

## **Women's Empowerment**

Ms. Sushmita Manandhar (Nepal)

Even today, a woman's voice remains mostly unheard in Nepal. This is hardly surprising given that Nepal is a patriarchal society where men continue to influence not only politics but everyday life decisions. I have worked closely with the women's wings of political parties from the grassroots to the highest level. Except for a handful of women, Nepalese women have almost no say be it politically, economically or socially. Though urban areas are no exception, cultural and social barriers religiously followed mostly in rural areas have placed women in a vicious circle of suppression and bondage. I have closely worked and traveled with women members in 65 out of 77 districts and share a very close and cordial relationship with them. As a woman myself, I can understand other women's feelings and can quickly bond with them.

I have worked closely with women political leaders since the Inter Party Women's Alliance (IPWA - 2006), a working group of women political leaders, was established in Nepal. IPWA has a common political forum for women to ensure that the Nepal Action Plan, which is a set of reforms and policies to improve the status of women, is implemented within political parties and the government to fight years of discrimination and ensure women's participation in the political process. With a view to address these pertinent issues, IPWA expanded its chapters throughout the country to serve as focal points for civic education campaigns and advocacy efforts. One of the major objectives of the Alliance was gender-mainstreaming, and IPWA emerged as a strong localized voice advocating for the rights of women, ensuring 33 percent representation by women at all levels of the government, and especially to protect their interests in the new constitution. As a result, in May 2007, the government issued a proclamation reserving one-third of all government positions for women. This was a great stride forward for the Alliance and is seen as a major accomplishment. I have travelled to the remotest villages of Nepal with women leaders to engage and strengthen their chapters and provided capacity building trainings in order to advocate for their rights. These programs focus on building the capacity of women through tailored programs by strengthening their ability to identify issues that can be advocated at the national level for future policy development.

From the constitution drafting process till the promulgation of the constitution, I have organized many trainings, workshops, seminars, and trainings of trainers (TOT) to educate and empower women in their fight for women's rights. Later, the women members strongly advocated for their rights and trained more women at the grassroots level. I played a role as one of the key facilitators in the Constituent Assembly and Women Leadership Development programs and trained women at the grass roots level by strengthening the ability of women to advocate for their rights in the context of the Constituent Assembly elections. As a focal

person for gender, I have worked closely with the women's wings of major political parties during the constitution developmental process. It is because of these contributions by the members of the women's wings that today we have 33 percent representation by women at all levels in government bodies, including political parties. Many of these women are now in decision-making positions within their parties including as ministers and members of the parliament, which inspires me to do even more and better work at the local level where 40 percent of women members are elected and the country is now under a federal system. Despite decades of progressive policies, Nepal remains a very patriarchal society, where a male-dominated society is still the norm. I always find it more interesting and challenging to work with women as it always inspires me to work even harder to change lives in remote villages in Nepal where a woman's existence is barely recognized. As a woman, I believe that we must carry out multiple tasks to survive in a family or in a society and we can do many activities to empower a woman to change her life socially, economically and politically.

Nepal promulgated its Constitution in 2015, and held its much-awaited local elections in May 2017 after almost two decades. A total of 35,041 local representatives were elected in the 2017 elections and of these, 14,352 or 40.96 percent are women. More trainings and interactive programs on their new roles and responsibilities are now needed for these women to gain an understanding of how to work under the current political affairs of the country.



Women welcoming party leaders in Humla during a Women's leadership training program. Humla is considered to be one of the most remote and isolated regions in Nepal, accessible only by foot or small aircrafts.



Facilitating a provincial-level training in Kavrepalanchowk.