



# GESI MAINSTREAMING IN COVID-19 RESPONSE

**Stories of Change, Good Practices and Lessons Learned**  
2021 Edition

Developed by UN Women Nepal

**With Gender in Humanitarian Action Task Team (GiHA-TT) Participants**

Supported by the Government of Finland

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**Cover Photo**

Clockwise from L to R:

1. *Dhana Bista at work in her home-based tailoring shop. Photo: Narendra BK/EDC*
2. *Ramkali Mahato picking vegetable produce. Photo: Nishant Gurung/UN Women*
3. *Lilawaati Marasini at her dairy processing shop. Photo: ADBL*

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# ACRONYMS

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<b>ADBL</b>	Agricultural Development Bank Limited
<b>CAC-Nepal</b>	Community Action Centre Nepal
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
<b>CISMU- UNDSS</b>	Critical Incident Stress Management Unit – United Nations Department of Safety and Security
<b>CMC Nepal</b>	Centre for Mental Health and Counselling Nepal
<b>COVID-19</b>	Corona Virus Disease 2019
<b>CSN-FMB</b>	Community Safety Net – Feminist Movement Building
<b>CSOs</b>	Civil Society Organizations
<b>DRRM</b>	Disaster Risk Reduction Management
<b>DRRNSPA</b>	Disaster Risk Reduction National Strategic Plan of Action 2018-2030
<b>EDC/AAN</b>	Equality Development Centre/Action Aid Nepal
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
<b>FEDO</b>	Feminist Dalit Organization
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-Based Violence
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>GEDSI</b>	Gender, Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion
<b>GESI</b>	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
<b>GiHA-TT</b>	Gender in Humanitarian Action - Task Team
<b>IFAD</b>	International Fund for Agricultural Development
<b>JP RWEE</b>	Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards Rural Women’s Economic Empowerment (JP RWEE)
<b>KDAD</b>	Kavre Development Association of the Deaf
<b>LGBTIQ+</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual/gender, Intersex and Queer
<b>MHPSS</b>	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services
<b>MoWCSC</b>	Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens

<b>NGOs</b>	Non-Governmental Organizations
<b>NNDSWO</b>	Nepal National Dalit Social Welfare Organization
<b>NPR</b>	Nepalese Rupee
<b>NYC</b>	National Youth Council
<b>SYN</b>	Sangarsha Yuba Nepal
<b>TPO Nepal</b>	Transcultural Psychosocial Organization Nepal
<b>UK Aid</b>	United Kingdom Aid
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNCDF</b>	United Nations Capital Development Fund
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UN Women</b>	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
<b>USD</b>	United States Dollar
<b>WEE</b>	Women's economic empowerment
<b>WFDM</b>	Women-Friendly Disaster Management
<b>WHDRRMP</b>	Women Humanitarian Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Platform
<b>WHR</b>	Women for Human Rights
<b>Women Act</b>	Women Acting for Transformative Change
<b>WOREC</b>	Women's Rehabilitation Centre



# INTRODUCTION

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## Another challenging year

The year 2021 saw Nepal confront another string of humanitarian crises. A second and more devastating resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred between April and July, peaking to a seven-day rolling average of 9,000 infections and up to 200 fatalities.<sup>1</sup>

Against this backdrop, monsoon rains battered 47 districts across Nepal during the last quarter of the year, displacing and further exposing people to the risk of contracting COVID-19. Around 90,000 people in Nawalparasi, Rupandehi and Kapilvastu districts experienced the country's worst floods and landslides of the year, which severely damaged infrastructure and isolated many communities. These disasters devastated huge portions of ready-to-harvest agricultural crops, threatening food security among the affected populations.<sup>2</sup> During the same period, the Ministry of Health and Population reported that a cholera outbreak affected 885 people in Kapilvastu, Lumbini Province, with seven reported fatalities.<sup>3</sup> The year wrapped up with statistics that suggested an imminent third resurgence of COVID-19 in the country.

These crises further drained the survival resources of many people, with impacts being most felt among women and marginalised groups. Women's economic security has been further eroded by damages to Nepal's informal economy and agriculture sector, where women comprise 90.45 per cent of all workers,<sup>4</sup> widespread job loss and the closure of small and domestic businesses (61.03%, Nepal Rastra Bank, 2021).

## Advancing gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) in humanitarian action

Amid these challenges, the Gender in Humanitarian Action Task Team (GiHA-TT) remained steadfast in coordinating multi-stakeholder initiatives to ensure that women and most marginalised groups are positioned at the core of humanitarian efforts. In 2021, GiHA-TT conducted 10 virtual meetings involving 1,014 participants, or an average of 101 participants per meeting. In the years 2020 and 2021, GiHA-TT registered 293 participating agencies and organizations, comprised of: 19 government agencies; 225 national and international civil society and non-government organizations (CSOs/NGOs) and networks; 16 private sector, media and academic institutions; 12 development partners; and 21 United Nations (UN) agencies.

## GiHA-TT: Growing from strength to strength

The major strength of GiHA-TT's work continues to be the dynamic cooperation of its diverse team of humanitarian actors. Over the years, this multi-stakeholder coordination and advocacy mechanism has successfully facilitated constructive dialogues, promoted a diversity of voices demonstrating thought leadership and advanced effective strategies to achieve GESI-responsive results and leave no one behind in humanitarian efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> Kharel, Paras, UNESCAP South and South-West Asia-COVID-19 Updates No. 2, Nepal's fight against the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Available at: [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/25.2.22%20Nepal%20Paper\\_Covid.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/25.2.22%20Nepal%20Paper_Covid.pdf).

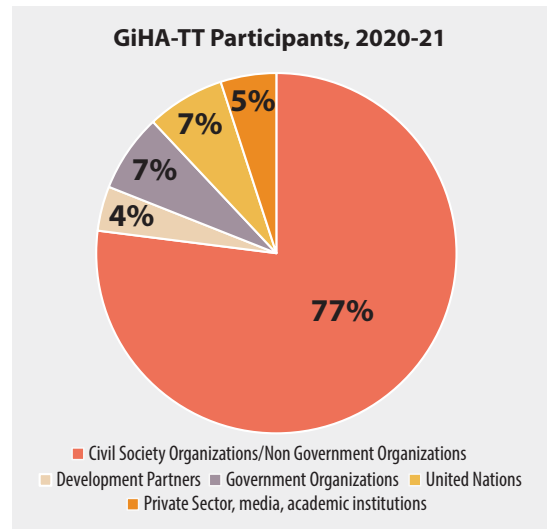
<sup>2</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/nepal-covid-19-pandemic-situation-report-no-49-1-november-2021>

<sup>3</sup> The Kathmandu Post, available at: cholera outbreak affecting 885 people in Kapilvastu.

<sup>4</sup> Nepal Labor Force Survey, 2017/18, available at: [https://nepalindata.com/media/resources/items/20/bNLFS-III\\_Final-Report.pdf](https://nepalindata.com/media/resources/items/20/bNLFS-III_Final-Report.pdf).

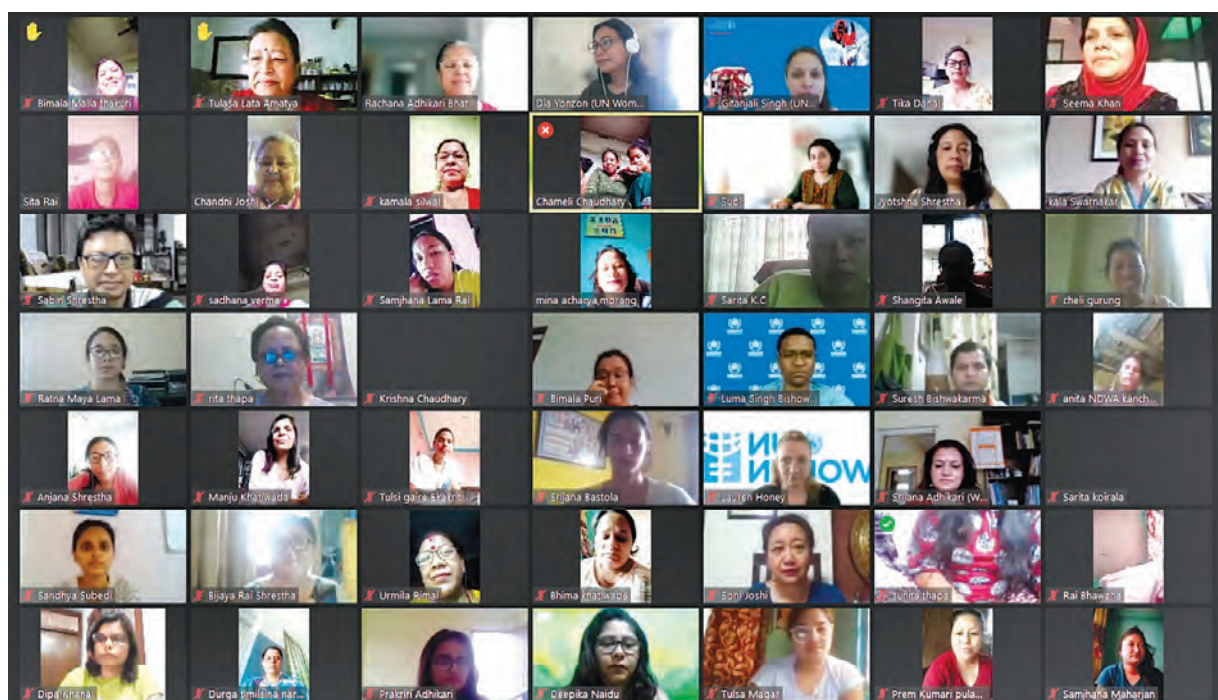
The GiHA-TT also serves as a platform for participants to: (a) collaborate and support a GESI focus in humanitarian responses, (b) learn from each other about effective approaches and access strategic information and analyses, (c) draw wisdom and inspiration from the breakthroughs achieved by other GiHA-TT members and (d) expand networks, opportunities and resources to improve their own GESI initiatives.

Chaired by the UN Women Nepal Country Office, GiHA-TT has been at the forefront of providing evidence-based analysis, recommendations and tools to advance GESI concerns in disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM). The **“GESI Mainstreaming in COVID-19 Response: Stories of Change, Good Practices and Lessons Learned, 2021 Edition”** is one of such initiatives. With this publication, GiHA-TT honours its participants and partners who have enabled women and many marginalised groups to live through the crises thanks to their hard work, innovativeness, creativity and commitment to leaving no one behind. The stories of change, good practices and lessons learned were drawn from ideas shared during the 2021 GiHA-TT meetings and the stories of its diverse participants and partners. Altogether, the publication conveys a message of strength in collectivity – that innovations lead to effective solutions and build wider pathways to unity and resilience.



Once again, GiHA-TT invites readers to connect with these stories, send in comments and adapt these good practices to appropriate circumstances. Let this be another step forward in Nepal’s journey towards sustained strength and resilience.

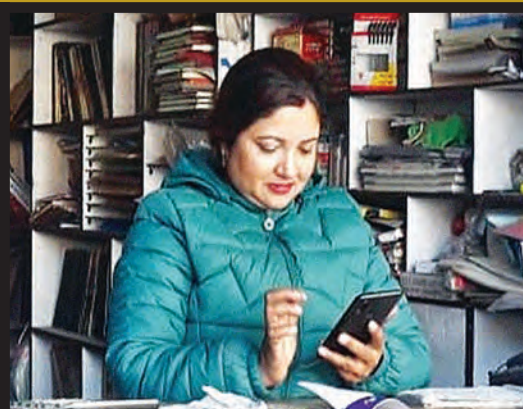
### Task Team Meeting, 8 June 2021







# STORIES OF CHANGE, GOOD PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED





# 1

## INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH



I have income, I know my rights and I can give my kids a better chance at life

**One woman's journey from engaging in sex work to advocating for women's rights.**

Roshmita, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, is a 35-year-old woman from the Dalit community. She has two children, who are now 16 and 19 years old. Growing up, she had a tumultuous relationship with her abusive step-mother and at age 17, she eloped with a man who fathered her two kids but abandoned them soon after. In this story, she describes her journey to a new life as a micro-entrepreneur.

Each day, I wake up excited to sell my products. It all began in 2021 after the second COVID-19 lockdown, when I was overwhelmed with anxiety about keeping my family going. With the support of UN Women and the Government of Finland, the Community Action Centre Nepal (CAC-Nepal) brought comprehensive relief support to me – multiple times – which included food, a gas stove, cylinder, medicine, seeds and fertilizers and a mobile phone, which I learned to use with their guidance.

CAC-Nepal representatives informed me that they were giving out rolling carts and asked what I would like to sell if I had one. I chose to sell slippers because vegetables rot easily and clothes could get discoloured when drenched in the rain. So, they taught me business skills and gave me money to stock my cart. From slipper vending, I earn around 800-1,000 Nepalese Rupees (NPR), which is equivalent to 7-8<sup>5</sup> United States Dollar (USD) per day. This income supports our needs. I hope to expand my business by adding shoes and warm socks for the winter.



Roshmita received a cart from CAC-Nepal and started a rolling-cart vending business in the neighbourhood in 2021. Photo: CAC-Nepal

<sup>5</sup> All NPR currency conversions to USD were based on the exchange rate reference of the Nepal Rastra Bank as of 31 December 2021, which was NPR 118.76 per USD. Available at: <https://www.nrb.org.np/forex/>

When my husband left in 2010, I knew that it would be very difficult to raise my kids alone. I was not trained in any skills. My formal education is limited and I had no work experience. I considered working as a domestic helper. However, because of my caste identity, I knew people would stop me from touching water, entering kitchens or cooking in their houses – a form of discrimination, which is against the law. Desperate to feed my kids and without support from my family or the government, I turned to sex work. This is frowned upon and considered an indecent job, but it gave me income that fed my kids. It is a tough job, as I had to risk my life and endure violence from some customers.

CAC-Nepal taught me and other women engaged in sex work how to protect ourselves from sexually transmitted diseases. Being able to protect myself gave me a sense of security, but later, the police raided our place and I was jailed for human trafficking. I lost contact with my kids. I was released after four years and found my younger son deep into drugs, so I brought him to a rehabilitation centre. But again, there was no work for me. I returned to sex work to make ends meet, but during the pandemic, I had no clients.

I participated in a training by CAC-Nepal, Maiti Nepal and Forum for Women, Law and Development, where I learned about the rights of women engaged in sex work, the roots of sexual violence and laws criminalising this offense. I realised that I was jailed for human trafficking because there is legal ambiguity on whether sex work is illegal or not. To justify my imprisonment, I was accused of another crime. CAC-Nepal and its partners taught me to speak publicly about the rights of women engaged in sex work and the issues that affect them – at one time, in the presence of the Minister of the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens (MoWCSC) and representatives of government and NGOs. There, I stressed that, unlike human trafficking, sex work is not a crime. It is illegal to jail a person engaged in sex work on charges of human trafficking. I still do sex work to save money for the schooling of my kids. But now, I have an alternate livelihood, I know my rights and I am able to give my kids a better chance at life. The livelihood support and public speaking opportunities I've had to raise concerns among leaders have all been very empowering.



## GOOD PRACTICES

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### 1. Training gender-based violence survivors in employable skills

The MoWCSC applies intersectionality in its approaches. It defines intersectionality as “a framework for conceptualising a person, group of people or social problem as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages, taking into account people’s overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of prejudices they face”<sup>6</sup>

In 2021, MoWCSC implemented a skills development project on shoemaking for 20 women survivors of human trafficking and gender-based violence (GBV) in Godawari,

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<sup>6</sup> Source: MoWCSC’s written contribution to this publication, 2 November 2022.

a municipality in Lalitpur, Nepal. The goal was to scale up this project once further resources became available. Winrock International and PD Footwear provided funding and technical support, respectively. Of the 20 participants, 10 are now employed in various footwear factories, earning 12,000-20,000 NPR (101-168 USD) a month. The project also provided: (a) small capital assistance and technical follow-up to the participants who chose self-entrepreneurship and (b) referrals to those who preferred formal employment. A 32-year-old participant shares:

“ I was a survivor of human trafficking, but after I was rescued, my family refused to accept me. I had nowhere to go, but I refused to give up. I approached the MoWCSC and asked for guidance and support. The Ministry gave me counselling and included me in its skills training for shoemaking. I was in the five-month residential training, learning how to make shoes for women. Then, they helped me apply for employment in a local footwear factory. Now, I am earning up to 20,000 NPR (168 USD) monthly, depending on how many shoes I produce. I have achieved financial independence – I’m able to support myself and save for the future. Recognising my ability to recover from my unfortunate past, my parents and siblings have started to respect and accept me back in the family”.

The MoWCSC is hoping to secure funding for the continuity of this initiative, especially because it opens up opportunities for GBV and human trafficking survivors to rebuild their lives. Ensuring sustainable funding to cover the trainings and capital of new participants remains a huge challenge.

## 2. **Enabling marginalised individuals to obtain their citizenship certificates**

Lacking Nepali citizenship impedes a person’s quest for a better life, especially during humanitarian crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it prevented many marginalised people from accessing government services and support, including vaccinations, relief and cash distribution, medical aid and access to quarantine centres. Under no circumstance should anyone be without a citizenship certificate.

The lack of citizenship is prejudicial to girls’ claims for inheritance in Nepal because of a prevailing discriminatory norm that denies inheritance to daughters with no citizenship. It serves to reinforce other factors that block the right to inheritance among daughters, such as: (a) patriarchal norms that don't see women/girls as equal human beings to men, (b) uncooperative attitudes of officials issuing citizenship certificates, (c) lack of support from family members and (d) lack of knowledge and information on filing requirements and procedures. Also, women are often married before the age of attaining citizenship, which forces them to rely on their spouse for citizenship.

Cognizant of these issues, UN Women Nepal and its partners provide guidance to marginalised women and LGBTIQ+ people to obtain their citizenship certificate and other



documents. Under a joint programme between UN Women Nepal and UNESCO titled “Empowering Adolescent Girls and Young Women through the Provision of Comprehensive Sexuality Education and a Safe Learning Environment in Nepal”, Aasaman Nepal provided handholding support to 210 adolescent and young women from Achham, Bajura and Sunsari to acquire a citizenship certificate. Supported by the Korean International Cooperation Agency, the initiative facilitated their access to skills trainings, skill test certificates from the Commission on Technical and Vocational Education and Training and seed fund facilities, including from the government.

With support from the Government of Finland, UN Women Nepal’s partner, the Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO) also enabled 166 women from excluded groups and their children to acquire their citizenship documents, birth certificates and voter identity cards. A total of 977 women who have identity documents were also supported in opening bank accounts, through which they were able to save money and access financial services from local governments and financial institutions.

Meanwhile, people availing mental health services through Koshish Nepal who do not have citizenship documents are also being provided with coordination, accompaniment support and assistance to fill out and file their citizenship applications.

In 2021, Koshish Nepal assisted 19 marginalised individuals (1 LGBTIQ+ person, 13 women and 5 men) to acquire their citizenship certificates. One of them was Saraswoti, an LGBTIQ+ person who grew up with no known parents in Nepalgunj, a sub-metropolitan city in Banke District. She lived for 50 years without a citizenship certificate. She shares:



*In 2021, Saraswoti received food and non-food support, such as hygiene and sanitary supplies, from Koshish Nepal as part of its relief distribution, with support from UN Women Nepal and the Government of Finland. Koshish Nepal also helped her obtain her citizenship certificate. Photo: Koshish Nepal*

“ The counselling from Koshish Nepal gave me a more enlightened perspective about myself and the discrimination that I experience. I understood why LGBTIQ+ people live challenging lives. I also recognised that lacking a citizenship certificate deprives me not only of services and opportunities but other rights and entitlements of a Nepali as well.

So, with the help of Koshish Nepal, I became more determined to solve my issues related to legal identity. My counsellor and community-based volunteer at Koshish Nepal helped me search for a person who knew me during my birth. My application was filed, and after eight days, I received my citizenship certificate. I am very grateful and I plan to pay back this blessing by helping elderly LGBTIQ+ people in minority communities”.

### 3. Distributing comprehensive relief packages through an intersectional lens<sup>7</sup>

An intersectional lens is like “a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other”.<sup>8</sup>

UN Women Nepal’s *comprehensive relief package* ([UN Women Nepal and the COVID-19 response - YouTube](#)) is an example of applying an intersectional approach to humanitarian assistance. The package was designed with an intersectional lens to address multiple disadvantages that block the capability of marginalised individuals to help themselves. Local governments prioritised its distribution in communities where people are mostly marginalised, such as sexual and gender minorities, single women, adolescent girls, women with disabilities, women living with HIV/AIDS, pregnant and lactating women, Muslim women, indigenous women, Dalit women, returnee women migrant workers, women engaged in sex work, domestic workers, trafficked women, survivors of gender-based violence, homeless women, women home-based workers and women engaged in wage work and daily labour. The package has two primary components:



*Nirmala Pariyar, who works in a farm in Hetauda, a city in Makwanpur district, is keen to improve her family’s economic situation through the cash support. “I have informed my brothers to keep a few goats ready,” she says. “I want to buy them as soon as I get the cash support”.*  
Photo: Srijana Nepal

- **Cash-based support** – This is a financial grant that enables individuals who are unable to earn during the pandemic to cope with their immediate survival needs and own money to invest in livelihood activities. It is distributed in the amount of 2,800 NPR (24 USD) per person and 13,500 NPR (114 USD) per household, which has been established by the Humanitarian Country Team’s Cash Coordination Group. Taking into consideration the intersectional needs of women, UN Women Nepal included three additional cash components, namely: (a) 200 NPR (1.20 USD) for women needing childcare support, (b) 2,000 NPR (17 USD) for pregnant or lactating women and (c) 2,000 NPR (17 USD) for women living with disabilities.
- **Access to coping tools and services** – This component includes access to nutritious food, energy, essential supplies, information and essential services, such as psychosocial counselling, legal counselling, financial services and digital services.

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from “Comprehensive relief package provides support to women and excluded groups during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal”, an article by Subeksha Poudel, published by UN Women Asia and the Pacific in October 2021. Available at: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2021/10/relief-package-provides-support-to-women-and-excluded-groups-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-nepal>

<sup>8</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American law professor, coined the term ‘intersectional feminism’ in 1989.

With support from the Government of Finland, Fondation CHANEL and UK Aid, UN Women Nepal has distributed comprehensive relief packages across Nepal in collaboration with the MoWCSC, local governments, World Food Programme, United Nations Development Programme and various CSOs, including Women Act, Mandwi, FEDO and Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC). Between May 2020 and November 2021, over 4,085 individuals across Nepal benefitted from the comprehensive relief package.



## CONSIDER THIS

“ Intersectionality is a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power. It is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalise people – gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc.”<sup>9</sup>

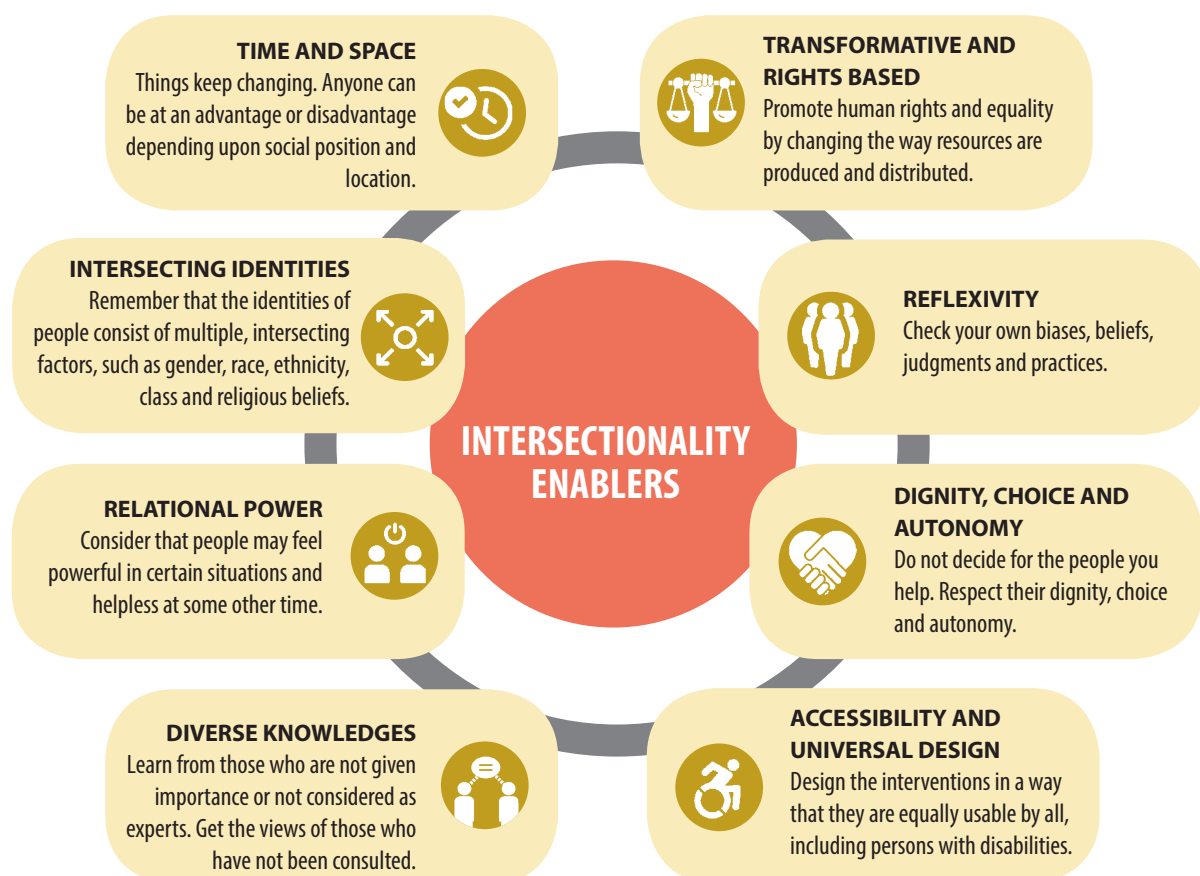
Using an intersectionality lens gives visibility to people who are often missed by vital interventions, especially during crises. An intersectionality approach is important in uncovering interlocking disadvantages that impair the ability of women and marginalised groups to help themselves. As such, it informs responders to design and deliver tailor-fit support that rebuilds confidence and resilience during humanitarian crises, especially among the most marginalised.

### Consider the eight enablers of intersectionality

Leaving no one behind requires a deliberate focus on the most marginalised. In humanitarian situations, responders must recognise that they are supporting people with intersecting vulnerabilities. Applying an intersectionality approach requires analysing each individual's needs and packaging a response that will not only provide relief but also lead them to a path of empowerment. Along this line, the *Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit*, created by UN Women and the UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, identifies eight 'intersectionality enablers' for consideration while working with marginalised people. These enablers are useful points of reflection for stakeholders as they plan interventions for women, vulnerable and excluded groups.

<sup>9</sup> UNPRPD and UN Women, *Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit*, available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Intersectionality-resource-guide-and-toolkit-easy-to-read-en.pdf>





Source: *Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit*, by the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and UN Women.

## Fulfil the right to citizenship for every Nepali

Discriminatory provisions on nationality/citizenship in the 2015 Constitution of Nepal should be reformed in compliance with Article 9(2) of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to which Nepal is a signatory. The CEDAW Committee, in its Concluding Observations to Nepal's Sixth Periodic Report, recommended that the Government of Nepal: "Repeal all remaining constitutional and legal provisions that discriminate against women and girls, in particular in the areas of nationality, distribution of marital property upon divorce, and access to employment abroad".<sup>10</sup> This recommendation urges the government to specifically repeal the concerned constitutional provision on citizenship so that women can independently confer nationality to their children and spouses on equal basis as men.

During crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, people who lack citizenship documents face additional barriers and marginalisation. These include people who are left behind in normal, non-crisis times – single women, disadvantaged caste/ethnic groups, people with disabilities, migrants, returnee migrants, elderly people, refugees,

<sup>10</sup> Article 9(2) of CEDAW Convention reads as follows: "States Parties shall grant women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children". The CEDAW Committee's recommendation to Nepal through its Concluding Observations to Nepal in 2018 (CEDAW/C/NPL/CO/6) reads as follows: (para. 31 (a & b)): **Nationality** 31. The Committee, in line with its general recommendation No. 32 (2014) on the gender-related dimensions of refugee status, asylum, nationality and statelessness of women and its previous recommendations (CEDAW/C/NPL/CO/4-5, para. 26), recommends that the State party: (a) Amend or repeal all discriminatory provisions in its Constitution that are contradictory to article 9 (2) of . . ."

informal sector workers, daily wage workers, women engaged in sex work and LGBTIQ+ people. Therefore, it is critical to ensure that no one is discriminated or deprived of relief, rescue and multisectoral services in times of crisis, including the pandemic.

There should be measures in place to protect people from such discrimination. For example, marginalised people may be allowed to use substitute proof of identity, such as a recommendation from a Ward-level office. Also, marginalised groups and people deprived of legal identity and citizenship should be supported and accompanied to get legal identity and citizenship documents. This will help ensure that they don't face such barriers, both during crisis and in normal times.

### **Apply an intersectional approach to humanitarian interventions**

An intersectional approach rejects 'one-size-fits-all' thinking. The interventions provided to Roshmita, in the above story, focused on every factor that weakens her capability to live a better life. The responses addressed her lack of skills and livelihood; psychological trauma due to tumultuous experiences with her stepmother, husband and customers; four years of imprisonment; lack of knowledge about her rights; and the exclusionary effect of being discriminated against as a so-called untouchable.

The comprehensive relief package, on the other hand, was designed and implemented based on a sound understanding of the intersecting factors that reinforce disadvantages among marginalised people during the pandemic. The top-up cash for women needing childcare support, pregnant or lactating women and/or those living with disabilities is groundbreaking, as it highlights the specific needs of women that are usually rendered invisible in "one-size-fits-all" interventions. The incorporation of coping tools, such as information and digital services, recognises that marginalised people are further imperilled when they do not have access to information and digital technologies through which critical information is channelled. The package also covers referral services to essential services, such as mental health counselling and legal support, due to the increased incidence of GBV and mental health issues during lockdown and other stresses brought by the pandemic. In both cases, this intersectionality approach helped empower the participants to manage their difficulties and engage in livelihood activities that move them from crisis to self-reliant recovery.

## 2 BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

“ Digital marketing increased my profit by over 50 per cent during the pandemic<sup>11</sup>

**One entrepreneur with a hearing disability recovered her business through digital marketing.**

Rose Shrestha, 55, is a deaf entrepreneur from the indigenous Newar community in Banepa municipality, which is a 50-minute drive from Kathmandu, Nepal's capital. After learning sign language, she managed to start a thriving business, increased her networks and formed a business cooperation group for women with disabilities. All of these accomplishments were threatened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rose's story is one of determination, creativity and resilience amid adversity, highlighting the importance of appropriate support by local organizations and the use of digital technology in fostering resilience and business productivity.

I was in grade six when I lost my sense of hearing due to typhoid fever. I could no longer continue my schooling because the school did not have a sign language interpretation facility. It was the Kavre Development Association of the Deaf (KDAD) that enabled me to learn sign language, 14 years later. This skill helped me improve my relationships with people and empowered me to pursue entrepreneurship. So, I took vocational trainings from the Centre for Resilient Individuals, Families and Communities and *Sakchyamta Bikash Samaj*.<sup>12</sup> Later, I produced and sold post cards, reusable sanitary pads, embroidered items and woven handicrafts.

My business took off smoothly. I marketed my products to people and organizations and attended meetings to pick up ideas and business contacts. I also formed a group for women with disabilities to collaborate in producing and promoting our products. Our businesses were thriving, but everything changed with the outbreak of COVID-19 as we



*Shrestha, a deaf woman entrepreneur who recovered her business from losses caused by the pandemic in 2021. Photo: Tayar Nepal*

<sup>11</sup> This story is shared by Rose Shrestha through *Tayar Nepal* with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). All stories from *Tayar Nepal* in this publication have been made possible by the support of the American People through the USAID. The contents are the sole responsibility of *Tayar Nepal*, and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

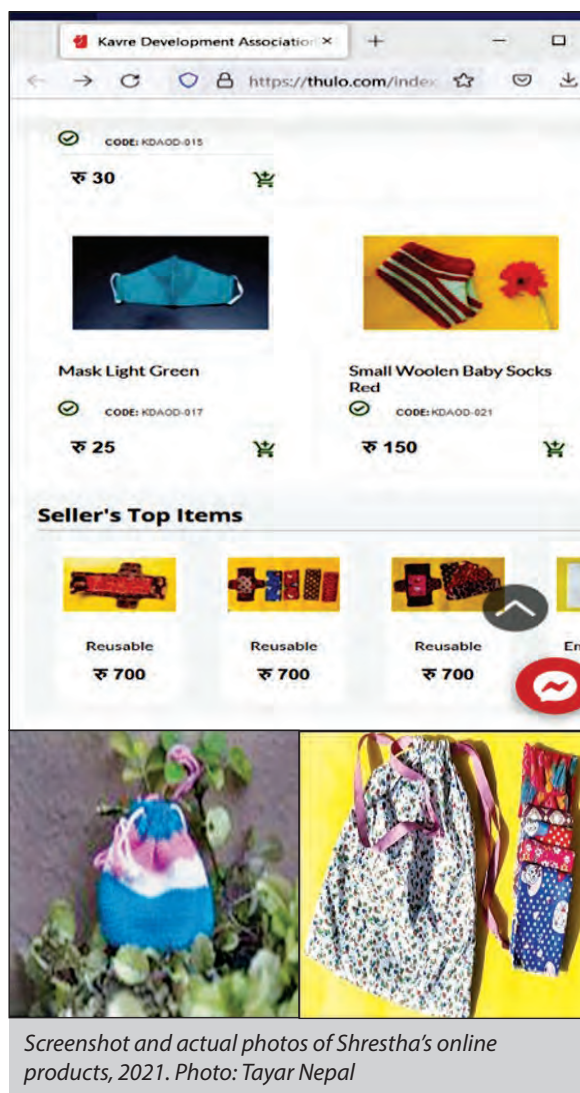
<sup>12</sup> *Sakchyamta Bikash Samaj* means 'Capable Development Society'.



could not buy materials and sell our products. Our businesses ceased to be lucrative. I worried about my survival because I am single and I do not want to be a burden to my family.

Then, I learned through KDAD that USAID's Tayar Nepal was reaching out to entrepreneurs like me. In partnership with its grantee, Thulo.com, and the Enterprise Management, Economic Reform and Gender Equality, Pvt. Ltd., Tayar Nepal implemented a rescue, recovery and resilience-building response for women's micro, small and medium enterprises as well as home-based women producers' businesses, including mine.<sup>13</sup>

Using sign language interpretation, we were trained on the basics of digital technology in business management, online shop management and business marketing. We also learned about banks and insurance companies, banking facilities and lending schemes. More importantly, we learned how to make a Business Continuity Plan – a set of strategic actions on preparedness, response and recovery to keep our businesses resilient in times of crisis.



Screenshot and actual photos of Shrestha's online products, 2021. Photo: Tayar Nepal

Tayar Nepal enabled me to revive my business through a digital platform. I now sell my products at [Thulo.com/Uddhyami Utthan](https://thulo.com/UddhyamiUtthan) online shop, a leading e-commerce platform in Nepal. With its support, we do not have to worry about product delivery or mobility and restroom availability. From our online sales, we earned 35,000-40,000 NPR (273-312 USD) in January and February 2021, respectively. We still continue to receive orders. Digital technology has become a game changer for women entrepreneurs. Now, I earn enough for my family and can save for the future regardless of my disability. I appeal to families and organizations to support the education and training of people with disabilities so that they can live a productive life. I plan to expand my business by engaging more women and adding more products.

<sup>13</sup> The response is called, "Fostering Resilience of Women Led Businesses (including home-based women producers) and Consumers" of USAID's Tayar Nepal - Improved Disaster Risk Management Project.



## GOOD PRACTICES

### 1. Making digital engagement easy

Making digital engagement easy ensures that marginalised communities are not further disadvantaged by lacking access to digital programmes and content. Viamo makes digital easy through the Viamo Platform, known colloquially as the 3-2-1 Service. This is a free, user-friendly digital platform, powered by Interactive Voice Response. Since its inception in Nepal in 2019, it has reached 3.2 million Nepalis, allowing them to access information 45 million times. A listener of the Viamo Platform from Bardiya, Lumbini Province, shares:

“ I was married when I was very young. I have not been treated cordially by my in-laws. Since my husband and in-laws mostly use the radio and television, I turn to 3-2-1 Service to listen to content of my own choice. I am learning a lot from its broadcasts. For example, I did not know before that the legal age of marriage is 20 and that forced and child marriages are both illegal. I have also learned about other laws on marriage, such as land ownership, divorce and children. I tell all my friends to listen to the 3-2-1 Service because it is very educational”.

The 3-2-1 Service keeps listeners engaged with daily news, weather reports and crop calendars. It enables them to learn about many issues, such as menstrual hygiene, vaccines, GBV, parental education and other topics, through songs, games and dramas.

The 3-2-1 Service is groundbreaking because it can be used by everyone regardless of education, physical ability, age, gender, religion or geographic location. The 3-2-1 Service is accessible through both feature and smart phones and is free to Nepal Telecom subscribers both on mobiles and landlines through the toll-free number, 32100. The effectiveness of gender equality messages broadcast through the 3-2-1 Service in Madagascar and Malawi were assessed by the Global System for Mobile Communications Association.

The results showed its impact in changing behaviours, from 11 to 13 per cent.



Community members in Topla Paribada, Jumla share their satisfaction over the usefulness of the 3-2-1 Service of Viamo Nepal, 2021. Photo: Aradhana Gurung/Viamo-Nepal

## 2. Empowering agricultural women farmers through digital finance

Agricultural women farmers generally lack financial management support. As a result, they face challenges in accessing remittances, product marketing and cash flow management at the household level. The Agricultural Development Bank Limited (ADBL) addresses these difficulties through the *Kisan* mobile app and *Kisan* credit card.<sup>14</sup> The *Kisan* mobile app enables them to digitally access their bank accounts and make digital transactions. The ADBL Agriculture Knowledge Centre is integrated into the *Kisan* mobile app, which enables farmers to access information on raising their agricultural yields, procuring agricultural inputs, selling products and receiving updates on the weather.

The *Kisan* credit card, on the other hand, helps them buy agricultural inputs and farm tools from merchants enrolled by ADBL and sell products through cashless means. Eligible women can also receive subsidized loans from the bank through the *Kisan* credit card and use the card for digital transactions.

Lilawaati Marasini, a woman dairy farmer in Rupandehi district, Lumbini province, appreciates the ADBL *Kisan* Credit Card and *Kisan* Mobile App, which are directly connected to her loan account. “It is very easy to use and very helpful,” she says. “My earnings get credited directly to my ADBL account. I do not have to go to the bank for my banking needs”.



Lilawaati Marasini manages her dairy processing shop in Rupandehi district, Lumbini province, 2021.  
Photo: ADBL

ADBL promotes equal enrolment of women and men farmers in the *Kisan* credit card and *Kisan* mobile app. As of December 2021, the bank had 61 merchants and 7,524 farmers who were benefitting from the *Kisan* app and *Kisan* credit card. Of these, 2,463 are women. Women farmers comprise 35 per cent of *Kisan* credit card and 30 per cent of *Kisan* mobile app subscribers.<sup>15</sup> They demonstrate confidence and interest in expanding agro-based income generating options. Improvement in women farmers' roles in decision-making over their farms and families has also been reported.

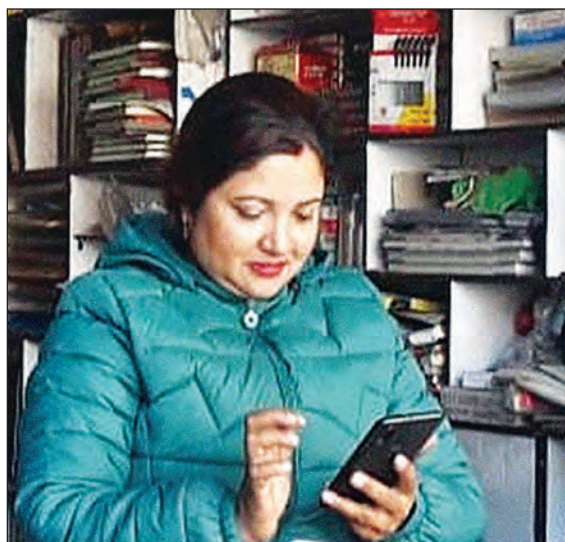
<sup>14</sup> <https://www.adbl.gov.np/services/modern-banking-services/kisan-credit-card/>

<sup>15</sup> As of 2022, the bank has 158 merchants, 87 cash points for withdrawal and depositing of money and 19,638 farmers who have been benefitted from the *Kisan* app and *Kisan* credit card. Of these, 9,213 (47 per cent) are women. Women farmers now comprise 48 per cent of *Kisan* credit card and 45 per cent of *Kisan* mobile app subscribers.



### 3. Developing the digital skills of entrepreneurs from marginalised groups

Entrepreneurs from marginalised groups have a better chance to succeed if they have the capacity and technology to digitalise the marketing and management of their business. Along this same line, the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) provides women entrepreneurs with skills on the use of digital technology for financial transactions. In 2021, UNCDF partnered with SABAH Nepal<sup>16</sup> and Khalti Bazaar to support 2,019 women entrepreneurs, including home-based workers, with training on using the digital marketplace to be able to receive and send money through mobile wallets. In 2021, UNCDF also worked with Prabhu Management<sup>17</sup> to support 10 dairy cooperatives in enabling 1,365 (476 women) from marginalised communities to use an innovative technology to access digital credit.



“ Adopting digital payments, with the support of Khalti, helped me save time. I can now pay everything digitally, from internet bills to government taxes. Cashless transactions have helped my business in many ways. The transactions are processed seamlessly”.

**Sarita Dangol**

*Stationery shop owner from the indigenous Newar community, in Khokana, Lalitpur, 2021. Photo: SABAH Nepal*

“ I was about to close my business during the lockdowns, but I found Khalti Bazaar, which facilitated orders and deliveries of our bread. I began to earn more income. And for small home-based businesses like ours, it is easier to track the income and expenses by looking at the transaction history on my digital device”.

**Ganga Khadkam**

*Home-based business owner, in Saibu Bhaisepati, Lalitpur, Nepal. Photo: SABAH Nepal*



<sup>16</sup> South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Business Association of Home-Based Workers Nepal.

<sup>17</sup> Prabhu Management is an agent network manager for Prabhu pay mobile wallet and Prabhu money transfer.





## CONSIDER THIS

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The digital divide is “the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard to both their opportunities to access information and communication technologies and to their use of the internet for a wide variety of activities”.<sup>18</sup> The 2019 Digital Nepal Framework recognises and seeks to address the digital divide from the digital foundation to agriculture, health, education, energy, tourism, finance and urban infrastructure. It also recognises the need to build and harness digital inclusion to tackle society’s deep structures of social exclusion.

Efforts to bridge the digital divide in Nepal must consider intersectional constraints that impair the ability of women, vulnerable and excluded groups to pay, own and use digital devices, electricity and internet services to improve their well-being. In a humanitarian context, where survival orbits around collaboration and interdependence, those who have no skills and access to digital technology are already being left out, thereby worsening their vulnerability and exclusion. Thus, in quantitative terms, Nepal has to deliberately overcome a 54 per cent gap on digital inclusiveness and a 43 per cent deficit on gender exclusiveness as the country moves forward in achieving a digital economy that leaves no one behind.<sup>19</sup>

### **Make digital engagement easy**

While most digital interventions focus on building people’s skills, it is equally important to focus on making digital engagement easy so that lacking training may no longer impede people’s use of digital technology. Viamo’s 3-2-1 Service is a game-changer in minimising the number of people who are left out of digital media. Its expansive outreach reduces social isolation during crises, which helps prevent mental health problems and strengthen the ability of listeners to address their own difficulties. It is also levelling the digital playing field by eliminating drivers of digital exclusion, such as money, formal education, disability, age, gender, class and other factors. CSOs working with marginalised communities must consider collaborating with Viamo in developing content that challenge discriminatory norms for the 3-2-1 Service broadcasts.

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<sup>18</sup> Organization for Economic and Development Cooperation, available at: <https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=4719>

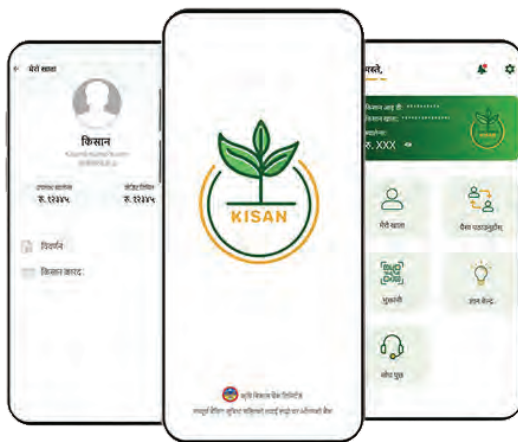
<sup>19</sup> This is based on the 2020 Inclusive Digital Economies Scoreboard (IDES) Report of Nepal, which was published by the UNCDF in 2021. The report revealed that the digital inclusiveness score for the country is 46 per cent and the gender inclusiveness score is 57 per cent. The IDES is a policy tool developed by UNCDF to help governments set priorities for their countries’ digital transformation. It identifies market constraints hindering the development of an inclusive digital economy and helps set the right priorities for public and private stakeholders to foster a digital economy that leaves no one behind. Available at: <https://www.uncdf.org/article/6856/inclusive-digital-economy-scorecard-ides-report---nepal>

## Provide digital skills, technology and technical support to marginalised entrepreneurs

In times of humanitarian crises, this intervention must first target the most vulnerable entrepreneurs whose productive capital could get easily wiped out. This includes micro and small-scale entrepreneurs who are widows or single parents, person with disabilities, and those engaged in sex work, youth, LGBTIQ+ persons, Muslims, GBV survivors, returned women migrant workers and other individuals with pre-existing vulnerabilities. The support must be tailor-fitted to their unique vulnerabilities, as in the above story of Rose Shrestha, in which sign language interpretation was used to overcome the barrier of hearing difficulties. It must also be empowering enough to restore the person's confidence and ability to face ensuing challenges in the evolving humanitarian context. The Tayar Nepal's package of interventions would benefit many marginalised entrepreneurs if the government scaled it up.

## Ease financial management for women agricultural farmers through digital technology

Having “access and control” over economic resources lies at the centre of discourse around women's economic empowerment. Through the *Kisan* app and *Kisan* credit card, women agricultural workers achieve a stronger positioning with respect to access and control over the fruits of their labour. The *Kisan* interventions develop the women farmers' skills and confidence to handle financial matters with ease; they are assured of technical guidance in case of difficulties; and, as a collective, they help shape a more bankable reputation for women as agricultural producers. Most importantly, the interventions have a high strategic value in facilitating the inclusion of rural women farmers in the digital economy, which is a strategic goal that the government endeavours to realise.



*Kisan* App. Source: <https://kisan.adbl.gov.np/>



*Kisan* Credit Card. Source: <https://kisan.adbl.gov.np/>

# 3 | WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS



Advancing representative leadership in disaster risk reduction and management

**One social activist calls for representative leadership to leave no one behind.**

Dr. Januka Neupane, 50, is a social activist from Ward 6 of Bhimeshor municipality in Dolakha district, Bagmati province. Her work as coordinator of her province's Women Humanitarian Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Platform (WHDRRMP) has yielded grassroots approaches to supporting marginalised people during humanitarian crises.

Leaders are most effective when they are chosen by, and from, the very constituents they represent. I call this 'representative leadership'. It is about ensuring that the most marginalised people are equitably represented in decision-making, including in disaster risk reduction and management. Representative leadership is a right. It is also an imperative of effective crisis management



Dr. Januka Neupane at an event. Photo: Tayar Nepal

I was married at age 13 and now I am a mother of three. Being a wife and mother at such a young age demanded many sacrifices. I had to learn fast, mature quickly and try harder all the time. I lived through years of a violent relationship, which left behind deep emotional scars and irreversible damages to my reproductive health. I also had to give up a blooming career in government. Thankfully, I soon found out that being an NGO social activist and engaging in life-transforming initiatives with marginalised people could be immensely insightful and fulfilling. In 1996, I joined the Asia Pacific Development Centre. Years later, I worked with the Building Resilience Disaster Risk Reduction programme, and then, with the Women-Friendly Disaster Management organization up to the present. Regardless of my position, my goal has remained unchanged – to help transform the lives of the most marginalised.

Being a social activist enables me to work with remote marginalised communities all over Nepal. Through this, I realised that the hardships I face as a woman from a lower middle-class family are magnified multiple times in the lives of people with intersectional

disadvantages. I learned that they have good ideas on how to change their situation but inadequate skills, opportunities, resources and voice that limits their ability to do so. In a humanitarian context, their marginalisation tends to be reinforced by lack of information, remote location, physical disabilities, discrimination and other factors.

Working with them was my university. Through them, I learned that before a humanitarian crisis, a leader must ensure the existence of a complete and updated database of the most marginalised people – one that shows their location, concerns, constraints, means of communication, family profile, vulnerabilities and other factors that could aggravate their experience of a pandemic or disaster. And during the crisis, a leader must be able to ensure that the most marginalised are reached as quickly as possible and support to them must alleviate their specific vulnerabilities. An example of this was UN Women Nepal's additional cash components for women who were in need of childcare support, pregnant or lactating, or living with disabilities.

An effective leader must be able to muster the support of local officials. For example, we trained 51 local government representatives and 26 female activists and community leaders on GESI, which resulted in their commitment to foster it in the work and leadership of local committees and sub-committees. The engagement of WHDRRMP with the government also led to increased collaboration and enhanced acceptance of GESI-responsive DRRM principles by people's representatives. Our leadership on this topic has been widely recognised and has emboldened local leaders to step up their GESI advocacy.

Representative leadership may be hindered by biased perceptions against women and marginalised groups. Also, no policies exist to guarantee their leadership in humanitarian mechanisms and processes, except for policies within Ward-level committees. Advocacy by people with low academic credentials are often ignored. Capacity building to foster leadership among women and marginalized groups working in DRRM must be intensified. I also think that policies in support of their leadership in non-government mechanisms and processes must be adopted and that public allocations for their leadership in disaster prevention and risk mitigation must be increased.



## GOOD PRACTICES

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### 1. Strengthening DRRM through GESI

Rajapur municipality in Bardia district of Lumbini province, which is located in southwest Nepal, is naturally predisposed to disastrous flooding because of its constantly moving landscape. Out of 53,533 people living in Rajapur, marginalised people comprises 85 per cent of the population, 78.6 per cent of whom come from the indigenous Tharu community.



The risk of leaving behind marginalised people during disasters is higher when leaders have an inadequate GESI perspective. Aware of this, Rajapur municipality's Deputy Mayor, Mankala Kumari Chaudhary, who is also a member of the Local Disaster Management Committee, ensures that GESI is incorporated in Rajapur's DRRM efforts.

Even before serving as Deputy Mayor (2017-2021), Chaudhary was leading campaigns to eradicate violence against women and other forms of discrimination. "People used to bring all sorts of problems, including gender, ethnicity and caste-based discriminations injustices, and exploitation issues to my father, who was a local leader," she says. "Learning about problems people face, I was motivated to run for public office to help solve those problems". Deputy



*Deputy Mayor Mankala Kumari Chaudhary leads relief distribution to people affected by unseasonably heavy rains in Rajapur in September 2021. Photo: Tayar Nepal*

Mayor Chaudhary focuses on flood disaster mitigation and preventing discrimination and GBV, which tend to increase during disasters. She ensures that relief support addresses the distinct needs of women, girls, the poorest people, Dalits, Janajatis, people with disabilities, elderly people, and LGBTIQ+ communities, among others.

Her most notable achievements include river protection work in Budhikulo; budget allocation for flood mitigation activities, such as gabion wall construction; coordination of groundwork as lead of Rajapur's Judicial Committee; GBV prevention and sensitisation as well as awareness-raising on local shelter provisions, psychosocial counselling and training on gender equality and livelihood for GBV survivors; and the establishment of the municipal GBV Elimination Fund and its accompanying guidelines.

During the pandemic, Deputy Mayor Chaudhary led the collection and distribution of cash, clothing, food and dignity kits to women, girls and marginalised families. She also intensified campaigns for quarantine and collecting disaggregated data on COVID-19 infections in Rajapur. "Despite hazards, women stay behind to care for and ensure that family members are not exposed to any further risks," she says, discussing women's roles in DRRM. "We must address obstacles that women face, such as lack of time due to multiple domestic responsibilities, lack of access to leadership and technical training and limited opportunity to serve as a leader. I urge local governments to ensure that women are included in all disaster preparedness activities, capacity building and simulation exercises, policymaking and implementation of disaster resilient activities".

Aside from ensuring gender responsive budget allocations for livelihoods, leadership, capacity building and access to cooperatives, Deputy Mayor Chaudhary also actively promotes the municipality's compliance to laws on cooperatives, child protection, DRRM and the GBV Elimination Fund's guidelines. She has plans to support Rajapur's most vulnerable groups by making them resilient against disasters through policy, provisions, economic empowerment and capacity building.

## 2. Flood prevention infrastructure built under a woman's leadership



People of Besharmafata work on the river flood-mitigation project under the leadership of Soniya Chaudhary, 2021. Photo: Tayar Nepal

Society's perception of leadership remains hugely gendered, with women and men being stereotyped in fields that are either traditionally female or male domains. In 2021, Soniya Chaudhary, a member of the Community Learning and Action Centre of Besharmafata-2, Thakurbaba municipality in Bardiya district in southwest Nepal, crossed the perceptual barrier to women's leadership in construction, which is regarded as a traditionally male-dominated field. She led her community in a three-month Bioengineering Embankment Construction Project, resulting in the construction of a 996-meter gabion wall that blocks inundation from the Ambasa River. The river normally swells and brings floods during monsoon rains, damaging crops and properties of people in adjacent villages. Chaudhary shares:



Chaudhary led the construction of a 996-meter gabion wall for flood mitigation. Photo: Tayar Nepal

“ I received training on DRRM-GESI from USAID's Tayar Nepal, under the Improved Disaster Risk Management Project's small grant Rupantaran through Kamaiya Mahila Jagaran Samaj. While leading the construction project, I continued to learn a lot more, especially the practical part. We learned about creating bamboo fencing, filling bags with sand and soil, checking the dam and sampling local plants. We also learned how to build mesh wire boxes to contain the sandbags. I had to ensure that all of these meet the required specifications so that the wall may be sturdy enough to withstand the force of the flood.

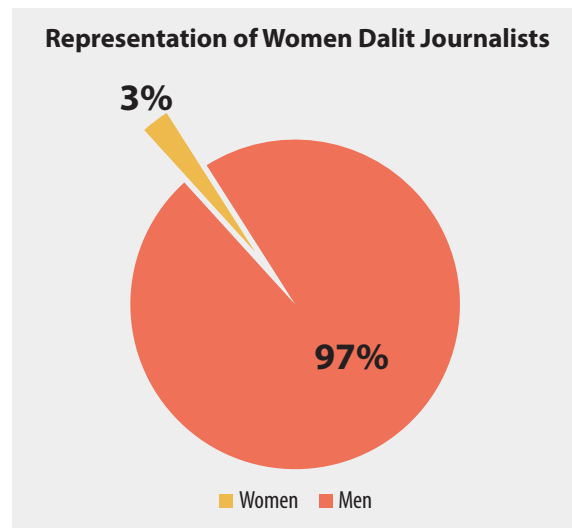
Before this, I only ever saw men leading projects like this. After receiving training and joining discussions at the Community Learning Centre, I gained knowledge and confidence to lead this project. 20 people, including 14 women, participated in constructing the gabion flood mitigation wall. Other people from nearby villages also supported the construction. We lobbied with the local government for funding and received 80,000 NPR (674 USD) from the local government, which we used to buy sacks, mesh wire and food for the participants.”

As a bioengineering construction leader, Chaudhary convinced women from her community to work as labourers, assuring them of gender-equal pay and work norms. As a community representative, Chaudhary coordinated with the Ward and municipal government for support. The contractors and community members trust and respect her leadership and seek her support in mobilising women to work as labourers.

### 3. Strengthening the leadership of women and marginalised groups in media

The primacy of media’s roles in enabling people to get through a humanitarian crisis cannot be overemphasised. The media keeps people informed, connected and linked to resources that sustain their mental health and overall well-being. Further, the media has a responsibility to raise the voices and visibility of people who are often left behind, particularly in a way that reflects their authentic sentiments and in a language that resonates with their aspirations and culture.

Kriyashil Dalit Patrakar Sangh<sup>20</sup> works to advance human rights, justice and opportunities for Nepal’s Dalit community. It raises the voices of Dalit people in media and supports the advancement of Dalit media practitioners. Its President, Pabitra Sunar, who is also a journalist of Nagarik Daily, advocates about the importance of increasing and strengthening the representation of women, vulnerable and excluded groups in media, both qualitatively and quantitatively. She asserts that their representation in the media slightly increased recently, especially in FM radio



Source: Jagaran Media Centre

<sup>20</sup> This article and the recommendations below on advancing the leadership of women and marginalised groups in media are from a presentation given by Pabitra Sunar, the President of Kriyashil Dalit Patrakar Sangh and a journalist at Nagarik Daily, during the GiHA-TT meeting held on 29 March 2021.

and television news and entertainment programmes. Yet, they remain severely under-represented in media professions and organizations. For example, according to Jagaran Media Centre's estimates, there are only 700 female Dalit journalists, representing only three per cent of the 25,000 Dalit journalists across the country. Data released by the Federation of Nepali Journalists in 2020 also shows that only nine per cent of its female members are actively practicing their profession. Data about their representation and leadership are still largely incomplete and scattered, preventing a more comprehensive analysis. Documentation of existing good practices in improving the representation of marginalised groups in media remains a huge area of concern that must be addressed.

To advance the leadership of women and marginalised groups in media, Sunar recommends :

- (a) adopting and implementing affirmative action for women's leadership in media organizations;
- (b) protecting them from unjust benefit reduction and lay-off, especially during crises;
- (c) designating a mechanism to monitor and address GESI-based discrimination in media;
- (d) providing them with access to childcare facilities and equal benefits, like salary increment, promotion, job security and transportation; and
- (e) prioritising media personnel from marginalised groups for opportunities and advanced trainings in addition to building their professional connections.



## CONSIDER THIS

Women's leadership and the development of their capacity to become effective decision makers are mandated under Strategic Objective G.2 of the Beijing Platform for Action.<sup>21</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 5.5 likewise declares a global commitment to "ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making".

Leadership is critical to the effective management of humanitarian crises. Ensuring the proportional representation of women and marginalised groups in leadership and decision-making positions, especially during crises, is an imperative for democratic governance and social justice.

<sup>21</sup> It stated, among other things, that all actors must "Provide leadership and self-esteem training to assist women and girls, particularly those with special needs, women with disabilities and women belonging to racial and ethnic minorities to strengthen their self-esteem and to encourage them to take decision-making positions".



Even more critical than these reasons is evidence suggesting women leaders have competencies desired during times of crises. For example, in a study titled “Leading the Fight Against the Pandemic: Does Gender “Really” Matter?” researchers from Liverpool and Reading Universities reported that “COVID outcomes are systematically better in countries led by women”. Their study attributed this to: (a) proactive and coordinated policy responses, (b) attitudes to risk, (c) empathy and (d) clear and decisive communication.<sup>22</sup>

Another study published in the Harvard Business Review<sup>23</sup> in 2020 found that women demonstrated stronger leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic than before. The study also revealed that women outscored their male counterparts in all but one leadership competency. These competencies included initiative, learning agility, inspiring and motivating, developing others, building relationships, displaying high integrity and honesty, powerful and prolific communication, collaboration and teamwork, championing change, decision-making, innovation, problem solving, analysis of issues, customer and external focus, drives for results, values diversity, establishes ‘stretch goals’<sup>24</sup> and developing strategic perspective. Men only outscored women leaders (by 2 points) in technical or professional expertise. Exclusion of women in leadership and decision-making is,

### Women Were Rated as More Effective Leaders Before and During the Crisis

Based on analysis of 360-degree feedback data between March and June, their scores were even higher during the first wave of the pandemic.

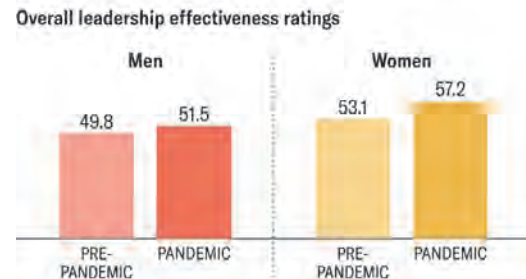


Figure 1: Women score higher as leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic

### Women Outscored Men on Most Leadership Competencies

According to an analysis of 360-degree reviews during the pandemic, women were rated higher on most competencies.

Competencies	Ratings	
	WOMEN	MEN
— WHERE DIFFERENCE IS STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT		
• Takes initiative	60	50
• Learning agility	59	50
• Inspires and motivates others	59	52
• Develops others	58	49
• Builds relationships	58	51
• Displays high integrity and honesty	57	49
• Communicates powerfully and prolifically	57	52
• Collaboration and teamwork	56	50
• Champions change	56	51
• Makes decisions	56	49
• Innovates	56	53
• Solves problems and analyzes issues	56	53
• Customer and external focus	56	54
• Drives for results	55	48
• Values diversity	55	45
• Establishes stretch goals	55	50
• Develops strategic perspective	55	54
• Technical or professional expertise	53	55
• Takes risks	52	51

Figure 2: Women outscored men as leaders on most competencies

Source: Zenger and Folkman, Research: Women Are Better Leaders During a Crisis, 2020, available at: <https://hbr.org/2020/12/research-women-are-better-leaders-during-a-crisis>

<sup>22</sup> Supriya Garikipati† and Uma Kambhampati, “Leading the Fight Against the Pandemic: Does Gender “Really” Matter?”, University of Liverpool and University of Reading (not peer-reviewed). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13545701.2021.1874614>

<sup>23</sup> Jack Jenger and Joseph Folkman, December 30, 2020. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2020/12/research-women-are-better-leaders-during-a-crisis>

<sup>24</sup> Stretch goals are defined as “deliberately challenging goals that can inspire your team and boost their performance. Even if you don’t hit your stretch goal, it is a great metric to calibrate new goals”. Available at: <https://asana.com/resources/stretch-goals>

therefore, tantamount to denying people the opportunity to benefit from the strengths of women's leadership.

## **Create an enabling environment for women's leadership**

There are numerous intersecting barriers to women's leadership in humanitarian settings. These include social norms that are biased towards male leadership, especially in dangerous situations; mobility and safety concerns; multiple burdens that increase during crises and exact additional tolls on women's time and energy; lack of networks and support systems; and limited capability or access to training, both for technical and leadership subjects. An enabling environment for women's leadership needs to address the barriers rooted in their intersecting identities. It could begin with practical actions, such as:

(a) documenting and promoting successful leadership stories of women and marginalised individuals,

(b) advocacy for the designation of women and people from marginalised groups as leaders in humanitarian efforts,

(c) organising family and community support to domestic responsibilities of women who are in leadership roles,

(d) enabling women leaders to write and talk about their innovative and transformative approaches and

(e) prioritising women in leadership training opportunities for disaster prevention, risk reduction and management.

## **Build the capacity of women and marginalised groups to engage in DRRM leadership**

Nepal's commitment to promoting the participation and leadership of women and marginalised groups is already embedded in its national policies, including in Nepal's Disaster Risk and Reduction Management Act, 2074 (2017) and Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Rules, 2076 (2019). It is time, therefore, to focus on implementation. Within the ambit of the Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) Strategic Action Plan in Disaster Risk Management, which is being developed under the leadership of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority (NDRRMA), a clear strategy to realise this commitment must be emphasised. Such a strategy must include: (a) a mapping and gender analysis of DRRM leadership and decision-making positions at all levels, (b) identification of potential DRRM leaders among women and marginalised groups in all provinces and the provision of targeted trainings for them and (c) ensuring the allocation of an appropriate budget for such purposes. The NDRRMA may consider the creation of a multi-stakeholder GESI mechanism to oversee, coordinate and monitor accountability over the implementation of the aforementioned GEDSI Strategic Action Plan on DRRM.

## Measure advancements in women's leadership during humanitarian efforts

The advancement of women's leadership in humanitarian efforts will be accelerated if government, civil society, development partners and other stakeholders adopt a system of measuring its progress. To accomplish this, it is important to: (a) set quantitative targets, such as achieving at least 30 per cent representation of women in humanitarian decision-making mechanisms and (b) adopt a set of qualitative outcomes based on what are deemed to be most essential in fostering women's leadership in Nepal's humanitarian efforts.

A recent collaboration between the Humanitarian Advisory Group, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Australian Aid and UN Women has resulted in a Toolkit for Assessing Women's Leadership in Disaster and Climate Resilience, which can be used for such purposes. Its qualitative assessment parameters consist of:

(a) transformative leadership,

(b) safe and meaningful participation,

(c) collective influencing and advocacy,

(d) enabling partnerships,

(e) capacity development for leadership and

(f) funding.

The use of this tool can yield evidence to show progress, gaps, barriers and opportunities for women's leadership,<sup>25</sup> which can inform further planning to support the leadership of women and marginalised groups in humanitarian action.

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<sup>25</sup> Assessing Women's Leadership and Meaningful Participation in Disaster and Climate Resilience, a collaborative effort of Humanitarian Advisory Group, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Australian Aid, and UN Women, March 2022. Available at: <https://wrds.unwomen.org/practice/listing-toolbox/toolkit-assessing-womens-leadership-disaster-and-climate-resilience>

# 4 | ENDING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

“ I broke free!

**One survivor of gender-based violence rebuilds her life.**

Neha Giri is a 32-year-old entrepreneur from Bara district in Madhesh, Nepal's smallest but most populous province. After struggling in an abusive relationship for eight years, she now works as an entrepreneur and advocate, promoting zero tolerance for GBV. Her story offers options that GBV survivors may consider when leaving abusive relationships.

Women need not wait until they can no longer endure. Freedom from violence is a human right. Women must not allow anyone to violate their rights.

I am now the Vice President of Gramin Utthan Abhiyan, an NGO working for the rights of women and girls, adolescent education and social awareness. I own a tailoring shop from which I earn around 25,000-30,000 NPR (211-253 USD) monthly. This is enough to support myself and contribute to the sustenance of my parents and four siblings. I am able to provide jobs for six women who help me produce the orders of our customers, such as *salwar kurtas*<sup>26</sup> and women's blouses. The satisfaction that my customers get from using my products strengthens my determination to make my business bigger in the future.



*Giri produces and sells garments in her home tailoring shop, 2021. Photo: Tewa*

I experienced eight years of severe battering from my husband and in-laws after I got married at age 12. Emotional, verbal and physical abuse puts women in serious danger, right inside their own homes, which is supposed to be the safest place for all, especially during lockdowns. I had a mental breakdown after three years of constant battering. On two occasions, the beatings were so severe that half of my body was paralysed. My family, who lives 30 kilometres away from my husband's house, helped me recover through

<sup>26</sup> *Salwar kurtas* are loose trousers and collarless tunics.



care, kindness and support. My husband and in-laws took me back many times after I recovered from their beatings. But after three times of breaking their promise to stop beating me, I finally made a personal decision to step out of my abusive situation. On my own, I tried to learn tailoring to be able to support myself. However, I could not start a business because I had no idea of how to move forward.

I realised that women who experience domestic violence must be knowledgeable and courageous enough to secure help when they are being abused, whether it's at home, in the workplace or elsewhere. In my case, I joined a workshop conducted by Community Safety Net - Feminist Movement Building (CSN-FMB), with support from UN Women Nepal through Tewa. There, I found courage in sharing my story because I learned that it is the perpetrator and not the victim who should be ashamed of GBV. I asked my fellow participants to support my aspiration to change my life. CSN-FMB encouraged me to open a tailoring business to become economically self-sufficient. Thus, I borrowed money from relatives and friends and established my in-house tailoring business. Four of my six seamstresses are members of CSN-FMB.

Everybody must know that domestic violence is against the law. Women should know their rights and where to seek help when necessary. Nowadays, there are many organizations, like Tewa Nepal, that provide family counselling, legal and health support to survivors of violence. Some also provide opportunities for women to earn income. This is very important because it helps strengthen a woman's status in the family and reduce her vulnerability to violence.



## GOOD PRACTICES

### 1. Ending GBV, especially during humanitarian crises

Severe stress resulting from a pandemic or natural disaster precipitates a rapid increase in GBV. The subordinate position of women, children, LGBTIQ+ people, people with disabilities and the elderly put most of them at the receiving end of GBV.

Former Deputy Mayor Sushila Mishra Bhatta controlled the rise in GBV in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City at the height of the pandemic. Cognizant that GBV is rooted on many factors, her municipality put together a 6-point GBV response package, with legal, economic, health, safety, information, community watch and funding components. She shares:



*Former Deputy Mayor Sushila Mishra Bhatta controlled the increase in GBV during COVID-19 lockdowns through a six-point intervention package.  
Photo: UN Women/Srawan Shrestha*

“ The increase in GBV has to be stopped because it weakens the power of households to manage their COVID-19 challenges. Our response was immediate, bold and comprehensive. We tried to address both the causes and consequences of GBV through a holistic, multisectoral approach with six components.

The first component is a policy, which ensures **quick access to justice** for GBV survivors, even at the height of the pandemic, unlike in other places where GBV cases were being deferred until the pandemic subsided. The second is **livelihood assistance** to survivors of GBV, which mitigates economic pressures on the family and leverages a more empowered status for the survivors in the family.

Third, we established a **safe centre**, which provides women and children with temporary shelter, health referrals, food and psychosocial services while also keeping them safe from the perpetrator. It is run by an all-women team composed of a manager, two counsellors, two guards and a kitchen aide. The centre works with a UNFPA initiative that supports community volunteers to reach out and raise awareness on GESI and the prevention of GBV. The fourth component was awareness-raising, which deterred GBV by highlighting the legal punishment for GBV perpetrators. Another component is the creation of a **GBV Prevention Fund** amounting to 100,000 NPR (842 USD), which is being used for activities to stop GBV, including support to uplift the well-being of affected women and children. The last component is the formation of 24 **GBV watch groups**, which intervene and prevent GBV in their own communities.”

## 2. Providing economic power to women as a deterrent to GBV

Evidence points to the power of income in strengthening women’s position and reducing their vulnerability to GBV. WOREC, a movement-based organisation, leads other groups working to prevent GBV and address its causes and consequences. One of its approaches is organising marginalised women into groups to advance their economic empowerment and prevent GBV.

In addition to group organising, WOREC conducts entrepreneurship trainings and provides capital, awareness-raising and counselling. In 2020, WOREC formed the Nursing Women’s Group in Ward 24 of Janakpurdham Sub-Metropolitan City for entrepreneurship and GBV prevention. Lal Pari Devi, Secretary of the group, shares:

“ Because of WOREC’s business training, I was able to prepare a business plan for a small home grocery business. I received 17,500 NPR (137 USD) from WOREC, which enabled me to start my business. My daily income is around 3,000 NPR (25 USD) per day, of which 1,500 NPR (12.6 USD) is saved daily in a cooperative. My husband and sons have taken over the responsibilities for domestic chores and they take care of my business when I attend meetings”

Lal Pari Devi and her family have received counselling on GBV prevention and women's empowerment from WOREC. They now recognise that GBV is not acceptable and should not be tolerated. WOREC aims to support women and their families to lead a violence-free life. It has conducted four different trainings for the community on GBV, harmful traditional practices, women's rights and human rights. It also engages vulnerable women in awareness-raising campaigns.

### 3. Strengthening the multisectoral approach to support GBV survivors

Agencies and organizations working in the field of GBV are able to support GBV survivors better when they work in a collaborative manner. In Krishnapur municipality, the local government, CSOs, volunteers, shelter providers, the local One-Stop Crisis Management Centre and other actors work together to provide adequate and appropriate support to GBV survivors.

“ I believe that I can raise my children by running a business. I feel more confident and safer, and I am thankful to Koshish Nepal, SAATHI, Deputy Mayor Ramita Rama and all the organizations that supported me”.

*Baijanthi*  
GBV Survivor

This collaborative approach is demonstrated in the case of **Baijanthi**, whose name has been changed to protect her identity. Baijanthi is a 19-year-old, pregnant mother of two who struggled with domestic violence and mental distress for over three years. To support her as well as her eight-year-old son and 11-year-old daughter, the Deputy Mayor provided a safe house in the municipal building. The Judicial Committee of the municipality also tried to resolve her marital conflict. The Deputy Mayor also secured the support of a Koshish community-based volunteer, who, under a UN Women-assisted project, provided Baijanthi with information, counselling and psychosocial support.

Baijanthi had a premature delivery that resulted in the death of her newborn baby. So, Koshish Nepal referred her to the One-Stop Crisis Management Centre,<sup>27</sup> which provided her and her kids with medical support. To keep Baijanthi and kids together, they were taken in by SAATHI's Mid-Term Shelter Home, where Baijanthi was able to reflect on her situation and decide what to do after a series of counselling sessions. They were also able to eat nutritious foods and sleep

#### Free helpline numbers for GBV

National Women's Commission Nepal 1145

Nepal Police 100

Child Helpline 1098

<sup>27</sup> Nepal's One-Stop Crisis Management Centres provide health services; psychosocial counselling; legal advice, counselling and support; information, education and empowerment; safe home services; and rehabilitation to GBV survivors.

comfortably. She has enrolled in the vocational training of SAATHI Shelter and is planning to run a business to support her kids. Her son, who has a congenital developmental condition, has been enrolled in a school for special-needs children with the help of the provincial Ministry of Social Development. He also received a scholarship from Shree Shiva Shankar Secondary School in Kanchanpur.



## CONSIDER THIS

Gender-based violence is a violation of human rights and is prohibited under the constitution of Nepal.<sup>28</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, the risks of GBV have multiplied due to interlocking pressures that impair people's sense of psychological and emotional balance. With or without a humanitarian crisis, GBV is already globally prevalent,<sup>29</sup> and it persists over generations through a pattern of behaviours abetted by patriarchy.

To amplify the message of former Deputy Mayor Sushila Mishra Bhatta, the argument to immediately stop the spread of GBV goes beyond legal imperatives, security, social consequences and health risks. GBV undermines the potential of families to work as a team and find creative solutions to their challenges during times of humanitarian crises. It wrecks family morale and diffuses the energy that should have been directed at managing the crisis. GBV also sabotages policies, such as lockdown measures, which assume that the home is the safest place for everybody.

Apart from the social costs of GBV, it also has huge economic costs. It puts additional drains on the limited survival resources of marginalised families and exacerbates funding pressures on an already overwhelmed public health sector. GBV is inimical to resilience and must be viewed as the responsibility of everybody. The above experiences of GiHA-TT members offer useful insights for consideration.

### **Educate society about the economic cost of GBV**

So much has been said about the social costs of GBV. But now that the economy is seeking to rebound after the pandemic, the importance of how much GBV exacts from national gross domestic product must also be brought to the fore. The amount is significant, and it matters. For example, research suggests that "the cost of violence against women could amount to around two per cent of the global gross domestic product. This is equivalent to USD 1.5 trillion, approximately, the size of the economy of Canada".<sup>30</sup> It is high time, therefore, that Nepal conducts an estimation of the economic cost of GBV, using the available cost calculation formula on violence against women and

<sup>28</sup> Art. 38. The Rights of Women' provisions of Article 38 of the 2015 Nepal Constitution include: "No woman shall be subjected to physical, mental, sexual, psychological or other forms of violence or exploitation on the grounds of religion, social, cultural tradition, practice or on any other grounds. Such act shall be punishable by law, and the victim shall have the right to obtain compensation in accordance with law."

<sup>29</sup> The findings of the WHO study on "Global and regional estimates of violence against women" reports that "overall, 35 per cent of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence".

<sup>30</sup> Remarks by UN Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, Lakshmi Puri at the high-level discussion on the "Economic Cost of Violence against Women", 2016.



children.<sup>31</sup> The result of this estimate can support advocacy for improved emphasis on the prevention of GBV. It will also enable decision makers to recognise that the amount that the economy loses to GBV could significantly boost economic recovery and stability.

## **Adopt a holistic, multisectoral approach to end GBV**

The interventions led by two women Deputy Mayors in Dhangadhi and Krishnapur demonstrated the value of a holistic, multisectoral approach. Both approaches put emphasis on prevention (awareness-raising, GBV Prevention Funds and community watch groups) and response (access to justice, police support, conflict mediation, economic and food assistance, medical services and shelter/safe houses).

Interventions must enable survivors to confidently leave a hostile/violent relationship. Continuing counselling and follow up, vocational training and capital support to start livelihood activities are essential to this purpose. If the survivor is unable to move out, family counselling on GBV prevention and relevant laws, along with periodic case monitoring, must be incorporated into the support. Interventions must include elimination of impunity among men, in-laws and other perpetrators of GBV.

## **Intensify advocacy to effectively implement Nepal's GBV and Gender Equality Funds**

Resource allocation is an imperative of policy implementation. It is an indicator of the government's political will to implement its commitments on GESI, including the elimination of GBV. In 2019 and 2020, UN Women Nepal collaborated with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Forum for Women, Law and Development and Himal Innovative Development and Research to conduct a study on the challenges in implementing 12 funds related to gender equality and eliminating GBV in Nepal, in the context of federalisation.

The report "*Nepal's Gender-Based Violence and Gender Equality Funds: The Path to Effective Implementation*"<sup>32</sup> contains important recommendations that must be pursued to ensure that the established funds are meaningfully accessed and utilised.

In the short term, it recommends

- (a) awareness-raising to improve understanding of the funds and how to use them;
- (b) advocacy and capacity building among concerned government officials;
- (c) enhanced coordination among stakeholders; and
- (d) repeal of inconsistent policy and legal provisions.

In the medium-term, the report calls for the revision of relevant federal laws and regulations and adoption of procedural guidelines and fund flow mechanisms to allow each fund to operate effectively in the federal context. In the long-term, it proposes the consolidation of the funds for enhanced effectiveness.

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<sup>31</sup> UN Women, *The Costs of Violence*, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Available at: [np-the-path-to-effective-implementation-english.pdf](#)

# 5 | ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND RESILIENCE

## “ Investing in climate-resilient farming

**One farmer in Nepal’s southern plains shows the way to sustainable agriculture.<sup>33</sup>**

Ramkali Mahato is a 38-year-old agricultural farmer from Babarguni in Sarlahi district, which is in Nepal’s southern plains, known as the Terai region. Her husband’s income as a rickshaw<sup>34</sup> driver in India has been inadequate, so Mahato ventured into farming to help support her three children and in-laws.

I am sharing my story because I want people to realise that investing in climate-resilient farming yields huge dividends. I was one of the many farmers who used to struggle with poor harvests and low income. But by practicing climate-resilient farming, I was able to significantly increase my earnings – from 30,000 NPR to 750,000 NPR (253 to 6,315 USD). This is a difference of 720,000 NPR (6,062 USD).

I learned farming in 2016 through an agricultural training provided by *Accelerating Progress Towards Rural Women’s Economic Empowerment (JP RWEE)*. This was a UN joint programme implemented by UN Women, Food and Agriculture Organization, World Food Programme, and International Fund for Agricultural Development, which uses a holistic approach to enable rural women to realise their full potential as farmers and entrepreneurs. The training focused on strengthening the leadership capacity of rural women farmers and



*Mahato built 14 plastic tunnels in the 1.33 hectares of land that she leased for commercial vegetable production in 2021. Photo: Nishant Gurung/UN Women*

introducing climate-sensitive farming techniques. This includes plastic tunnel farming, which enables us to earn year-round by growing off-season vegetables.

<sup>33</sup> Abridged from an article written by Subeksha Poudel, Communications Officer of UN Women Nepal Country Office and published by Nepali Times on 8 March 2022. A similar article written by the same author titled ‘The Transformative Journey of Ramkali Mahato’ also informed the writing of this story.

<sup>34</sup> A rickshaw is a two or three-wheeled passenger vehicle.

First, I bought a buffalo, sold its milk, and used the proceeds to buy more cattle. I also planted crops in a small plot of our family land. With this, I managed to secure food for my family, but most of my produce became spoiled. Maybe it was due to the weather, which is so unpredictable in the Terai. I solved this problem by building 14 tunnels through which I now grow grains and all types of vegetables. I also learned how to make organic fertilizers out of spoiled vegetables and kitchen waste. This is what I use to keep the soil fertile.

I am currently leasing a 1.33-hectare plot of land to grow commercial vegetables. Now, our income is enough to support our needs and the schooling of our three children. My husband has returned from India and is now selling our harvests in the market of a neighbouring city. The JP RWEE's Gender Action Learning System taught us to equitably share domestic and farm work as a couple. This has improved our teamwork and productivity. Nowadays, neighbours seek my help to construct their plastic tunnels and people are more open to lending me additional capital.

I was part of an all-women committee, which constructed a market outlet for women farmers' products. This was unheard of in our conservative village, but we set a precedent that sparked a favourable attitude towards women's involvement in a traditionally male occupation. I also chair the Laxmi Rural Women Farmers' Group and Hariyali Women Multipurpose Cooperative, through which I help other women generate more income from agriculture. During the pandemic, these networks served as a support group for women in crisis, including GBV survivors. The JP RWEE's holistic approach is life-changing and it should be scaled up for women in other marginalised communities.



## GOOD PRACTICES

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### 1. Pursuing a holistic approach to address the challenges of women migrant workers

Women's disadvantages as migrant workers spring from the aggregate impacts of their subordinate status in society. Unequal access to education, training, job opportunities, productive capital and economic resources, along with domestic violence, oppressive relationships and multiple burdens make it difficult for them to compete for work in the job market. Many end up working precarious jobs, especially in unregulated sectors, or migrate through irregular means. Deceptive contracts, lack of information, undocumented status and exploitation by agents and employers are only a few of the factors that contribute to their vulnerability as migrant workers.

The global spread of COVID-19 aggravated the pre-existing hardships of women migrant workers, with some being trapped in crisis situations. POURAKHI Nepal supports migrant women by conducting rescue operations; providing temporary shelter, healing and counselling; reuniting survivors with their family; and supporting their recovery and transition to normal life. This was how a rescued migrant woman worker from Pragatinagar-07 describes her experience:

“ Because of the pandemic, I was stranded for over two months in UAE on my way to Kuwait to work as a domestic helper. My agent left me at the Housemaid Agency of UAE, but I experienced abuse while working as a housemaid. I escaped and went to the Non-Resident Nepal Association (NRNA) shelter in UAE with the help of a Nepali taxi driver.

The Non-Resident Nepal Association collaborates with Nepali organizations, such as POURAKHI Nepal, to support migrants in distressed situations. It bought my return air ticket and when I reached Nepal, I sought help from their emergency shelter. There, I was screened, provided with emergency shelter, health care, life skills and psychosocial counselling until I was reunited with my family. They conducted follow-up visits and a series of counselling for my family and me as well. My plan was to start a business from home, so I completed POURAKHI's entrepreneurship, vocational and financial literacy trainings. Meanwhile, I also joined a Korean company producing wigs and was able to contribute to my household's income. I am now completing POURAKHI's skill upgrading training. They provided me with capital, and I am now ready to start my own business after the training. I am confident that I can make my business successful and I do not need to migrate overseas to earn a living”.

## 2. Incorporating norm change into women's economic empowerment interventions

Support for women's economic empowerment (WEE), even during the most challenging humanitarian crises, must expand pathways to gender equality. The efforts of Equality Development Centre and Action Aid Nepal (EDC/AAN) to organise women's groups and provide its members with entrepreneurship knowledge and skills was designed for this purpose. In 2021, 75 women from 16 women's groups in three municipalities of Doti district received training on value chain, marketing and business planning. Among them, 26 started their own small businesses. Cognizant that economic empowerment drives many positive changes in women's lives, they were also taught skills that enabled them to mobilise support, access market opportunities that are profitable during the pandemic, prevent GBV, exercise leadership and assert their right to equality. Dhana Bista, an active member of Parivartansil Women's Group in Dipayal-5, shares how this intervention improved her life:



*Bista established her home-based tailoring shop and produced face masks and clothing for the local health post and quarantine centre. She is now securing technical support from the municipality and a loan from the Agricultural Development Bank to expand her business. Photo: Narendra BK/EDC*



“ My husband, who was working in India, lost his job during the pandemic. With my training from EDC/AAN and the revolving fund that it established, I developed my business plan and secured funds for a small tailoring business. Then, I was selected as one of the four skilled women to produce facemasks and clothing for the local health post and quarantine centre. I initially made 1,500 facemasks from which I earned 45,000 NPR (379 USD). I continued to earn a net income of at least 6,000 NPR (51 USD) monthly, which was a great help to my family.

In the future, I plan to expand my business by sewing tailor-fit clothes for neighbours and customers so that they do not need to buy expensive ready-made clothes. For this, I have formally registered my business in the Cottage and Small Industries Committee. I have prepared a business plan and application for myself and two other women from our group. I submitted the papers to the municipal office for funding and to the ADBL to access a capital loan. Presently, my in-laws have taken over domestic responsibilities and I feel like I am valued as a family member and entrepreneur. My husband now works in a village bread factory, so we are doing much better with our combined income”.

### 3. Providing job opportunities to marginalised people in humanitarian response operations<sup>35</sup>

Women and vulnerable individuals are among the first to lose income during crisis situations. Yet, they are also expected to ensure that there is food on the table for family members. It is therefore important to recognise that they have capabilities that must be harnessed for paid work within response operations.

During the pandemic, UN Women Nepal ensured access to food and nutrition for many marginalised families through 10 community kitchens that received funding support from the Government of Finland.<sup>36</sup> With UN Women Nepal’s technical support, Women for Human Rights, Maiti Nepal, Nagarik Aawaz, and Nari Bikas Sangh have been intermittently operating community kitchens in three provinces of Nepal. They have served over 178,181 meals to adults and 666 meals to babies between June 2020 and January 2021. Aside from access to food and nutrition, the kitchens also help alleviate the care burden among women and build trust and cohesion in communities.

**Let us remember that paid jobs are being created during humanitarian situations. It is up to government and organizations to ensure that marginalised people are able to access those jobs.**

<sup>35</sup> Source: “Women-managed community kitchens support vulnerable women in Nepal”, an article authored by Subeksha Poudel, Communications Officer of UN Women Nepal Country Office, 19 August 2021. Available at: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2021/08/women-managed-community-kitchens-support-vulnerable-women-in-nepal>

<sup>36</sup> The community kitchens are part of UN Women Nepal’s COVID-19 response to support vulnerable women with food and non-food items; address GBV, unpaid work and lack of access to information; and challenge discriminatory gender norms and harmful practices during pandemic.

More importantly, every kitchen employs an all-women team to manage its operation. The kitchens have engaged marginalised women as head cooks, assistant cooks, helpers and volunteers, recording a total payroll of 5,494,010 NPR (46,261 USD) from June 2020 to December 2021. Pushpa Sunar, a 30-year-old from Nepalgunj, is one of the 123 women employed in the community kitchens. She shares:



*A women-managed community kitchen in action.  
Photo: Maiti Nepal*

“ When I heard that Maiti Nepal, UN Women’s partner, was starting a community kitchen, I asked if I could work there. I explained that I have expertise in cooking for all weddings and celebrations in my village. I was hired as assistant chef with a monthly pay of 30,000 NPR (253 USD). Before the pandemic, I worked as a social activist, preventing child marriage. But the project ran out of funding. My father, who was a security guard, did not receive regular pay during the lockdown. So, it was my income that saved us from starvation.”

Maiti Nepal takes pride in being one of UN Women Nepal’s partners in running the community kitchens. According to its project coordinator, Maheshwari Bhatta:

“ All staff in the community kitchens were either unemployed during the COVID-19 pandemic or were sustaining their families with minimal income. The kitchens are not only enhancing people’s energy and immunity; they are also providing jobs to vulnerable women, which is a lifesaver for many of them. Let us remember that paid jobs are created during humanitarian situations. It is up to the government and organizations to ensure that women are able to access those jobs”.

Sunar’s team began cooking at 5am and delivered the food at 9am. She shared that some people cried with gratitude because even without a lockdown, they were in no position to afford such nutritious foods.



## CONSIDER THIS

The economic empowerment of women is catalytic to the realisation of women’s rights. WEE includes:

(a) women’s ability to participate equally in existing markets;

(b) their access to and control over productive resources, access to decent work and control over their own time, lives and bodies; and

(c) increased voice, agency and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels, from the household to international institutions.<sup>37</sup>

In Nepal, the COVID-19 pandemic severely imperilled the viability of women's livelihoods, especially among women belonging to society's most marginalised groups. Disruptions in the supply chain, depletion of productive capital and downtrends in market demands pushed many women's businesses to the brink of collapse.

Thus, the imperative of making women's economic efforts resilient cannot be overemphasised. Economic resilience is a scenario in which:

(a) adverse impacts of external shocks on women's livelihoods are prevented;

(b) they are better equipped to withstand external shocks;

(c) they are able to cope and recover from shocks; and

(d) they adapt and leverage changing economic conditions/environments to their advantage.<sup>38</sup>

Informed by insights from the above good practices, the following are recommended.

## **Advance a holistic approach to safe migration for women workers**

Article 11 of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women declares that work is an inalienable right. Also, the freedom of migrant workers to leave a country is guaranteed under Article 8 of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. However, the Government of Nepal is not yet a signatory to this Convention.

**Government and society** must also fulfil these rights, not only because of their normative imprimatur but also because of their benefits to economic and social development at the national and global levels. Also, women migrant workers' financial remittances boost the economies and well-being of households and communities while their social remittances (i.e., norms, ideas, insights and social capital) help steer new patterns of thoughts and behaviours towards more positive and egalitarian power relations.

Strengthening the economic resilience of women migrant workers demands that: (a) risk factors to their employment overseas are prevented and (b) they are better prepared to manage potential crises and recover from shocks they encounter. Towards this end, it is recommended that the Government of Nepal:

- Review its position on acceding, signing and ratifying the International Convention on the Protection of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, especially in the light of the evolving global economic order and Nepal's post-pandemic economic recovery.

<sup>37</sup> UN Women Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment, available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>

<sup>38</sup> UN Women Nepal Country Office, Strategic Note 2023-2027.

- Revisit, and when necessary, amend the provisions of the Foreign Employment Act, 2064 to ensure its conformity with international normative standards.
- Identify receiving countries that have ratified the International Convention on the Protection of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and ensure that bilateral agreements conform to its provisions, especially in regard to migrant workers' enjoyment of **the same rights** as those of the host country's citizens.
- Scale up intervention packages for migrant women workers, such as those implemented by POURAKHI Nepal, and institutionalise them within the functions of the concerned government agencies.
- Encourage the: (a) review and revision of laws, policies, practices, traditions, curricula and codes of ethics from a norm-change perspective and (b) public discussions on the changes that have to be adopted to institutionalise structures that uphold non-discrimination, equality and inclusion in all spheres of life.

### **Strengthen WEE intervention models**

The above story of EDC/AAN demonstrated the effectiveness of a holistic approach to WEE, which combines empowerment and entrepreneurial competencies with norm change and the elimination of structural barriers in domestic and public spheres. It would be advantageous to strengthen the link of this approach to targeted and comprehensive support to women's entry into the formal economy and their expansion into higher value chains.

Also, in view of Nepal's vulnerability to humanitarian crises, it may be helpful to include in the WEE intervention some components that contribute to the four economic resilience scenarios mentioned above. New economic policies, opportunities and markets that are spurred by the new normal must also be considered, including the allocation of job opportunities to vulnerable individuals in humanitarian operations, as exemplified in the above story on community kitchens.

### **Promote climate-resilient farming as a high-value livelihood option**

The story of Mahato is indisputably successful and must be aggressively promoted for wide adaptation. The agricultural training package provided to Mahato and her colleagues may be improved by incorporating actual success stories that highlight effective practices. A tool that farmers could use to self-assess the resilience of their farming approach could also be developed and widely promoted, along with interventions by CSOs and governments that will address resilience gaps in farming methods. It is important to recognise that no standalone intervention could transform women's lives because their challenges are manifold and intricately intertwined. Mahato's story demonstrated that transforming women's lives requires a holistic approach, which, in her case, includes knowledge and skills in sustainable and climate-resilient agricultural farming, competence in renegotiating gender roles in domestic and public life, feminist leadership and economic empowerment of other women.



# 6 MENTAL HEALTH

## “ Resilience begins with mental health

**One family breadwinner recovers from mental illness and shares her insights about the importance of mental health in overcoming life crises.**

Druhi, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, is a 30-year-old single mother and the sole breadwinner of her family of five. During the pandemic, she experienced mental health problems. Recovering with the help of Koshish, she shares the importance of self-care and sustaining a state of well-being while facing extreme crises.

When we have strong mental health, we have a greater chance of being resilient while facing a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. It is very important to look after our own mental health and encourage others to do the same.

I am the sole breadwinner in my family. I live in a tiny hut in Manarahi rural municipality with my father, who has physical disability; my mother, brother; and son, who is temporarily under the care of my estranged husband. It is located nearly two hours outside of Kathmandu, where I used to work as packer of women's garments. When COVID-19 erupted, I lost my income. We ran out of food and could not access relief due to lack of transportation.



*Ram Devi Desimaru, Therapeutic Worker at Koshish Nepal, shows the process of bead making as a form of therapeutic activity. Photo: UN Women/Subeksha Poudel*

I was still in Kathmandu when my fellow workers detected my urgent need for mental health support. They said that I had outbursts of aggression and my colleagues were feeling unsafe in my presence. Some of them helped bring me home. Having no idea of how to manage my situation, my parents sought help from traditional healers, but my condition did not improve. It was my brother who found help for me. According to him:

“ I joined a community orientation by Koshish Nepal, a national NGO that works to improve the quality of mental health policies and programmes. It also challenges discriminatory attitudes towards persons with mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities. I asked Koshish Nepal to check the severity of my sister’s mental health condition and help alleviate it. So, they came to our house, diagnosed my sister and brought her to the Koshish Transit Care Centre, which is 57 kilometres away from our house.”

The Centre provides first aid, advance trauma and/or intermediate life support, critical care and transportation to mental health service seekers. It also provides training, financial grants, therapeutic and follow-up support. I participated in a healing process that involved these services, including psychiatric counselling for me and my family. The healing exercises were truly effective, such as group dancing, meditation, breathing and bead making.

After more than two months, I felt a lot better and returned to my family. Unfortunately, there is stigma attached to mental health. Villagers thought that my issue was communicable, and I was called “insane”. Our family members have been excluded from social events. As a result, Koshish Nepal community-based volunteers<sup>39</sup> held local community awareness sessions on the importance of family and community support to speed up the recovery of people with mental health issues. Koshish counsellors also organised orientations with educational institutions and local stakeholders to fight the stigma attached to people with psychosocial problems.

I am fortunate that I am now beginning to fully recover. I am employed in the packing department of a fancy store in Kathmandu, earning 12,000 NPR (101 USD) per month. My father has received his disability card with the help of Koshish, which enables us to access food support. My mother and brother have also found work in the village and are both earning money. After this experience, I learned that it is very challenging to have only one breadwinner in the family and that when we have strong mental health we have a better chance of overcoming difficult challenges. I believe support from family and one’s community is the key to fast recovery. I hope that campaigns to eliminate stigma against mental health seekers will be successfully implemented nationwide.



## GOOD PRACTICES

### 1. Recognising the importance of sound physical, emotional and mental health to resilience

In the event of a pandemic or crisis, healthy people are better equipped to aid both themselves and others. By ensuring proper and prompt coordination for people's well-

<sup>39</sup> Community-based volunteers are supervised by Koshish Nepal under the UN Women-supported project “Provision of Essential Mental Health and Psychosocial Support to Women, Youth and Excluded Groups in the Context of COVID-19”.

being inside the UN system, the Critical Incident Stress Management Unit of the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (CISMU-UNDSS) provides essential support to deliver psychosocial and mental health services. It supports the growth of counsellors' and mental health professionals' capacities on a global scale. According to Karuna Kunwar, Senior Psychologist and CISMU-UNDSS Certified Stress Counsellor:

“ The pandemic brought into sharp focus our interconnectedness as human beings. Everyone was impacted by what happened to other people. We discovered that even though we ourselves were not sick of COVID-19, the suffering of affected people has a negative impact on our mental stability. On the other hand, when we look after our physical, emotional and mental health, we have a positive and beneficial impact on others.”

During the pandemic, Kunwar conducted over 50 individual stress counselling sessions as well as trainings and workshops for UN personnel. Her office, the Centre for Mental Health and Counselling Nepal (CMC-Nepal), implemented counselling services, case monitoring and supervision. Its interventions are in collaboration with the government, which it regards as the most powerful champion of mental health. The CMC-Nepal also collaborates with local *palikas*<sup>40</sup> to provide mental and psychological support to address a wide range of mental health issues and community challenges. In addressing GBV, for example, the CMC-Nepal held counselling sessions to help affected couples understand their issues and how their dynamics are being exacerbated by the pandemic. Gender inequality in the home and its consequences are addressed in the counselling. The intervention also teaches couples how to negotiate and resolve disagreements between themselves and with other family members in a way that avoids aggression and violence.

In addition to the activities above, UN Women Nepal also provides accompaniment and counselling support to its personnel and partners. Its partners also provided psychosocial support to 619 persons (344 female, 216 male, 59 LGBTIQ+ persons) in Madhesh Province, Bagmati Province, Lumbini Province and Sudurpashchim Province. Among them, 442 accessed remote counselling services through toll free numbers. The remaining 177 cases accessed in-person counselling and accompaniment support, which involves accompanying the clients during their stay at the hospital; supporting them in visiting different government offices for vital registration, including applications to access citizenship cards; and referral to transit care centres.

## 2. Improving the access of women and marginalised populations to mental health services

Bringing mental health services closer to women and marginalised people is crucial, especially during crises. In 2021, with funding support from UN Women, the Tarangini Foundation, an NGO that advances feminism at the grassroots level, built capacities and delivered services to meet the mental health needs of marginalised people, including

<sup>40</sup> A *palika* is an administrative unit. Administratively, Nepal is divided into provinces, districts and municipalities. Rural municipalities are called *gaun palika* and urban municipalities are categorized as: (a) a metropolitan city (*mahanagar palika*), (b) sub-metropolitan city (*upmahanagar palika*) and (c) municipality (*nagar palika*).

GBV survivors. The Foundation's mental health and GBV public awareness efforts reached around 135,797 people in five rural municipalities through broadcasts over radio stations, national television shows and live Facebook talk shows. It also established toll-free mental health support helplines and online platforms that benefitted 86 participants (56 women and 30 men) from marginalised groups.<sup>41</sup> A total of 64 women GBV survivors also received relief and mental health support in two government-run centres (Adarsha Griha, Chitwan and Three Angels, Pokhara).

Tarangini Foundation convened a webinar collect ideas on how to strengthen mental health response during the pandemic. Attended by 42 key officials of ministries, local government units and NGOs, the webinar came up with vital recommendations that include:

- (a) the institutionalisation of a local government mechanism responsible for psychosocial health issues, including counsellors;
- (b) greater attention to the mental health and well-being of service providers;
- (c) the assignment of at least one psychosocial counsellor per school and education of teachers on GBV and mental health;
- (d) allocating a budget towards self-care and psychosocial counselling; and
- (e) advocacy with the National Planning Commission to put a stronger focus on psychosocial health in the national development plan.

Dr. Usha Jha, a former member of the National Planning Commission said, "Local government bodies must recognise the importance of making psychosocial services accessible to the people. They should provide skilled professionals, facilities and mechanisms for this purpose".

More importantly, the Foundation conducted a mapping of mental health services throughout the country. This resulted in the production of a report titled "*Mapping of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Gender-Based Violence Survivors in Nepal*".<sup>42</sup> This report will serve as a tool for people across the country to locate and access the service facilities closest to them. A total of 66 government organizations and NGOs and 11 international NGOs are included in the mapping report.

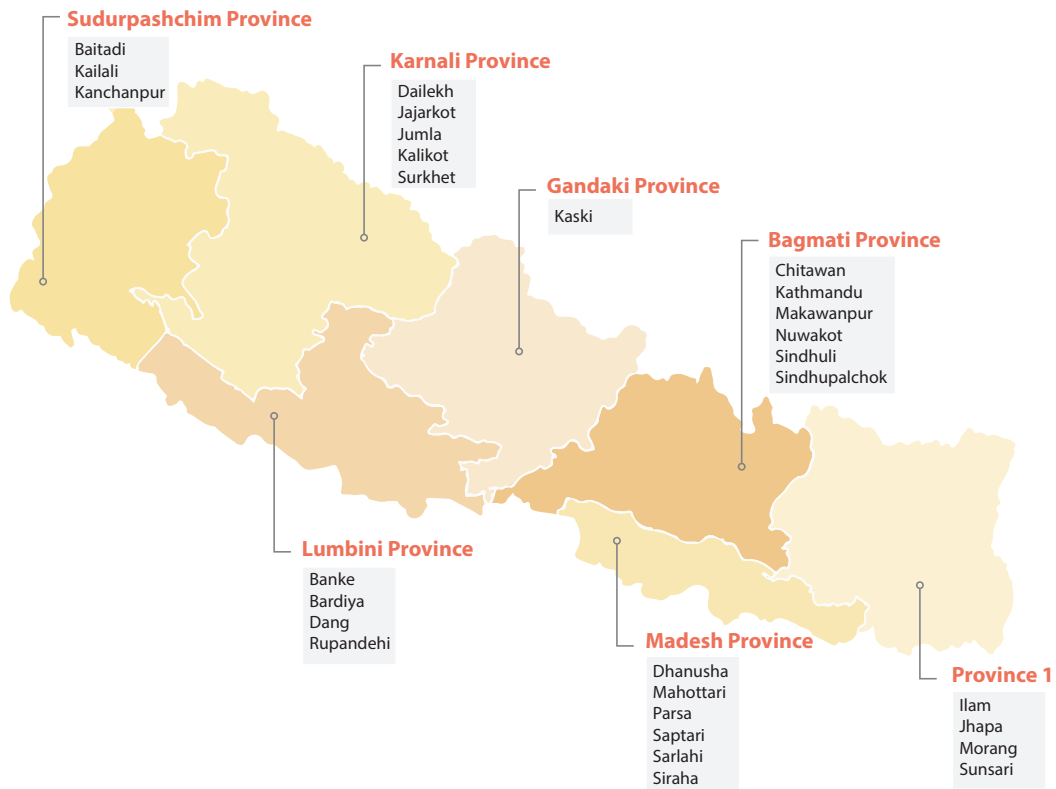


<sup>41</sup> The caste/ethnicity breakdown is as follows: Brahmin/Chettri (36 women, 19 men), Dalit (4 women, 2 men) and Janajati (16 women, 9 men).

<sup>42</sup> Available at: <https://tarangini.org.np/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/>



## Mapping of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Gender-Based Violence Survivors in Nepal



### 3. Strengthening capacity and partnerships to expand and raise the quality of mental health and psychosocial support services

Organizations are able to serve better when they have strong capacity, partnerships and networks. One of Nepal's leading organizations in the delivery of mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS) is the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Nepal. In 2021, TPO Nepal reached 40,731 individuals in 22 districts across the country with psychosocial support and counselling, through face-to-face interactions and virtual mediums. Its services include a 7-day group healing psychosocial intervention, psychosocial counselling, stress management and self-care services, psychosocial first aid, psychotherapeutic support, physical and medical treatment, psychiatric consultation services, legal and social support, capacity building and community awareness and advocacy. It also offers support through the TPO Nepal toll-free (1660 010 2005) and the National Suicide Prevention (1166) helplines. The services help address general psychosocial distress, depression, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, sleep disturbance, physical symptoms and worries of the participants. A 35-year-old patient of TPO Nepal, who had suicidal thoughts, shares:

“I was having a very difficult time. When I got the helpline number 1166 and talked to the counsellor, I felt a great relief. I felt relaxed after my first session. I continued with two more sessions, which really helped me to tackle and understand the psychosocial problem that I was going through. I practiced self-care relaxation and deep breathing exercises. It really felt much better. I should say that my anxiety and low self-esteem issues were resolved after the counselling.”

The effectiveness of TPO Nepal's interventions is rooted on its partnership and collaboration with a wide array of supporters, such as funding agencies,<sup>43</sup> academia, ministries and like-minded organizations. It also collaborates with the Medical Research Council, Wellcome Trust, National Institute of Mental Health, King's College London, Stellenbosch University, George Washington University, the University of Liverpool and Institute of Medicine of the Tribhuvan University.



*Psychosocial counselling service in a community setting, 2021. Photo: TPO Nepal*

TPO Nepal continuously improves its capacity through trainings/workshops, supervision and tool development. It ensures the safety of its staff and participants and demonstrates transparency and accountability in working with marginalised populations. Its program includes capacity building for community stakeholders, such as awareness-raising, training, supervision of community-based psychosocial workers, mental health gap action programme training for medical officers and paramedic professionals, auxiliary nurse, midwives and staff nurses and other personnel working in the health service sector. TPO Nepal closely works with the health, protection and education system in the community to ensure that mental health is accessible to all. It is developing, adopting and contextualising global evidence-based MHPSS interventions.

TPO Nepal believes that the government can help by facilitating approval procedures for its operations, including endorsing its grant proposals to donors and helping align its projects with national standards. For its part, TPO Nepal can support the government in advocacy, evidence-based knowledge for policy making, technical input to programme design and action plans and coordination at the field level.



## CONSIDER THIS

A robust state of people's well-being, including mental health, is an essential component of a country's defense against a huge crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the World Health Organization, mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well and contribute to their community. The right of all citizens to remain mentally sound and live a dignified life is guaranteed under the Constitution of Nepal.

Even before the pandemic, it is estimated that over two million children and teenagers in Nepal were affected by mental health issues. Various studies show that mental health

<sup>43</sup> These funding agencies include: United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Office on Drug and Crime, United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, World Health Organization, World Bank and The Asia Foundation.

problems are the leading cause of suicide among women in Nepal of reproductive age (15-49 years) and studies suggest that about 20 per cent of Nepal's general population suffers from mental illness.<sup>44</sup> A recent study titled "COVID-19 pandemic and suicides in Nepal: Way forward for prevention,"<sup>45</sup> indicated that the rise in suicides during the pandemic may be a reflection of the true state of mental health of the nation, with the stresses of the pandemic merely exposing its fragilities. The report stressed the need for a multi-faceted and inter-related public health programme that includes education of the public on the virus, de-escalation of mass pandemonium and panic and efforts to reduce stigma surrounding mental health. While there are numerous policies in Nepal addressing mental health, there is a need to intensify their implementation, especially at the community level. Below are recommendations for consideration.

### **Provide community-based mental health support, especially in marginalised communities**

Mental health support should be easily accessible to everyone, especially women and marginalised people. Considering the fragility of the nation's state of mental health, support should be brought closest to them, right in the community, with or without a pandemic or disaster. The services should include stigma prevention, case interviews and completion of a basic assessment checklist, counselling, accompaniment and referral to treatment facilities and follow-up or after-care support to mental service seekers. Educating families and communities towards a more enlightened understanding of mental health issues and improving help-seeking behaviours among affected individuals and families must be part of this package.

### **Analyse and address the GESI dimensions of mental health**

There is a GESI dimension to mental health that must inform policymaking and implementation. According to a study on socially constructed differences in roles and responsibilities, "the status and power between men and women contribute to differences in mental health, health seeking behaviour of those affected, and responses of the health sector and society as a whole".<sup>46</sup> A study conducted in Karnali and Sudurpashchim by Vinod Acharya et al. titled "Association between COVID-19 pandemic and the suicide rates in Nepal" also reported "an overall increase in the monthly suicide rate in Nepal with an average increase of 0.28 (CI: 0.12,0.45) suicide per 100,000 during the pandemic months. The increase in suicide rate was significant both among males (increase in rate = 0.26, CI: 0.02,0.50) and females (increase in rate = 0.30, CI: 0.18,0.43). The most striking increments in suicide rates were observed in June, July and August 2020. **The pattern of increased suicide rates faded away early on among males, but the effect was sustained for a longer duration among females**".

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<sup>44</sup> Public Health Update, Mental Health Policy, Nepal, available at: <https://publichealthupdate.com/mental-health-policy-nepal/>

<sup>45</sup> Published by the Nepal Journal of Epidemiology in December 2021, authored by Indrajit Banerjee, Jared Robinson, Brijesh Sathian, and Indraneel Banerjee. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8730343/>

<sup>46</sup> News Medical Life Sciences, "The Gender Gap in Mental Health", available at: <https://www.news-medical.net/health/The-Gender-Gap-in-Mental-Health.aspx>

In addition to the gender dimensions of mental health, there are indications that more factors precipitate mental health issues among marginalised people. Their ability to access mental health support is also more limited by economic, social, cultural and geographical factors. A study titled “Dalits and Mental Health” reports that “Dalits face the greatest discrimination and have greater prevalence of depression and anxiety when compared with higher castes”.<sup>47</sup> Experiences during the pandemic also demonstrated that marginalised people (i.e., people without a national identity card, women in entertainment and sex work, people who lost their source of income and Dalits) faced increased anxiety when they were disqualified from receiving government support.

Conducting a comprehensive, policy-oriented study on the GESI dimensions of mental health, especially during humanitarian crises, is necessary to improving preventive and response measures to mental health that leave no one behind. Along with this, gaps in the mental health data system – including the lack of GESI disaggregated data and under-reporting of cases – will have to be assessed and corrected.

## **Advance GESI in the implementation of new national mental health measures**

The government has endorsed the National Mental Health Policy and a five-year National Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan (FY 2077/78 to 2081/82). Among others, the strategy aims to create an environment in which mental health is valued and promoted, mental disorders are prevented and persons affected by these disorders are able to exercise their full range of human rights and access high-quality, culturally-appropriate health and social care in a timely way. The policy contains five key provisions, namely: (a) ensure easy availability and accessibility of basic and quality mental health services for all citizens, (b) prepare necessary human resources to deliver mental health and psychosocial services, (c) protect the fundamental human rights of people with psychosocial disabilities and mental illnesses, (d) enhance public awareness to promote mental health and (e) combat the stigma attached to mental illness.<sup>48</sup> Towards this end, the following recommendations<sup>49</sup> may be considered:

- Adopt a “one *Palika*, one Counsellor” programme to ensure accessible psychosocial counselling services at the community level.
- Ensure the maintenance of an updated database regarding professionals and organizations working on mental health and psychosocial support across the country, disaggregated by sex and location.
- Develop a mobile phone/computer app for free online psychosocial and mental health consultations and services.
- Incorporate mental health education into school curriculums.
- Encourage non-health sectors, such as education, justice, social welfare and migrant services, to incorporate mental health services into their programmes.

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<sup>47</sup> French AN, “Dalits and Mental Health: Investigating perceptions, stigma and barriers to support in Kathmandu Nepal, Journal of Global Health Reports, 2020. Available at: <https://www.joghr.org/article/12136-dalits-and-mental-health-investigating-perceptions-stigma-and-barriers-to-support-in-kathmandu-nepal>

<sup>48</sup> Source: <https://thehimalayantimes.com/health/new-strategy-to-promote-mental-health-developed>

<sup>49</sup> Draft Policy Brief on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Nepal, developed by Koshish with funding and technical support from UN Women.



# 7 PROMOTING YOUTH INNOVATION AND INTERVENTIONS

## “ No more chhaupadi in my family!

**One family from Dipayal Silgadhi municipality demonstrates that ending chhaupadi brings more benefits than harm.**

Ditya, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, is a 17-year-old and seventh-grade student who lives with her parents, younger sister and brother in Ward No. 5, Bagthata in Dipayal Silgadhi municipality, Sudurpashchim, a province in far western Nepal. Her story is about breaking a deeply rooted, harmful tradition called chhaupadi – the practice of isolating menstruating women and girls into cramped sheds away from home – which has caused severe psychological, emotional, physical and social trauma to countless women and girls for years.

Ours is considered a typical family. My four elder sisters have left the house since their marriage. My family is engaged in agricultural activities and my father works in the road department of the government. Life is normal and good.

In my family, *chhaupadi* was practiced for a very, very long time. The tradition dictates that during a girl or women's menstruation period, they must stay in a cow shed, desist from eating curd and milk, refrain from looking at men and boys or from touching objects or entering spaces considered pure, such as rooms for worship, houses, cattle, plants, certain food items, such as meat and dairy, and more. They cannot attend school or social activities, bath themselves, eat proper food or engage in everyday activities. Many women and girls have faced sexual violence in the sheds, lost their lives to animal attacks and snake bites and died of suffocation while trying to keep themselves warm by lighting small fires inside the enclosed space.

*Chhaupadi* also includes a purification ritual that involves washing bodies, clothes and drinking or sprinkling *sunpani*,<sup>50</sup> *gaunt*,<sup>51</sup> and purifying the sheds with the use of cow dung. It is believed that violating the tradition will bring harm to family members and their community. For example, brothers will be unhealthy, trees will die, the milk of cows will rot and misfortunes will befall all concerned. Menstruating women cannot touch '*dhami-jhakri*.'<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *Sunpani* means 'water touched by gold'. As known, *sunpani* is the essential symbolic means employed in rituals that clarify the difference between 'high' and 'low' and 'pure' and 'impure' in everyday ritual life. 'Gold water' is used to purify food and to wash hands when food is given to or some contact has occurred with a person of an 'impure' caste. Source: [https://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ebhr/pdf/EBHR\\_12&13\\_08.pdf](https://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ebhr/pdf/EBHR_12&13_08.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> *Gaunt* means cow urine.

<sup>52</sup> '*Dhami-jhakri*' refers to priests, religious leaders and local traditional healers.

It was a highly tormenting practice that made me feel as if being a woman is a curse. And yet, I marvel at why this should happen when only women have the power to give birth to human beings. The idea of going through *chhaupadi* for many more years ahead makes me angry. The first time I had my menstruation, I cried so hard that my mother and younger brother had to sleep with me in the cowshed.

Then, I had the chance to participate in a programme by Sangharsh Yuva Nepal, a youth organization working for social change. There, I learned that menstruation is a natural, normal and healthy process. I also understood that health and safety are my human rights and should not be violated and that *chhaupadi* is against the law. I am the youngest daughter in my family, and I was unsure if my voice would matter. But I tried to explain to my mother what I learned. After many months of persistent explaining, I have been allowed to stay with them during my menstruation. Initially, I was scared that something bad might happen and I would be blamed. When nothing bad happened, my mother and I felt confident that we are right, and we began to convince our neighbours to give up *chhaupadi*.

Nowadays, the practice of *chhaupadi* has been significantly reduced in our place, but we still campaign to convince other families. When the government demolished the *chhaupadi* huts, girls in remote areas of far western provinces were forced to sleep under the open sky or inside caves. But in our place, the effect was positive. Girls now talk to their friends about ending *chhaupadi* and there is greater optimism that the tradition may disappear in a few decades. Media, faith leaders, local officials and people with influence should help by constantly explaining the fallacies of *chhaupadi*. As my mother said, "Education is key. Today we change our family; tomorrow, the community; and then, our country."



## GOOD PRACTICES

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### 1. Advancing youth solutions to harmful traditional practices

Gender inequality is rooted in harmful traditions that are perpetuated through intergenerational transmission. The youth, therefore, have a strategic role in blocking the path of transmission and creating more positive norms that support gender equality. Below are three organizations that combat *chhaupadi* using simple grassroots solutions.

**Sangarsha Yuba Nepal (SYN)** is a ward-level youth NGO with 38 diverse members. It is registered in Dipayal Silgadhi Municipality, Ward No. 5. Organised in 2019, it transforms traditional harmful practices through simple, low-key, cost-free, small scale and replicable approaches. So far, it has: (a) convinced 12 families (including the family in the above story) to end *chhaupadi* by talking to the parties involved and helping them demolish the *chhaupadi* huts; (b) prevented three child marriages through interpersonal dialogues, awareness-raising and police support; and (c) raised awareness about GBV and non-discrimination to persons with disabilities. UN Women provides the organization with guidance and technical support through JuRI-Nepal.

**Gift for Girls** is a campaign led by young men and boys to promote awareness about dignified menstruation and hygiene among youth and children across the country. It focuses on alleviating the stress of menstruation by: (a) teaching girls to make safe, biodegradable menstrual pads; (b) distributing menstrual pads during the lockdown; (c) conducting awareness-raising on menstrual dignity; and (d) holding meditation and yoga classes for women during the lockdown. One of its creative approaches is the *'Bichar Hajur ko Samartha Hami Sabai ko, Didi Bahini ko Marma Daju Bhai ko Karma'*,<sup>53</sup> which aims to strengthen the bond between brothers and sisters. Here, the concerns of sisters are collected and presented as a poster to brothers, which serves as a conversation piece for both of them.



Some key questions of the Gift for Girls campaign.  
Photo: Gift for Girls

**The Nepal National Dalit Social Welfare Organization (NNDSSWO)** was established in 1982. It raises awareness about human rights and promotes the well-being of neglected Dalit communities, including women and girls. During Nepal's federalisation process, it helps ensure that their concerns are heard and resources are mobilised to improve their lives.

One of its youth-oriented programmes is with the above-mentioned SYN youth group. It successfully advocated for the adoption of a GESI policy in Dipayal Silgadhi municipality and supported the completion of the action plan, by-laws and registration of the SYN. It has also provided the government with support in public awareness-raising and advocacy to stop *chhaupadi*, child marriage, GBV and caste-based discrimination. These were pursued under the Comprehensive Capacity Development Project in Dipayal Silgadhi, which was jointly implemented by NNDSSWO and JuRI Nepal and funded by UN Women Nepal and the Government of Finland.

## 2. Innovating information mediums during the COVID-19 pandemic

Public information has been central to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Sankathma Saathi**,<sup>54</sup> an initiative by youths who graduated with a degree in Crisis Management Studies, works to address misinformation and raise awareness about how marginalised groups are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the initiative reached a predominantly young audience (age group 28-35) of over a million people through a podcast series that was also disseminated by 20 radio networks in 47 districts. More than half (54 per cent) of the podcasts were stories, opinions and advocacies of women and 43 per cent were of Dalit, Janajaati and Madhesi people. Bimala Tamang, from Ramhiti Kathmandu, shares:

<sup>53</sup> We/all of us support the ideologies/the thoughts. It is also the responsibility of men to end the painful experiences/realities of women.

<sup>54</sup> *Sankathma Saathi* means "a friend in need".

“ Nobody ever came here to document our experiences on promoting menstrual dignity. It is difficult for our daughters, especially during the pandemic. As we live with limited resources, it is a luxury to discuss this topic. There are many misconceptions on menstruation that need to be clarified. We are glad that you are sharing our daughters’ stories. Media can play a catalytic role in fostering a positive perspective that menstruation is a natural, healthy life process”.

The podcast series has been effective in connecting people to support and learn from each other, especially during the lockdowns. It also drew insights that could inform broad information campaigns, such as: (a) the need to focus on stories that relieve stress and teach people how to deal with difficulties, (b) use of new styles of media for younger audiences, (c) inspirational stories seldom covered by mainstream media and (d) media content in local languages.



*The Sankathma Saathi team undertaking advocacy with a local official in Sunwal municipality, 2021.  
Photo: Sankathma Saathi*

### 3. Building youth capacity to sustain economic recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic and other natural calamities have been weakening the country’s economic base, which could lead to more damaging repercussions for the next generations. Cognizant of youth’s potential to accelerate post-pandemic economic recovery and help sustain a robust economy, the **National Youth Council (NYC)** has been intensifying its entrepreneurship programme for youth nationwide.

Through the government’s entrepreneurship start-up programme, NYC trained 700 participants in 2021 in partnership with the International Labour Organization and National Federation of Savings and Credit Cooperative Unions Limited. Among them, 70 were trained as national-level trainers. During the pandemic, 379 of the participants were provided with technical support to address challenges to their business. Mobile markets and outlet services were also established to increase their sales. Together with Kathmandu University and Namobuddha Municipality, NYC is preparing to establish an innovation centre to support young entrepreneurs on product design and development.





## CONSIDER THIS

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The United Nations considers youth the “torchbearers of the 2030 Agenda” and considers them a major force for sustainable development and key agents for social change, economic growth and technological innovation<sup>55</sup>. Cognizant of this, the above efforts of GiHA-TT members focused on supporting initiatives that are central to youth priorities in the Sustainable Development Goals, namely: technological innovation, social change and economic growth. Insights from the above good practices are highlighted below for consideration in advancing the development of Nepal youth for national progress.

### **Implement GESI commitments in the 2019 Digital Nepal Framework**

The *Digital Nepal Framework* that was launched in 2019 has been framed with strong attention to GESI. It provides that, “It is crucial to harness the potentials of digital inclusion of the excluded and marginalised groups not only to achieve the goals of growth, equality and cooperation, but also to tackle the deep structures of exclusion. The exclusion is more critical for individuals with a disability, old age, remote residency<sup>56</sup> and women restricted by social norms”.

The application of this principle is addressed in various sections of the Framework, including in agriculture, health, education, energy, tourism, finance and urban infrastructure. The implementation of the Framework has received 22 billion rupees of funding support from the World Bank.<sup>57</sup> With this, it is important to inform advocates about the specific GESI outcomes targeted under the Framework and plan their actions to monitor the achievement of those outcomes. This will ensure that the GESI commitments are not missed in the allocation of resources and in ranking the Framework’s implementation priorities.

### **Incorporate disaster risk reduction in the Youth Vision 2025 and Ten-year Strategic Plan**

At 40.35 per cent of the country’s population,<sup>58</sup> Nepal’s youth represent a potentially powerful force that must be nurtured and harnessed to strengthen the nation’s capacity for more effective prevention and management of humanitarian situations in the future. The guiding principles of Nepal’s *Disaster Risk Reduction National Strategic Plan of Action (DRRNPA) 2018-2030* provides that:

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<sup>55</sup> Source: ‘Four things you need to know about youth and SDGs’, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, available at: <https://www.un.org/en/desa/four-things-you-need-know-about-youth-and-sdgs>

<sup>56</sup> Individuals who live in rural areas.

<sup>57</sup> Nepal Telecom, available at: <https://www.nepaltelecom.com/2022/05/digital-nepal-framework-gets-22-billion-investment.html>

<sup>58</sup> Population of the 16-40 years age group is considered as the youth population in Nepal. According to the 2011 Census, the total youth population in Nepal is 10,689,842 (40.3% of the total population). Among them, 45.8 per cent are males and 54.5 per cent are females. Available at: <https://un.info.np/Net/NeoDocs/View/3527>

“ Disaster risk reduction and management shall be pursued with an all-of-society engagement and partnership. It also includes empowerment and inclusive, accessible and non-discriminatory participation, paying special attention to people disproportionately affected by disasters, especially the poorest. A gender, age, disability and cultural perspective shall be integrated in all policies and practices, and women and youth leadership shall be promoted”.

On the one hand, the Plan is unclear about how this principle will be operationalised. On the other hand, it provides that “sectoral strategies and action plans will be revised to harmonise with this Plan.” There is a need, therefore, to review and revise Nepal’s *Youth Vision 2025 and Ten-Year Strategic Plan* to reflect young people’s ideas on how they will contribute and benefit from the implementation of the DRRNSPA. This process may need the support of development partners to ensure that female and marginalised youth are not left behind.

### **Adopt a GESI perspective while engaging youth for economic recovery and beyond**

The NYC’s initiative to invest in the development of youths’ entrepreneurial potential is key to the achievement of sustainable economic stability and progress. Consistent with Agenda 2030, this ambition must be framed with a commitment to achieve gender equality, social inclusion and the principle of leaving no one behind.

Thus, it is important to review the NYC’s programme from GESI and resilience perspectives. The participants’ data must be disaggregated by sex and by type of vulnerability to ensure gender balance and inclusiveness. The types of projects must contribute to norm change, including the eradication of sex-role stereotyping and zero tolerance to discrimination and GBV. GESI-sensitive leadership must be incorporated into capacity building for all aspects of entrepreneurship, including in production, product innovation, trading and marketing. It would be helpful to support the expansion of their enterprise into higher value chains and conceptualise their eventual linkup with the formal economy.

More importantly, the enterprises of the participants must be sustainable and resilient to humanitarian shocks. The NYC may want to consider adopting a resilience assessment tool for the use of its participants and ensure that they are assisted in addressing the identified gaps. The four economic resilience scenarios cited in the section on Economic Empowerment and Resilience may be used as a springboard for this purpose.

**“ Gender equality is the closest we have to a magic bullet for development and progress. It is the most powerful multiplier of success across the range of our objectives. There is a close correlation between gender equality and stability, resilience, poverty-reduction, growth and social cohesion. So, SDG5 is fundamental to all SDGs. Without gender equality we cannot achieve any of the Sustainable Development Goals.**

***Sima Bahous***

*Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations  
and UN Women Executive Director*



**Source:** Keynote speech at the 2022 World Assembly for Women (WAW! 2022), 3 December 2022, available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2022/12/speech-tackling-challenges-head-on>

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