

GAINING GENDER EQUITY THROUGH THE INCREASED PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS AND PUBLIC DECISION-MAKING: AN ADVOCACY EXPERIENCE FROM NEPAL

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In Nepal, women's crucial role in nation building is well recognized. The government has not only made statements in support of women, but has also restructured several of its ministries (the Ministry of Local Development and the Ministry of Agriculture) to include activities and policies which benefit women. Recognizing there were problems with co-ordination, scattering of resources, and program benefits not reaching women, the Nepali government even announced plans to consolidate the activities of all line ministries related to women's development and place them under the Ministry of Women and Social Welfare from the year 1999/2000.

Evidence from the field, however, shows that in Nepal, as in other developing nations, no measurable difference in the lives of rural women has taken place over the last decade. Initiatives such as the Production Credit for Rural Women (PCRW) program have achieved success, but they have proven to be slow and uneven in building self-reliant groups. Educational programs, despite being inherently a process for awareness and change, have suffered a similar fate. In all spheres of development, from the field to the policy making level, a wide gap continues to exist between women and men.

Donor communities have also been generously supporting projects that target women specifically. They have been sponsoring and funding numerous government and non-government studies and programs that address the current role and status of women in Nepal. If some are said to be highly successful, others are found to be either wasting the scarce resources of the country in the name of women, or benefiting men and other powerful classes in their communities.

Part of the problem lies in the poor conception of the projects during the planning stage and the failure to understand the prevailing socio-economic situation of women, their concerns, and the power dynamics. The inability of researchers and policy planners to understand that men and women function in different worlds and to internalize this fact in the planning process is at the heart of the problem. Yet gender neutral programs will not help to address women's issues and needs. Women have suffered due to sectoral biases within the programs, a lack of co-ordination among different actors and stakeholders, and inadequate funding and resources for action oriented learning initiatives. The top-down orientation and use of conventional transfer of technology methods ignores the inherent power dynamics and perpetuates the imbalance as interventions undervalue women's knowledge and skills.

DidiBahini's Innovation

As Nepalese women's lives are dominated by immediate survival issues and the lack of access to and control over family and community resources, they are rarely found putting their ideas and

concerns forward at the community level, or in the planning and implementation of any development initiative. They are never listened to seriously due to the patriarchal culture and inherent flaws in the chosen intervention approaches and methodologies. DidiBahini initiated an action research that was intended to provide a model for those who are serious about improving the quality of life of rural women through the establishment of democratic governance. The intention was to contribute towards alleviating rural poverty, the sole objective of the government's current Ninth Plan 1997-2002, through political empowerment by enabling women to work in all stages of planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of health, education, environment, and local resource management activities in their villages.

This paper will deal with the process and experiences of one of the many action researches of DidiBahini, namely the Women in Health, Education, Environment and Local Resources (WHEEL) project. The project's name is self-explanatory in that it deals with different sectors. Due to DidiBahini's relatively long working experience in the area of women's empowerment, it is firm in the belief that nothing can be achieved by intervening in only one sector of the women's day-to-day lives. Interventions must encompass several sectors that have connection with women's multiple realities and are crucial to their survival issues. Therefore, considering the socio-economic conditions of the majority of Nepali women, the WHEEL project mainly focuses on four sectors: health, education, environment, and local resources as per their interface in women's daily lives.

The overall objective of WHEEL is to improve the quality of life of community women. It aims to increase women's autonomy and to improve their lives, their personal confidence, integrity, and decision-making ability, and thereby contribute to the national goal of poverty alleviation through gender equity and the democratization process.

The immediate objectives are as follows:

- To enable women to work in all stages of planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of health, education, environment, and local resource management activities in their villages;
- To enhance women's ability to manage their own sustainable development, including access to relevant resources and to dialogue with "outsiders";
- To contribute methods and tools for intervention in support of marginalized groups such as women.

The Concept and Approach

In recent years, the complex relationship between governance and women's empowerment has come under increasing scrutiny by academics, development practitioners, and grassroots constituencies. One of the key issues is whether the establishment of democratic governance can foster an environment in which groups that have traditionally been excluded from full involvement in economic and political arenas, such as women, can gain greater control over the circumstances that affect their lives and enable them to live beyond the bare survival level. It has also become critical to determine whether new systems of "good governance" allow women to

gain political skills, claim individual and collective rights, participate in public decision-making processes, and establish a more equal footing with their male counterparts.

Approaches to the overall empowerment of women have begun to integrate tools and strategies designed to promote democratic values, practices, and institutions. This trend has stimulated fresh insights and innovative field programs in the area of integrating gender concerns with development interventions. As illustrated by DidiBahini, a few action research initiatives have generated new understanding of the relationship between governance and women, as well as new strategies for strengthening the inclusion of women in the democratization process.

This synthesis paper establishes a framework for examining the relationship between good governance and women's empowerment. All of the initiatives of the action research in different communities have been examined through three core elements that provide references to what happened in the field. The major focus, however, is on the aforementioned WHEEL project. The core elements are: political culture, civil society, and government institutions.

Political Culture

Establishing participatory democracy is a challenging process that first requires recognition and understanding of the powerlessness experienced by individuals under the prevailing political system. The next step is to work with citizens in such a way as to encourage political consciousness, organizations, and advocacy. This approach, in turn, requires the development of new networks that can strive for common goals and foster a political culture defined by proactive norms and values. Such a culture creates an environment in which effective political involvement is not only possible, but can be carried out without fear of violence or repression.

Changing a political culture requires both individual and collective actions, for example, providing education on political structures and how political power is exercised; improving public access to information; and increasing respect by policy makers for citizens' opinions, voices, and right to influence decision-making. Certain key issues must be examined when assessing the state of political culture, such as political consciousness, power, and social capital.

Political Consciousness

The character of political culture depends upon the level of consciousness of citizens and the value that they attach to political behavior and norms, both of which vary depending on social, cultural, economic and political circumstances. In contexts where individuals are not free (for many reasons) to gain and express knowledge, political consciousness may not exist. Starting open political activity may not be an option either. In contexts where individuals are free to share and understand the political influences on their lives, it is likely that political engagement is a shared value and is routinely practiced as a means of reconciling competing interests.

In order to assess the level of political consciousness in a particular situation, it is important to look at the extent to which community men and women recognize their ability to change circumstances and to avail themselves of opportunities for political education and awareness-building. The situation of economic hardship, political oppression, cultural

orthodoxy, and gender discrimination generally leads to powerlessness; people in this state may conclude that no alternative vision for their lives is possible. As a result, this inhibits them from claiming the things to which they have a right, such as access and control over public resources, fundamental freedoms, security, political participation, and autonomy. Many people, especially women, are not in a strong enough position to recognize that what appears to be a “private problem” may in fact be part of a broader trend that affects thousands of others like them. This way of thinking can undercut the development of a political consciousness by obscuring opportunities to learn how to overcome constraints and exercise rights.

In developing political consciousness, individuals and groups analyze situations, abandon their sense of isolation from politics, and acquire the confidence to strive for political change. The process, however, requires strategies for building awareness, promoting education, developing analytical skills, alleviating internalized oppression, and supporting indigenous knowledge — all of which enable people to challenge existing values and norms. Women, in particular, face these constraints which block the process of transformation. Women often do possess the skills and language necessary to articulate political ideas, but only in certain culturally acceptable, private ways such as through stories, songs, humor, music, and discussions with family and friends. This type of political consciousness can be used in certain public spaces — such as community organizations, popular education centres, literacy classes, users groups, and committees.

With this consciousness as an integral part of every learning initiative, DidiBahini operates with a few common values: participatory empowerment as a process; gender equity as a crosscutting theme; women and disadvantaged segments of society as major target groups; a multi-sector and holistic perspective as an approach; and geographical, socio-cultural, and ethnic diversity and adoption as a discipline.

In order to learn and assess the existing community-based assets and constraints, for each learning project DidiBahini initiates a comprehensive gender assessment study (GAS) with participatory rural appraisal (PRA) tools as an initial prerequisite for planning and designing subsequent activities. The activity is an informal, collective learning and exploration event whereby all women, men, and children participate to identify and analyze their own community situation, initiate a breakthrough in the existing community dynamics, and elevate the level of political consciousness — especially among women and other disadvantaged groups. This is followed by education activities such as training in gender awareness and planning.

Capacity building of women political leaders, regular sharing and interaction programs with government officials and political leaders, macro-policy review, and advocacy have been DidiBahini’s major strategies for increasing political consciousness.

Power

The understanding and exercise of power determines the level of political consciousness and status of political culture in a given context. The dynamics and experience of power shape advocacy strategies and influence the degrees of success that people are able to achieve. If citizens, either out of ignorance, discrimination, or oppression view power as fixed, their ability to transform power relations will be limited. If, in contrast, they understand the exercise of

power to be an outcome of constantly shifting indicators, they will be in a stronger position to push for change. According to this view, knowledge can always be attained and alliances established for the purpose of transforming political conditions.

In general, women have often understood power in terms of who has *power over* them, rather than power that is exercised on their behalf or for the larger common good. Since many women have been denied power in the public sphere, they have exercised power primarily in the private sphere. Very few women have experience in working with both other women and men in the pursuit of social goals. As a result, women engaging in public political activity for the first time are often unable to perform the expected roles. They normally are pressured to accept the norms and values of the existing male-oriented political culture. However, participation in some collective activities, such as GAS and PRA orientations and training, helps women to learn and to articulate their persistent subordination, even in the private sphere. This, in turn, enables them to challenge power differences and seek alternatives to the status quo. This awareness and skill can inspire the formation of social movements located within communities and lead to organized political action.

After the comprehensive and detailed GAS and PRA exercises in all the field areas of DidiBahini, women organized on their own to address the priority gender needs they identified and to advocate against some of the gender-based discriminatory norms, values, and practices existing in their communities.

This versatile understanding of power provided openings to transform power relations in the communities. Although women's groups often lack power that is generated by money, control, and authority, they have access to alternative sources of power. Their state of powerlessness, however, motivates them to build alliances with larger numbers of like-minded people, to generate knowledge and information, create new activities, upgrade planning skills, and organize their moral authority. When power is conceptualized in these ways, political culture is enriched and the possibility of change increases.

Moreover, DidiBahini's WHEEL project provides a good illustration of how the experience of power influences advocacy. The project was implemented after a long community-based action research with an interdisciplinary and intersectoral intervention to address the multifarious aspects that influence the empowerment of women and other disadvantaged groups in society. The project is based on a new learning paradigm whereby project facilitators — as well as community men, women, and children — share their knowledge and develop a collective new learning that will guide the process and activities for equitable and sustainable development. The process has resulted in advocacy initiatives, including proposals to reform and modify macro policies and laws related to women. Organized groups in communities are now meeting government officials of different sectoral ministries on a range of issues, including reproductive health, access to credit, the right to inherit property, access to local natural resources, technical assistance, education, and so forth. These advocacy initiatives not only pressured the government to take action, they helped officials of different departments to learn about the issues more analytically and critically.

The inter-district, inter-village exchange and exposure activities enabled rural women to recognize mutual concerns and the value of control over economic, political, and natural resources. They also learned to take responsibility for creating an advocacy platform, whether it is a caucus of Elected Women Ward (village) representatives, or a forum of Female Community Health Volunteers, or federation of Forest Users Groups. Most importantly, these rural women in collaboration with some community male allies are able to apply their new confidence, knowledge, innovation, and leadership skills to create greater gender awareness and equity within their own Village Development Committees (VDCs).

Social Capital

As a democratic political culture develops, individuals and groups begin to take on new roles and identities, gain self-respect, develop new skills, and adopt values of mutual respect, mutual trust, and mutual support. In this situation, even with very small energy and effort, the spaces in the political culture can be transformed to provide settings in which private lives and public institutions can converge and enjoy comparative advantage. Then, ordinary citizens like women can claim their rights as citizens with dignity. An evolving political culture depends upon these spaces for the creation of social capital, which is often defined as the web of relationships, institutions and norms that help people co-operate and co-ordinate with one another for common benefit.

The level of social capital in a given context reflects the degree of social cohesion that exists. It is the “glue” that holds institutions together and ensures that they function effectively. By enhancing levels of reciprocity, co-operation and co-ordination, a web of social capital and proactive political culture is promoted which is instrumental for the development of sound governance, economic prosperity, cultural harmony, and gender equity in society. Social capital determines the extent to which people are engaged in collaboration, exchange information, share experiences, and feel connected to a broad desire for change. Through this collective empowerment process community people become confident in expressing themselves publicly, draw strength from one another, and recognize that each one has unique skills and perspectives to offer. Hence the status of women and other disadvantaged groups is automatically upgraded. Therefore, social capital is the concrete manifestation of a dynamic political culture.

DidiBahini’s mutual learning principles and process-oriented participatory approach to action research have developed the institutional and technical capacity of community women’s and men’s groups and encouraged mutual critical reflection leading to activism, at least among women and other disadvantaged groups. Each research process follows a cycle of stages as its discipline. It begins with participatory data collection, then moves to collective analysis leading to common community actions to change oppressive systems with ongoing reflection and evaluation. The process has helped build social capital and establish the necessary structure for women to pursue public advocacy. As a result, community people have gained a stronger sense of citizen responsibility, and women’s groups are being recognized as contributors to public/political decision-making. More village women have attained new knowledge and become well versed in the gender aspects of a range of economic, social, cultural, and political issues. A stronger group identity has subsequently been forged. In addition, a reciprocal relationship has

been established with community (male) leaders and governmental officials, which can be counted as a significant achievement in terms of strengthened social capital.

By bringing together women and developing male allies, the WHEEL project demonstrated that women at any level can initiate change by working together and being more proactive. For example, an alliance of women political representatives, female community health volunteers, and female literacy facilitators in Dadhikot village not only advocated for access and control over community resources and decisions, they also brought government line ministries together to enforce their commitments to the cause of gender equity. Now they have regular Maternal Child Health and other health camps, literacy classes, agriculture related training, and credit programs for women. In addition, women are invited and consulted on each community decision and are valued as significant contributors to the community. A separate gender action and monitoring committee has been formed at the VDC level. A similar multiplier effect has been observed in other VDCs also. This is the essence of social capital and a strong indicator that a more pluralistic political culture may be emerging.

Civil Society

One of the important aspects of social capital is civil society. Civil society is a constantly evolving network of politically active, aware organizations and individuals who represent diverse interests, shape public dialogue, and influence political outcomes. It occupies the space between formal government institutions and grassroots constituents.

A vibrant civil society can also support justice through the work of organizations that hold governments accountable for promoting the human rights of their people. Therefore, strengthening civil society organizations means increasing citizens' capacity, leadership, organization and power. It generates a greater voice and serves to counterbalance the exercise of excessive authority by governments and members of the political or economic elite. The extent to which civil society is capable of becoming a viable arena of political activity and expression is determined by constituency building, access to political systems, the development of political skills, and institutional development.

Constituency Building

In order to advocate for reform on specific issues, people must first be able to analyze their situation and identify constraints and opportunities to address their needs, which is the process of constituency building.

Constituency building is a natural extension of political consciousness because it results when people compare their own lives with others around them through community participation and a critical analysis process. The identification of differences, realization of existing discrimination, and a cause and effect analysis of the situation are the steps towards building a critical constituency that helps establish and maintain a healthy political culture.

In the context of WHEEL activities, constituency building emerged during the participatory situation analysis process. This brought forward issues such as gender-based discrimination, the

rights of women, and the need for a social equity based development approach. Expanding education initiatives that promote political participation have helped women learn about their rights and potentialities.

Access to Political Systems

When civil society is strong and responsive, citizens have a capacity not only to influence public decisions, but also to enter into the political process. This process requires citizens to understand the nature and functions of political institutions, as well as how to intervene in the prevailing political culture and structure. For women, barriers to such success have always existed in the form of functional literacy, gender discrimination, and entrenched political norms. The greatest challenges are to gain access to the dominant political culture so that it is more inclusive of previously marginalized groups such as women.

DidiBahini's action learning process, which included many women's institutions, created a national level movement to demand for women's meaningful participation in political processes. As a result, the Government of Nepal declared a minimum 20% of seats for women representatives to be mandatory at the local level. This opening of access to political systems brought tremendous opportunities and alternatives for women's groups to act together to achieve the desired changes and to influence decisions. However, women desperately needed political skills to be effective.

Political Skill Development

Once women's groups or civil society organizations gain access to political systems, it is important that they have a set of skills to exploit their authority within the position. Even when basic advocacy and participation skills are fairly established, women leaders still seek to expand their abilities, at least in the context of Nepal. Realizing this fact, DidiBahini made the capacity building of women leaders one of the mandatory, ongoing activities of its projects. It is important to note this in-built process of skill development promotes a greater sense of ownership of the political process by women leaders, which can eventually generate strong social movements.

Institution Building

The development of non-government institutions is one of the indicators of a strong civil society, because eventually the operational strength of civil society actors lies in their ability to produce the social capital necessary to achieve policy reforms. Without an emphasis on their own institutional development and maintenance, it is difficult for civil society actors to sustain their efforts, remain influential in the political process, and hold government accountable.

Building capable women's organizations is a challenging task. However, DidiBahini's experience has shown that, over time, women's involvement and participation in the democratization process has been enhanced in each of the communities where WHEEL has been implemented. As an indicator of their growing influence, women's groups — be they female community health volunteers or forest users committees or literacy center groups — are more and more frequently

called upon to serve as issue experts and to provide inputs. This process has helped women's institutional development gain momentum.

Government Institutions

The status and character of political culture and the role of civil society to some extent are determined by government institutions such as legislatures, ministries, judicial entities, and local agencies. At the same time, it is civil society that determines the degree of transparency, accessibility, and accountability of government institutions for which a democratic political culture is required. Therefore, political culture, civil society, and good government institutions are interrelated and interdependent variables.

Institutional Reforms

Transforming government institutions so they are more responsive to all constituencies and interests, including those of women, is a slow process. Normally the "official" political culture is gender biased and does not take into consideration the concerns and needs of women. Therefore, to establish a democratic political culture and gender equal society, institutional reforms must occur.

Transformation of traditional gender relations both in private and public spheres is the principal means to reach these ends. These shifts can be manifested as changes in the gender-based division of labor, women's equal access to resources (such as food, property, health care, employment, education, credit, water, forest, etc.), changes in legislation and public policies, and women's increased participation in public decision-making.

In all four of DidiBahini's action research areas, women's participation in political life has begun to break through the traditional norms. Their engagement in public decision-making has brought forward new opportunities and greater political discourse. As a result, individuals and organizations are increasingly recognizing the linkages between civil society and government institutions. They are better able to feed their concerns into the policy-making process, in turn resulting in transformed institutions of governance.

State Accountability

The commonly held view in seeking gender equity is that the role of the state is to create conditions that catalyze, reinforce, or enable women's local efforts to secure their empowerment. In addition, the state is seen to be required to live up to its obligations to its citizens, as expressed in international human rights treaties such as CEDAW (Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination Against Women). Accordingly, a state and its many agencies or departments must work to promote and legitimize women's entry into the political arena.

There are many ways for the state to carry out these responsibilities. For example, it can mandate women's representation in political bodies and recognize the efforts of women leaders from civil society. Action by the state can often break through the traditional boundaries that

restrict women's access to participation and decision-making in the public sphere, and subsequently allow them to attain formal political power. In short, the state can help establish an environment in which women are enabled to be politically active.

Although national institutions are ultimately responsible for ensuring gender equity, various elements of civil society can assume the role of watchdog by promoting a gender responsive policy environment. Through civil society organizations, people's participation in legislative reform can help institutionalize gender awareness, consolidate democratic practices, and build constituencies in support of women. Effective advocacy can influence government decision-making by educating leaders, policy makers, and those who implement policies about women's economic and social conditions and rights, thereby reforming policies, laws, and budgets; developing new programs; and supporting measures to enhance the transparency, democracy, and accountability of the legislative process.

DidiBahini's role as a catalyst for community-based organizations, women's groups, youth organizations, village political bodies, and political leaders to work for gender equity and women's empowerment can be taken as an example. Apart from its village level activities, DidiBahini frequently initiates dialogue, interaction, sharing workshops, and seminars for district based line agencies/institutional leaders and professionals as part of its ongoing educational process. This activity helps to develop consensus and constituency opinion on the issue of gender equity and women's empowerment as a strong basis for peaceful, harmonious, and sustainable development. The initiation and organization of training and interactions with central level institutional leaders (e.g. members of parliaments, leaders of political parties and unions, secretaries of government ministries, and professional staff of bilateral and multilateral agencies) are other steps to raise state accountability on the issue.

DidiBahini, as mentioned above, organizes ongoing educational forums for women in its project areas. In Bhaktapur, after several sittings with only women's groups, participants suggested that unless we communicate with and educate male members of the community the issue of gender disparity would not be tackled. A few interaction workshops were organized for community male members, some of whom were representatives of their VDC (the local political body). They were so convinced about the need to educate political bodies and develop workable strategies to address the issue that the village council allocated a substantive amount of resources for the purpose, and requested DidiBahini to support them as technical experts.

For the first time in history in all of DidiBahini's action research areas, International Women's Day on March 8 was celebrated by bringing different civil society organizations, political bodies, and government institutions together in a forum where they collectively established targets and made public commitments to address the issue. An alliance comprising all party women representatives, party leaders (male), civil society, youth, and government representatives was also formally announced.

Lessons Learned

There are various lessons to be learned from DidiBahini's experience. They are as follows:

1. Participatory community analysis helps all community men, women, and children to learn, visualize, understand, and realize existing disparities and to plan for collective action to address the issue. The activity also generates a gender disaggregated information base, which can be a powerful instrument to monitor and assess the progress related to women's development. In addition, the GAS-PRA exercise (the entry activity of the WHEEL project) not only brought forward the hard core reality of existing gender disparity in each community, it also helped civil society organizations and political bodies to prioritize the issue in their development plans.
2. Even very small but sequential steps can provide the basis for social change and allow everyone in the community to take part. For example, in the Parsa project site, after GAS-PRA there was a big debate between women's groups and men's groups regarding setting priorities for their community development plan. For men, the most pressing and first priority need was fertilizers, but for women it was education centres. Finally it was agreed that the community would initiate several formal and informal education activities that generated other learning activities.
3. Creating a regular forum for community women to exchange ideas and reflect on their experiences not only helps them to gain knowledge and information about their own situation, it also encourages them to take up advocacy.
4. Advocacy skill training for women can be used as a means to develop a deeper understanding of their own subordination and to take steps to challenge the inequitable social structure. The project used advocacy training to enable women to critically analyze their own situations and to develop action plans focused on the concerns and needs they have identified through the process.
5. Continuous skill building and support for women to participate in public decision-making not only enhances their status, it also strengthens the democratic political culture in the community and generates a multiplier effect. It creates pressure to initiate women-related development activities to address the existing gender gaps.
6. The participatory learning process facilitates the development of different networks and alliances for equitable and sustainable development. There are already many different inter-village, inter-district and national networks being built in WHEEL working areas among different women's groups based according to their interests — such as the district federation of elected women ward representatives, female community health volunteers, the network of female non-formal education facilitators, etc.
7. The establishment of an information pool and dissemination mechanism within the community enables the strengthening of a literate and informed culture in society. Regular information updates encourage critical thinking and raise political consciousness. Therefore, each WHEEL community developed its own informal information collection and dissemination mechanism and established a community information bank. This initiative brought together women and other marginalized groups who often possess knowledge and information necessary to articulate certain political ideas. Beyond simple access to information, the establishment of community information banks helped to raise the

confidence and status of those groups and encouraged men to appreciate the essence of comparative advantage.

8. To achieve sustainable and equitable development using a reflection, learning, and action process demands the participation of all in every stage and step of development activities. Therefore, the participation and support of men in women's development is crucial. As a result, the process is generally slow and demands a longer time and continued commitment.

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