



# Political empowerment of women in the Terai

## महिला नेतृत्व



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## *Political Empowerment of Women in the Terai*

*Editor:* Pallav Ranjan

*Project Manager:* Meena Sharma

*Research:* Rasani Shrestha

*Photos:* Search stock

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Search for Common Ground Nepal  
Nursery Marg, Lazimpat  
Kathmandu 44616, Nepal

Phone: 977-1-4002010

Email: [webinfo@sfcg.org](mailto:webinfo@sfcg.org)

Web: <https://www.sfcg.org/Nepal>

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## *Political Empowerment of Women in the Terai*

Good practices to promote women's  
leadership and political participation



## Opening words

A transformative program for Nepali women's leadership – "Netritwa", was a one-year pilot project funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) implemented in Siraha district from April 2016 to March 2017. The project strengthened women's leadership skills and their participation in political processes and engaged men in enabling women's political participation. It contributed to create a conducive environment for women's political participation. The project was able to empower women on their rights which led to more access for local women to govern-

ment services and entitlements. In addition to having a say in the decision making process, these women are collectively raising their voices and issues through their own networks.

Search for Common Ground Nepal conducted an assessment of 24 women's leadership positions and competencies in Siraha district before and after intervention to document significant changes and their reasons. The abilities and competencies of these women to identify local issues and priorities and to speak out effectively in decision making bodies were seen to have increased significantly. They are also able to deliver speeches in public with confidence. These women are now eager to take on leadership positions in local government and political parties. With more knowledge and understanding of political and electoral processes, these women are claiming leadership positions in local institutions and committees.

I would like to thank Shiva Kumar Dhungana, Asia Regional DMEA Specialist, for his technical input and guidance in designing and conducting this study and Yubakar Raj Rajkarnikar, Director of Programs, and Meena Sharma, Project Manager, for managing this one-year pilot project. I am pleased to acknowledge the guidance and support of Nireesh Chapagain, DMEA Manager, for leading and managing this study. I congratulate Rasani Shrestha, associate coordinator DMEA, on successfully carrying out the Most Significant Change (MSC) tool from the beginning to the end of this project. I am thankful to Manisha Lamsal, Senior Officer of DMEA and Ayush Joshi, Program Development and Communications, Senior Coordinator, for technical input and feedback in ensuring quality of this product. My gratitude goes to the Regional Manager Aalok Thakur, Field Coordinators Rajesh Lohani and Sunil Shah for their hard work and coordination with local people and stakeholders. Special thanks goes to Pallav Ranjan of Spiny Babbler for his insightful editing on this report, making it publishable.

Finally, I highly appreciate the entire team of Samagra Jana Utthan Kendra, our partner in Siraha for this project, in making it a success, and express my gratitude to National Endowment for Democracy for their kind support to this noble cause.

Dr. Bhola Prasad Dahal  
Country Director  
Search for Common Ground – Nepal





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*Welcome.*

## Here's our story

**N**epal prepares for local elections for the first time in 20 years. *Netritwa*, or leadership, by women in the Terai can achieve significant transformation at this crucial time. Their proactive political participation, their ability to influence elected bodies, and their engagement within local governance can change individual lives, families, and communities. Local level election act doubles the representation of women at the grassroots from 20 to 40 per cent. Nepal now has the necessary legal framework and favourable environment to enhance women's leadership.

Though historically the country has had fairly good policies and laws on paper, the implementation thereof is severely lacking. The constitution guarantees 33 per cent representation of women in government structure and mechanisms but quality of participation and leadership in governance institutions have been low. A recent 24-member council of ministers had three female members and data shows political parties have had as few as 1.6 per cent women in decision making positions. Women's participation has been quantitative rather than qualitative. Both men and women blame social norms and values that restrict women's freedom for the lack of leadership opportunities available to women.

Women need social and financial support, opportunities, knowledge, and skills in order to move forward. Programs that work simultaneously to empower women and transform community, family and leadership perception of women as leaders will be pivotal in order to increase women's voices and influence in politics and governance, particularly in the eastern Terai.

Search worked for a year, from April 2016 to April of 2017, with "Netritwa: A Transformative Leadership Program for Nepali Women Leaders" and helped women of three village development committees and one municipality of Siraha district advance their leadership capacities. The project strengthened leadership potential of women for political participation and influenced and engaged men as partners to create an enabling environment for women's political representation.

Specific objectives of Netritwa were to:

- strengthen leadership capacities of local women leaders to actively participate in and influence local elected bodies; and
- engage men as partners in enabling women's political participation in local governance.

Siraha offered diversity of Madhesi flatland and Pahade hill communities for the project to reach diverse communities as it worked with (i) local level women leaders who were already playing some leadership roles in local committees or political party structures and had aspirations to run in the upcoming local elections; and (ii) male counterparts of the women leaders – men who the women identified as influential and important to their success.

The Netritwa project built on a foundation set by “Women Building Peace and Democracy in the Eastern Terai,” another project implemented by Search for Common Ground with support from NED from 2011 to 2013. Among the activities and foundations built for women included comprehensive research that identified capacity, gaps, and constraints for women as they sought to assume and exercise political roles and influence. Study of the role of men as enablers to women's empowerment; development of curricula to enhance women's capacity in leadership and mapping and selection of local women leaders from across the political and ethnic spectrum was achieved.

A major criteria for the selection of women participants was their aspiration to run for local elections and the likelihood of their candidacy. Search consulted local structures of inter-party women alliance (a network of women leaders from across political parties). Women's identification of who they deemed influential and important to their success were selected as male counterparts. Search's aim was to help create a conducive environment for women's political participation. Participants strengthened their leadership potential, gained confidence and planned to run for upcoming local elections and increased their skills to govern as effective and influential leaders.

Transformative leadership program for women leaders covered training and follow-up coaching. Training equipped women leaders with fundamental knowledge on local governance and the role of elected representatives. The





activity strengthened leadership skills, especially in areas of forming visions, collaborative problem solving, negotiation, advocacy, communication, and public speaking. Training was experiential and tailored to the capacity and needs of the participants.

Search facilitators lead the training with support from the local partner organization Samagra. Repeatedly sharing a most significant initiative that the women had carried out on their own during the project period contributed to increase individual impact. Broadly, the areas of transformative leadership training for women included collaborative leadership, forming visions, communication, local governance, role of elected officials, negotiation, public speaking and gender equity.

Residential leadership training for 48 participants (24 women and 24 men) took place and was followed up by dialogue with other stakeholders on contentious issues such political participation, gender mainstreaming and others. 16 were selected based on qualitative change after training, their involvement in political processes and organizations, and potential for leadership. 12 participants with greatest potential for candidacy in local elections were shortlisted



and stories of eight are presented in this publication.

Other achievements include support for public speaking forums and the formation of speakers' clubs in each village development committee. They provided a platform for women to communicate openly and assertively with men and the community. Men were encouraged to attend these forums so they could witness how women harnessed leadership roles and support women's leadership.

The "do no harm" policy and durable outcomes were fostered during this period. Male counterparts of participating women engaged to create a supportive and enabling environment. A 3-day residential training was provided. Broad coverage on positive masculinities included patriarchy, gender roles and gender equity. Understanding of traditional gender roles, their impact on both men and women, positive masculinities, redefined role of men from dominant to partnership were focused on.

Trained women and men discussed challenges and opportunities for women's leadership and political participation and developed leadership action plans. One-on-one interaction with

men who showed resistance and counselling helped bring them on board. Dialogues on gender roles took place. Men listened and understood women's perspectives on decision making and pledged support. The dialogue identified barriers to collaboration and discussed needs and benefits of women's leadership in local governance.

Best practices, results and lessons learned were documented. A study team undertook field visits in the initial phase of Netritwa to document target beneficiaries' participation in politics, political party affiliation, expectations, ambitions, and baseline information. The team's second visit collected attitude changes, understanding of challenges, and active contribution of political parties. During the last visit behavior change and impacts were captured.

Evidence of transformation throughout the intervention was recorded using the "Most Significant Change" tool. This qualitative approach built better understanding of participants and helped Netritwa improve the work that was going on. It linked participants' pasts, presents, and potential futures. Clear domains of change were established and most significant achievements shortlisted by a committee using key informant interviews as a base.

Participants shared progress in leadership status and linked changes to the Netritwa project and how they influenced personal life. Regular interaction increased trust, shared experiences (such as those related to gender based violence), perceptions, challenges, and motivation. Experiences of transformative leadership aimed at other like-minded organizations will replicate the approach and modules.

It was evident that over the year women and men who participated in the effort initiated processes through which women can be selected as independent or party candidates for local elections. They can actively fight and represent their constituencies and enhance the status of women in the communities that the project worked in. Not only would their victories be significant but the fact that they themselves chose to take on political presence would encourage other women and girls to attempt to break through into a sector that is under represented by women and bring about lasting change in mindset and confidence.

# LILA PARIYAR

**I** remember standing on my own, watching my three brothers and friends going to school in uniform. We, the two daughters, did not. Sometimes, I felt immense happiness: by candlelight, my bothers and friends would teach me how to write. Dipping a stick in an ink pot, I dragged out lines trying to write Devnagari alphabets क, ख.

I never did go to school. My parents said they could not afford to send daughters to school and we'd get married off anyway. Married at 19, my "new" life was no different. My husband, a tailor respected in the community for honesty and hard work, was a gentleman on the outside, but he did not treat me well. My parents and husband have passed away, but memories continue to hurt.

I was nine months pregnant when my husband dragged me out of the house and told me to come back only if I gave birth to a son. I returned to my parents in great fear. The gods were kind and I gave birth to a son. A month later my husband came to take me home. I did not want to return, but mother said that I was a married woman so I had to go. Denied education, beaten for being a woman, thrown out because I could give birth to a girl child, I wanted to do something to change my circumstances, but I did not know what.

One day, my friends told me of a training for those who wanted to become health volunteers. I participated in the training and could now raise awareness on health issues and serve the community. I gave birth to two more sons and continued my work as a health volunteer, gradually establishing my own identity, building a network and helping people. Next, I trained to mediate. As a mediator, I was able to help women suffering violence, became a shoulder to cry on and a supporter in the fight for women's rights.

My husband was still alive then. He left for Dubai where he would be paid better. My eldest son reached grade 10 and made an important life decision that would impact us all. He joined the Maoist rebel army. "I will do my best to give you a better life," he said. 31 August 2002 was the saddest day of my life: I was told my son had been shot dead by government troops. The pyre of your own child is the worst thing a mother can face.

I did not want my son's hopes to end like this so I joined the Maoist party. This was in 2003. I participated in capacity building programs





and learned to make candles and soap. I believed we can challenge contemporary politics and bring about equitable development. I organized an excursion for women of my community to Sunsari and Jhapa where we visited small-scale enterprises and learned how to do business. Women on the tour wanted to learn more about Maoist politics and how they could fit in. Listening to them, I, too, wanted to expand my involvement in the party. In order to do this, I joined Netritwa's leadership training. I had so many expectations and I learned much more than I had expected.

I learned about local elections: how they take place, the role of women and how to put forth a candidacy. Women are now recognized as important in politics. After the training, I felt an equal, no longer an inferior and I believed I could become a good leader. I cannot read or write but I saw, on video, people who never lost hope and made significant contribution to the world despite their shortcomings. I realized that they, too, had faced many constraints but trusted their own ideas and judgments. I felt better. I, too, have strengths I can use to become a good political leader. I began to update myself, watching television, getting involved in conversation, sharing my ideas. Being a survivor of violence and a conflict-affected woman, I can be the voice of other victims and help bring about greater change at the national level, I realized.

The session on gender equality taught me about social setups and helped me understand that things need not be the way they are. On the last day of training, we were ten: six women and four men. I am happy male leaders were present. We need to work together. We discussed actions plans for our communities. Working together like this meant I could continue interacting with male and female leaders and improve things.

After the training, I became a coordinator and formed a market management committee. I participated in a 16-day campaign on violence against women: child marriage, dowry, rape, and alcoholism were some of the issues that we raised awareness on. The road construction consumer committee had never had a female representative, I became the first female member on this committee. Timely and corruption-free road construction is what I want to work towards. I became a member of the distribution committee that handed out free material under the *Sunaulo* golden 1,000-day campaign. I became a member of the village WASH coordination committee and advocated on behalf of conflict-affected women.

Before being a part of the Netritwa program, I did not know how I could become a candidate in the local elections. I felt I did not have money and since I am not well educated, I thought I did not stand a chance. After the training, I feel more confident. I feel I can seek and secure financial assistance, gain knowledge on legal issues, find a person who can help put my thoughts in the written form, and share them with the public and the leaders of the party. I consult with local people and find out who support me. I ask for help in moving forward. I feel that I can win.

# MALARI DEVI PASWAN

**I** thank my gods. “Maybe because you did not let me see my father, you gave me a supportive husband,” I tell them. Baba passed away when I was in the womb. My mother struggled and faced discrimination as a single woman. Relatives would go as far as to tell her to abandon us three girls and remarry. But my mother was her own woman and she took care of us as far as she knew how.

I did not go to school. I was married when 11 and came to Sitapur Pra Dha. My husband was very hard working. He farmed chilli to make money. Then he fell ill and did not recover for a long time and I had to take care of the farm and the family. I carried big sacks of chilli on my back to the market and brought money back home. I learned to save money. My husband was so happy when we bought four *katha* of land from the money I had saved. My neighbors said I earned money through “suspicious means.” I wanted to help them understand how to save money so I asked the person who taught me to visit them and teach them also.

Having grown up in a community where the majority was Tharu, I did not wear a veil. My husband was fine with this but relatives, neighbours and community members were not. I moved without a *ghungat* covering my head. I took part in meditation training. As a mediator, I walked a lot and it was difficult without slippers or *chappals* on (women used to walk barefoot in the community then). People laughed at me and mocked me, “*Hai re chappalkwali!*” they said when I wore slippers.

I was invited to a Panchayat meeting, a gathering of village elders. A *pancha* said, “Malari should go for further training and become a health volunteer. She has shown that she is capable of handling her husband’s chilli business and is working as a mediator already.” Happiness filled my heart when I heard this.



I wanted to attend the health volunteer training but it was far away from village and I was reluctant leave my ill husband.

My husband said, "This is a golden chance. Stop worrying about me and attend the training." I rented a room for a fortnight near the training location in Bhagawanpur and lived away from home. Relatives were angry, they told my husband that I had crossed acceptable social limits but he would not listen to them. The training took place in the monsoon and I had to cross the canals to reach the training site from where I was staying. The water was high and I had to lift my *sari* up as it was difficult to move forward otherwise. It was really quite scary and embarrassing as well. I felt that I would be swept away. But the 11 days passed by swiftly and I had completed my training!

When I first started working in the community, eating with me or sitting with me was difficult for many people as I belonged to an "untouchable" caste. Back home I went to the doctor for my husband's regular check-up. "Namaste, health volunteer ji, how can I help you?" the doctor asked me politely. I felt so proud. A woman from the Dalit community, it felt amazing to be treated with such respect.

I was still illiterate and I was the only health volunteer who was illiterate. Some people suspected the quality of my work because I could not read or write. After each meeting, others would sign their presence into the attendance sheet while I had to fingerprint. Again, my husband encouraged me to join an adult education course. I learned to read and write and developed my own signature.

Because I was breaking social barriers, people of my caste were not happy and those that were unhappy called a Panchayat meeting of the elders again. Men told my husband at the gathering, "Your wife rides a bike with other men. She eats with people of higher caste. She is setting a wrong example for our women and the community. She has to stop working."

My husband was silent at the gathering. The Panchayat session ended inconclusively. At home, I told him that I would quit if he wanted me to. The next day, at the gathering of Panchas and community people, my husband took a stand. He supported me fully. He made it clear that he trusted me and said that I work hard and deserve to continue doing the good work that I was doing. That meeting expelled our family from our rightful place within our caste and community. My husband also had to pay a fine of 500 rupees for not giving in to their demands.

I continued to learn. I trained as a mid-wife and began earning 2,000 rupees per delivery. Time passed and even people who were against us began to trust me. When calling me, they started to use my own name, "Malari," rather using the name of my husband or my father-in-law. When I learned that the local government budget allocated to women was being merged into other development activities, I advocated that the funds be allocated to women's causes only. To my surprise, I was given the responsibility of distributing the

budgeted funds to women's empowerment activities. Buildings and vocational training for women are among of the fund's achievements.

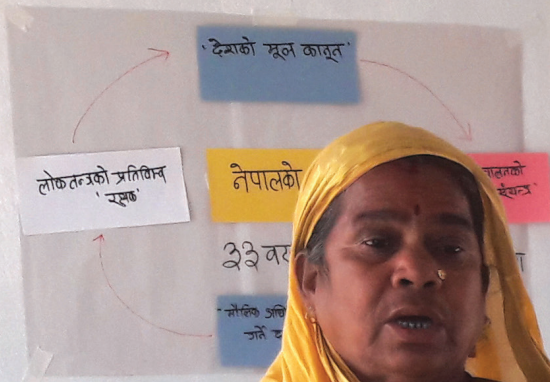
My reach within the community grew. I became a member of the women and justice committee. Members of my caste accepted me and my husband back: they now contact me if they have health problems or come across conflict. Though 60 years old now, I continue to be fond of challenges.

I found out that the Netritwa leadership training was taking place in Lahan. I could also take part. On the first day, I felt like I had entered a different world. Women who were associated with different political parties from my own village and other villages were there. Though a member of the Communist Party of Nepal, United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), I am not active politically. Others, in the meanwhile, shared political ideas and first-hand experiences. Compared to other women, I felt that I knew nothing. I was pleased to make friends and learn about women leaders.

Being a social worker, I interacted with people a lot but I had never spoken to them over a microphone or a loud speaker. Greeting a crowd, sensitivity towards the local context, making eye contact, all these preceptions were new to me. I felt excited and wanted to practice these skills. I was really nervous when I stood in front of the microphone for the first time, my hands were shaking. But once I started speaking, I felt comfortable and confident. I spoke in Maithili as my Nepali is not very good. This really was a great opportunity for me as grassroots women do not normally get a chance to explore such opportunities and platforms.

After training, organizers of a campaign against open defecation asked me to share my thoughts in front of their audience. I stood on stage, greeted the chief guest, special guests, the organizers, and the audience and provided a brief background on the issue and talked about the importance of bringing open defecation to an end. My speech was received with loud applause. The chief district officer was present. He said that I had spoken really well. We spoke for some time and he praised my work and assured me that he would help me. After the event, at the get together, he danced with me!

I have been speaking at different events lately, including in front of a committee against gender violence. I have learned that I want to participate in politics. It is a powerful platform that can bring about social change. The Sanghiya Samajwadi Forum invited me to become a member of their party. They said that they appreciated my work and would support me as their candidate if I were to stand for elections. I have accepted their proposal. I want to win and I want to help women.



NETRITWA : Transformative Leadership Program

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# GAURI NARAYAN YADAV

I would run barefoot with only a *gamcha* towel tied around my waist when I was young. Shirts and pants were unheard of in those days. But even in those days my parents enrolled me and my younger brother in school. After grade 5, we were sent to Lahan to continue our education. I passed the school leaving certificate examination in 1978. My parents' investment had paid off.

My two elder sisters did not get the same chance, however. Life decisions were made by our parents – whether it was education or marriage. One day, my parents told me to prepare for the *din duwaran* ritual to bring home my bride. I was shocked, I learned that I had been married at the age of 10. I did not remember my own wedding! I felt shame and confusion. I realized that my wife must also be feeling the same. In fact, it must be even more difficult for her as she had to leave the home she had known all her life. I knew then that I wanted to make things better for her and others who faced similar situations.

In 1979 my political life began. My grandfather was a respected *gumasta* leader. People respected his ideas and points of view. One evening a group of people were at home and a revolution was mentioned. I listened intently to their talk. They began to visit us frequently and soon they were pleading with my grandfather to involve me and my brother in this revolution. My grandfather was reluctant to do so in the beginning. He did not want to risk our lives: revolutionaries are imprisoned or worse. "If they are caught, we will free them. Do not worry," they said and my grandfather gave in. I felt happiness surge inside me when I heard him give permission for us to be involved.

I became an active member of the Congress Party and was selected secretary of the committee that would promote multi-party democracy. I was young and fearless. I took risks. By the time the National Referendum took place in 1980, my village area of Sitapur was ready, it cast the highest number of pro-multi-party votes. However, our area's contribution was not enough. The single-party Panchayat system won the referendum.

A decade later, in 1990, Sitapur was again at the forefront of support for multi-party democracy. This time we achieved multi-party democracy. In 1997,



I was nominated village development committee chairperson. Women in politics was not at the forefront of discussions though there were women who played key roles within the party. Working as a representative of the party at the grassroots level, part of my work was to involve them more.

Search for Common Ground and Samagra's leadership training I attended in October 2016 was an eye opener for me. It helped me and other men refresh our thoughts on women's political rights and place. I feel obliged to do more to promote women's leadership after participating. Other men also feel the same. Netritwa project had helped us observe women and their capacity first hand.

After this training, I was at a meeting that would form an agricultural cooperative. I advocated that a woman be made chairperson and nominated Phul Kumari Yadav. She is active within the community and has the necessary education. Some men refused to be part of the cooperative if it was led by a woman. I visited them at home and gave examples of other female chairpersons. A few were stubborn while others chose to support Phul Kumari. The cooperative was registered and she was made chairperson. It now utilizes the village development committee fund allocated for women as a woman is the chairperson.

The government allocates funds in the annual budget for women's development. I wanted women to decide what to do with this money. I asked the village development committee secretary to invite women to the council meeting. They said they wanted a building where they could gather and organize activities so NRs. 3.5 lakhs was allocated towards its construction.

At a Congress Party meeting in January 2016, I initiated a conversation with Sita Devi Paswan, Chandra Kala Ram, and Ram Kumari Chaudhary who had participated in Netritwa training. I encouraged Ram Kumari to share what she had learned with other women interested in standing for local elections. Local government election law 2016 requires that at least two women be elected from each village development committee. Perhaps the women in our area can do even better. Chief district officer, local development officer and representatives of different organizations such as the Red Cross were present and all six Netritwa trainees spoke before them. Many were surprised, "Women have learned to present their thoughts in front of everyone," they realized.

A dialogue on political participation at Shree Rama Mahanthi Yadav Secondary School saw them speak clearly in the presence of male political leaders. Opportunities are being limited to a few women, one of them said. Commitment to a fairer distribution of opportunities was sought. Women who covered their faces behind the veil were now able speak to us face to face. They are able to help themselves. This is an achievement indeed!



**HIRA  
KUMARI MAHATO**

**R**ice. Rice. I eat as soon as I get home. I am hungry.

At the doorstep, I reach into the rice-filled pouch hung from the ceiling. Mother knows I love rice. The soft feel of the rice-filled cloth and the warm smell lingers in my mind still.

Rice was precious and expensive for my poor family. My mother made sacrifices to feed me rice. Her in-laws would scold her. But she would speak for me and take care of me. She wanted me to study, become educated. Few would spend money to send a married daughter to school.

Yes, I was married in 1997, I was thirteen then. I do not remember much of the wedding day. As I was young, I was allowed to stay with my parents until I passed the school leaving certificate examinations. A married daughter eating rice and attending school was acceptable to no one in my family but my mother. Men are not the only perpetrators of discrimination against women, I learned then. I felt bad for my mother, I felt bad I was the cause of trouble.

My husband's family in Badaharmal was not economically better off either, but they were really wealthy in terms of love and support. My husband always focused on my personal development and made sure I was happy. He encouraged me to continue studying and allowed me to complete my intermediate level studies. He supported me as I sought to work outside the home and became a teacher at Nepal Rastriya Phul Kumari Higher Secondary School in Bandipur. I would leave home early and come back in the evening. "How do you handle house work?" my colleagues would ask and I would answer with pride, "My mother-in-law takes care of things for me."

My mother-in-law would tell me, "I will take care of the work at home, you do what you have to do." Since I do not like lentils much, she would make sure that I could have vegetables with my rice! I felt empowered.

The headmaster at the school I worked in was involved with the Maoist party. He talked of their struggles with goals such as gender equality. I felt that I wanted to make a difference in

this battle. I became a member of the Maoist party in 2009 and worked with all my heart so it would do well in the second Constituent Assembly elections. I learned about politics and I built a network with political leaders and local people.

I formed a group to discuss women's issues. Friends and neighbours were a part of this group and we were registered with the village development committee in 2005. The Nanda Baba Mahila Committee of 30 women made me chairperson. I shared my experiences and knowledge related of politics and women's rights. Ten years have passed since the group was formed: we have not missed a single meeting on the fifth of every Nepali month. This dedication has led to the transformation of members. Punita Das was very excited and wanted to join us but her family would not let her. When I met them and talked to them, they were not fully convinced but they did allow her to become a member. Now her family, too, have become very supportive.

When a local mediation center was looking for people to train as mediators, I applied. I learned to build a working relation with the police and the Women and Children Development Office. I became the focal person for local governance structures such as the Ward Citizen Forum and a member of the committee against human and girl trafficking as well as a paralegal committee and a cleanliness campaign.

Just as things were going well, I received notification from my school: due to a financial crisis they had to let many teachers go and I was one of them. I had to apply for another job and leave the Maoist party. My interest in politics persisted.

I became a member of the CPN-UML party. They chose me to participate in the leadership training organized by Search for Common Ground and Samagra. I was inspired when I watched videos of women leaders from around the world. The thought of becoming a political leader had never crossed my mind. I saw that unlike other political parties, senior political leaders of the CPN-UML were not a part of the training. I had missed an opportunity to interact and build bonds with party leaders. After the training, I met leaders of my party and asked them to tell me about political activities so I, too, could participate. I used the dialogue platform set up by Netritwa to improve my public speak-



ing skills and speak about violence against women. I prepared notes on important ideas and included interesting quotations. I stood straight and made eye contact. Trying out these new skills was difficult but I will keep practicing and hope to become an effective public speaker.

Recently, our party collected names of active members. I do not know if I will be nominated a candidate for the upcoming local elections. Siraha District Committee member in my contact could not tell me how I could achieve this. Since I have not attended all party activities and I have moved from the Maoist party, maybe it will be difficult this time around. But the Search for Common Ground training has taught me to keep working hard and I will keep trying to gain the trust of key political leaders. After the Netritwa training, I was made coordinator of a network that would help the people within a police station. But as social workers we do not get the same kind of respect and valuation as we do not get to make key decisions. I believe my contributions will be valued by the community more if I have a political presence.

Recently, I learned that a meeting would be held on the Jitiya festival day when women are busy. I made the time and attended. When I reached the small hall where the meeting was taking place, I found it full of men and they voted a six-man panel to select the school management committee. I was angry. I stood up and said “Women are not here at this meeting so it needs to be canceled.” This silenced the men. Representatives of district-level structures were also there. In the process of finding a compromise, I found that I and Gyanu didi – who had come to the meeting with me – had been chosen as committee members because we were told we were interested and had the courage to speak up. We were successful in getting a woman on the school management committee of Nepal Rastriya Phul Kumari Higher Secondary School of Bandipur before our roles were wrapped up.

Recently, the Women and Children Development Office has asked me to join the Women and Human Rights Defenders Group. While I still need to gain the trust of key political leaders, I feel that I am doing some things right.



NETRITWA : Transform

सहकार्या

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# GYANU KUMARI SHRESTHA

**T**he school was on the top of a hill, the village and fields beneath. Early in the morning, I would be out herding goats. The school bell would ring and I would run home. I would put on my school uniform and run to class up the hill on an empty stomach. During lunch break, I would run again back home to eat. Once school was over, I would be back herding goats again. The animals were the only source of income for our family.

Time passed, I was married. My husband, a teacher at Pashupati Adarsha Higher Secondary School, was much older. While he encouraged me to take the school leaving certificate examinations, I was not allowed to go outside the household. My husband taught political science at the higher secondary level in Lahan. He explained news on the television and patiently talked to me about politics. But I had to think twice before eating, walking, working.... I wanted more out of life so I joined the Maoist party as they promised gender equality.

Ours was a violent struggle. I helped organize covert meetings and hid weapons. Being a part of table talks with the chief district officer, the local development officer, and army colonels was an eye opening experience for me. I would reach home late and my husband would get angry,



beat me, and stay away from me. The government-rebel talks broke down and I was on the most wanted list. I chose not to surrender to the government. I had the option of joining the Maoist base in the jungle but my husband would not hear of it. He moved instead to Pokhara with me until a ceasefire was announced.

Back in Siraha post ceasefire agreement, I had to manage the home as well as the responsibilities given to me by the party. I was a hill woman living in the Terai plains. The Terai violence was brewing and ethnic tensions were high. I was asked to solve a complaint: a man had occupied someone else's land. When I went to talk to him, he incited local people and attacked my home and damaged it. I sought him out, faced him and told him of the legal consequences that he would face.

Soon after I left, my Madhesi friends told me that he put together a mob. They planned to capture me and set me on fire alive in downtown Lahan. Shyam Yadav arranged a place for me to hide and protected me for three days. I stayed inside a hut, the windows were shut and the door locked from the outside. I could not eat because I would then have to go outside to defecate. Three days later, I escaped from Lahan in the middle of the night. Starved and having walked all night, I reached a local tea shop in the morning and called the Maoist area-in-charge Ramput Ram. "You are still alive!" He exclaimed delightedly. "I heard you were killed."

He picked me up and I returned to Siraha after the situation normalized. Politics has taken a large part of my life. I could not take good care of my children. I could not contribute economically to my family. My husband passed away.

I am a central committee member of the Maoist party at the ward level. I distribute funds earmarked for women by the government budget. I am president of the Women Advocacy Forum, adviser to the Phul Kumari Higher

Secondary School Management Committee and coordinator of the village WASH coordination committee of ward number 3. I help prepare development budget proposals for my ward. I have consulted with women and other stakeholders and allocated a portion of this year's village development committee budget to training on legal issues. In mid-August 2016, I visited the Prime Minister's office as a delegate and was successful in getting funds for the construction of Choharwa Hospital.

Participating in Netritwa with women leaders from different areas of Siraha made me more confident. After my husband passed away, I had no one to get political advice from. I had so many questions about the local elections as I would like to run for office. Search for Common Ground and Samagra helped me learn how to secure candidacy. I interacted with political leaders from other parties. Different political leaders appreciated my contributions to the society and encouraged me to take part in the coming elections as a candidate.

After the training, I have started to meet with other women participants of Netritwa and we discuss how to increase our visibility. I plan to bring clean drinking water and electricity to the village. Badaharmal has many conflict-affected people. Those injured and physically disabled have not received support from the government as their names have not been registered by the District Administration Office. I will work to help them receive their entitlement. I have made a name for myself through my struggles. Maybe one day I will lead my people using the political arena.

# SUBHA NARAYAN MAHATO

**I** grew up in a family that treated girls and boys equally. My parents invested most of their earning from the farm to educate the four of us, two girls and two boys. I received my school leaving certificate from Nepal Rastriya Secondary School, completed intermediate level studies from J.S. Muraka Campus in Lahan and got my bachelors degree from Surya Narayana Satya Narayan Marwaita Multiple Campus.

I became a member of the Maoist party in 2003. The party stressed women's empowerment. I got the opportunity to attend events and speak about women. I believe we cannot think of ourselves along ethnic lines such as Madhesi, Janajati, Dalit, etcetera: it is already difficult for women to find space in political parties without such divisions.

I always invite women leaders of Badaharmal to events I attend and advocate the inclusion of women in key decisions making positions. When women leaders of Badaharmal, such as Gyanu, Hira and Shila seek leadership positions, I support them. When Hira became coordinator of the open defecation free campaign, we discussed on how she could move forward. I, Om Prakash, Shila and Gyanu discussed how existing networks could help and the activities that could be organized. Hira worked really hard and in November 2016 our village development committee area was announced as open defecation free area. When I learned that the village development committee has budgeted funds for women, I helped invite women leaders to participate and organize events that empower women.

I have read my political party's philosophies on paper and realize how difficult it will be to bring them into practice. Concepts





like gender equality are difficult to achieve as people follow deep-rooted cultures and traditions that discriminate. Netritwa taught me new ways to enhance the leadership ability of women, enable them to become politically active, and helped me bring some of the philosophies of the party to fruition.

I met like-minded political leaders such as Keshab ji and Nagesh Katuwal ji. I discussed how women could take on leadership roles. I proposed interaction between women and men political leaders in different locations of Siraha so views were shared, leadership understood and women's significance appreciated. I personally know many women who are interested in becoming candidates this election cycle. But these women are not confident that they will be backed by their parties. Therefore, platforms such as Netritwa create qualitative interaction and build trust. The training fulfilled the need of the hour.

The training that was provided to us reinforced the role of men as partners in change. When women leaders spoke confidently on stage, I felt motivation rise in me. I saw first hand that women of Badaharmal are active – I just had not got a chance to know them or interact with them. Listening to the women speak, other men felt the same way, they said. Exchanging ideas with women leaders from our areas was an eye opener for all of us.

A dialogue on “participation in politics” was organized by the same organizers. The women had become better at speaking out. A year ago, they were not comfortable speaking in front of anyone, now they held the mike and presented issues and ideas before key political leaders of their area confidently. They said that the leadership training had boosted their public speaking skills and confidence.

These interactions should be organized regularly. Village development committee and police personnel should also be involved. Representation of women is 50% in Badaharmal in most areas and this must happen in political representation as well. I don't know why representation of women is limited in politics, especially at the central level. Organizations need to continue programs that result in gender equality and convert men into supporters of women's empowerment.

# KALAWATI KUMARI MAHATO

**I**t was 1989. I was eight years old. They dressed me up in a bright red *sari*, bangles adorned my wrists, *tika* was bright on the forehead and a veil covered my face. Make-up, pretty clothes, jewelry – I was enjoying this transformation. Musicians came and played loud fun music. I could not stop myself from dancing. My brother said, “You are to be married and you dancing in front of your father-in-law! Don’t you feel ashamed?”

I did not understand. He wanted me to stop dancing. So I did. After the ceremony, at school, a few of the boys respectfully began calling me, “Bhauji,” or sister-in-law. I felt strange. Years passed and I passed the school leaving certificate examinations. My mother said the time had come for me to go to my husband’s house. My husband’s family came to take me away and I cried all the way to my new home. My husband was a teacher at Shree Lower Secondary School. He always cared for me and understood me. When asked, my new family members allowed me to give adult literacy classes in the community.

It felt good to work outside the household. I began teaching adults how to read and write. When it was time to give birth to a baby, I did not want the classes to stop so I asked my husband to take the classes on my behalf. Nine days after giving birth I started teaching again.

I took part in health training and worked for three years as a health volunteer. As I have worked with community members of wards 1 to 9, most people know me. In 2012, I



participated in leadership training organized by Search for Common Ground and Samagra. After training, we, the women participants formed Arnama Agriculture Cooperative Limited. I had no idea what cooperatives were and what they were supposed to do. When I was nominated chairperson, Sunil ji and Ram Bharoshi ji – who had organized the training – explained my role and they continue to help me.

Taking part in Netritwa has changed me. I felt nervous speaking in front of others, I could not sit and eat with men: I stayed hungry because I could not bring myself to eat with them. Ram Poshan ji helped me there, he said it was okay to eat with men and promised to convince my family that it was okay for me to eat with others.

Urmila, my friend, and others have seen the change in me. “You are a much better president of the cooperative now,” they say. It was a fight to beat the stigma of being a woman who worked outside the household. People complained to my family that I was out of line with our culture and some made fun of me. Women used to walk barefoot. When I put on slippers, everyone stared at me and made fun of me. I felt so alien initially that I took off my slippers from time to time and walked barefoot. In 2014 I was invited to join the CPN-UML. I have been joint secretary of the CPN-UML village committee for the last five years. I organize meetings and participate in events. I am also an active member of the V-WASH-CC.

The party nominated me to attend the 5-day leadership training organized by Search for Common Ground and Samagra in Lahan. The struggles of local women political leaders were shared first hand. Watching women leaders of the world on video made me feel that we can achieve anything. The importance of men’s role and cooperation was also brought to the forefront. I had never taken lessons in public speaking. I believed that talking for a long time was important. This training taught me that I needed clarity, focus, integration of social and cultural values, people’s feeling, and confidence. As everyone was learning, I was not nervous speaking into the microphone in front of them.



Later on, I delivered a speech on women's rights in the general assembly of Arnama Agriculture Cooperative Limited at the meeting hall of the health post. I participated in the 16-day campaign on violence against women. I delivered a speech on violence against women in our society and how can we address this. I was proud that I delivered a concise speech. An invitation was sent for a Netritwa leadership trainee to participate in a meeting. I went and was selected treasurer for a committee responsible for building a maternity hospital. I helped establish a speaking forum where people could share issues over the radio and receive suggestions on how to solve such issues.

Our trainer told us that the government allocates funds for women in the local budget. I visited the village development committee offices and asked the staff where the funds were and did not get any information. At the village council meeting, I said that there was no information on where the budget allocated for women is being used. "Since the fund has been allocated for us, we need to have a role in deciding where it will be utilized," I said. The council agreed. We prepared a proposal which has been sanctioned.

I had been a member of a political party for the past three years. I now aspire to become an active political leader. I learned about the local elections and how I could become a candidate. Knowing political leaders from different places has increased my interest in politics. I watch television more. The way I think has changed. People have taken to calling me *netaji*, or leader, now. I talk about the local elections, political representation of women, and how to become a political party member.

I am excited, I want to be nominated a candidate for the upcoming local elections so I interact with local women. I believe that people trust me. I am happy with the contributions I am making to the community. People are encouraging me to stand for the position of village development committee chairperson. During the dialogue program, political leaders said they wanted to foster women's leadership. Perhaps with their guidance and support I will be able to win the elections this year.

# PHUL KUMARI RAM

**M**y heart aches when I remember my childhood. My parents were laborers on the farm. One day, they asked me to get a tool from the landlord's house. I was about to step inside, "Stop right there!" the landlord's wife shouted at me, "Do not enter the house and defile it." I was stunned, fear and shame enveloped me.

I suffered discrimination all my life. I felt cursed, born into a family line considered untouchable. I wanted to feel accepted, I wanted to feel human. Because I really wanted to study, I attended school until I was in the third grade. That came to a halt when my brothers were born. "Take care of your brothers. What will you do going to school?" my mother said.

I was married on 12 March 1990, at the age of 13. My husband had a stepmother. She told us to live separately. My husband could not continue his studies because he had to earn our keep. It took me six years to conceive a son and until then I faced stigma and abuse that comes the way of a daughter-in-law who does not bear children, particularly sons.

We moved to Devipur in Siraha and my husband went to the Middle East to earn money. My son was old enough to go to school and I, too, joined an informal education course and got a job raising awareness and distributing temporary contraceptives. In 2001, Bal Kumari Raut, president of Grameen Mahila Kalyan Sewa Kendra asked me to become a general member of the organization. In the first general assembly, I was voted secretary. I could now participate in different events related to the law and women's rights and learn more about discrimination. In 2006, I became member of Women and Human Rights Defenders and was a part of a documentary related to women produced by IHRICON.

When my son died in an accident in 2007, I cried for hours and hours. My husband returned home to take care of us and began teaching in Chainpur Higher Secondary School. As we no longer had an offspring,

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सहभाज कार्यक्रम

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आयोजक

दीर्घात जनकल्याण युवा कल्लव लहान, इनसेक गिरहा  
क.अ.म. धनगढी, मातव अधिकार संरक्षण केन्द्र  
समग्र जनउद



neighbors and relatives told him to remarry. At 40, he took on a second wife, a 17 year old girl. I was devastated. We had to live together. Their relationship did not grow. The huge age difference and lack of understanding created a barrier between them. They are now divorced.

Discrimination, poverty and violence have not weakened me. I became member of the CPN-UML ward committee in 2011. In 2016, I participated in the 5-day training organized by Search for Common Ground and Samagra and the Netritwa project gave me further hope. I spoke for the first time in front of male political leaders using a mike. Listening to inspiring stories of other women and learning about leadership enriched me. I liked the practical approach. I learned to present ideas and speak about women's participation in politics. I think I was also able to capture the interest of male political leaders. After the training, I received invitations to attend meetings organized by the party. Discussions on women's participation came to the forefront and invitations were sent to other women to participate in events organized by the party.

I learned about the local elections and the change that we, women, can contribute. As I am interested in putting forth my candidacy in the upcoming local elections, I have already started preparing. In the past, when invited to speak before a public, I would solely focus on the subject matter at hand. Now I speak of the upcoming elections and state my interest in running for office. At a CPN-UML evaluation workshop, I said I was interested in becoming their candidate and asked the leaders to give me a chance.

I am involved in events and contribute to the welfare of women and marginalized people. I encourage friends and relatives to participate in rallies against caste based discrimination. I participate in *sahabhoj* feast where people cook and eat together no matter what caste they are. On 16 December 2016 I was awarded for my contribution to the community. This was one of the proudest moments of my life. As coordinator of the cleanliness campaign, I have to visit people door to door to raise awareness about cleanliness. I talk about the elections and about possible choices. I helped form a committee that organizes interaction programs among leaders and the public so that women leaders get an opportunity to speak before the public. I am now coordinator of Women and Human Rights Protector, a member of the United Planning Committee and vice-president of Mediation and Development Forum. My participation in the community has moved forward and I believe my role in local politics has become stronger.



## In the end

**B**y setting a minimum requirement of 33% women's participation and representation in government structure and mechanisms, the Nepalese constitution has one of the world's best women's engagement provisions. After 20 years, Nepal prepares to hold local elections in 2017. At this crucial time Search for Common Ground advanced political leadership capacities of women leaders in three village development committees and one municipality of Siraha district through "Netritwa: A Transformative Leadership Program for Nepali Women Leaders."

Madhesi plains and Pahade hill peoples were reached and women already playing leadership roles in local committees or political party structures with aspirations to run in the upcoming local elections were engaged. Creation of a conducive environment for women's political participation was an important focus. Targeted at only 24 women and 24 men, the effort was uniquely qualitative. It increased acceptance and identification with women's leadership; increased clarity of roles and claims of representation; empowered networking; and furthered awareness. *Netritwa*, or leadership, training equipped women leaders with fundamental knowledge of local governance and the roles of elected representatives. Visioning, collaborative problem solving, negotiation, advocacy, communication, and public speaking were covered and practiced during the project period.

Men were exposed to positive masculinities and patriarchy, gender roles, violent masculinities, gender equity, traditional gender roles, their impact on both men and women, and the role of men from dominant to equal partnership.

Trained women and men discussed challenges and opportunities for women's leadership, political participation and leadership action plans. Dialogue brought men and women together, identified barriers to their collaboration, and discussed needs and benefits of women's leadership in local governance.

By project end, women who could be selected independent or party candidates for local elections, put up a genuine fight in the elections and represent their constituencies had become more conscious and capable. Their participation in the local elections could set examples and realize the vision laid out by Nepal's Constitution for their communities.

*Search for Common Ground (Search) is, a leading international peacebuilding and conflict transformation non-governmental organization, working in 36 countries across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Search strives to transform the way that the world deals with conflicts away from adversarial approaches towards collaborative solutions. The organization has been working in Nepal since February 2006 in collaboration with a broad range of stakeholders, including government and non-government organizations, media, education, justice, and security institutions. Currently Search works with 24 NGOs, 13 FM stations and relevant line agencies in 20 districts to promote youth and women in political leadership and development, to support media for peacebuilding and collaborative culture, to strengthen rules of law and good governance, and to increase access of marginalized people to security and justice services at the local, regional and national levels.*



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## Political empowerment of women in the Terai

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