



Emerging women
leadership in
Transboundary Water
Governance

Stories of women from the Mahakali River Basin



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Stories of women from the Mahakali River Basin

Women living in river basins are dependent on rivers for several reasons, that includes drinking water, irrigation, and other forms of livelihood. However, women have limited control over the resources, they are dependent on and are impacted by the water-induced disasters, living in a constant fear of loss of lives and properties.

With the belief that empowering these women can eventually change their lives in a positive way, creating a forum for the women where they are able to raise issues with the concerned stakeholders, demanding action, is therefore one of the major components of the TROSA project. Women need to be better informed and be involved in opportunities for transboundary water dialogues and decisions making because they are the ones impacted the most by transboundary water management issues.

When the water governance policies and practices are implemented with agreed transboundary commitments, and where there is political will and authority within governments and private sectors to meaningfully engage women in water governance, it will create an enabling environment for greater inclusion of women's voices.

When the basin communities, especially women have increased access to, and control over, riverine water resources it will ultimately contribute to reduce poverty and marginalisation and they can realise their basic human rights. Achieving transformation in women's roles in governance and management of water and natural resources mean that the change can be sustained for future generations too.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Transboundary Rivers of South Asian (TROSA) is a five-year (2017-2021) regional programme jointly implemented by Oxfam and its partners¹. The program brings together efforts to support the lives of communities (especially women) living along the Mahakali River basin.

TROSA GOAL:

Reduced poverty of river basin communities through increased access to, and control over riverine water resources.

TROSA OBJECTIVES:

- Improved policies and practices of government that protect the rights of river basin communities
- Improved policies and practice of private sector and other actors that respect the rights of river basin communities to water resources
- Strengthened capacity of river basin communities and civil society to influence trans-boundary water resource management
- Amplification of women's profile and influence in dialogues and decision-making on water management and water infrastructure

¹Oxfam Nepal Partners for TROSA – Nepal Environment and Equity Development Society (NEEDS) in Kanchanpur, Rural Women's Development and Unity Centre (RUWDUC) in Dadeldhura, Rural Development and Environment Management Society (RUDES) in Baitadi, Sankalpa in Darchula

Regional Partners: Oxfam International; ICIMOD (International Centre for Integrated Mountain), WWF (World Wildlife Fund for Nature), Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI), International Rivers (IR); International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

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WEC for women leadership in transboundary Water Governance

One of the objectives of TROSA is to support women leadership in decision-making, policy dialogues and project specific interventions around transboundary water governance. Women's inclusion and women's empowerment is a central tenant of this program.

WEC (Women Empowerment Centre), also known as (Community Discussion Centre), brings women and girls as well as men and boys together for up to two hours regularly to enhance their knowledge around women's rights, gender issues, local decision making processes, improve their advocacy and leadership skills in participatory manner.

WECs at TROSA are formed with special focus on transboundary rivers to sensitize them about their rights over, and responsibilities for riverine water resources, to capacitate them in becoming leaders and involving them in transboundary water resources planning and decision making.

Each TROSA WEC has around 30-35 members, majority of women and also men members, living along river basin who depend on riverine

resources for their livelihoods and who have experienced transboundary issues, such as floods and landslides.

The WEC meeting/classes are run by trained social mobilisers (SMs).

The stories presented here are some of the examples of women and other river basin communities becoming aware of their basic human rights, rights to access and control over river resources, right to protect their culture and livelihood resources, threats to these resources, and also understating their responsibilities towards equitable management of river resources.

Here, there are stories of WEC members and communities strengthening their groups, their voices, and their profile and increasing their participation not only in water resource governance dialogues and decisions making processes, but also other day-to-day issues.

Here are some examples of WEC members emerging as Water Women Leaders.



Photo Credit/RUWDUC, Dadeldhura

When the ferry connects two communities

Gauri Hamal

Member,

Bahadure Women Empowerment Center
Parigaun, Parsura Rural Municipality-5, Dadeldhura

Beyond the border was the shrine of Punya Giri Mata, and inside Nepal's border was Parshuram Dham. Both of which are important Hindu holy places. However, there was no means to travel from one place to another. Neither a ferry nor a bridge. When the people from across the border came to temple in Nepal, locals in Nepali land would be taken aback fearing something unpleasant may happen with them. Same was the scenario for people across the border. Communities from both sides of the land had suspicions about each other. This continued for many years. "But from Push 30, 2075 (14 Jan 2019), all suspicions came to an end," says Gauri. People from neither side are afraid to travel across the border to visit the temples. But, what is the secret behind this change in perception?

What miracle had happened? "This is not the outcome of any miracle or spell," adds Gauri. "It all changed when we, from Women Empowerment Centers, organized a water transportation, people from both sides happily participated. Earlier this was something unimaginable."

As Mahakali river flows from Nepal to India, cross-border water transport had not been possible without community members agreeing to contribute on this initiative. They would not have benefitted from the huge river flowing in front of their eyes. Nonetheless, this concern was outgrown when a Religious Tourism event was organized from Push 30 to Magh 8 (14 – 22 January 2019) in Parshudham, initiating rafting along the Mahakali River throughout the event period.

Rafting, which started as a recreational activity during the event, turned an impossible mission to possible by giving people a medium to commute. "It has shown us the opportunity of continuing river rafting in Mahakali river," said Gauri. During the event, not just spectators and tourists, but women members from Bahadure Women Empowerment Centre also did rafting without any fear. The rafting conducted in three kilometers' distance from Kalpate to Parshuram Dham has boosted the confidence and courage of women of the center.

As this river lies on the border line, government initiatives and their activeness is required for proper utilization of the river resource. But how was this possible simply through the initiative of Women Empowerment Center with only 30 members? "When we discoursed to conduct religious fair in Parshuram Dham, we decided to take this opportunity to make the event an effective and successful program. Sisters from the centre came up with interesting ideas and that's how we decided that rafting was an ideal activity," Gauri said.

Rafting was chosen among other alternative ideas because women from the centers were not just focused on one-time event, but were thinking to introduce an initiative that would also serve people living in the riverine communities for long run. The idea of utilizing Mahakali river for benefits of both sides of people naturally became the priority for them. And, this led them to explore the possibility of starting rafting in Mahakali.

Women from the center shared the idea with RUWDUC, an implementing partner of TROSA project. And, it was eventually proposed to India Nepal Joint Action Forum (INJAF), a network of civil society organisations from Nepal and India. INJAF decided to hold talks about the matter with Indian officials working in this sector. This kick started the talks amongst the officials to discuss the possibility of starting rafting service in Mahakali.

Members and officials from Parshuram Municipality (which organized religious tourism event) and district officers of India-based Champawat district and other officials were invited in this discussion program. After the short briefing over the rafting program, officials from Champawat district responded by saying "this is the best thing to do." They opined that rafting service can connect the people living around

the border region. This opened the doors for the governments of two countries to work on it. And, the organizers started to work towards that direction. The municipality together with RUWDUC and INJAF led the initiative. Hence, the boat was arranged for the start of rafting service.

This service proved to be very important because it raised the possibility of operating the rafting service in the days to come as well. The women of Bahadure Women Empowerment Center had worked as per their center's name, bravely.

The bravery of the women was not limited to the efforts to initiate rafting. These women served as volunteers to take care of pilgrims coming to Parshuram Dham from various places of India and Nepal. They managed for their lodging, food and mobility. They wisely prevented the people from dumping the waste generated from the fair into the river. They managed the two trippers of waste in separate places. They had made a public appeal for making the fair successful and effective. The person to lead the initiative was none other than Gauri.

Gauri, who went to school up to grade 12, is a taekwondo player and she is more passionate about the game. Nevertheless, she has been devoting her time to social service in the recent times. "All this started after I participated in Women Empowerment Center regularly and became its member. That was when I realized, much was needed to be done to solve the problems faced by women living around river bank areas." It is this understanding which led Gauri to participate in the discussions in center more frequently. Assisting the chairperson of Empowerment Center also gave her exposure to the issues and problems faced by women.

Experiment was successful

The prospect of rafting had been overshadowed earlier as the community members from both sides did not have any communication building to trust. And, this much-needed service was sidelined. Now, that all sides have stood in its favor, it has opened doors of establishing rafting as a reliable business enterprise. And it has also proven to be a successful experiment.

Debraj Joshi, Rafting Business Entrepreneur

Joys of a bridge

Pushpa Dhimi

Chairperson,

Sagarmatha Women Empowerment Center
Surkada, Mahakali Municipality-8, Darchula



Photo Credit/Sankalpa, Darchula

Tourist visiting this river during the dry season would immediately frown. “Can this even be a biggest river?” Not a single drop of water is seen. But, in the rainy season, this river would surge, devastating the communities nearby. “It has taken the lives of two persons already. Students and those who collect the fodder for the cattle have been swept away many times. I have lost the count of how many people suffered in this disaster,” Pushpa narrated the tale of loss. “This river had become the biggest curse to our settlement.”

However, things did not remain the same. On Mangsir 13, 2074 (November 29, 2017), Sagarmatha Women Empowerment Center was established in her village. The center established by Sankalpa, from assistance of TROSA project, had the main objective of working for the welfare of people living around the river banks of Mahakali River. Soon, the center started to raise important problems faced by community members around the settlement area. Classifying them and solving them based on priority. This is how Sagarmatha Empowerment Center rose to its height.

The main problems facing the people living in riverine community are floods, landslides, inundation, erosion, etc. Adding to these problems, the harassment inflicted by the security agency of neighboring country, mobility problems and issues related to utilization of river resources makes it worst for the community people. The people of Surkada Kakada village were no exception. So, they listed building a bridge over Kakada River in their utmost priority. “During the discussion, we took the decision that we will put a bridge over this river by all means.

We did not only take the decision. We started to work for it from that day itself,” said Pushpa. But how did they do it?

Purchasing two big trees from a local community kick started their agenda to build a bridge. Local villagers supported them to cut the trees into proper sizes. Bridge Construction Committee was established under chairpersonship of the member of center. The women from the empowerment center themselves organized the tasks of cutting the tree logs, taking them up to the river, collecting and carrying sand bags and finally constructed the bridge. All 31 members of the empowerment center were mobilized for this work for three consecutive days. Finally, the job was done and the bridge was up.

Interesting part of this story is that women themselves accomplished all the responsibilities of constructing the bridge. Except for cutting the trees, all the activities were carried out by women themselves. They carried woods and stones and took them to the construction site. They brought all the materials needed for constructing the bridge and accomplished the job. “We employed only five men to get this job done. That is also when the women members of the family could not make it,” said Pushpa. “We deliberately did not involve many men in this work. We wanted to prove that we women are capable of doing the job that is not expected from them. And we proved it.”

Community members from Surkada and Kakada villages which lie on the sides of the river had less of chance to meet and greet. Two settlements were completely disconnected, especially at the time of rainy season. Mobility was impossible; hence, communication was completely reduced. Now, those days seem like a tale for us. “Students now can move from one place to another. People going to the woods to collect fodder and firewood are safe. We can reach our destinations safely,” Pushpa shared happily.

There are three schools in these two settlements; Bhagawati Primary School, Himalaya Secondary School and Malikarjun Secondary School. There are also three villages and a river named Dhakod too. But, Dhakod is not a worrying river. Students

living across Kakada and Surkada would attend schools in any of the villages. But during the rainy season, many students would have to skip schools because of the surging river. Now, people of this village are happy.

A local provided them two trees on credit. Pushpa and other members of the empowerment center have promised to pay him for the trees after the construction and he had agreed. They also must pay for the construction materials they used for the bridge. But Pushpa is not worried at all about it. Ward office of her village has assured to pay the dues. “They will be paying for it,” she said.

Pushpa, who went to school up to grade 12, has proved herself as a woman who can accomplish the job she aspired for. Therefore, she has been chosen as the chairperson of the Women Empowerment Center for a good reason. She had been teaching in Bhagawati Primary School for about five years without taking any salary. Besides, Sikhar Women Multipurpose Cooperative founded by Pushpa herself, has been established as such a successful organization that it was bestowed with excellence award worth Rs 100,000 from Women Development Office. She herself raises cows, buffaloes and goats and does farming as well. Despite of these commitments, she has managed time for social service. Her devotion for social work has become a source of inspiration for other women too.

Such a noble job

When it rained, it flooded. When it flooded, the Kakada raged. And then the students having to move across the river would be stranded. How could we run the classes with just few students? Such was the problem back then. Since the bridge was built we have not had to face any such problem. We have not had to discontinue the classes. The women of the empowerment center did the best job.

Chandra Singh Daga
Headmaster, Himalaya Higher Secondary School
Dhaukot, Darchula

Magic of lights

Ritu Sijapati
Chairperson,
Bikasnagar Women Empowerment Center
Kutiyabakar, Mahakali Municipality-10, Kanchanpur

Khadge Budhathoki had parked his motorbike securely at his own home yard. But it was stolen along with his goat. This was the first incident. Similar incident occurred with Dhana Bahadur Sunar. His paddy rice, goat and she-goats, nothing was spared. Everything was stolen from his home. Likewise, Anjali Sunar was sexually abused. Her family could not live in this place anymore and was displaced.

These are just some of the cases. If we explore more, we get to know more about these incidents. This village sits atop Jogbudha and tributary of Mahakali river. And it borders Bangali settlement of Pilivit district of Uttar Pradesh of India. During the rainy season, the rivers surges and floods their village - 35 residents from this village has no safer place to escape. The people living in this precarious settlement also faced the problem of theft and violence. Kutiyabakar, questionable village is an example of the difficulties the villages lying in cross-border areas alongside the river has to face.



Photo Credit/NEEDS, Kanchanpur

As TROSA project was working around this area, it established Bikas Nagar Women Empowerment Center on Push 9, 2074. Members of the center raised this important issue in their meeting and discussed for solutions. As the center was established to address the problems of people living around river banks in bordering areas, these questions found prominent space in the discussion. Though the main objective of the empowerment center is proper utilization of cross-border rivers and river resources, members present in the discussion realized that they could not avoid the more pressing questions and focus on only this issue. "Therefore, we could not ignore the more pressing issues," says Ritu Sijapati, outlining the need to prioritize the issue of lights in their villages.

"Where there is a will, there is a way," says Ritu, who is also the chairperson of the empowerment center. "First of all, we decided to bring proper lighting system in our village to solve those problems." We discussed over this matter and concluded that once the village gets light, many of the problems of theft can be solved. With proper lighting system, we can see things clearly and we can also identify the faces of people and strangers. In case of danger, we villagers can gather immediately. The meeting of the day ended with this conclusion," Ritu said. After the meeting, 32 members of the center did not stay quiet. They started to work immediately to execute their plan.

In Jeth, 2075, these women invited Nara Bahadur Sunal, chairperson of their ward, to inspect their empowerment center and to listen to discussion program. He complied and came to the center where the related issues were put forth. After listening to the women, he assured them that based on their decisions, he would work to install solar lights in the village. Two months had passed but his assurance did not see the light of the day. "But we did not give up," said Ritu. "We had learned from the lessons in the empowerment center that we need to constantly push our agenda to make it successful. So, we worked for it constantly. Then when we sensed that ward chief alone could do little about our demands, we called in Mayor Bir Bahadur Sunar to our discussion. He accepted our invitation and came to our class. We told him of our problems and submitted memorandum."

Slowly but steadily, it started to materialize. Within a week, they received the assistance of Rs 8,00,000 for eight solar lights. They held

the village assembly and decided where to install those lights. Now they have installed eight lights in eight different places of the village, illuminating the entire village during the night. "We did not fear thieves nor the attacks from the wild animals anymore. There has not been any case of abuse on women. We walk fearlessly," said Ritu. Before the lights came, even the people from neighboring village looked down on residents of Kutiyabakar. And the wild animals of Suklaphata troubled them. With lights, all this has become a history.

There are 32 Sunar households in this village apart from one of Budha, one Sharma, and one Magar. The entire village is battling with deprivation. Most men have left for India to find work. Only women, children and elderly are seen in the village. Which is why, theft and violence was rampant. With lights, many of those problems has been solved. The villagers are happy that their village has become a safe and livable place. They are thankful to members of Bikasnagar Women Empowerment Center, which brought solar lights in the village and eradicated darkness. Formally, these lights should have been installed through Border Development Fund eight months ago. But this fund was being channeled for somewhere else. The women came to know about it and they started to raise their issue more vigorously. And the result was delightful. "We have been working to get the solar lights installed in other places as well," said Ritu. "Now that we have found the solution to our problems, we are not going to relent unless we provide light to every possible place."

Wonderful opportunity

The empowerment center sent me to district level lobby office. That was my first participation in such program. I came to know about the development projects of the local government. We had put forth our problems related to drinking water and irrigation in front of the ward chief and mayor. They assured to heed our concerns. This rare opportunity was a pleasing experience.

Janaki Budhal,
Panchakoti Women Empowerment Centre
Bhekkar, Dasrath Chand Municipality-10,
Baitadi



Photo Credit/Sankalpa, Darchula

Happy communities, where liquor is banned

Uma Kuwar

Social Mobilizer,
New Bhagawati Women Empowerment Center
Kakada, Mahakali Municipality-8, Darchula

There are 35 households in ward number eight of Mahakali Municipality. Almost all the male members of these households are in India for work. Usually, men drink but even though males in the village were in small number, there were two shops which were still selling liquors. This shows that the liquor consumption in the village is considerably high. More than the consumption of liquors, the adverse impacts it had on the village was worrisome. It had led to growing cases of gender violence because of which women suffered more. Liquor consumption had even led to the displacement and separation of families. This undoubtedly left the women folks of the villagers deeply depressed. This issue was raised with high prominence in

New Bhagawati Women Empowerment Center. "When we discussed this matter, it was good to see that all the 26 members present in the meeting were against alcoholism. This was a common issue for everyone. Then we decided that we would ban liquors in the village," said Uma Kuwar. One Shanti Thagunna told the sad tale of how her husband abused her after drinking and how after leaving for Delhi for work, he has totally stopped caring her. This agitated the participants in the meeting when Shanti broke into sobs while narrating her sad story. When others spoke of how the men folks during the Dashain holiday drained the whole liquors from the stores and how afterward they beat up their wives at home, the meeting fell silent for

moment. Some others presented the case of how drinking habits had made some families totally bankrupt. Therefore, they came to a decision that they would prohibit sale and consumption of liquors in the village at any cost.

The members of women empowerment center spoke about the matter with ward chief and told him of their decision. Chandra Singh Bista, the ward chief, was taken by dilemma. He could not stop the sale of liquors if it was done legally by taking license. He could not ignore the concerns of women either. Then he came up with the idea. He would not allow these sellers to renew their license once it expires. He would not issue recommendation letter for them. He did as he planned. He stopped renewal of two liquor sellers. As a result, both the liquor shops in Kakada has been closed since July, 2019. But this did not prevent the possibility of liquor consumption entirely. Even if it was banned in the village, men could bring it from elsewhere or even brew it at their homes. "This is the reason we did not stop there. We discussed the matter with the ward chief and called the assembly. We also invited those who argued on selling the liquors legally. Then the ward chief declared," Uma continued telling the story, "Kakada, henceforth, will be liquor-free village." "If anyone is found of selling or consuming the alcoholic drink, and if anyone is found to abuse women by drinking, action will be taken against him immediately," said the ward chief.

Thanks to that momentous declaration, people do not get to consume liquor in this village ever since. This has drastically reduced the cases of violence, abuse and quarrels. Yet, the women of the empowerment center have not stayed quiet. They oversee if any shop is selling the liquor and inspect if any household is brewing it. "Not only the ward office, also the police have helped us in this initiative, the police come for patrolling here from around one and half kilometers away. This has put a stop to sale and consumption of liquor."

Women of Bhagawati Women Empowerment Center are active bunch of people. When the women of neighboring Surkada village ran the campaign against excavation of sand and aggregates from the river banks, these women showed solidarity and offered their help. While travelling to and from Kuche bazaar of India (half

an hour walk), or Dharchula (10-12 kilometers) or to the district headquarters of Darchula (10-12 kilometers) they take check whether any shops are selling liquors. They have also been actively raising the concerns of riverine community. "We raise our concern with whichever authority can address it," said Uma. "After all, this is what we learned from empowerment center as well."

Kakada is a home to Joshi, Samanta, Pal, Shahi and Lohars (dalits). But this village literally has no men present. One can see only women, children and the elderly. Indian currency is in circulation, Indian actors are their favorites and they use Indian sim cards on the phone, thus almost detached from Nepali songs and culture. Women empowerment center established by TROSA has also worked to familiarize the people with Nepali songs and culture. They firmly believe that only national organizations come to aid in times of need.

I liked their proposal and offered to help

"A total of 76 women came to me with written appeal to prohibit sale and consumption of alcohol. Then, I monitored if the alcohol consumption was the main reason for increasing the cases of violence against women. I found that 12 to 13 years old youths had become addicted to alcohol. This got me deeply worried. I called the assembly including women who demanded alcohol ban too. I invited the sellers as well. We reached to the conclusion that alcohol consumption was leading to many illness and decided that it should be banned. Then, I declared Kakada alcohol-free village. I have not stopped monitoring even now. I myself go for monitoring. Other times, I send other staffs to do the job. I have told the women of empowerment center to look into this matter closely. I have found that so far, no body has breached the ban. Anyone found going against the declaration will be punished. I have stopped renewing the license of those who had it already. I am not going to issue new license either."

Chandra Singh Bista
Ward Chief, Mahakali Municipality-8, Darchula



Photo Credit/RUDES, Baitadi

Bonds of solidarity

Gunadi Chand

Coordinator,

Sirjansil Women Empowerment Center
Binayak, Pancheswar Rural Municipality-4, Baitadi

Binayak village lies within Nepal. Just across it, lies Halko Saurya of India. Around 150 households live in Nepali village and around 250 in the Indian village. The residents of both village use Mahakali river for water source. Since the bazaar is right next to Indian village, mobility of people between two places is high. But there is no bridge to connect the two settlements. Which is why they use boats for transportation. But boating is risky. In boating of around 10 to 15 minutes' distance, many have lost their lives already. Many others have suffered.

People of both villages share the problems of riverine community; drinking water crisis, erosion, inundation, lack of bridges and so on. Thus, the

people of both villages discussed the ways to find solutions to this common problem. And this discussion gave birth to Saurya Binayak Nepal-India Joint Advocacy Forum. According to Gunadi Chand, the member of this forum who is also the coordinator of Sirjansil Women Empowerment Center, the forum meets once every two months. The meeting discusses the problems facing people of riverine communities. It identifies problems and suggests possible solutions and lays out plan for implementation of the decisions. According to Gunadi, after the formation of the forum, it has helped solve problems facing Nepali people within the Nepali side. According to her, the five-member forum coordinates with Indian police and Seema Sasatra Bal (SSB) officials.

Thus, the hassles earlier faced while using sand, water and other resources of the river have been minimized. According to her, prior to formation of the forum, SSB used to harass Nepali women several times.

Amrita Chand, a social mobilizer from Sirjansil Women Empowerment Center, testifies the effectiveness of this forum. "In Halko Saurya of India, liquors have been banned. But it was not so in Nepali side. So, Indians would come to Nepal side to drink liquors. Then women from Indian side made the proposal of banning liquors in Nepal as well. We discussed this matter in our empowerment center and decided to take this matter to the ward office," said Amrita.

As a result, the ward office of her village has banned sale and consumption of liquors. The women request men to refrain from consumption, and if anyone is found to disregard the law, the action is taken immediately. Yes, this has angered the Indian men who used to come to Nepali side for liquors but Indian women are happy with the decision in Nepali village. "The Indian security officials have been cooperative. The liquor ban in Nepali side has made Indian women very happy. This is the preliminary evidence of effectiveness of the forum," shared Amrita. "We did good thing by constituting the joint forum."

True to its name Sirjansil which means creative, this empowerment center never tires of working and exploring new ideas. The women of this center have planted trees along the river banks to prevent further erosion of land. When erosion went unabated, and started affecting the settlements, women raised this issue in the empowerment center and reached the decision of tree plantation. They made an appeal to Rural Municipality Office which availed them bamboo saplings, which they planted along the riverside. They have hoped that it will keep their village safe.

With the single objective of discussing the problems facing riverine community and raising awareness regarding the remedial measures, Sirjansil Women Empowerment Center, in financial assistance from Joint Forum, had organized a cultural program in Binayak village itself. The event held on Push 3, featured Deuda

songs and dances. Love and romance was not the theme of the songs. The songs were basically about the pains and problems faced by the people of riverine communities. It raised awareness on violence against women and heavily criticized the drinking habits of men. Songs also suggested remedial measures, giving the encouragement to solve all such problems once and for all. The Empowerment Center highlighted their own Deuda culture, and set the goal for better future. Indeed, this empowerment center has remained true to its name.

We will do, as much as we can

The members of Sirjansil Women Empowerment Center came with the demand to control sale and consumption of liquors. They argued that it was resulting in grave social problems. "Unrestricted sale of liquors in our village had affected families across the border too and that women were bearing the brunt. Even the women across the border were in favor of controlling liquors in our village." We realized that their concerns were valid and we ran the campaign of restricting sale and consumption of liquors. Now, we have made a rule to prohibit sale and consumption of liquors in our village. Firstly, we issued a notice to this effect clearly stating that those who sell liquors will be fined Rs 5,000 and those who consume will be fined Rs 2500. As a result, sale and consumption of liquors has been controlled in Binayak. Women of Sirjansil Women Empowerment Center have been doing creative works. They are alert about safety of their village and have planted bamboo saplings along the riverside. They collaborate with ward office when they initiate new programs. "I have assured to provide them as much assistance as possible from our side. We need to support those who believe in their work."

Raj Bahadur Chand

Ward Chief, Pancheswar Rural Municipality-4, Baitadi



Photo Credit/NEEDS, Kanchanpur

Yes, we have electricity!

Janaki Pun Magar

Coordinator,

Mahakali Women Empowerment Center

Bhujela, Bhimdatta Municipality-11, Kanchanpur

If someone asked Janaki Pun Magar “do you have electricity in your village?” she would not know how to respond to this question. She could not say no, because the village was connected with electricity grid. She could neither say yes, because the power supply was either too irregular or non-existent at times. Additionally, the transformer fuse would often break. So, her answer to the question would be both yes and no.

Janaki does have a reason for her vague answer. When you have electricity, it means that your kids get to do homework under the light; we can run

fans during the hot day and get to use electrical appliances. But none of this was happening in her village. The power was either too low or non-existent. This was the plight of the people sharing line from the transformer of her village. Strangely, no one spoke of this. So, she raised this issue in Mahakali Women Empowerment Center. The participants discussed how long they should bear with such situation. Even more pity was they had to pay electricity bill even though they were not being able to enjoy the facility. “So, all 27 members of our empowerment center rose to the occasion. We vowed to find solution to this problem,” said Janaki.

They wrote an application letter, signed it and took the matter to the ward office. They submitted memorandum to ward chief, Prem Prasad Jaisi, and informed him of the problems facing them. "We want nothing less than uninterrupted power supply in our village," they told him. "We demanded this from the ward chief who is our leader and ward office, our government. Hence, we entrusted him with this responsibility," said Janaki.

Janaki and her colleagues did not stop here. They kept following up on this matter. Then at the end of Magh, 2075 (early February, 2019) new transformer was installed. Now, the problem of irregular supply and transformer circuit break has been solved. Mills in the village run uninterrupted. "Children get to read under the light and we can also operate other electrical appliances," Janaki shared her happiness. Since the women of this village could get transformer of higher power installed, it has changed impression about them among the villagers. It was not that nobody else had tried to fix the problem. "But when we rose for it collectively and made a public appeal for new transformer, it had greater positive impact. We have learned that if we take up the cause collectively, we can achieve the success," said Janaki.

All 27 members of this empowerment center, including Janaki, are involved in shifting sand and making aggregates in Mahakali river. So, they rarely get free time. Since they would be involved in this work from dawn to dusk, they would not be able to participate in programs of empowerment center. They blamed their fate for suffering. Bhuwaneshwari Joshi, social mobilizer of empowerment center says, "since they started participating in discussions of empowerment center, they have not only become able to identify their problems but also find ways to solve them." Though the members of this empowerment center are basically sand and aggregates workers, they are active in getting the problems of riverine community solved. Once canal along Bareli section of Mahakali river was disrupted, blocking water supply to their community. The women rose to action and went to the Irrigation office at district headquarters to file the complaint. The office then cleared the

blockage, resuming water supply. "Once water supply breaks, we lead a delegation to the concerned office," said Janaki. "When we start complaining and speaking up, we are heard. We did not realize the power of collective action until we participated in empowerment center."

Since their association with empowerment center, the women have come to know about many things. They have been enlightened about the pains and problems of people of riverine community. "We have installed a flood alert system in our village. When this gives a signal, we take the children and elderly to safer places. We also safely place vital documents such as citizenship cards, land ownership certificates, education certificates and so on. "The empowerment center taught us," this is how she shares her learning with others these days.

I got my citizenship card made

It was already 10 years since marriage but I was not aware that my marriage had to be registered. My citizenship certificate had not been made because of this. Neither did my children's birth were registered. Without citizenship, I was not able to become the member of saving group either. So, I was not able to save up what little money I made by shifting sand and making aggregates. But when I started to go to empowerment center, I learned about vital registration and its importance. I got all my vital documents made. Now, I have my children's birth certificates along with my citizenship and marriage registration. I am associated with saving group and have saved up some money as well. This has made me very happy.

Sashi Rana

Member, Mahakali Women
Empowerment Center
Bhujela, Bhimdatta Municipality-11,
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Photo Credit/RUDES, Baitadi

Birthing centre saving lives

Tara Karki

Member,

Nawajyoti Women Empowerment Center
Sera, Dasrath Chanda Municipality-6, Baitadi

Located on the side of Mahakali river, Sera, a village lying in the lower elevation has around 85 households. There is a health post in the settlement, but, is only able to provide basic services and common medication for fever, cold and cough. How could it do more than this anyway? The health post was operated by only one auxiliary nurse midwife. Where would she run? What would she do? This is precisely why the women of this village had to walk uphill to the district headquarters for five long hours to receive maternity service during pregnancy and childbearing. "These are the times when the women need more care and more rest. But they had to be carried on the backs and taken up to the health post. And as they had to walk long hours, their bodies suffered exertion leading to complication in their uterus. As such, women taken to the district headquarters for delivery, suffered uterus complication, even uterus prolapse. Belmati Karki, a local, died on the way to the district headquarters while being taken there for childbirth," Tara Karki shared the moments of suffering and hardships.

The only alternative to escape this fate was to go across the border to India for treatment. But even that was a risky proposition because there was bridge nearby to cross the river to India. They had to walk two hours to reach a place where the bridge (situated in Jhulaghat) connected Nepal with India. Yet another option was to sit upon tube and sail on Mahakali river, which, again, was not easy. Even after reaching the Indian land via tube, one must go further for two hours from Pithauragadh. For the residents

of Sera, there were options, but no option was a better option.

Now, those hardships have become a past for many like Tara of Sera village. The secret as said by Tara is "that we have a birthing center in the health post of our own village." Which is why, we don't have to walk all the way for five hours up to the district headquarters nor go all the way up to Pithauragadh of bordering town," says Tara. With birthing facility being available in the village itself, it has saved many lives including time and money.

Women have benefitted from the birthing center. However, men also have benefitted from this service. It has saved them from having to carry patients on their backs and take them all the way up to the health posts. Also, it has saved them travel expenses which incurred while going to the health posts far away. "Most importantly, it has helped us fight the cruelest enemy of women: the uterus prolapses and fall of the womb," says Tara. "The problem has been solved."

But, how did the birthing centre come into existence suddenly? Mamata Karki, social mobilizer with Nawajyoti Women Empowerment Center, has the answer. "When the large number of women were suffering from uterus related problems, we discussed the matter at the women empowerment center. In course of discussion, it was found that the complication was the result of heavy work, walking and physical exertion that women had to undergo during pregnancy and after delivery. While searching for solution, we

concluded that we must have a birthing center in our village itself. We all focused on one single goal of constructing birthing center in the health post of our village,” Mamata recounted the story.

TROSA had established Nawajyoti Women Empowerment Center with the objective of addressing the problems faced by the residents of riverine communities along Mahakali river. Because the very objective was to identify the problems of riverine communities and address them, the uterus related problems faced by the women of this village also was discussed with prominence. Members of the community were clear about one thing, if they had to live and exercise their rights properly, they had to be healthy. The women associated with this women empowerment center had understood this very well. So, the women of this center first decided that they will bring the birthing center to the health post and registered an application demanding the same at the ward office. The ward office offered to provide rods and cement needed for constructing birthing center. But these materials alone would not suffice to make the center. So, they knocked the doors of the municipality as well, which availed them with certain amount of budget for the purpose. Remaining expenses were borne by RUDES, which had implemented the TROSA project and which also constituted empowerment center.

The construction work completed in Falgun, 2074 (February, 2018). However, the building alone would not provide the services. They discussed the next course of action. The women of the empowerment center first got the recommendation of the municipality office and went to knock the doors of District Hospital. They shared the problems facing them due to lack of birthing center. They also forwarded the evidence of completion of building. District hospital finally agreed to provide one Assistant Health Officer for the birthing center. “He, along with a nurse has been providing service together,” said Tara. “This has made our lives easier.”

Apart from visibly changing the health status of women, the birthing center has drastically reduced the work burden of women. “We do not have to walk all the way up to the district headquarters like in past. While travelling far away for checkup, piles of workload would be waiting for us at home then.” “the women associated with the empowerment center say in unison. “Now we can use that time for rest and for taking care of kids at home and to do our household works.” In addition to the new building and a human

resource to run the facility, the health post provides birthing facility. On top of that, the government has also announced that free medicines will be provided through this health post. Earlier only few medicines would be available for free. “But after women started visiting the health post constantly and for follow up, the health post started to give medicine for free. Now, we go to the health post and enquire about effective service delivery and medicine etc. And if we find any lapses we find solutions,” said Tara.

Like many residents of Sera, Tara also has a mobile phone with Indian SIM card because Nepali network is not available in Sera. Like others’, her husband has also gone to India for work. Tara devotes most of her time for farming in the field. This is what most people in this place is going through and that is hard work. All 30 members associated with the empowerment center has similar fate. There are 12 Dalit members in the empowerment center. Now, the empowerment center has been working actively to resolve the problems facing the community and the members of the center also raise their issues assertively. They have drawn the attention of the ward chief, the mayor of municipality toward their concern. They have demanded the projects related to tailoring and goat farming. “They have agreed to our proposal. And, we are not going to give up. We are going to bring these new projects to the village,” said Mamata.

Sisters are happy

The birthing center lies in the middle of the settlement with 128 households. Every year seven to eight women visit this center for childbirth. Getting the birthing service at their own village has saved them time and resources and reduced their work burden of women. They previously had to do all the household chores irrespective of whether they were pregnant or in post-natal state. Now, that the birthing center is in village itself, work load has reduced. This is a good thing.

Suna Karki
ANM, Sahari Health Center, Sera



Photo Credit/RUWDUC, Dadeldhura

Prioritising irrigation and drinking water

Durga Bhattarai

Deputy Coordinator,
Shiva Shakti Women Empowerment Center
Parigaun, Parshuram Municipality-5, Dadeldhura

On one side was Mahakali river and on the other was Rangun river. In between, stood a big settlement, called Parigaun. But despite straddling rivers on both sides, the village always suffer from lack of drinking water. During the dry season, the people here suffer like Kakakul birds. Surrounded by rivers, the village though expected to have the irrigation facilities, the fields and farms here are barren for lack of irrigation facility. They have no means to take the river water up to their village nor convert it into drinking water.

The unpredictable floods have led to erosion, inundation and even displacement. People living in Ghatteplat, Baluwatar, Bishalpur, Thakur Tol, Krishna, Tatopani and Chhela have to suffer the most.

These problems however are not the recent ones. For years, they have been facing these problems simply because they are the people living in riverine community along the border sides. It was not that they did not raise the issue with political

leaders. They did, and political leaders also assured of assistance but did absolutely nothing. Now, however, the locals of this place have started hoping for betterment and believe that things will change soon. "Shiva Shakti Women Empowerment Center has been established to advocate for problems faced by people living in the riverine communities," says Durga Bhattaraim, who is the deputy coordinator of the center. What does their center actually do? "We identify our problems and then find ways to solve them and work toward that goal," says Durga. During discussion, the center identified the main problem of the village. It was irrigation and drinking water. They decided that they would work actively for this cause and find the solution. The Empowerment Center does not take decision in whims. First, they assess what kind of work can be done through which means, and whom they should consult. Only when they clearly identify the stakeholders, they step up the work. Shiva Shakti Empowerment Center did not do things any differently. First, they raised their problems with ward office through the written application drawing the attention of Municipality. They also wrote an application to division office of irrigation and water resource division. "Now we are waiting and assessing through which office we can get this job done," said Durga.

The women of this center have learned many valuable lessons while drawing attention of various authorities toward their problems. They have learned that while demanding any project they have to first consult the municipal council. Before they go to any authority seeking project, they should be familiar with the rules and regulations. Only then, they will be able to bargain from the position of strength with the authorities. They have learned that if they raise the issue collectively and clearly, they are more likely to be heard. These are the lessons these women have learned. They have learned that they should constantly update themselves regarding the progress being made on their demands and letters. The source of all this learning is the discussion session in their Empowerment Center.

Shiva Shakti Women Empowerment Center has gone extra miles in advocacy. Together with

neighboring empowerment center, it led the 16 days' activism against gender violence and it has also marked international disaster reduction day. It has initiated the cleanliness campaign in the village. According to Durga, this has raised the awareness level to the greater height.

Durga is confident and feels reassured because she has found a platform to raise the problems facing her community. She is thankful to TROSA which helped them to form the empowerment center.

I am impressed

The Women Empowerment Center opened in our village is strong and empowered. This is very sensitive to the problems facing riverine communities. Therefore, I have been supporting them in literally every initiative from preservation of forest to cleanliness, to organizing mega events, drinking water and irrigation. It is important to support women's initiative because without raising the status of women who make more than half of the country's population, we cannot think of the country's development. I firmly believe that society cannot move forward by sidelining women leadership. They have demanded projects related to irrigation and drinking water. As a local, I understand their problem very well. As much assistance as possible will be provided for this cause. I will do all I can to address their problem as soon as possible. Since most male members leave the country for foreign employment, women are the ones who have sustained the society and families. Therefore, their concerns must be heard. It is right that the women themselves have taken the lead in getting their problems solved. I have been really impressed by the way women empowerment center have been actively working to solve problems facing the village. This had to be done.

Bhim Bahadur Saud
Mayor, Parshuram Municipality, Dadeldhura

