

EMPOWERING WOMEN

2

LEARNING AND SHARING SERIES



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HELVETAS NEPAL Learning And Sharing Series No. 2

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Abstract

“Empowering Women” focuses on how Helvetas Nepal and its partners work to bring women into the mainstream of the development process. Women, especially in the Mid and Far Western regions of Nepal, face social, economic, political, and physical discrimination, exploitation, and marginalisation — much of which is based on gender myth, superstition, and unsubstantiated religious claims. Burdened by household responsibilities and sidelined in the public arena, women have remained powerless to change and improve their situation.

Any effort or programme that works to initiate social change and lasting benefits must start from, and move with, the reality of the community where it works. The challenge is to match programme support with the pace of change, capacity, and interests of the community. This challenge is critical for empowering women because they are so disempowered. Women must not only prove their worth to their husbands, fathers, brothers, mothers, and communities: they must also prove themselves that they are indeed capable, resourceful, and innovative agents of change.

The immediate task for the Helvetas programme has therefore been to initiate a social change process to create a condition in which women can participate actively in new development opportunities and activities. Helvetas, its partner organisations, and the communities they work with, have identified five steps towards helping women to bring about this condition: 1) gender sensitisation and awareness raising; 2) social mobilisation; 3) economic development activities; 4) organisation/network building and strengthening; and 5) building on changes.

Helvetas has learnt valuable lessons about how to apply these steps: understanding local women’s (and men’s) perspectives starting with women’s common issues; building relations with both women and men and providing them with the space to sensitise themselves to these issues; starting with only women groups; ensuring the quality of women’s participation in group activities, which is critical to their success; forming alliances and networking women’s organisations so that they can learn and develop more quickly than in isolation, and finally mainstreaming women’s issues by putting them on the public agenda increasing awareness in the community.

Women remain powerless to improve their situation because they are burdened by household responsibilities and sidelined in the public arena.

Helvetas has initiated a social change process where women can participate actively in development.

Helvetas’ Lesson: Quality comes before quantity.



Women are burdened by household responsibilities.

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Abbreviations

CAED	Centre for Agro-Ecology and Development
CBO	Community Based Organisation
DDC	Districts Development Committee
DEC	Dalit Empowerment Centre
IGA	Income Generating Activities
LLINK	Linking Local Initiatives to New Know-how
MCH	Maternal and Child Health
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NTFP	Non-Timber Forest Products
OD/ID	Organisational and Institutional Development
RSDC	Rural Self- Reliance Development Centre
SLOW	Small Farmers, Landless, Occupational caste/dalit, and Women
SPACE	Society for Participatory Cultural Education
VDC	Village Development Committee

Credo of Rural Reconstruction

Go to the people

Live among them

Learn from them

Plan with them

Work with them

Start with what they know

Build on what they have

Teach by showing, learn by doing

Not a showcase, but a pattern

Not odds and ends but a system

Not piecemeal but integrated approach

Not to conform but to transform

Not relief but release

Helvetas Nepal and its staff have adopted this credo from James Yen, the founder of the Global Rural Reconstruction Movement, and bring this into their daily work.

Introduction

This short paper, *"Empowering Women"*, is one of a series of *Learning and Sharing* papers on various topics of current importance in the Helvetas Programme in Nepal. It attempts to provide a parallel country-level series to the current *Experience and Learning* documents produced by Helvetas at the international level.

The paper provides a glimpse of our working experience in the rural areas of Nepal, as seen by our operational teams and the staff of their civil society partners. It does not claim to provide an exhaustive or definitive picture of the topic under discussion. Instead, the paper is a humble attempt to document some of our field experience - a small building block in our learning and sharing. This document will be further elaborated upon as we learn more lessons.

"Empowering Women" reveals how Helvetas and its partners are reaching and benefiting women in its working areas in Jajarkot, Dailekh, Achham and Doti districts through the main support sectors of forest and agriculture, trade-based employment, and social empowerment. Through their own organisations, women are able to participate actively and equally in the development process through self-reliant means. First, the paper explains the *context* and *rationale* of Helvetas' specific objective for women's empowerment. The paper analyses how Helvetas and its intermediary partners are addressing this objective, outlining the *approach* implemented and its *outcomes*.

The paper then expands upon the *learning* Helvetas has drawn from programme progress, through regular critical reflections with stakeholders. Based upon this learning, Helvetas maps out *future directions* for working with women towards their socio-economic empowerment. These directions are flexible and remain responsive to the needs and interests of participating communities, and they are sensitive to the deepening political crisis threatening the region and country.

Helvetas' works in the rural areas of Nepal.

Helvetas and its partners are reaching and benefiting women.

This paper explains Helvetas' context, rationale, approach, activities, outcomes, learning, and future directions.



Women and men working together.

Background

Helvetas' Programme

Since 1997, Helvetas has conducted an integrating community development programme called Linking Local Initiatives to New Know-how (LLINK) in Dailekh, Doti and Achham districts, and has recently extended the programme to Jajarkot. The Mid and Far West regions, within which these districts lie, are characterised by extreme poverty, a lack of rural infrastructure, a limited food production base, poor resource management, underemployment, and adverse effects of migration, caste, and gender discrimination and exploitation, and weak local governance.

Helvetas assists disadvantaged and marginalised communities.

Helvetas strives to assist disadvantaged and marginalised communities of Mid and Far West regions to tackle the underlying issues of poverty and address their needs through a range of activities, which link and support people and local organisations from the grassroots level up to national level.

Helvetas seeks to enable these communities to utilise emerging markets and other opportunities. It supports and works in direct partnership with local institutions, including CBOs, NGOs, VDCs and DDCs, and with social and economic intermediary partners in the areas of:

- Forest and Agricultural Production and Marketing
- Training and Employment of Youth
- Organisation of communities, including Dalit and Women groups

It also supports these areas through facilitating i) the development of local institutions, ii) the development of rural infrastructure, iii) water resource management, and iv) the development of regional linkages.

Helvetas aims to achieve gender equitable development.

Helvetas Nepal's programmes encompass a gender-balanced strategy aimed at identifying, understanding, and achieving gender equitable development. The strategic framework includes a gender sensitive checklist and indicators. Each Helvetas programme applies these when selecting, planning, implementing, monitoring, and reviewing its programme to determine how far the programme is reaching, consulting, moving with, and benefiting women and generating a process of building equity. And through this Helvetas ensures the development of gender equity.

It is crucial to understand the specific situation faced by women in each programme working area.

Context - Women in Helvetas' Working Areas

It is crucial to understand the specific situation and conditions faced by women in each programme working area in order to devise an effective working strategy. Issues and challenges are bound to arise in the struggle to position women firmly and positively in the social and economic development of the region.

In Nepal, social and cultural traditions and practices predominantly start from within the home and severely disadvantage women to participate equally and benefit from their communities and broader civil society. Helvetas understands this social, political, and economic discrimination, exploitation, and marginalisation of women in terms of position, power, and role and opportunity:

Helvetas examines the situation of women in terms of positions, power, roles, and opportunities.

Position: In a patriarchal culture that from birth to old age gives preference to males, women hold a very low position within the home and broader community. A woman's work is given little status even though it contributes a major part to the family's livelihood. Men's ability to earn money brings respect, and their traditional role of provider grants them higher economic and thus social status.

Power: A woman's power - her decision-making role and influence and control over resources is almost negligible in many households of the Mid and Far West regions. Men predominantly control resources and decide their usage. Lack of access to and control over resources means a woman has no power to invest in productive activities and raise an income. Men dominate most decisions made in the family and it is taken for granted that they hold a higher status. Issues concerning property, marriage, expenditure, and education are men's business, and women can exert little or no influence over the outcomes. Recent legislative changes still do not give equal rights to women for the inheritance of parental property.

Women's power in the social sphere is also marginal. Social power is often gained through organisation, representation, and participation. Women lack this and therefore have little or no public voice. A woman's lower social status reduces her ability to influence community dialogue and decisions. Her political power is often merely a token representation to meet legislative requirements. In higher caste and/or wealthier families in rural Mid and Far West Nepal, women often suffer more acute caste and gender based discrimination because many of these families hold more strongly to traditional values.

Roles and Opportunity: The role ascribed to a person directly affects his or her status. The future role of the child determines the opportunities granted to males and females from an early age. A woman's role is to support the responsible, decision-making, money earning, and socially respected male head of the household. Boys are taught to be bold and be the future earner, and to hold the main responsibility for the family. Hence, a male is given more opportunity in education, develops job market skills, and knowledge and exposure for building confidence.

Girls on the other hand, are taught to be the caretaker, be submissive, and be responsible for household chores and the family's well being and health. A girl's opportunities are therefore limited to within the household. Women have poorer education, higher rates of illiteracy, less confidence in the home and in public, little knowledge of their legal rights, and are bound to their responsibilities at home. There is little opportunity for her to develop entrepreneurial skills and be involved in community and social activities.

A woman's decision making and control of resources is negligible in many households.

The low social status of women reduces their ability to influence community decisions.

Men are given more opportunities for education and employment.

Women are bound by their household responsibilities.



Despite a woman's contribution to household production, she has no input to decision-making or control of resources.

After marriage, a woman's workload increases and her position in the house falls to the bottom.

After marriage, her world is the same, only her workload increases and now that she has become the new daughter-in-law, her position in the house falls to the bottom. Her management of the day-to-day operations of the house and farm, is undervalued mainly because it does not directly generate income. Overburdened with laborious work and lacking family support, she has little time and mobility to become involved in social development and income generating activities.

Traditional practices and taboos that clearly exploit and discriminate against women:

Traditional social practices operate in many households of the Mid and Far West, and these have major implications in terms of nutrition, general welfare, and basic human rights for women.

- In poor households, women and girls suffer most as they always eat last and get the least amount of food. In times of food shortage, they may get very little food.
- Women carry the heaviest work burden, and often suffer serious physical damage as a result of working too soon after giving birth. The incidence of uterus prolapse in the Mid and Far West is extremely high.
- The practice of menstrual untouchability - women staying outside the house in the cowshed, or a specially constructed chaupadi, is strictly adhered to in most homes. However, she is still expected to do all household chores and farm work, except cooking, and can take only dry food.
- Many women are forced to give birth in the cowshed, often alone, and stay there with the baby afterwards for the required number of days, sometimes up to one month. There are also food restrictions on the new mother (such as fresh milk), which seriously compromises the nutritional status of both mother and child.



In Mid and Far West Nepal, women must stay outside of the house in a shed during her menstrual period and child birth.

Rationale

It is within this context that Helvetas launched its programme in the Mid and Far West with special emphasis on enabling women to participate and equally benefit from the opportunities available and emerging in the region. Until conditions improve so that women can be mobilised to participate willingly and with a purpose in the activities offered, development programmes will continue to sideline and marginalise women and their needs. Helvetas is trying to create these conditions and to propel the change process that will ultimately enable local women themselves to pursue their rights and interests, and to gain new opportunities. Helvetas has therefore set specific operational objectives to focus on and support women.

To increase the employment of female and male youth and the income they earn.

To empower the disadvantaged - women and Dalit groups - to address the effects of discrimination and exploitation.

Until women can participate, development programmes will sideline and marginalise women.

Helvetas and its SLOW partners ensure that activities are directed towards women.

Helvetas and its partners SLOW's (Small Farmers, Landless, Occupational caste, and Women) criteria for group formation, and gender guidelines/checklists for programme support, ensure that Helvetas' other operational and supporting objectives are also directed towards women and bring them tangible benefits.

Approach And Steps

Women are given the opportunity to have influence over the processes and content of development plans and activities.

Helvetas follows a step-wise strategy.

1. Women and men participate in gender activities.

Community dialogue on women's issues has led to a movement on rights and empowerment.

Women are beginning to speak out about their issues.

With support from husbands and families, women have more free time to participate.

Informal education classes on legal issues have motivated women to resist exploitation and pursue their rights.

Helvetas enhances the participation of women quantitatively and, more especially, qualitatively, by ensuring women have influence over the processes and content of development plans and activities. Improving women's participation in development programmes requires a significant initial shift in attitudes, social norms, and values to allow women's mobility and availability of time.

Helvetas works according to a step-wise strategy of social and economic empowerment. The steps are:

1. Gender sensitisation and awareness raising
2. Group formation
3. Economic development activities
4. Organisation/Network building and strengthening
5. Building on changes

1. Gender Sensitisation and Awareness Raising

Women and men are sensitised, become critically aware of the situation of women, and look at options and ways to address these issues themselves.

Activities:

- Gender Sensitisation Workshops for men and women provide a forum to openly discuss the issues and discrimination confronting women, and ways to address these.

Outcomes:

- A community dialogue on women's issues has led to the emergence of a movement on rights and empowerment in the districts. Women's awareness of their critical situation has increased significantly. Women are gaining the confidence to question and challenge their treatment and position within the home and broader society, for example, the treatment of women during menstruation is now a public and often discussed issue. An effective chaupadi poster campaign by the Centre for Agro-Ecology and Development (CAED), an NGO partner, has done much to raise public awareness in the districts, and make it an important 'rights and health' issue rather than an unspeakable social taboo. Some women are now refusing to sleep in the chaupadi (menstrual shed), or are at least reducing the time spent in the chaupadi during menstruation. Annex 1 shows a sample chaupadi poster.
- Women are now finally accessing treatment and preventative education services for uterus prolapse. Uterus prolapse has emerged as an important public issue. Women are increasingly bold to speak out about such a traditionally taboo topic, and raise public attention and support to address the alarmingly high incidence of uterus prolapse in the region.
- Women are gradually being able to have more free time in order to participate in workshops, training, groups, and public meetings, with the support of husbands and families. Gender sensitisation workshops have helped create this understanding and generate support within families by explaining the benefits and advantages for women to participate in activities outside the home.
- In some areas, legal awareness, gained through informal education classes, has motivated women to resist exploitation and pursue their rights to property and equal wages. Men usually control legal procedures such as registration of births, deaths, and citizenship. Classes on simple legal procedures organised by the Women's Network in Dailekh have given participating women confidence and respect. Women groups in the other districts are also establishing learning centres for women that cover awareness raising, legal rights, improved/appropriate agricultural practices, and literacy on specific issues identified by the participants.

Tearing down the Chaupadi Goth

Bishna Shahi is 34 and is refusing to stay in the chaupadi goth (shed) during her menstrual period. Bishna is one among many courageous and brave women who dares to act as a pioneer by breaking discriminatory and abusive social taboos. She is hoping that this will serve as a demonstration and will lead other women in her community to do the same.

Bishna admits that because her house lies a little outside the village it is easier for her to break the taboo than if she was living right in the centre of the village. Bishna continues to be put under enormous pressure, especially by older women, to revert to the traditional norm. She is also held responsible for every misfortune in her house that occurs during her monthly period. If somebody catches a cold during this time, it is Bishna who is to blame. However, Bishna is persevering. She is determined to help break the tradition of chaupadi in her own family and community.

Bishna is, like many other women in and around CAED's working area in Achham, trying to demonstrate that women during menstruation are not impure and untouchable, and certainly do not bring about harm and misfortune to their house and community. Women are benefiting from a number of initiatives that CAED is implementing to help end the untouchability of women during their menstrual period.

CAED wanted to first show that absolutely nothing bad would happen if women interact, touch, or perform their normal duties, etc, during their period. Therefore, CAED first insisted that its couples' workshops be held in its meeting room knowing that a number of women participants would be menstruating. Participants were unsure and nervous; many had never interacted publicly during their period. Of course, nothing "bad" happened, and both male and female participants were able to see that public interaction during menstruation had no negative consequences.

CAED then encouraged its female participants to enter temples and milk buffaloes. Again, the gods did not show their anger and consequently, nothing out of the ordinary happened. Gradually, men and women are recognising that these discriminatory practices are indeed based on unsubstantiated myth and superstition.

Then CAED launched its chaupadi poster campaign and gave the issue excellent coverage and attention. By putting the issue firmly on the public agenda with pictures and themes everyone can access, women have gained greater confidence to disobey the chaupadi practice and have strong arguments to support their claim. CAED produced Dashain greeting cards to push the issue within the religious context.

Perhaps the most physically liberating initiative came after an exposure tour to Kathmandu by CAED's Dalit couples. The women visitors were perplexed with a certain item they saw while visiting New Road and shopping centres. It was the first time that many participants had seen underwear. They all agreed that having underwear would help them immensely during their menstrual period, and give them more freedom for movement and better hygiene (with improved hygienic i.e. washing practices).

CAED then took the initiative to produce special cotton underwear that women could use during their menstruation. Four hundred pairs of underwear were made and sold to the women in CAED's community in Achham. The demand is increasing as women are realising and slowly convincing their families that menstruation is not an impure, burdensome punishment, but a natural part of life that in fact enables life.

Women are put under enormous pressure by older women to revert to the traditional norm.

Men and women participants are made aware that public interaction during menstruation has no negative consequences.

The chaupadi poster campaign aided the abolition of traditional practices.

Exposure tours offer physically liberating opportunities to women.



Husbands, who assist with the household chores, offer their wives an opportunity to participate in development activities.

2. Group Formation: introduction of basic confidence building activities.

2. Group Formation

Women mobilised either in mixed or separate groups have developed confidence, awareness, purpose, new skills, information, and knowledge, and have become involved in social development activities and simple income generating programmes.

Activities:

- Group formation and the introduction of basic activities that build confidence:
 - Training in leadership and management
 - Training in group and public speaking
 - Issue based discussions within groups on discrimination against and the rights of Dalits and women health and sanitation, community work by the group, and responsibility
 - Saving and credit mobilisation
 - Accounting training
 - Accessing local resources

Outcomes:

- After one and a half years of informal meetings and discussions, women's groups were formed in five VDCs in the working area of CAED and are active in health and sanitation awareness raising workshops, discussions on women's issues, and advocacy.
- In two districts of the LLINK programme, women have formed more than 100 groups.

3. Women are trained in economic development activities.

3. Economic Development Activities

Women's access to and participation in income generating activities improves through skills development, new and improved agronomic practices, and marketing systems. Economic empowerment in turn raises women's status and confidence within the home, market, and broader community.

Activities:

- Training and skill development on:
 - Cash-crop cultivation with improved and sustainable agronomic practices
 - Marketing systems and linkages
 - Trades-based skills training and employment (e.g. sewing and cutting, fabric painting, weaving, beverage processing)
 - NTFP production/cultivation and marketing

- Small livestock keeping
- Developing female technical resource persons (e.g. leaders in farming/local technicians/gender sensitisers)

Outcomes:

- Women's participation in income generating activities promoted by Helvetas and its intermediaries is slowly improving. Women have begun to invest funds and loans mobilised through saving and credit groups and cooperatives. Technical skills development, improved technologies, knowledge of keeping accounts, exposure tours, knowledge of marketing, and links and access to other organisations are enhancing women's roles in economic development beyond the traditional role of physical labour.
- Women are increasingly going to the markets and collection centres to sell their commodities (29% of women at the time of writing). The money earned from the sale is viewed clearly as the woman's input into the family income, and she has more influence over its expenditure. Women in South Dailekh are participating equally in productive/income generating activities - families/couples are working together to increase the cash income of the household. There is still, however, little involvement of women in the commercial activities of the household, and their input remains largely labour intensive.



Women can earn significant incomes through ginger farming.

A woman's earnings are viewed as her input into the family income, thus she has more influence over its expenditure.

There is still little involvement of women in commercial activities of the household except for labour.

4. Organisation/Network Building and Strengthening

Groups develop institutionally by becoming more organised and self-reliant, and by taking over the social mobilisation activities and the simple income-generating/semi-commercial activities currently carried out by Helvetas' partner organisations. Economic activities are being upgraded as the organisation of the groups is strengthened.

Activities:

- Organisational strengthening includes training and support in:
 - Leadership
 - Increasing women's participation
 - Participatory review and planning
 - Proposal writing and accessing resources
 - Saving-and-credit management
 - Small project management
 - Accounting and record keeping
 - Group work dynamics
 - Networking/Coordinating/Complementarities

Outcomes:

- Women groups operate under the umbrella of the Dalit Empowerment Centre (DEC), the new local organisation formed in CAED's working area.
- Formation of Women's Networks - North and South Dailekh. Women Networks are active in social awareness raising, advocacy and lobbying, conducting legal literacy classes, small health and sanitation programmes, and coordinating simple economic development programmes (income generating -IGA).
- As women's organisations emerge, strong female leadership within the community is developing. Women with initiative, commitment, vision, and community-wide respect are gathering support and momentum for their plans and activities. Amrita Thapa from the Women's Network in Dailekh, for example, is motivating other women and

4. Training and support is offered through Organisation/Network Building and Strengthening.

Strong female leadership within communities develops through women's organisations.

Women are more involved in local government and the public forum.

Women's organisations have established links and alliances with other organisations working in the district.

5. New situations require new approaches.

establishing useful linkages and coordination for the Network. Her ability to articulate ideas confidently and her proactive public role, pursuing relationships and linkages with other local offices/organisations, is creating new opportunities for the Network and building strong and active membership.

- Consequently, women's representation at local government (VDC) level and in public forums is improving. A unified and strong women's voice is now being heard in local VDC council meetings and in other public forums, such as mass rallies on International Women's Day. Access to local government resources and funding for women focused programmes is thus increasing. During Chauratha VDC's council meeting, representatives from the Women's Network (Dailekh) collected NRs.10,000 for the construction of a meeting place for the Network. In Achham, representatives of CAED's women's groups demanded and secured funding from Turmakhand VDC during a council meeting to support women's programmes.
- Newly formed women's organisations, for example the Women's Networks of Dailekh, are establishing linkages and alliances with other organisations working in the district to address their members' interests and needs. These include links with the Safer Motherhood Project, Family Planning Associations, and the Centre for Rural Technology (who focus on improved cooking stoves) to support health and sanitation related programmes.

5. Building on Changes

As changes come about, the programme must build on the "new" situation gradually in order to catalyse the next change. Through reflection and learning, the programme, its partner organisations, and women's groups improve their activities and ways of operating.

Lessons And Issues

It has proven extremely difficult to attract and maintain the purposeful and qualitative participation of women in the programme. However, the team and its working communities are slowly building the ground for women to participate equally and with influence in the region's development. Helvetas and partners are now trying to consolidate women's social mobilisation and organisation so that they can together confidently move into up-scaling economic/income-generating programmes.

Being committed to a group meeting or workshop is often the biggest hurdle women face in trying to open up their world and increase their opportunities. This is often due to the social values preventing women's more active and public role. External intervention and support needs to start by demystifying and mainstreaming "women's issues" through a process that local women and men can relate to, grasp, and continue. It must also provide more suitable and practical opportunities (and timing) for women to participate.

Local organisations and even "expert" intermediaries cannot deliver radical change within a short period. Through a step-by-step, issue-by-issue process, women and their organisations with community support can start to bring about the changes women want in their lives. Helvetas' experience and learning provides us with a number of critical lessons in the process of change.

Creating an environment for women's active participation in programme activities is the first and perhaps most difficult task. Women themselves need to be convinced of the advantages of participating and then persuade their husband and family who are suspicious and who discourage women from attending activities outside the home. Therefore, Helvetas and partners must approach the situation according to local women's perspectives and reality. Local women need to open up about the real felt issues facing them so partner organisations and Helvetas are aware of and can start from women's common issues. The partners must win the trust, confidence, and respect from the community in order for women to feel comfortable and secure enough to share concerns that have been kept inside the home.

The first essential steps are building a rapport with the community's men and women, communicating with women on their level, spending time with them, showing genuine interest and concern for their situation, and demonstrating commitment to working together. Partner organisations can then invite husbands and wives to gender sensitisation workshops and women to female-only discussion groups for raising awareness on issues.

Gender sensitisation for both men and women is essential for family/community support or any real and positive social change. Gender is a social construct of male and female, boy and girl, husband and wife, mother and child, father and child. An understanding of how women's discrimination and exploitation is linked with prescribed gender roles is

Local women and men can relate to "women's issues" if the issues are put into the mainstream.

Radical change takes time.

Situations must be approached according to the reality of the local women.



Women can speak at meeting of men and women.

Helvetas aims to build a rapport with the community's men and women.

Women's empowerment cannot take place without addressing the preconceived roles of both men and women.

necessary throughout the entire programme. Helvetas and its partners must be active to especially include men together with women in gender sensitisation and awareness raising workshops and activities. Without addressing the preconceived roles of both men and women, women's empowerment cannot take place.

Use real issues to involve women in discussions.

Regular meetings between women has initiated mobilisation and related action/activities.

"Women-only" groups are an advantage at the start of social mobilisation activities.

Encourage a public dialogue that demystifies the issue and explains the reality and pressures for change.

Partners must have a deep understanding of the issues in order to work effectively with local communities, and women in particular.

By improving technical skills and confidence in income generating activities, women can increase their access and control of resources and finances.

Real issues as entry points. More women have shown interest and participated in group discussions when an issue such as uterus prolapse has been used as a starting intervention point. Maternal and child health (MCH) has surfaced as an extremely important issue in the region. CAED's ability to quickly raise women's interest and participation in its programmes using health as the premise for intervention and entry point, demonstrates that these are the immediate concerns and priority issues facing women in the region (and all over Nepal). However, CAED has also used health as a platform to raise other women's issues and gender discrimination.

Empowerment through regular meetings and group formation. Once the issues have been raised, it is important to empower women with the feeling that their concerns are real and important, and that they have the ability to do something about their situation. Group formation (RSDC, SPACE and Sahavagi) or regular informal meetings of women (CAED) have proven to be effective approaches that build on critical self-awareness and initiate mobilisation and related action/activities. CAED's women groups have only recently formed after one and a half years of informal meetings. This ensures that their purpose, vision, and strategy are clear. The women groups now have a defined role under the umbrella of DEC.

Women only groups (activity based or informal discussion groups) are an advantage at the start of social mobilisation activities. Women can gain confidence while free from public/family pressure and are able to articulate their concerns within a supportive environment. Group members eventually have more confidence to articulate ideas and arguments; therefore, interaction with other/mixed groups at this stage can help build broader community awareness and solidarity.

Politicising/publicising issues identified - put these issues on the public agenda, raise them as problems affecting the whole community, and encourage a public dialogue that demystifies the issue and explains the reality and pressures for change. CAED's chaupadi posters displayed all over Dailekh and Achham districts, in public communication offices, meeting halls, NGO offices, and local shops is giving women the sense that their issues are valid and important and is generating public debate and action.

On International Women's Day, women networks in Dailekh and women from CAED and Shahvagi in Achham have successfully brought women's actions and issues on gender based discrimination and exploitation to the public forum. The gathering of thousands of women on this occasion was an inspiring accomplishment for this part of Nepal.

A deep understanding of issues by partners, their staff, and local organisations through training, experience, and a demonstrated willingness and commitment, is required for them to work effectively with local communities and women in particular.

The quality of women's participation in income generation activities increases empowerment. Implementing and coordinating income generating activities at the grassroots level is effective to monitor and facilitate/promote active women's involvement in economic programmes. Focusing on the quantity of women's involvement in income generating activities ignores women's real economic empowerment potential and provides little information on the qualitative impact of their new income. Emphasis is placed on what women are doing within the production process, i.e. what is their skill development and how is it affecting their position, opportunity, and access to resources and power. Strategies, such as developing technical resource persons, leadership in farming, and promoting female leadership within income generating/purposive groups can help advance and monitor women's qualitative participation in economic development beyond labour input.

Despite their membership status in saving-and-credit groups, women's husbands (non-members) often make the decisions on how funds should be invested, and claim they have more knowledge and experience. Women are slowly understanding that by improving technical skills, know-how, and confidence in income generating activities, they can assert their influence in decision making processes, and thus increase their access and control over resources and finances.

Organisational capacity building of local women's organisations provides an opportunity to address social issues. And then drives the local social and economic empowerment of women. There are distinct challenges such as the discrimination, exploitation, and lack of opportunity, which girls and women face. Women's organisations and networks confront these issues when strengthening their capacity to manage and coordinate programmes in a self-reliant and sustainable manner.

Women's organisations need to limit their activities to make them manageable. Poor literacy, education, public speaking skills, lack of exposure and experience, and lack of time and mobility make it extremely challenging for women's organisations (North and South Dailekh Women's Networks) to consolidate their capacity and manage programmes independently. Managing a multitude of tasks and responsibilities overstretches the capacity and can undermine the growth of networks. Helvetas and its partners are therefore encouraging the networks to first consolidate by focusing on programmes with limited scope and complexity. So far, they have focused on advocacy and lobby campaigns, non-formal education, simple service delivery/training for IGAs, and creating linkages with resource organisations.

Support appropriate levels of activities in community organisations. It is important to carefully assess the capability of network/organisation members before upgrading programmes and delivering Organisational and Institutional Development (OD/ID) training. High expectations can severely damage the future effectiveness and confidence of the organisation. It can also encourage the emergence of wrong and unrealistic attitudes.

Self-initiative and self-reliance by members makes organisations stronger. The people themselves should take the lead when forming organisations and setting a vision and objectives. Partners (and Helvetas) should play the role of facilitator, move at the pace of the local women, but also guide organisations/women to reach realistic goals within the organisation's vision that will enhance its ultimate self-reliant capacity.

Alliances and networking strengthens local women's organisations. Alliance building and networking of organisations involved in women's development provides a good opportunity and forum for sharing experiences, building solidarity, and developing strength and influence at the district level.

Political instability within the country, and especially in these working districts, is creating additional and increasingly dangerous obstacles. Helvetas and partners are currently unable to work as frequently and closely in the field as before due to the unpredictable security situation. The situation reinforces the need to capacitate local women and their organisations to continue the process of empowerment that should deliver them greater opportunities, rights, and influence.

The social and economic empowerment of women begins by building the capacity of local women's organisations.

Before giving an organisation support, a thorough assessment of the capability of its members is necessary.

Organisations are more manageable if activities are limited.

The people themselves should set a vision and the objectives.

Alliances and networks strengthen local women's organisations.

Political instability can create additional obstacles.

Future Approaches

The lessons Helvetas, its partners, and the communities have drawn from monitoring their progress and impact form the foundations of Helvetas' approach of working towards bringing women into the mainstream of local development.

In order to bring women into the mainstream, development organisations must follow a set of principles.

Principles

The outcomes and lessons learnt by all partners demonstrate that to bring women into the mainstream of the development process, development organisations must adhere to the following principles:

Active and quality participation of women. Encourage and maintain the active and quality participation of women in the programmes and activities intermediaries offer.

Women take over. Take this to the next stage by allowing the women to take over some of these programmes by assuming leadership and facilitator positions.

Work from the women's perspective and the reality. Work from the women's perspective and the reality, and match programme support and the pace accordingly.

Mainstream "women's issues". Mainstream "women's issues", putting them on the public and political agenda. Deal with one issue at a time, setting realistic and achievable goals without trying to do everything at once. Though seemingly limited in impact, mainstreaming issues gradually sensitises an extremely unexposed and conservative community on gender and "women's issues", and initiates a change process that picks up momentum, scope, and vigour with each success.

Gradual and incremental change process. Be patient and responsive to a gradual and incremental change process.

Capacitate local community organisations/networks. Capacitate local community organisations/networks to take over the change process that has been activated by external organisations.

Full support until they clearly demonstrate their new role/position with confidence. Identify and support selected women to take over the training/facilitation role of external intermediaries as soon as possible and give those women full support until they clearly demonstrate their new role/position with confidence.

Future Approaches

The following *future approaches* focus on what changes, enhancement, or differences Helvetas and other organisations can make in the consolidation and expansion of programmes that help empower women.

Programme and partner staff must be sensitised on gender and women issues.

1. Awareness Raising and Gender Sensitisation

1.1 Make the Gender Sensitisation Package/Workshop a core and regular component of the programme. Gender sensitisation must start with sensitising all programme staff and partner staff on gender and women issues. Programme staff and partners can then develop a clear policy and strategy for implementation in the community. Intermediary partners and newly forming organisations/networks should develop their own resource person to conduct gender sensitisation workshops. Local resource persons can then facilitate the workshops at member, community (male and female), and broader local

institution level. Programme staff and partners will offer follow-up and frequent sensitisation workshops.

- 1.2 Gender sensitisation workshops should include men and women participants, and ideally husbands and wives (where possible).
- 1.3 Gender sensitisation workshops should give participants a sense of purpose and benefit. Husbands often ask their wives “what did you get from the meeting?” Participants should be able to answer, “by attending the meeting, I and/or the community can gain something productive.” Participants should then be confident in saying what they have learnt.
- 1.4 In addition to raising awareness, other practical considerations need to be taken into account to encourage women’s participation in meetings/workshops. These include consideration of meeting location, time, and duration.
- 1.5 In new working areas, programme staff and intermediaries should focus more on building a rapport with the community, building trust and respect, and identifying and starting from real felt and common issues.

2. Group Formation

- 2.1 Where possible, intermediaries should encourage the formation of women only groups to run their activities/programmes. This enables partners to give the specific support and time required, and for members to gain confidence.
- 2.2 Group activities with emphasis on ensuring women’s participation and influence in group decisions and confidence building can include:
 - Saving-and-credit mobilisation
 - Accounting, record keeping and leadership training
 - Training on improved agricultural activities
 - Off-farm/trade based skill development and employment generation
 - Public/group speaking activities
 - Group membership and responsibility discussions
- 2.3 Partners should also facilitate issue-based discussions/workshops during informal meetings with groups on areas identified by the participants, such as gender based discrimination, women’s legal and human rights etc., and how participants themselves can address the issues. Experience indicates that action on uterus prolapse and menstrual untouchability (*chaupadi*) has roused the interest and enthusiasm of female participants. Using this insight, partners can be prepared on issues to motivate and guide participants for constructive future action/direction.
- 2.4 As members begin to gain more confidence and are able to articulate ideas and arguments, partners can begin to provide opportunities for groups/members to interact with other male-female/Dalit/mixed groups, organisations, etc.
- 2.5 *Functional* literacy should be introduced across the programme in a meaningful and persuasive way and needs to be relevant and practical to the women participating. Programmes and partners should continue to explore alternative methods of non-formal, clearly functional education and literacy training. The learning centre approach adopted by CAED is one example. By taking up issues that have been identified and prioritised by the participants (usually relating to their daily needs and interests), learning centres can offer awareness raising group activities and related literacy training.
- 2.6 Programmes should continue to explore and utilise media, including radio, print, and posters to advocate and promote gender and women’s issues within the districts and region.
- 2.7 Rural dramas, folk song and dance competitions/programmes, gatherings, marches, and interactions with local government bodies should be promoted, and the whole community should be encouraged to participate. Involving the broader community will contribute positively to the process of social change by building greater understanding and cooperation. These efforts will minimise potential conflict and resentment that may

Gender sensitisation must include both men and women participants.

Workshops should give participants confidence and a sense of purpose.

Building a rapport with the community helps to build trust.

Group activities should emphasise women’s participation and influence in group decisions.

Participants can address their own issues.

Interaction with other male-female, dalit, and mixed groups enables members to gain confidence.

Literacy activities should be relevant and practical for women’s daily needs.

Media can help reduce conflict and resentment when challenging traditional beliefs.

Leadership development at the early stages can help women to take up activities that build their organisations.

Specific support increases the quality and quantity of women's involvement.

Women can be trained to lead and serve other members as technical resource persons.

Differentiated support subsidies and special credit/loan facilities enable women to start their own enterprises.

Avoid programmes that increase the overall workload of women.

A step-wise approach to development can help overcome challenges and barriers.

Consolidate new organisations' strengths and capacity first.

emerge as traditional beliefs and practices are challenged and as women gain a more powerful, united, and influential voice.

- 2.8 Programmes and partners should select and support women leaders to take over clear duties of the project. Initiating leadership development early in the programme will support the women led organisation/community to take over activities/programmes and the empowerment process.

Awareness raising and social mobilisation is approximately a 2-3 year process through programme/intermediary direct intervention.

3. Economic Development/Income Generating Programmes

- 3.1 Once women groups/participants have reached a sustainable level of production for a subsistence level of household consumption (approx. 2-3 year process), programmes and partners should introduce income-generating activities/programmes based on interest and potential. Income generating programmes should take hold and progress steadily with the foundations built from the prior 2-3 year awareness raising and social mobilisation process.

- 3.2 As the newly formed organisations (Women Networks, DEC, Janasanghs) will not yet be capable to entirely manage economic programmes, initially income generating programmes/activities will be supported by expert organisations.

- 3.3 Partner organisations should give specific support to women participants/groups and focus on increasing the quality and quantity of women's involvement in commercial activities. Activities include: skills training and application, production and marketing, trade based employment, and small enterprise development.

- 3.4 Local organisations should strongly encourage and promote their members' active participation in these economic programmes and can support their members with coordination and linkages.

- 3.5 More attention should be given to develop women's skills and potential in production and marketing, small enterprises, and traditional and new trades such as small livestock, NTFP collection and marketing, pickle production and marketing, vegetable and seed production, and tailoring.

- 3.6 Develop women as technical resource persons for their organisation/community. For example, CAED is currently developing female farmers as leaders to serve members of DEC as it grows into a socio-techno organisation.

- 3.7 Women groups/members will be given differentiated support subsidies and special credit/loan facilities for productive activities.

- 3.8 Programmes and partners must be more creative, flexible, and careful to ensure that women's involvement in income generating activities increases. This should occur without the further increase of the overall workload of women. (Existing annual work cycles of the women should be carefully considered.)

4. Organisation/Network Strengthening

- 4.1 Women in management and leadership positions are often held back. Building the capacity of newly formed women's networks and other organisations with women's empowerment objectives and activities (i.e. DEC and Janasanghs) need to address these distinct challenges and barriers. Programmes and intermediaries must therefore continue to approach the organisational and institutional development of these organisations in a step-wise manner.

- 4.2 Programmes and partners should support new organisations to consolidate their strengths and capacity first within a limited scope and complexity. Programmes can then support the organisations to gradually build their programmes, activities, and coverage area. This growth process and external intervention must be based on the vision, objectives, and strategy set by the organisation and members themselves building from where the people are, not from assumptions made about their current reality.

4.3 Organisational and Institutional Development must target specific and timely needs of the organisation. Example areas include:

- Skills development in social mobilisation and understanding group dynamics
- Management and leadership training
- Accounting and administration skills training
- Exposure tours
- Developing local gender resource persons and good governance/institutional development
- Defining vision, objectives, strategy, activities, etc.
- Policy development: institutional frameworks and guidelines
- Resource generation and tapping
- Alliance building and linkages
- Strengthening representation and influence at local government level

4.4 An important component of organisational strengthening is consolidating women's skills and capacity in leadership as facilitators and in management positions. Women must be given the opportunity to develop and demonstrate their capacity in these roles with sufficient support from Helvetas and partners.

5. Supporting Activities

5.1 Support to local government (DDCs/VDCs) to promote women's development includes:

- Gender sensitisation of all representatives;
- Capacity building of female representatives;
- Promoting women's organisations' voice and access to funds;
- Poverty/SLOW oriented planning and programme implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

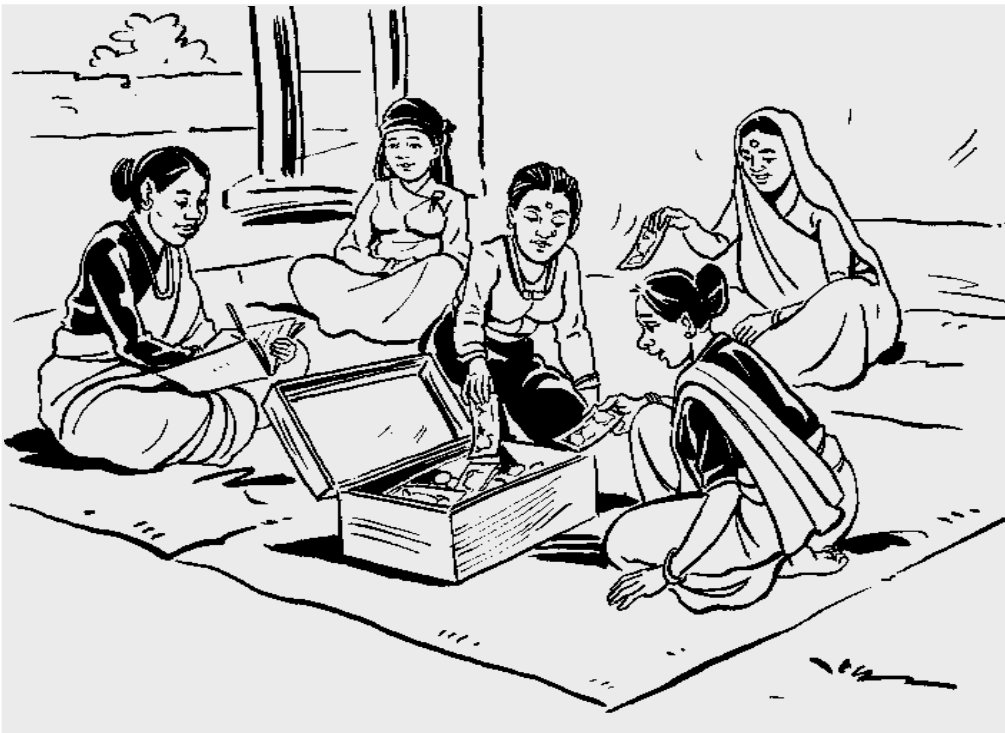
5.2 Develop Monitoring and Evaluation to guide support for women's development:

- Leadership by women in monitoring and evaluation process;
- Implementation of gender sensitive checklist and indicators;
- Application of lessons learnt in future plans.

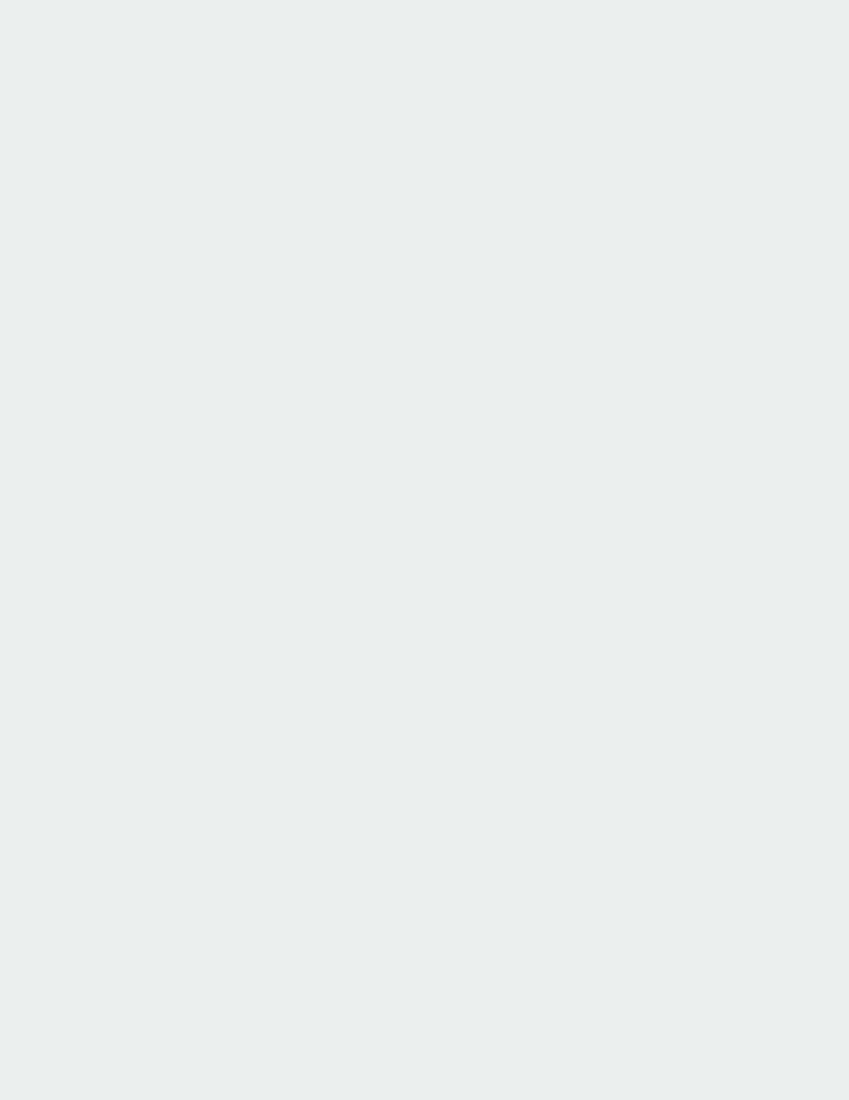
Organisational and Institutional Development must target specific needs of the organisation.

The strengthening of an organisation should include women facilitators in management positions.

Support must be given to local governments to promote women's development.



Functional literacy allows women to keep records in saving and credit groups.



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