

CASE STUDY

A Single Approach is Not Enough to Help Poor, Rural Women



Women's empowerment is a complex process that requires integrated and innovative solutions. Photo credit: ADB.
A package of economic, social, legal, and institutional measures helps provide equal opportunity to minority and low-caste women in Nepal.

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Overview

Women in Nepal have long experienced high levels of poverty, social exclusion, and marginalization because of their gender. For women from ethnic minorities and groups considered low caste, these disadvantages are greatly compounded.

The 2013 Gender Inequality Index, reflecting gender-based inequalities in three dimensions—reproductive health, political empowerment, and economic activity—ranked Nepal 102nd out of 182 countries.

This is a shorter version of the case study on the Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women Project developed and implemented between 2002 and 2013 by the Government of Nepal and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The project's beneficiaries were women from poor, disadvantaged, ethnic, and low-caste groups, who

were extremely marginalized and disempowered, and frequently excluded from past development programs.

Project snapshot

Dates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16 December 2004: Approval Date • 11 December 2013: Closing Date
Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US\$ 15.5 million: Overall project cost • US\$ 10 million (65.5%): Financed as a loan by ADB • US\$ 3.4 million (21.9%): By Government of Nepal • US\$ 2.1 million (13.6%): By the beneficiaries and community
Institutions and Stakeholders	<p>Executing agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare of the Government of Nepal <p>Implementing agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Women Development under the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare

Challenges

In Nepal, there was significant progress in ameliorating gender disparities in the 3 decades prior to the project. During that time, female literacy increased fivefold, fertility dropped by half, and female life expectancy increased by 11 years.

Between 1996 and 2003, conflict and insecurity exacerbated the conditions of poverty in the country, especially in the far-western regions. The insurgency created security risks, disrupted rural economic life, generated increased burdens and threats for women, and also resulted in the exodus of large numbers of men. However, it also opened doors for women, especially those from lower castes and ethnic minorities. During the insurgency, new land tenancy arrangements, lending interest rates, and workers' wages were established to benefit the disadvantaged; and steps were taken to eliminate caste-based discrimination.

In focusing especially on the economic empowerment of rural, ethnic, and low-caste women, the project directly addressed the negative consequences of conflict for women, as well as the opportunities it created. This was necessary, since at the time of the project implementation, women still bore a disproportionate share of the poverty burden; had unequal and often insufficient access to food, education, and health care; and suffered from long working hours and high levels of exclusion from

productive resources and community activities.

Solutions

The project covered 82 village development committees (VDCs) across 15 districts: 40 VDCs in 8 districts in the western region and 42 VDCs in 7 districts in the central region. These districts were identified as the poorest and most remote communities in rural Nepal, with deep-rooted gender discrimination practices.

Project preparations included consultations with women and men in communities, and with representatives of the local and central governments, civil society, women's nongovernment organizations, donor partners, and other stakeholders.

The goal of the project was to reduce poverty by empowering poor rural women and members of other disadvantaged groups, such as ethnic and low-caste women. Its objective is to improve the socioeconomic conditions of poor rural women, including ethnic and low-caste women, through a process of economic, social, legal, and political empowerment.

The project took an integrated approach, with four mutually supportive components, each with its own objective.

- **Economic Empowerment**

Increase income, assets, and employment opportunities for poor rural women.

- **Legal Empowerment**

Increase poor rural women's control over their lives with law.

- **Social Empowerment**

Improve opportunities of women and free up their time to pursue both personal and community development.

- **Institutional Strengthening**

Increase the capacity of key institutions to mainstream gender and promote women's empowerment.

Numbers and facts

9,392 women's savings and credit groups established

12,187 women trained in livelihood skills and microenterprise

More than 100,000 women and men joined legal awareness campaigns

27 judges, 28 prosecutors, and 30 police women received women's rights training

30 local line agencies in 15 districts gender audits

Results

The project achieved intangible and tangible positive results for women and their communities.

Intangible, but not less real, transformations include a decrease in negative beliefs and practices relative to girls' education, child and early marriage, and the appropriate role of women within and outside the home. The project also led to changes in daily practices of "untouchability."

More tangibly, large numbers of women in the 15 districts of the project have become more productive economically, and their households enjoy higher incomes and improved health status. Socially, women marginalized by caste and ethnic origin have successfully taken on community responsibilities not previously open to them. Their legal rights have been bolstered by increased legal knowledge, by the possibility of seeking easier redress under local dispute resolution systems, and by the possession of personal documentation.

Institutionally, the project has contributed greatly to enhancing the credibility and capacity of Nepal's Department of Women Development and its district-based Women and Children Offices in project management and in planning and implementing future programs.

Lessons

Lessons from the project point to the following:

- the necessity of promoting women's status and well-being directly and explicitly;
- the effectiveness of integrated approaches to eliminate economic, social, legal, and institutional obstacles to women's empowerment; and
- the value of carefully designed systems for collective action, functioning at different geographical and administrative levels.

The women's groups at the ward level, and federated into the VDC organizations, had a role and importance far beyond savings and credit. They became crucial institutions for the social empowerment of women in homes and villages, and also became platforms for networking and collective actions.

Finally, the project indicates that working for women's rights in a conflict context can offer considerable opportunities and may require responding to its negative impacts on women and on gender equality.

Resources

ADB. 2004. Report and Recommendation of the President to the Board of Directors: Proposed Loan to the Kingdom of Nepal for the Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women Project. Manila.

ADB. 2012. Rural Infrastructures. Sectoral Perspectives on Gender and Social Inclusion Series. Monograph 6. Kathmandu: Asian Development Bank / Department for International Development of the

United Kingdom / World Bank.

ADB. 2016. Gender Equality Results Case Study: Nepal Gender Equality and Empowerment. Mandaluyong City: Asian Development Bank.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2013. Human Development Report: The Rise of the South, Human Progress in a Diverse World. New York.

ADB. 2011. Empowering Women in Nepal through Livelihood Programs. Case Study. 30 November.

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Prior to her appointment to the Inspection Panel, Imrana was Asian Development Bank's Principal Social Development Specialist (Gender and Development) from 2010 - 2017. She was elected a Commissioner on the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in 2006 and served on the commission's Executive Board. A lawyer by profession, she is the author of the "Law for Pacific Women: A Legal Rights Handbook," architect of the Fiji Family Law Act 2003, and a founding member of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement.

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