

Research Report: Rural Women's Stories of Change Motivation, Challenges and Opportunities to Lead (Nepal)

I. Introduction:

In December 2011, WOCAN conducted research as an activity of the Rural Women's Leadership Year 2 project. This was conducted by a team of researchers comprised of the two WOCAN staff and an independent researcher, Ms. Shradha Ghale, guided by WOCAN Core Associate, Dr. Barun Gurung. The research focused on exploring how change takes place and looked into factors that influence women to become leaders. A narrative approach was adopted where 12 women leaders trained under the RWL-Project were asked to tell their stories of change. These 12 women leaders participated in an intensive research process. In addition to the in-depth interviews, a reflection workshop was also conducted where these women leaders shared their stories in the group. The research questions focused on three main topics: 1. Motivation, 2. Challenges and 3. Opportunities to lead.

II. Stories of Change

Below is the summary of the women leaders' stories of change:

1. What motivates women to lead?

1.a) Painful Experiences

Nanu Ghatane from Kavre:

I think my personal experiences have played a huge role in shaping me as a leader. As a woman who witnessed the sufferings of women since childhood, and as a Dalit woman in particular, I learned to empathize with marginalized women at a deep level. Sometimes motivation can come from negative experiences. Let me recall an incident from many years ago which today when I think of it was the turning point in my life. For quite some time we had been seeing non-Dalit women going out of their homes all dressed up, but whenever we asked them where they were going, they would shrug their shoulders and say, "Oh, just out for a stroll." But later we found out that the government had been providing training for women through the local Women Development Office. The training was open to all but women in the Dalit settlement had not been told lest they participated in it. A few of us gathered information and learned that we needed to form a women's group to take part in the training. We tried to collect ten rupees each from women to form a savings group, but our sisters had so little awareness none of them showed any interest. In the end I got together with two other women (one was Dalit and the other Tamang) and formed a three-member group. We went ahead and took part in the training, which covered topics related to women groups and cooperatives. But during lunch break, while the rest of the participants ate inside the hall, my Dalit friend and I were made to sit outside with our food. It was one of

the most humiliating moments of my life. We sat near a pile of stinking shoes completely dazed and unable to swallow anything. That evening I decided to discontinue the training, but our third member (our Tamang neighbor) motivated us to carry on. So next day when we were told to go out during lunch, we simply refused. The air became tense, and then all the women except a couple left the hall. They could not imagine sharing their eating space with Dalits. The trainer of the Women Development Office scolded us for “creating trouble.” At that point I swallowed my fear and said, “Why should we eat separately? We are also human beings, not dogs!” I could not remember anything I learned at the training. I only remembered the insult and humiliation. This incident filled me with the urge to change my and my community’s status. I worked very hard to establish and promote our women’s group. The group gradually grew and became more organized.

I think what ultimately motivates me as a leader is the desire to bring change. I want to do whatever I can to address the injustices and inequalities that persist in our society. It is a very fulfilling experience to influence other women in the community.

1. b) Women Platforms – groups, network (safe place)

Phulmaya Tamang from Kavre:

After I joined the women’s group I realized I was not the only one who had suffered for being a woman. Meeting other women in my community and sharing our problems was deeply comforting and empowering. I had gone through a lot of hardship as a woman, and this strongly motivated me to work on behalf of women. In due course I received a number of trainings that built my capacity. They covered various areas such as community forest management, good governance, conflict resolution, agriculture (improving organic manure) and women leadership.

1. c) Women Mentors and Role Models:

Shova Karki:

One of the biggest factors of change in my life was the support of women leaders. I would not have come this far without the help and guidance of my fellow sisters. My past was filled with hardship. I had married into a conservative household. My father-in-law, who wanted me to become a traditional daughter-in-law, was vehemently opposed to my involvement in community work. He tried to stop me from going out and made my life miserable. My husband was working in India. I might have given up if not for women leaders like Kanchan didi, who encouraged me to continue working despite all the odds stacked against me. As it was starting to get impossible to work from my husband’s home in Sindhuli, I went and stayed at my parents’ house in Ramechhap. I travelled back and forth between Ramechhap and Sindhuli to mobilize women groups and carry out community development activities. Of course many people tried to bring me down. They did not approve of a woman who had rebelled against her in-laws to pursue her goals. So they made attempts to ruin my professional image and remove me from my post. Again women leaders like Kanchan didi came forward and intervened on my behalf. They boosted my morale when I was going through a tough time and rekindled my enthusiasm for work. Today I am fully independent and live on my own with my two children. I have my own house and do not need to depend on anyone for financial support. The community knows and respects me for who I am and what I do. They do not see me as somebody’s wife or daughter-in-law. I have come a long way with the unstinting support and guidance of women leaders, and I will always remain grateful to them.

1.c.) Trainings and meetings

Nima Lama from Kavre:

The trainings such as the rural women's leadership training gave me an opportunity to interact with others and gain knowledge and information. They raised my confidence level. In the past I could not express myself at all. But now I can address a whole gathering and say what's on my mind without any fear. Even my family members have started respecting me more. They no longer see me as a weak and dependent woman at the mercy of my husband. Now the whole community knows who Nima Lama is, and I too have built networks with many individuals and organizations. I feel honoured and encouraged when organizations invite me to participate in their meetings and trainings.

1. d) Women Role Model and Champions:

Bhakta Kumari Pulami from Sindhuli:

I have realized that a good leader serves as a role model and sets a precedent for future leaders. In my village in Sindhuli we had one such woman leader. Her name is Bhadra Kumari Ghale. She was already very active in the community while we were growing up. She helped bring many projects into the village and mobilized women into making decisions for themselves and the community. Since she had proved herself through her work even local authorities and men the village respected her decisions. A tradition was thus established for accepting women's leadership and giving priority to activities geared to women empowerment. This is probably why, compared to other places, women leaders in our community have faced fewer challenges in obtaining VDC/DDC funds and implementing women-oriented projects.

2. What are the challenges for women to lead?

2.a. Mobility:

Sushila Nepali from Kavre:

After I took the Rural Women Leadership training I got a chance to travel to Okhaldhunga district to train women groups from 6-7 VDCs on women leadership. The week-long training was a great opportunity to pass my knowledge on to other women, as well as to enhance my own leadership skills. People were very receptive and overall the training was hugely successful. Now I have been asked to give training, also in Okhaldhunga district. I am delighted at the opportunity but this would mean being away from my home and community for 10 days. I am unable to decide whether or not to accept the offer. This is the kind of challenge I often face as a woman leader. If I were a man I wouldn't have had to think so hard about leaving my family and community for 10 days. But given my dual responsibilities in the household and the community, I cannot always afford to make use of opportunities that involve travel.

2. b. Family Expectations and workload:

Family, especially men in the family, often act as the first barrier against women leadership.

Uma Parajuli from Kavre

My husband initially discouraged me from working with the cooperative. He wanted me to devote myself fully to looking after the family and household. Although I am now involved in cooperative activities the heavy work burden in my house continues to put a lot of pressure on me. I cannot prioritize my organization work as much as I'd like to. My relatives also scoffed at me for taking up a job outside the house. They thought I had overstepped my boundaries by trying to become something more than a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law.

Nanu Ghatane from Kavre:

Once our community organized a lok-dohori song competition to campaign against human trafficking. I felt strongly about the issue and wrote a song about it. I was delighted when my song got selected for the event. It warned people against falling for traffickers' traps and portrayed the sufferings of victims of trafficking. I was then asked to sing the song in a group. It was a wonderful opportunity but my husband was not at all happy about it. He had a job in Kathmandu and was home on leave at the time. He could not digest the fact that I was singing together and mixing with other men during the event. After the performance I went to have a snack with my singing group. This was more than my husband could take. He completely lost his temper.

After this incident my husband became increasingly suspicious and insecure. He eventually quit his job in Kathmandu and returned to the village. He just stayed home jobless. Our family faced a serious financial crisis as a result. It became extremely difficult for me to fulfill my responsibilities in the community. My relationship with my husband grew more and more strained. There were quarrels and bickering all the time. In the end I told him, "There is no point living together like this. If we cannot resolve our differences then we might as well separate. I am ready to leave you." But apparently he did not want to end our marriage. He admitted his mistake and tried to change his attitude. Finally, after one year of staying jobless at home, he returned to work in Kathmandu. Even then he kept insisting that I quit community work and stay home, but I did not listen to him. At this point in my life I know what I want and am not willing to make such heavy compromises just because my husband asks me to. This much I have learned from experience.

2. c. Woman's "Character" :

One of the easiest ways to discourage and demoralize a woman leader is to sully her "character." The general attitude is that if you start pointing fingers at her character, then that will put her back in her place. She will be forced to step back in order to protect her image and to avoid family conflicts. Women have to constantly worry that their friendliness or willingness to socialize with men as equals might be perceived as "loose character". She has to think twice before going somewhere with a male colleague or interacting with men in the course of work. Unlike men a woman leader is constantly under pressure to prove that she has a "clean" character. This inhibits her in unexpected ways and curtails her inner freedom.

Sushila Nepali from Kavre:

I remember once I had gone to the district agriculture office with a male colleague from my community. There we met and held discussions with district authorities. When it was time to return, one of the officers said he had a motorbike so he could drop one of us home. It was getting dark so the ride would have been tremendously helpful for me. But the officer did not feel comfortable offering me a ride because I was a woman. He asked my male colleague instead, and off they rode together while I walked towards the bus stand. Obviously the officer did not want to risk his image by offering me a ride. He too was under pressure. Had someone seen me riding pillion on his bike, they might have spread false rumors and tarnished his reputation. It might have created misunderstandings in his family. On the other hand my colleague, solely by virtue of being male, was able to get a ride with him and establish a relation with him. They might have gone for a drink on the way, had some informal chitchat, exchanged contact information and planned to meet again. In this way my colleague could have built relations with an important district official and extended his network. This is something I as a woman leader could not have done. The fact that he was a male already put him at a great advantage over me.

2.d. Male Status Anxiety

Shova Sharma from Sindhuli:

Most men are resistant to women's leadership. Whether it is at home, organization, community, or even at the national level, men resent having to defer to female authority. A successful woman leader challenges the power equation and shakes the entrenched notion of male superiority among men.

Until some time ago my brother-in-law was considered an influential man in the community. He knew local authorities and could use his connections to get things done. People in the village looked up to him and sought his advice and guidance before making decisions. He was proud of his might and reputation. Then gradually I too started being active in the community. I learned about the local government bodies and explored funding mechanisms. With my initiative many projects were launched in our village addressing all aspects of community life, from agriculture, irrigation and road construction to women empowerment, drinking water and electricity. Through these activities I was able to win the community's trust and gain recognition for my contribution. Now people were starting to bypass my brother-in-law and come to me for advice and consultation. His power and authority was starting to wane.

My brother-in-law could not take it. He became so resentful towards me he started poisoning people's ears against me. He warned my husband and relatives that I was going overboard with my community activities. He told others that I was using community funds for my personal benefit. Luckily I was very thorough with keeping accounts and provided the details of the expenditures for everyone to see. This cleared the misconception but I was left with a bad taste in my mouth. My brother-in-law does not even talk to me properly anymore. It was never my intention to overtake him. It's just that while his leadership was based on his status, authority and connections, mine is based purely on community work. So when I started getting more recognition in the community than him, he felt threatened and started seeing me as a rival.

2. e. Constraints on establishing public relations and networking

Unlike women, men in the community can often get things done by flexing their muscles and ganging up against those who threaten their interests. They have easy access to facilities and people in powerful positions. With a snap of their fingers they can arrange vehicles, go from one place to another, meet people and get this done. Women, on the other hand, only know the straight and simple route to getting things done. They are more engaged with community at the grassroots level but cannot establish contacts with powerful people (local authorities, party leaders, police, etc.) as easily as men. For example, a man has no problem taking a VDC official out for a beer and some informal conversation. This allows him to cozy up to power and extend his network. A woman would never be able to do that without scandalizing her family and community members, for that would jeopardize her "character."

2.f. Politics in resource distribution

Bhakta Pulami from Sindhuli:

As a women leader in my village, I attend most of the village level meetings and ask for information related to women's issues and development. Through different training I am aware about the provision for women related resources in the VDC (Village Development Committee). Based on the information I received, our women's group went with a proposal to the VDC planning meeting. We were informed that the meeting would start at 11am. We all reached the venue on time. However, there was no one in the meeting venue. We waited for about two hours. Finally the VDC Secretary arrived at 2 pm. The meeting started at 3.30 pm. The first 2 hours of the meeting was spent on formalities and speeches. By the time the actually planning took place it was already 5.30 pm. Most of the women left as it was getting

late. I decided to stay back to ensure that our proposal got included. But even after repeated requests to give me time to speak, I was asked to wait. It was 6.30 pm and I was the only women left. I began to feel awkward and handed over our proposal to one of the male members.

For every community activity, whether it's awareness-raising or income-generation training, gender campaign or adult literacy program, we need funds to get started. But it is very difficult for women leaders to obtain funds for their activities. There is too much politicization in the village local bodies. Whenever we go to the District Development Office (DDC) or the Village Development Committee (VDC) to ask for funds, they first try to find out which political party we are affiliated to. They only want to channel funds to their party cadres. If you say you are affiliated to a certain party, then people from other parties see you as a rival and come in your way. If you say you do not belong to any party, then no one wants to give you funding. You have to appease not one but seven political parties to get even a small thing done.

2.g. Shova Karki from Sindhuli:

For example, our community in Sindhuli municipality had received a fund worth Rs 2 lakh 50 thousand for a road project. But every party wanted a cut for their cadres before work could begin. To make things quicker and easier, the treasurer, a male, gave away a large percent of the funds to party people. The project finally got going. Had the treasurer been a woman, this would not have happened. Women leaders are not prone to resorting to such quick fixes. They would want to make sure that every paisa goes into the planned activity. They are not familiar with back channels and roundabout ways of doing things like men. Ironically, their transparency makes it more difficult for them to get things done.

Bhakta Kumari Pulami from Sindhuli:

Recently the district forest office asked us to submit proposals for a livelihood improvement project with a budget of Rs 50,000. We selected two VDCs to implement the project and did all the required homework. We visited the target communities in both VDCs, held discussions with women, gathered facts and information, identified their specific needs and informed them about the upcoming project. Based on this we developed detailed proposals for our activities. But later when we went to get the funds we were told that we would only receive money for one VDC. The district officials did not even give us proper explanation. They had already made the decision without consulting us. I thought this was simply unacceptable. We had already assured the community people that we would be bringing the project. They were hopeful and enthusiastic about getting involved. If we backed out at this point people would stop trusting us. So we pressured the authorities to disburse funds for both VDCs. I said, "Here are our proposals. We'll either implement the project in both VDCs or we won't start any project. It's all or nothing." This forced the authorities to revise their decision. They reviewed our proposals and realized how thorough and context-specific they were. In the end they agreed to provide funds for both VDCs.

2.h. Conflict of interest

Local authorities, who are predominantly men, think programs geared to women are less important. They only try to allocate DDC and VDC budget for activities that are on their priority list, such as road construction, school building construction and other such infrastructure development. But as women leaders who have understood the community's needs right from the household level. We feel infrastructure development is not enough to bring about change. We want funding to raise women's awareness, provide them with literacy and income-generation skills, and help them become agents of change. So there tends to be a conflict of interest between women leaders and local authorities and/or male community leaders.

Earlier when women were submissive and ready to put their signatures on any decision made by men, they used to invite women to meetings related to budget allocation and community programs. But now women are proactive and empowered. They know how the system works. They have identified the needs of women and can come up with detailed proposals for specific activities. They can make a strong case for themselves while asking for funds. Precisely for this reason men now try to exclude women from the decision-making process. They hold meetings behind closed doors and make decisions as they see fit. When we find this out and ask them why we were not called, they give the lamest of excuses. Their standard response is, "Oh, we called you many times but the call didn't go through." This is extremely frustrating.

2.i. Acceptance and Recognition:

Shova Sharma from Sindhuli:

It is not easy trying to lead as a woman. Initially when I started becoming active in the community, many people in the village criticized me. They said I was acting too smart for my own good. They were not used to seeing a woman, least of all a Dalit woman, going out and campaigning for various causes. They thought I was going to spoil their daughters and daughters-in-law. It took me a long time to win their trust. I had to work hard, go from door to door, organize and convince women and their family members, and sometimes face unwarranted accusations. But I did not stop. With my initiative we brought many projects into the village; these projects covered many areas such as agriculture, irrigation, cooperative, water and electricity, capacity building, etc. Gradually people's attitude towards me changed. They began to respect me and listen to what I had to say. I realized if you stay committed to your work despite challenges, then eventually people will come around. Once they see the positive impact of your activities, they will themselves start seeking you out for help and advice. I remember there was one woman whose husband beat her and broke her head for going to adult literacy classes. But today her husband is the one who reminds her to go to community meetings. I have seen plenty of examples to prove that change is possible.

A common challenge faced by women community leaders is the misperception that we are doing everything for our personal advancement. At this point I have widespread influence in the community and people rarely refuse when I ask them to gather or contribute their time or labour into some activity, and still I sometimes hear comments like, "Oh, she gets money for organizing us, that's why she is doing this work. We don't have much to gain from it." Such remarks make me upset but I must carry on.

Another barrier in women leadership is their low education level. I have only completed eighth grade, and I often wonder how much more I could have done if I had received an education. One may have all the skills and motivation needed to bring social change, but sometimes the lack of formal qualification can act as a serious hurdle in your efforts. Without a certain level of education you cannot make use of the opportunities around you. It prevents you from taking leadership positions and realizing your full potential.

And then there are household responsibilities that consume all of women's time and energy. It is a constant challenge for women to get out of the house to attend meetings and community activities. So women leaders are often torn between their social and family commitments. If I am about to go to a meeting, for example, and a guest shows up, then I am automatically expected to stop and entertain the guest, or at least go in and make tea before heading out. However, in the same situation my husband can say, "Oh, I have a very important meeting. I have to go." This will be acceptable coming from a man. It is assumed that a man's work is more important than a woman's.

3. What are the opportunities to lead?

Nanu Ghatane from Kavre:

Recently when I returned to my village after training women in Okhaldhunga, I found out that some men had cut down trees from the community forest in my absence. There was tension brewing between these men who wanted to sell the trees they had cut down and other forest users who wanted them to pay a penalty for violating the regulations. As a community leader I was expected to resolve the conflict.

So I called a meeting of all the forest users and took their opinions. There were heated disputes over what should be done. The men who had felled the trees seemed unapologetic at first. They were adamant about not returning the logs. Meanwhile the forest users wanted to file a case against these men and subject them to heavy fines. It was a challenging situation. But I tried my best to arrive at a resolution. First I addressed those who had cut the trees, and explained the rules and regulations of the community forest at length. I made them understand precisely how they had violated the rule and what kind of penalty they might be subjected to. But since they had already committed the mistake, I suggested that the forest users group withdraw their penalty on condition that they return the wood to the group. I explained that filing a case would only complicate the matter and take up everyone's time and energy without actually solving the problem. It would also ruin community relations and trigger a backlash. In the end both sides were willing to reach a compromise. Those who cut down the trees admitted their wrongdoing, returned the wood and vowed not to violate the forest regulations again. In turn the forest users group agreed not to file a case against them or demand a penalty from them. The case was thus resolved.

There are several reasons why my leadership worked in this case. Had I dealt with the issue through the traditional, top-down approach to leadership, then the conflict would only have exacerbated. Based on my experience in this particular incident and in general, I have realized that effective leadership does not necessarily mean ordering people around and imposing one's decisions on others. The most important thing is to talk, listen and respect other people's views. Issuing unilateral orders is going to make people shut themselves, and as a result their true opinions will not come out. This will foreclose the possibility of holding dialogue and arriving at a decision that benefits all. Even in this case I was able to resolve the conflict by consulting everyone and listening to what they had to say. Had I started by scolding and threatening the wrongdoers, as opposed to patiently explaining the rules and regulations to them, then the situation would have become worse.

Training focusing on Women's Leadership:

Phulmaya Tamang from Kavre

Most of the trainings I received were given by women. It made a huge difference that we were being trained by women leaders, not men. They made me realize that effective leadership does not simply mean asserting your authority and commanding others. Women leaders in my community were very careful not to act superior or demanding. Despite their knowledge and experience they would treat all community women as their equals and mix with them without trying to establish a hierarchy. They would go visit women in their homes and hearths, in the fields and forests. They would sit with them and eat what they offered no matter how plain it was. They would encourage them to share their personal stories and listen to them instead of simply giving instructions and advice. This allowed them to identify their real problems and think of solutions. Even poor and illiterate women were very receptive to their advice and suggestions. They trusted their leaders and were eager to learn from them even amid numerous challenges.

That is the type of leadership I have continued to practice. I have realized it is important to break the barriers that exist between the leader and the person she is trying to lead. For example, if I am trying to gather the intimate details of someone's life, and I sit on a sofa while my informant sits on the floor, then I have already erected a barrier that will prevent her

from opening up to me. Similarly it is important to understand the culture of the person I am trying to lead or convince. Even within the same village, culture can vary across households. So I make sure to take that into account while trying to transfer knowledge and skills to women.

List of Interviewees (Rural Women Leaders under the RWL-Project):

sn	Name	Organisation
1.	Nanu Ghatane	HIMAWANTI/Kavre
2.	Phulmaya Tamang	HIMAWANTI/Kavre
3.	Nima Lama	HIMAWANTI/Kavre
4.	Sushila Pariyar	HIMAWANTI/Kavre
5	Mina Pariyar	HIMAWANTI/Kavre
6	Uma Parajuli	HIMAWANTI/Kavre
7	Kalpana Humagain	HIMAWANTI/Kavre
8	Bhakta Kumari Pulami	ASTHA/Sindhuli
9	Shova Karki	ASTHA/Sindhuli
10	Mina Pariyar	ASTHA/Sindhuli
11	Rajani Mainali	ASTHA/Sindhuli
12	Bhagwati Humagain	ASTHA/Sindhuli