

# Rural women's leadership programme in grass-roots organizations; a case study in Nepal



## Introduction

There is a gap between women's major contribution to agricultural production, marketing and rural livelihoods, and their limited voice in making decisions that affect them, their livelihoods and their communities. In response, IFAD, with support from the Government of Norway, developed the Rural Women's Leadership Programme (RWLP) to strengthen the role and voice of women leaders in rural organizations, including in policy dialogue. The overall goal was to increase the responsiveness of national policies, programmes and institutions to the needs and potential of rural women farmers. It was implemented between 2010 and 2013 in Madagascar, Nepal, the Philippines and Senegal. The experience in Nepal is described below to illustrate the good practice.

## RWLP in Nepal

In Nepal, patriarchal norms continue to keep women at home and limit their mobility, which in turn hinders their economic opportunities. The Nepalese social castes create additional inequalities; Dalit (often called 'untouchable') women are marginalized by women from other castes, preventing them from accessing available opportunities.

The two-year RWLP covered five districts in central Nepal. It aimed to strengthen the capacities of rural women, their associations at all levels and their professional organizations, as well as enhance the quality of policy advocacy and dialogue. Various climate change programmes were concentrated in the target area, directly channelling resources to the district level. The Local Adaptation Plans of Action (LAPAs) represented an opportunity for women and men to access these resources and benefit equally from development opportunities.

RWLP in Nepal was based on the concept 'leadership for what' – motivating women's leadership by linking objectives to clear opportunities – in this instance, LAPA funds and improved natural resource management. Capacity-building and training were provided to women in leading roles at the local and national levels supported by coaching, mentoring and exposure visits. Policy frameworks were reviewed, and advocacy was fostered through the media and at relevant international events. A 'training of trainers' approach was adopted to reach women leaders at the district level and then through the tiers of rural organizations. The content was highly practical and included negotiation skills, confidence-building, self-development, organizational change, gender mainstreaming and technical knowledge on agricultural issues, including natural resource management. Crucially, it also facilitated women's access to LAPA funds at the district level.

The Panchdev Community Organization counts 36 women and 1 man. They have successfully invested funds borrowed from the project in livestock and commercial activities. Dadeldhura, Nepal.  
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Engaging men in building acceptance of women's leadership was key. Women leaders identified potential male advocates and they were included in training activities. Quotas were sometimes used so that men would comprise roughly one third of participants.

The RWLP also enabled rural women leaders from grass-roots organizations to engage in various policy processes at the national, regional and global level. These included: a three-day conference on 'Gender & Climate Change' in Nepal; the World Food Summit; the Civil Society Organization consultation workshop on the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP); sessions of the Conference of the Parties – Convention on Biological Diversity; the IFAD-supported Farmers' Forum in 2010; and Women's Leadership Circles, organized by Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN), in Nepal and other countries.

### **Stakeholders and Partners**

The target group included women from grass-roots organizations as well as women leaders at the district and national level.

WOCAN was the main implementing agency, with the support of two federations of grass-roots women's organizations (HIMAWANTI and AASTHA). WOCAN was well placed to scale up RWLP through its other activities and global advocacy network of women leaders in agriculture.

### **Impact**

The RWLP facilitated gender transformative change in women's and men's attitudes and capacities, as well as in their rural organizations and communities.

Training and collective effort made women more confident and capable of advocating for their priorities, and opened their eyes to the possibilities around them. Sharing and discussing issues and aspirations provided many incentives for the creation of women's groups. Empowered women who proved able to lead these groups have been essential in guiding and supporting other members. Women leaders from both HIMAWANTI and ASTHA deemed acquiring the ability to mobilize local state and non-state resources to tackle gender issues as the most important outcome of the RWLP.

An important outcome was the establishment of an informal network of men to support women's leadership and the transformation of gender roles in the household: "I remember there was one woman whose husband beat her... for going to adult literacy classes. But today her husband is the one who reminds her to go to community meetings. I have seen plenty of examples to prove that change is possible." – Shova Sharma from Sindhuli, Nepal.

Women have learned to look at themselves outside the roles of mother, wife and daughter-in-law, and have become respected as members of their communities, often developing income-generating activities. The programme has also encouraged women to take more interest in their communities and to become more informed about change processes. Through their engagement in national and international policy dialogue, grass-roots women leaders are better able to voice their opinions and demand the services and resources needed to improve rural people's lives.

### **Innovation**

RWLP is innovative in that it explicitly took on the challenge of reaching out beyond the better-educated women targeted by most leadership programmes, and aimed instead to engage with women leaders at the grass-roots level.

### **Lesson learned, success factors and constraints**

Poor and marginalized women's voices must be heard by policymakers. The RWLP demonstrates that there are various models to empower these women to lead grass-roots organizations and voice their priorities and concerns in local, national and international policy processes.

'Leadership for what' is a simple but effective concept. Access to LAPA funds and natural resource management provided a strong reason for women to become leaders and gain empowerment.

Social capital supports economic empowerment. RWLP participants in Nepal reported that it was easier for them to access funds and establish a dialogue with the authorities when they were able to talk to women in government structures.

Economic empowerment promotes gender equality. By enabling women to access local development funds, they could meet their own priorities and take on new challenges. Women contributed more to the economy of the family and community, which in turn contributed to them being taken more seriously in decision-making.

Participating in collective action brings concrete and financial benefits to women. Programmes need to give space for different kinds of groups according to women's needs and the broader context. Networking among women builds their confidence and generates ideas. The participants in Nepal reported an increased sense of solidarity. A supportive network of men is required to build understanding, acceptance and even advocacy for gender equality and women's empowerment.

Training should cover leadership skills as well as technical knowledge. Women need to practice and consolidate their acquired leadership skills, for instance, through forums, platforms and events. Projects workplans should accommodate this. Women role models inspire others, often more than traditional masculine ones.

Women can carve out their own leadership style. Women in Nepal generally preferred to develop a legitimate leadership style that was in line with their gender roles (i.e. relational/with empathy), rather

than attempt to imitate male styles.

Backstopping is required throughout the 'training of trainers' approach to ensure quality training is provided down to the most crucial level of grass-roots organizations. In some cases, direct targeting of activities to the grass-roots level may be more effective.

Training methodologies need to be adapted by local trainers to meet the different training needs, capacities and communication styles of farmers' organization members, grass-roots leaders and trainers.

The most effective women leaders were those who: (i) were already practicing some form of leadership in their homes, the community or other institutions; and (ii) had the motivation and resilience to lead or take on leadership positions and the potential social challenges that may have created. Adequate time should be set aside for identifying participants – they may not always be the most vocal ones, or see themselves as leaders even though they are practicing aspects of leadership.

Some of the key challenges encountered by RWLP included: the limited duration of RWLP to support sustained policy, organizational and behavioural change in the rural Nepalese context where gender roles are entrenched; the weak institutional capacity in gender mainstreaming at the district and local levels; caste-based discrimination towards Dalit women who are excluded and not informed by other women about capacity-development activities; women's time poverty and lack of mobility owing to a heavy domestic workload and traditional gender norms limiting their participation in training, general productive potential and the leadership responsibilities they can hold.

### **Sustainability**

The RWLP worked with existing women's organizations at the international (WOCAN), national (HIMAWANTI and AASTHA – federations of grass-roots women's organizations) and local level (farmer associations, producer organizations, etc.), and facilitated new women's groups at the community level.

The RWLP linked women leaders from grassroots organizations to innovative Women's Leadership Circles (WLCs), organized by WOCAN. WLCs provide a national platform for women to improve leadership skills and to promote regular dialogue between women policymakers and professionals and women farmers/rural women for more responsive policy design and implementation to benefit rural lives.

Backstopping is required beyond the project time frame, for example through coaching and mentoring, to ensure sustainability.

### **Replicability and/or scaling up**

IFAD has tapped into the experience of rural women's leadership training and the cohort of recently trained people.



The goal of the High-Value Agriculture Project in Hill and Mountain Areas in Nepal is the reduction of poverty and vulnerability among women and men in areas of the Mid-Western Development Region, by ensuring that small poor farmers benefit from sustainable increases in volume and value of production as a result of improved production, collection, value addition and sales of high-value niche market products. ©IFAD/Rockey Prajapati

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