

16 Days of Activism for Women in Nepal

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In the first week of December 2016, I had an opportunity to meet Mrs. Urmila Tripathi while I attended a conference programme in Mount Abu in India. In her interview with me, Mrs. Tripathi mentioned that she is originally from Nepalgunj, a city in western Nepal. She informed me that she faced discriminatory behavior from her husband and in-laws after giving birth to a girl child. Her family had been telling her that they wanted her to have a baby boy. She tried to tolerate their unfair behavior initially. When she approached the local authorities at her Village Development Committee, she was requested to keep mum and accept it as her destiny. When the in-laws started crossing limits, she decided to flee her house to ensure her own safety. Then, she reached the Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Ishwariya Viswa Vidyalaya (Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University) in Mount Abu, India, and decided to dedicate her remaining life serving there as a volunteer. Without doubt, there are thousands of fellow women and girls in Nepal who have been subjected to discriminatory practices and violence in their houses and communities. Sadly, not everyone is lucky enough to have found a shelter and a second chance to live a peaceful life like Mrs. Tripathi did.

Patriarchal values that prevail in Nepal since time immemorial have been fueling such unfair practices and atrocities against women. It will be very difficult for women and girl victims to raise their voice against the malpractice, as people in the society and local institutions, including the police, do not really consider such incidents as involving any kind of crime or human rights violation. Although the new Constitution of Nepal and several other policy and legal documents have tried to uphold the basic human rights of women, the enforcement and implementation of these regulations have never been satisfactory. The deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs and values embedded in people's mindsets have been the greatest barriers. Hence, it is very crucial to urgently launch relevant programs targeted at changing the mindset of people.

Nepal, along with many nations of the world, observed 25 November 2016 as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women with a variety of activities nationwide. Then, until 10 December 2016—the International Human Rights Day—Nepal marked 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence Campaign.

Many initiatives led by civil society organizations (CSOs) and international/national non-government organizations (INGOs/NGOs) were launched over these 16 days. These organizations carried out their programmes in close collaboration with the national and local government counterpart agencies. Awareness-raising activities such as community rallies, workshops with in-laws, couples' quiz competition, spouses' interaction workshops, special lecture sessions at local schools and colleges, community dramas, etc. were organized. Both women and men's participation was encouraged and facilitated in these activities. Some of these initiatives even offered some incentives such as travel allowances and daily subsistence to encourage participation of women and men in these activities. As a result, many of these organizations reported their programmes being very successful and attended by as many local people as targeted.

The nationwide momentum created by this 16-day affair was laudable. However, the main challenge has been to sustain the momentum, as most stakeholders tend to forget the commitments made during the activism period soon after the 16 days are over. Locals blame many of donor-supported initiatives of being more donor-driven and thereby lacking the local acceptance. They blame that the key benefits of such initiatives were hijacked by the donor

or implementing agencies, with themselves left behind with minor leftover benefits. On the other hand, the implementing organizations blame the communities for participating in activities just for the sake of cash or kind incentives. Nepal, having seen decades of INGO/NGO intervention with no remarkable progress on socio-economic fronts, really needs to look into this matter of mismatch. Analyzing this situation carefully will shed light on the future direction of international cooperation in a Nepal-friendly manner, not only for the women's empowerment but also for the entire development sector. When women like Mrs. Tripathi start feeling safe and adequately respected at home and community, only then these agencies shall claim that their desirable goal of the 16-Day Campaign has been achieved.

