha.”

The difference we experienced thereafter was immense, as Rita puts it. KMJS helped organise various training for leadership and skill development for these marginalised women. “We knew some basic ways about subsistence farming but we never knew how we could capitalise on its potential to generate income,” she adds. “During the training programmes in KMJS, we came to know about the value and

Rita and the fellow members had no reason to not take up the initiative. “And with new goals on our mind, we registered our group—the Hariyali Mahila Krishi Samuha.”

potential of organic farming. The agency took us to various places where people practiced organic farming and how it was supporting their livelihood.” Training programmes to teach accounting, value chain analysis, effective business management, gradually came after. Needless to add, the leadership development training further helped enhance their public speaking skills as well.

It has been more than 15 years since all this was set in motion and Rita continues to serve her collective now as the vice secretary of Hariyali Mahila Krishi Samuha. She hasn’t confined her roles to the collective alone—Rita is a member of the gravel road construction consumer committee, the treasurer of the group responsible for maintenance



of health post, and also an active member in the school management committee. And whatever she's learned and the skills she has acquired, she shares with the members and also trains them accordingly to bring out their leadership qualities.

Rita, and her collective members, also helped others to have access to the facility card, which was later issued by the government to grant concession in facilities for freed Kamaiyas after the Free Kamaiya campaign. The card can allow the children of Kamaiya to attend schools in a subsidised rate, and is also an important documentation for Kamaiyas to get land titles.

SPREADING AWARENESS

The road to becoming a successful leader has been less than easy for Rita. She has had to put up with countless demeaning and baseless accusations, and even fight with the society's oppressive values regarding women, she says. "Nobody believed in the potential of women, let alone be leaders. Working in a collective was considered to be an immoral act." Even their

families turned against them when they marched to address the community's issues. But seeing what Rita has achieved today, there's not much room for complaints anymore. "I gradually convinced my family members to attend various interaction and awareness programmes with me, and that helped clear many misunderstandings between us about what we were doing," she says. Following her example, other

members have also managed to win their families' confidence.

Various awareness campaigns regarding gender equality also helped in uplifting women's social status. Not too long before, it was only men that took lead in any kind of works and activities, also because women always kept in the dark about progressive ideas and weren't given any access to any kind of information, but today,



“Women are more keen on showing their support and participation in such programmes rather than men—not only that they are actually the ones leading such programmes as well.”

women have evidently surpassed them. “Women are more keen on showing their support and participation in such programmes rather than men—not only that they are actually the ones leading such programmes as well.”

SHIFTING POSITIONS

Notions about women being limited to their household is a thing of the past in Rita’s community. They are now aware of their right to stand on equal footing with men and receive equal labour wages, which was not addressed before. The collective accommodates 31 women, and has been instrumental in resolving matters of household disputes, violence and abusive behaviour against women, child marriage, redistribution of unpaid care work, and more. Since the region is very prone to floods during monsoon,

compensation for their damage is borne by the government offices. Once a government officials, due to their careless inspection, refused to account for the damage that the community suffered. When Rita found out about this, she immediately contacted the concerned authorities and raised her voice against their supposed error. The officials, upon realising the fallacy on their part, released the grant. These are certainly not the women to be messed around with anymore.

The collective that started small by collecting Rs 5 from its members of for the sole purpose of creating a communal fund for loan has transformed into a empowering platform that has changed the lives of these women. Rita herself is a successful vegetable farmer and during her free time, also helps in her sister-in-law’s

tailoring shop that is set up right beside their house. Much to their delight, Rita has not had to go around marketplaces to sell her vegetables either. Her customers themselves come to her house to pick up the vegetables. She grows beans, bitter gourd, lady’s finger, cauliflower, cucumber in her fields and also rears goats and sheep. Even though her husband works away from home, she has been able to sufficiently fulfil her family’s needs.

The collective has till date managed to save Rs 6 lakh, including the rotation fund of Rs 2 lakh provided by KMJS. Because of the such ease and access to funds, members have been able to pursue various income-generating options in the community to live a financially fulfilling life.

ActionAid Nepal

ActionAid is a global justice federation working to achieve social justice, gender equality and poverty eradication. ActionAid Nepal is a member of the federation, working for human rights, antipoverty and gender equality. It is a non-governmental national social justice organisation established in 1982 and working locally in different provinces of Nepal. It is also a part of both national and global social justice movement and other civil society networks, alliances and coalitions.

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