

# Getting results in rural Nepal



Since Raising Her Voice began in Nepal in 2008, over 1,200 leadership positions in local decision-making bodies have been filled by women; there is evidence of a change in attitude towards women's rights at local and national levels; and the project has contributed to the passing of a national law on violence against women. An awareness-raising campaign has reached more than 80,000 people nationwide.

## Background

Gender discrimination is a major cause of poverty in Nepal, and domestic violence is endemic. Traditional beliefs about the roles and worth of women has reduced their participation in political, social and economic life; increased their vulnerability to violence; and kept them – and their families – in poverty. The many barriers to women's participation have resulted in a lack of capacity, self-confidence and freedom of choice among women.

## Objectives

Raising Her Voice is being implemented in three rural districts of Nepal: Dailekh, Surkhet and Bardiya. Oxfam is working in partnership with three local NGOs (one in each district) and three national NGOs, each with a distinct geographical focus or area of expertise. The project aims to:

- Increase poor and marginalised women's representation in community decision-making bodies, and strengthen their ability to influence decisions.
- Ensure that selected community decision-making bodies promote increased participation of women, and selected public institutions develop and implement laws, policies and strategies to reduce violence against women.
- Enhance the capacity of project partners and activists to advocate for women's participation in local governance structures and to combat domestic violence.
- Create strong popular opinion in favour of increased women's participation in public life and against domestic violence.



## Achievements

### Increased awareness, confidence and group solidarity through community discussion classes

Community discussion classes are the project's main strategy for raising awareness and participation among poor and marginalised women. There are 81 discussion groups across the three districts, and around 2,100 women regularly take part for two hours daily. Local community facilitators use visual aids to initiate discussion on women's rights and issues affecting women's lives. Participants formulate action plans to tackle specific problems identified by the group.

### Enhanced capacity to advocate for women's rights

Management committee members, social mobilisers and local activists have received training in facilitation, leadership skills and advocacy. More than 37 per cent of community discussion class participants have also taken part in leadership and advocacy training. This has enabled women to link with their local village development committees and to claim ring-fenced, but often unclaimed, budget allocations for women's development. There are examples in all project districts of women's groups tapping into financial resources to implement their own development initiatives that respond to local needs.

## Increased women's participation in decision-making bodies

Because there is currently no elected local government in Nepal, the project has focused on increasing women's participation in the four key community decision-making bodies that impact on women's lives: Community Forest User Groups, School Management Committees, Sub-Health Post Management Committees, and Drinking Water and Sanitation User Groups. Community discussion class participants learn how these organisations function, the roles played by representatives, and how to apply for a position. As a result, 487 women have taken on leadership roles in these organisations, increasing women's participation from 28 per cent to 48 per cent. An additional 766 class participants have joined other community-level committees, such as Parent-Teacher Associations. There is clear evidence of women positively influencing decision making in these bodies.

## Increased public commitment to promote women's rights

Project initiatives have sought to influence the four target decision-making bodies to introduce policies to increase women's representation. The umbrella organisations of two of them have committed to increasing women's representation to 50 per cent. At a national policy level, Raising Her Voice has contributed to better enforcement of the Domestic Violence (Crime and Punishment) Regulations 2010, an important step towards enhanced women's rights in Nepal. The government also committed funds to set up shelters for victims of domestic violence.

## Strong popular support generated

The project has implemented a number of activities to communicate women's rights issues to a wider audience in Nepal, working in partnership with the media and building relationships with community listeners' clubs. For example, a weekly radio programme, produced by project partner Radio Sagarmatha and aired from three district radio stations, raises awareness of issues around women's participation in governance and violence against women.

## Evidence of a shift in gender relations

The confidence of women participating in the community discussion classes has greatly increased

and they have a new belief in their abilities. There is also evidence of a gradual shift in gender relations within the household. Thanks to the classes, there is also a new openness about domestic violence – and women are finding strength in numbers to tackle it (see box).

## Tackling domestic violence together

Fed up with being subjected to violence at the hands of their drunken husbands, women attending the classes in Sorahawa, Bardiya district, decided to impose a fine of 500 rupees on any man who beats his wife or other female household member after being warned not to by the women's group. A class member explains: "Now our husbands go quietly off to sleep, fearing that [if they are violent] they will lose face in the community and have to cough up the fine."

## Lessons

- The project has benefited from working with both national- and district-level partners, who have built trust with different constituencies. For example, by working together, national-level partners are able to draw on the experience of poor women to influence national policy, and in some instances poor women have travelled to the capital to talk directly to decision-makers.
- Bringing community members together regularly to take ongoing collective action is a more effective way to achieve changes in policy and practice than holding one-off workshops and meetings.
- Women's representation is increasing in community decision-making bodies but they still need support to be effective leaders.
- Raising Her Voice has begun engaging men to support its aims and influence others, which has had a greater impact than working with women alone.

*"We were largely invisible because we could not speak our mind. We could not speak because we were never encouraged to speak by our family and society. We have realised that it is not as difficult as we thought to break this barrier."*

Project participant

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Raising Her Voice is a five-year programme which promotes the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels. This is to be achieved through enabling their voices to be heard and increasing their influence, and by making institutions more accountable to women.

Working through local partners in 17 countries, Raising Her Voice has significant funding from DFID and is co-ordinated by Oxfam GB.

