

# BROKERING PEACE AND STRENGTHENING

## NEPAL'S SOCIAL FABRIC WITH GENDER EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

The losses from the April 25 earthquake and the multiple aftershocks thereafter are profound and irreparable. Yet, as Nepal and the global community focus on building back a better Nepal, we have an opportunity to also build a more equal, just, and inclusive Nepali society. “Build back better” applies to more than just reconstruction efforts. It implies creating a space to right the gender wrongs in the country.

Nepal had been undergoing a social shift long before the April 25 quake. With men rapidly becoming migrant workers over the last decade, women steadily stepped into social decision-making roles that were never theirs traditionally. Today, this social transformation is visible across Nepal, and women’s contributions and leadership are all the more apparent.

Here, we provide a snapshot of the gender inclusion and empowerment efforts by USAID’s Conflict Mediation and Mitigation Programs.

Bal Kumari (GC), from Kawasoti, Nawalparasi was pregnant when her husband went missing during the armed conflict. Afraid for her own security, she kept quiet about her husband’s disappearance, struggling to provide for herself and her family. Nine years later, she finally found an economic lifeline after the USAID supported SAMBAD: Dialogue for Peace program helped her become a peace volunteer. More confident and optimistic, GC now counsels conflict victims and has helped many conflict-affected children receive scholarships. As a conflict victim herself, she understands their fears and grief, and is diligent and proactive in her efforts. When GC gained access to the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction’s list of conflict-affected people, she worked to identify and help those missing from that list – conflict survivors who are entitled to state benefits but were excluded. GC is also deeply committed to encouraging conflict-affected women to become entrepreneurs. Thanks to her persistence and efforts, 25 such individuals have already begun small businesses in her village. Among those, 15 are women belonging to a broad range of caste and ethnic groups. GC also went on to become a member of the government’s Municipality Level Peace Committee; her able leadership helped ensure 50 percent representation of women and conflict-affected people in the committee, paving the way for people who genuinely understand the issues to participate in decision making.

The SAMBAD: Dialogue for Peace program has worked with hundreds of other conflict-affected Nepalis like Bal Kumari GC. SAMBAD is part of the USAID-funded Conflict Mediation and Mitigation Program (CMM), which supports NGOs and civil society to address the social aspects of conflict using a person-to-person approach. With gender inequality and social exclusion identified as the primary drivers of conflict in Nepal, CMM activities focus on integrating women and disadvantaged groups into community dialogue and peace-building activities.



PHOTO: USAID SAMBAD PROGRAM

In an effort to resolve anger, frustration, isolation, stigma, and dissatisfaction with local authorities and decision making processes, SAMBAD focuses on three key areas:

- empowerment of women and marginalized groups through capacity building, psychosocial counselling and mentoring for economic engagement;
- inclusive structures of power and decision making through representation in all local and community decision making mechanisms such as village-level peace committees, citizen forums and community-based organizations; and
- relationship strengthening in the community through increased attention to sexual- and gender-based violence, and more individual and person-to-person dialogue and reconciliation.

In Kailali district in Far-Western Nepal, women are starting to break social norms for the very first time, stepping out of their households to interact with people outside their immediate family circle. Previously in Kailali district, it wasn’t okay for a woman to even interact with “strangers,” nor was it okay to conduct any activities outside the home. But now women from Durgauli in Kailali have become conflict mediators and are helping resolve disputes in their community. All this was possible in just a few months! USAID’s local governance program, Saajhedari, used inclusive strategies for mediator selection in the 11 Community Mediation Centers operating in Kailali. As a result, 45 percent of the mediators are female, of which 75 percent belong to the traditionally marginalized Terai Janajati group. All mediators were trained, but it is the women mediators who proved more active than their male counterparts; a remarkable 70 percent of the cases registered in Community Mediation Centers were resolved by women mediators.

The women mediators are also actively involved in forest user groups and ward citizen forums. They participate

in Village Development Committee (VDC) council meetings and successfully advocated for VDC budget resources to construct a vaccination center in Durgauli, helping provide better equity and access to vaccination services and cutting down on the distance women from Durgauli and adjoining VDCs must walk to vaccinate their families. “Women’s representation in Community Mediation Centers has truly been an empowering experience,” says Maria Barron, Director of USAID’s Democracy and Governance Office in Nepal. “These women are not only speaking up for their socioeconomic and political rights, but are also actively working to make things better – participating in conflict mediation and mitigation processes, fighting for inclusive local decision making, and making service delivery better.”

In Bardiya district, also in the Terai flatland close to the Indian border, members of the Kotahi Mahila Community Forest User Group (CFUG) of Dhodhari village were frustrated with their Executive Committee, citing non-inclusive and opaque decision-making processes. The Committee meetings were often held in the house of the president, and most members were left unaware of their dates and times. The decisions made were not shared with other members. Users weren’t given financial information, nor were there transparent systems in place to show how funds were used. Audit information and reports were similarly unavailable.

The CFUG members identified these as governance mismanagement and corrupt practices, and demanded a new, inclusive Executive Committee, which was established with support from the USAID-funded Inclusive Resource Management Initiative program in May 2014. The outgoing Committee, however, refused to hand over responsibilities and documents, and continued exercising their powers. Only after six months of consultations and serious involvement of senior district

leadership did the handover finally take place.

Yoga Kumari Gautam, who now heads the Executive Committee, is also the first female chairperson of the CFUG. Under her leadership, the Committee officially updated the bank account signatories. As a result of this restructuring, Kotahi Mahila CFUG has been conducting regular activities as per their own operational plan, including regular, open and participatory monthly meetings.

“We used a self-capacity assessment tool and it reflected the real status of our CFUG like a mirror,” Gautam, said, “After the self-capacity assessment, we’ve been able to make plans to improve how we manage and run our CFUG as per the assessment findings, and that has helped strengthen our CFUG.”

Currently, in coordination with the District Forest Office, the CFUG is implementing a forest animal shelter management program. At the regular CFUG monthly meetings, members discuss their community-endorsed economic and natural resource management initiatives. The Executive Committee is gender-, caste-, and ethnically-diverse. It has also been able to involve user groups in monthly meetings to make participatory, transparent decisions, which they recognize as being critical to trust building.

The new Committee also made a collective decision to open the forest every Saturday for firewood and other forest product collection for daily usage, according to their CFUG policies. Users are now much more aware that the conservation of their forest resources is their collective responsibility. Members of the community at large, as well as of the CFUG, appear to understand that women in leadership roles, can help improve governance and transparency, which together help mitigate conflict.

It is clear that decision-making structures have to be inclusive, participatory and transparent in order to reflect the needs and interests of various stakeholders. Women and marginalized group representation and participation in democratic decision-making has strengthened community ownership. When problems are addressed by a community well represented, with a little bit of external mediation support, they can be resolved creatively and by local actors.

The quake has placed an unprecedented burden and responsibility on Nepali women. In many villages, women have been at the forefront, clearing debris, rebuilding shelters, and providing for their families — all this, at a time when they would be focused on planting for the monsoon season. But when women are empowered, society becomes stronger. At USAID, we are honored to play a part in the lives of so many strong, resilient Nepali women who have so eagerly embraced the opportunity to provide a better future for their families and for their communities.

Learn more about USAID GESI efforts <http://www.usaid.gov/what-we-do/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment> ●