

The silent revolution of Nepali women



Sustainable Soil Management Program Kathmandu, Nepal

in collaboration with
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Kusma, Parbat



Mangalsen village in western Nepal



A woman from Mangalsen in front of her "Katero"



Women are now breaking free from the shackles of the "Chhaupadi" system

Nepali women have traditionally been playing a crucial role in the agricultural sector of Nepal. Yet, as this example illustrates, rural women are still caught in their traditional roles. They are subordinate to men in virtually every aspect of life, their access to education is limited and their income-generating opportunities are inferior to those of Nepali men.

What Laxmi never dared to do?

It was a special day in the life of Laxmi Bhun of Mangalsen village in Western Nepal. She had decided to break an age-old practice called "Chhaupadi" that forces women in Hindu communities in the West of Nepal to spend seven days during menstruation in "exile" in a small cowshed or a special cottage called "Katero." Belief has it that women during their menstruation period are not pure and therefore should not touch food, people, animals, and fruit trees. *"I believed throughout my life that if a menstruating woman does not follow the "Chhaupadi" system, the community would be troubled by wild beasts, the cows will stop producing milk and snakes will trouble us,"* comments Laxmi.

Following several gender sensitisation workshops organized by a local NGO – the Society Development and Awareness Centre (SODAC) – with support from the Sustainable Soil Management Programme and CARE Nepal, Laxmi realized that it was time to break this age-old taboo. *"Initially, I was afraid that something bad might happen because I had violated the "Chhaupadi" system. A small piece of land, one buffalo and one cow is all we possess. I feared that my livestock might die or stop producing milk and that my neighbors would avoid me. Luckily, neither my family nor our animals got sick and no other misfortune struck our village. Some neighbors were very suspicious in the beginning but once they saw that nothing bad had happened, they forgave me and some of them now even follow my example."*



Mrs. Basyal preparing fermented urine

“Gopal’s wife” becomes “Mrs. Basyal”

Gopal and Jasuda Basyal live on a small farm in Urampokhari, a remote village in Western Nepal. Jasuda has been married to Gopal for many years and, till recently, everyone knew her simply as “Gopal’s wife.” She did what most women in her village do: She took care of her children, did the household chores, collected fodder and helped in the fields. In 2003, she was invited to attend a training on soil fertility management organized by the Center for Community Resource and Environmental Development (CeCRED), a local NGO that is supported by SSMP. During the course of the training, one particular topic captured her imagination: The fact that cattle urine is a very powerful organic fertilizer, provided it is collected, fermented, and applied to the crops.

Thus far, they had never bothered about their animals’ urine and most of it had been wasted. When Jasuda returned home, she decided to put into practice what she had learned. *“Initially, when I started collecting urine, others made fun of me saying ‘Gopal’s wife’ has gone mad. But I ignored them and used the urine in my vegetable garden. The result really took me by surprise as well as those who had laughed at me. My cauliflower’s grew bigger and were tastier than those that had been grown with the aid of mineral fertilizer. I am now producing fermented urine regularly. Since I don’t need all of it for myself, I have started a small business by selling the remaining urine. In this way, I earn NRs 75 daily.”* This is equivalent to around 1.20 CHF and sufficient to buy more than five kilograms of rice.

Nobody makes fun of Jasuda anymore, instead many of her critics have turned into her clients and even come to her to purchase fermented urine and seek advice on how to utilize it properly. As a result, people have begun addressing her respectfully as “Mrs. Basyal” instead of “Gopal’s wife” and even her father in law now helps out by preparing the fermented urine.

Hence, when the Sustainable Soil Management Program (SSMP), a joint undertaking of His Majesty’s Government (HMG) of Nepal and the Government of Switzerland, was initiated in 1999, it embraced as its guiding principle the equal participation of both men and women in any activity that it would undertake. Of the 50,000 farmers involved nowadays in SSMP-supported activities, more than 25,000 are women.

This is an encouraging achievement, but SSMP and its partners still felt that a lot more needed to be done to improve the status of women in rural areas.” In 2001, SSMP and interested partners therefore decided to take their activities one step further. Jointly, a set of tailor-made gender sensitisation tools were developed and used with the aim of stimulating women and men to discuss, reflect and review their roles and responsibilities. The case studies presented here illustrate the impact of these gender sensitisation activities on the life of rural women in Nepal.



Mrs. Basyal’s father-in-law collecting cattle urine



Other farmers are trained by Mrs. Basyal in the use of fermented urine

Practising what we preach

Although they are based on experiences of individual women or communities, they are representative for the broader impact of the programme. An important lesson learnt so far is that change is possible and is happening in real life. It often starts at family level and then gradually spreads to villages and local organisations. At the same time, it is our experience that these complex social changes need time and a great deal of dedication, patience and tact on part of the facilitators.

It all looked like a routine gender sensitisation workshop that the Equitable Development Centre (EDC), one of SSMP's partner organisations in the Far-West of Nepal, was going to organise in Khatiwada village in December, 2002. However, at the end of the workshop, the male EDC trainer was in for a surprise when Mrs. Naru Devi B.K. stood up and asked *"Sir, what you are saying about gender equity is well and fine and we will be working towards what we have learnt today. But I was just wondering why we never get to meet any female staff from your organisation. It would be nice if we could meet some of them so that we can talk more freely as they will be able to relate to our problems more."*

This question caught the trainer unaware since there were no women staff in the organisation. However, EDC accepted the challenge and now 40% of its executive committee and six of their staff are women. Other partner organisations of SSMP have undergone similar experiences and, as a result, the number of female staff in these organisations, too, is gradually increasing.



A scene of Western Nepal