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# Transforming gender relations in the trail bridge programme in Nepal: an analysis of policies and practices

Final Report



**HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Nepal**

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*The views in this document are those of the authors and they do not necessarily reflect the views of the Research for Community Access Partnership (ReCAP), HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Nepal Cardno Emerging Markets (UK) Ltd for whom the document was prepared*

**HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Nepal**

Dhobighat, G.P.O.Box 688, Lalitpur-3, Nepal

Phone: 00977 1 5524926, 5544337, Fax: 00977 1 5531109

po@helvetas.org.np, www.helvetas.org.np

Cover Photo: A focus group discussion at Bahakati bridge in Arghakhanchi district

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ReCAP Project Management Unit  
Cardno Emerging Market (UK) Ltd  
Oxford House, Oxford Road  
Thame  
OX9 2AH  
United Kingdom



## **Abstract**

This report presents the findings of a qualitative exploration of the degree to which Nepal's trail bridge programme contributes to changes in gender relations. It begins with a review of policy and legal framework and the literature pertaining to gender relations and trail bridges, noting that there are many positive provisions. These include a requirement for 40% women in trail bridge users' committees; equal pay for equal work amongst labourers; and priority to local employment, especially of women and disadvantaged groups. The study then focuses on how such guidelines are translated into practice in the field, taking nine short span trail bridges and one long span trail bridge as case studies. The findings are discussed by taking in turn seven drivers of women's economic empowerment, and assessing the degree to which they are fulfilled. Overall, the study found that field practice tends to lag behind the intentions of the responsive legal provisions. Key suggestions are that the time constraints imposed on women by unpaid care work should be recognised and addressed, and that far greater emphasis is given to the facilitation of social processes to transform gender relation in users' committees. In addition, disadvantaged women should be given more concerted support to maximise their income from wage labour through avoiding debt, undertaking skills training to be eligible for better wages, and transforming wages into assets. Finally, opportunities to learn and share from other users' committee experiences at local level should be deepened and greater coordination between technical and social bodies fostered at district level.

## **Key words**

Trail bridge, gender roles, transformative gender relations, Nepal

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## Acronyms, Units and Currencies

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AFDB	African Development Bank
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women
COMAT	Communication and Management Institute
DDC	District Development Committee
DoLIDAR	Department of Local Development and Agricultural Roads
DTO	District Technical Office
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GAD	Gender and Development
GBP	Great Britain Pound (1 GBP = 129 NPR)
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
GoN	Government of Nepal
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
ILO	International Labour Organisation
LBS	Local Bridge Section
LSTB	Long Span Trail Bridge
MoFALD	Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPR	Nepalese Rupee (1 GBP = 129 NPR; 1 USD = 100 NPR)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PBBA	Post Bridge Building Assessment
ReCAP	Research for Community Access Partnership
REFLECT	Regenerated Freirean Literacy Through Empowering Community Techniques
REMREC	Resource Management and Rural Empowerment Center
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SOS	Social Organisational Support
SSTB	Short Span Trail Bridge
SWAP	Sector Wide Approach
TBS	Trail Bridge Strategy
TBSIS	Trail Bridge Strategy Information System
TB SWAP	Trail Bridge Sector Wide Approach
TBSU	Trail Bridge Support Unit
UC	Users' Committee
UN	United Nation
VDC	Village Development Committee
WB	World Bank
WDO	Women Development Office
WEE	Women's Economic Empowerment
WID	Women in Development

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## **1 Executive summary**

The new constitution of Nepal, ratified in September 2015, guarantees full and equal rights to all citizens, women and men alike. This research considers the extent to which the provisions of the constitution are reflected in the Nepal government's trail bridge programme. Trail bridges are an essential means of access in rural Nepal, with over 6,500 existing across the country and on average 350 being constructed per year. The majority (short span trail bridges) are constructed under a community-based system, which primarily uses quotas to ensure the participation of women and disadvantaged groups in trail bridge users' committees, and in wage labour opportunities. In the first step of this research, the relevant legal frameworks for the trail bridge programme, and the rules, regulations and guidelines established for their implementation, were analysed with regard to their provisions for upholding the rights of women and disadvantaged groups. Key stakeholders in the relevant ministries, departments and agencies were then interviewed to better understand their perceptions of the legal provisions. The resulting information was used to shape a number of field research tools, notably questionnaires for focus group discussions and interviews with key informants (government officials and staff of development agencies), and case studies of individual women.

Nine short span trail bridges and one long span trail bridge were selected for the field research, covering different geographical areas and different users' committee compositions. Each was visited with the aim of investigating qualitative aspects of women's practical engagement in trail bridges. The 26 case studies of women are set out in an annex to this report. Relevant quotes from them as well as from the focus group discussions and other key respondents are included in the discussion of the findings, which draws on the seven drivers of change for women's economic empowerment identified by the UN High Panel (2016). We consider in turn the degree to which the trail bridge programme tackles adverse gender norms and promotes positive role models; addresses unpaid care work; promotes women's assets; supports women's representation and leadership; impacts on public sector employment and procurement processes; promotes women in business; and contributes to a revision of gender discriminatory laws.

Our analysis suggests that the trail bridge programme is broadly gender responsive in its provisions. A positive message is sent by the quotas of 40% women in users' committees and at least an individual from a discriminated group, with priority of woman in an executive function. Similarly positive is the provision of equal pay for equal work. However, whilst gender provisions are generally known at field level, they are sometimes only followed to the letter, rather than to the intended spirit. Indeed, we found a few cases of women's agency being deliberately undermined. An interesting finding was that the percentage of women in users' committees cannot be correlated with the extent to which women are empowered. Rather, what is important is the degree of support afforded to them by male family members and the wider community. Noting that our sample is small and the findings qualitative and not quantitative, we conclude with five suggestions on how the Nepal trail bridge programme might be made not merely gender aware, but gender responsive, and ultimately gender transformative. These are as follows.

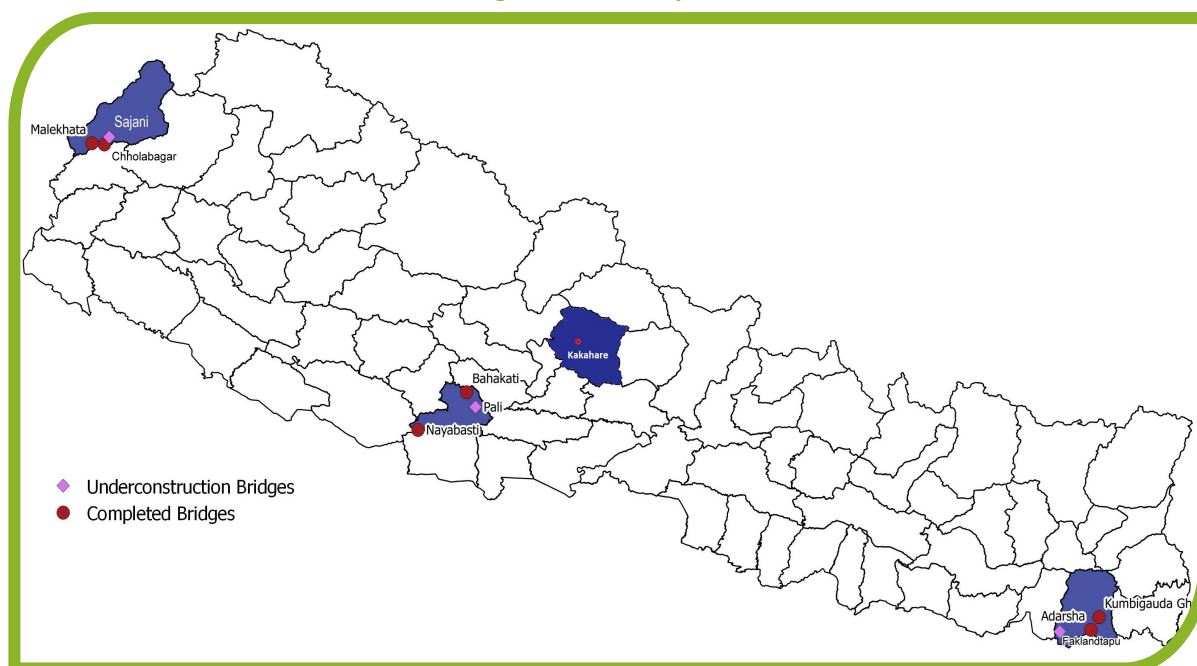
- The time constraints imposed on women by unpaid care work need to be actively recognised and addressed. This entails taking steps to reduce and redistribute such work (particularly through encouraging the support of male family members), as well as being accommodative to women's availability.
- Better facilitation of social processes for the transformation in gender relation in users' committees is needed. This is currently the responsibility of local NGOs but is given little weight due to the emphasis given in facilitation and monitoring to technical aspects. This could be addressed through a revision of monitoring processes and further training of NGO staff.

- Disadvantaged women working on trail bridges should be supported in maximising their income from wage labour. Ways to achieve this include ensuring that they are not forced into debt whilst waiting to be paid; offering skills training to make them eligible for better wages; and supporting them in transforming wages into assets.
- Opportunities for users' committee members to learn and share from other each other's experiences should be promoted. This could be achieved through exchange visits and workshops.
- Greater district-level coordination should be promoted between actors responsible for technical and social aspects of development. This is necessary both with immediate effect, and under Nepal's future decentralised administrative structure.

## 2 Introduction

This report documents a study undertaken by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation (henceforward HELVETAS) on behalf of ReCAP. Titled ‘Transforming gender relations in the trail bridge programme in Nepal: an analysis of policies and practices’, it was a largely qualitative piece of research, taking ten trail bridges as case studies. Three of each of these bridges are located in the three districts of Arghakanchi, Darchula and Morang. One long span trail bridge in Kaski district was also included. The location of all ten bridges is indicated in figure 1.

**Figure 1: The study area**



The entire research covered a nine month period, from August 2016 to April 2017, with an approved budget of GBP 47,550.00.

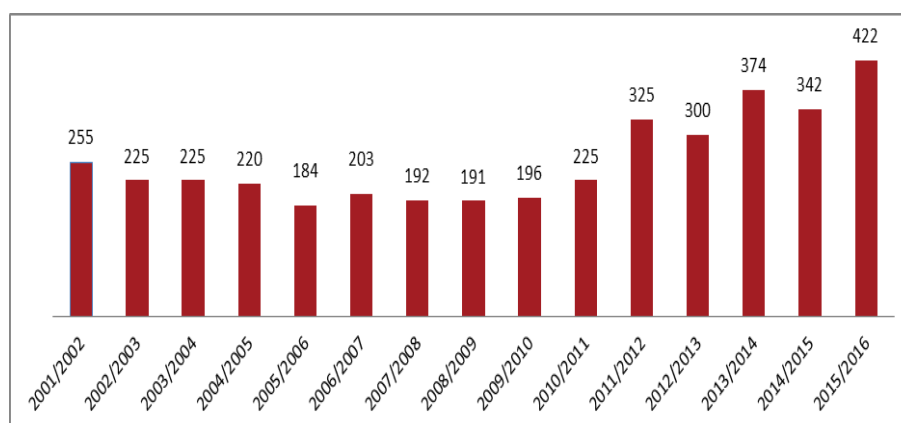
### 3 Background

#### 3.1 Trail Bridge Construction in Nepal

Trails and trail bridges are an essential feature of rural access in the rugged terrain of Nepal's middle hills and mountains, but also in the plains in the South of the country (the terai), where large rivers can pose major barriers, especially during the monsoon when rivers are in spate. Where there are no trail bridges, whole communities can get cut-off from road networks, markets, food supplies, service centres, education institutions and employment opportunities. Although there has been a significant increase in rural road networks over recent years, foot remains the most commonly used form of mobility for the majority of rural Nepalese women, men, girls and boys. The heavy dependence upon trail bridges for river crossings and overall mobility in the country explains why they have been accorded Priority-1 programme status by the government of Nepal. According to the Trail Bridge Strategy (TBS) 2006, the Government of Nepal's goal is *'...construction and operation of trail bridges to promote access for local people (particularly Women, Dalits, Ethnic communities, disadvantaged groups, discriminated and marginalised classes) to social and basic services, economic resources and opportunities, thereby contributing towards poverty alleviation'* (TBS, 2006).

To date, over 6,500 trail bridges have been built across the country, mostly in the middle hills and mountainous regions.

**Figure 2: Annual Trail Bridge Output (2001-2016)**



Source: PMIS, TBSU

On average, a further 350 trail bridges are added annually to this total (DoLIDAR, 2015). Post Bridge Building Assessments (PBBA) in 2015 record that the Average Daily Traffic Counts are 208 (53% men and 47% women) people per bridge, which indicates that throughout the country over 1.2 million people use the trail bridges daily, predominantly for accessing markets (28%) and performing household chores (27%), followed by going to school (14%), health facilities (11%), employment opportunities (10%) and social functions (10%) (Chhetry, 2015). Geographic locations were also found to be significant in terms of perceived benefits. Thus people in the hills give more importance to the 'safer access' provided by the trail bridges compared to people in the terai, who regard 'easier crossings' to be more significant (COMAT, 2013).

Over 90% of the trail bridges in Nepal are Short Span Trail Bridges (SSTBs), defined as having a length of less than 120 meters. As per the Trail Bridge Strategy 2006, these trail bridges are built through the 'community approach', which focuses on optimising local skills and materials through users' committees, who are supported by bridge technicians and social mobilisers to ensure engineering requirements in terms of quality, serviceability and durability. In addition, Long Span Trail Bridges (LSTBs), defined as having spans of over 120 meters, are also built across larger rivers and along strategic locations. These bridges are complex in design, and as per the Trail Bridge Strategy 2006 are built by contractors.

Since the implementation of the Sector Wide Approach in 2009, the trail bridge sub-sector has been led by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development (MoFALD) through the Department of Local Infrastructural Development and Agricultural Roads (DoLIDAR). The department oversees planning, implementation and monitoring as per the strategy and policy documents. The Local Bridge Section (LBS)/DoLIDAR is primarily engaged in SSTBs, whilst the Suspension Bridge Division of DoLIDAR is responsible for LSTBs built along international borders and at strategic locations. Meanwhile, the individual District Development Committees and District Technical Offices implement and maintain the bridges through users' committee for SSTBs and through private contractors for LSTBs. HELVETAS Nepal, with funding from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), provides technical assistance to the entire sub-sector.

### **3.2 Mainstreaming Gender within Trail Bridge construction**

Mainstreaming gender within the trail bridge sub-sector is outlined in the Trail Bridge Strategy 2006 and the corresponding policy documents: the Trail Bridge Sector Wide Approach Framework-I (2009-

#### **Box 1: Who are the elites, who are marginalised? Social diversity in Nepal**

The last national census of Nepal (2011) recognised 125 separate social groups within the population of 26.6 million people. Within this huge diversity, there is a complex social hierarchy based on the Hindu caste system, superimposed on an indigenous population. Broadly, the elites are drawn from three main groups: Brahmins (traditionally the priest caste), Chhetris (traditionally the warrior but also landlord caste) and the Newars (the indigenous inhabitants of Kathmandu valley with more hold on business). The most socially marginalised are the occupational castes or Dalits – traditionally smiths, leatherworkers, tailors, musicians, cleaners and similar assigned occupations. In between are a range of indigenous groups or Janajatis including Sherpa, Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Limbu, and Tharu, whose populations tend to be concentrated in different parts of the country. Religion is a further feature of social diversity; Hindus make up the majority of the population (roughly 81%) followed by Buddhists (9%), with small numbers of Muslims, animists and Christians making up the rest. In all groups, women tend to be more marginalised than men in community decision-making, although there are marked differences in gender relations between different groups.

2014) and the Trail Bridge Sector Wide Approach Framework-II (2014-2019). These policy documents are in line with the Local Self Governance Act 1999 and focus primarily on short span trail bridges with the engagement of women and disadvantaged groups through participation in users' committees and in employment opportunities during trail bridge construction.

Users' committees usually consist of 7 or 11 members, and are made up of representatives of the beneficiary communities. As per the working principles, they must be socially inclusive. The primary objective is to lessen the dominance of the traditional elites and at the same time to empower others as 'rights holders' to have control over resources and benefit equally from the trail bridge building process. It is mandated that users' committees must have a minimum 40% women members. The members should be proportionately representative of the beneficiary population, and a key position (Chairperson, Secretary, Treasurer) should be held by an individual from a socially discriminated group, defined as being women, Dalits, Janajatis (ethnic groups) and minorities (TB SWAP Framework-II, 2014). Besides these conditions for physical participation, Community Leadership Trainings for the members of the users' committee are also conducted yearly to capacitate them to have more meaningful engagement in the committees. Women members of the users committee are encouraged in the training.

Latest figures from the fiscal year 2015/16 record that most of the users' committees adhere to the social inclusion criteria. On average, the committee membership comprises 45% women, with some 83% of users' committees being proportionately representative of the beneficiary communities. This

is a notable improvement compared to a decade ago, when women representation was just 21% and only 50% of the users' committees were proportionately representative in fiscal year 2005/06 (Singh, 2009). According to an external review of the sub-sector, the provisions and efforts have been "...pivotal (mechanisms) for mainstreaming gender into the sub-sector", but it is also noted that additional complementary provisions (that is, various forms of capacity building) were required to support and sustain women to "express themselves" and make their "voices heard" (COMAT, 2014).

Meanwhile, annual figures record that during trail bridge construction, 29% of the employment generated was taken up by women, with provisions such as equal pay for equal work being enforced and monitored throughout the trail bridge building cycle. Post Bridge Building Assessments further show that once the trail bridges have been built, men and women tend to use the trail bridges differently. Women were recorded as primarily using the trail bridges for performing household chores such as fuelwood and fodder collection (58% compared to 42% of men) while men were found to be crossing the trail bridges to gain employment (63% compared to 37% women) and to go to markets (65% compared to 35% women) (Chhetry, 2015).

Past studies indicate that trail bridges play an essential role in reducing poverty, as their construction creates jobs, improves access to education, health, markets and also reduces women's workloads, eventually contributing towards an overall benefit to the local and national economy through the creation of employment and opportunities for both women and men. However, the correlation between trail bridges and some of its benefits are indirect and are not always clear and attributable, particularly with regard to those that take a gendered lens. This is important, as gender inequality is a huge challenge in Nepal.

Women experience widespread discrimination, which is further compounded by caste and ethnic differences. Dalit women are doubly discriminated, and tend to have low self-esteem and belief in their ability to change their lives. Furthermore, their experience of discrimination can have the effect of reinforcing hierarchical distinctions amongst themselves – thus for example a woman of the Bishwakarma (blacksmith) caste may insist on upholding her perceived superiority to a woman of the Sarki (leatherworkers) caste. In contrast to the often fatalistic perceptions of Dalit women, Brahmin, Chhetry and Thakuri women tend to have greater self-confidence and belief in the possibility of changing their lives. Yet these women may also be particularly constrained by strict patriarchal structures and societal expectations of appropriate 'feminine' behaviour. Amongst the different Janajati groups, gender relations are generally more egalitarian, although none can be cited as examples of gender equality. All these observations are of course generalisations: individual women and men can and do provide examples that break gender stereotypical roles. It may also be noted that gender roles are to some extent undergoing a forced change in rural Nepal due to the high prevalence of male out-migration, leaving many women to shoulder the burden of tasks otherwise performed by men. However, this has not yet had any significant influence on gendered power relations.

Despite the significant gender and social differences described, it is widely assumed that all local people benefit equally from new infrastructure. The full range of social and economic impacts that such programmes have on local communities is often not acknowledged. Furthermore, while gender mainstreaming has long been a government priority, action to this effect has been limited due to a lack of commitment on the part of government officials, inadequate funds, insufficient human resources, and the unresponsive design of development initiatives.

### **3.3 Research Objectives**

The specific objectives of this research were to understand:

- How and to what extent does the trail bridge programme and its related policies consider the traditional, stereotypical context of gender relations and attempt to change them in a progressive manner?

- How can trail bridge related policies, programmes and tools promote women's participation in social, economic and public life, and sustain their leadership while ensuring quality implementation of the trial bridge programme?
- Is there a gap between prevailing policies and practices in realising gender mainstreaming in line with the Constitution of Nepal, and relevant Conventions and Acts to ensure women's rights and gender equality?
- How and what sort of impact on women has been observed through the trial bridge programme in different social and geographic settings of Nepal? What differences, if any, have been made in the lives women - especially in accessing public services, taking leadership roles, and gaining full employment – as part of addressing their fundamental needs and rights, and bringing about meaningful change?

## **4 Desk Review**

The desk review covered legal provisions in Nepal for supporting gender equality and social inclusion, both in general and with specific regard to trail bridges. In addition, development literature, including academic publications, was reviewed to identify any existing research and/or lessons learned in Nepal or more widely. The complete list of reviewed policies and documents is given in the references at the end of this document.

### **4.1 Gender Equality and Social Inclusion under Nepal's legal framework**

The 2015 Constitution of Nepal has several provisions promoting gender equality and upholding the rights of women. The preamble of the Constitution clearly commits to end gender-based discrimination. Furthermore, a special article guarantees fundamental rights (Art.38) of women. The Constitution enshrines the right of women to participate in all state structures and bodies on the principle of proportional inclusion. In addition, equal rights to lineage for women and men are accorded, along with the right to freedom from gender based violence.

Article 51 (j) states that social justice and inclusion should be ensured by making appropriate livelihood arrangements, prioritising employment for single women who are in a “helpless” condition, and promoting self-reliance amongst women who are vulnerable, victims of conflict, excluded by family and by society. This should be done through necessary arrangements for women's rehabilitation, protection and empowerment; ensuring the use of appropriate services and facilities for reproductive health; and placing an economic value on their labour contribution with regard to child care and care for the family. The latter is in fact quite a radical provision – or would be, if it was to be systematically implemented in practice. Overall, the new constitution creates a strong base for women and the socially disadvantaged to claim their rights as equal citizens.

The principle of inclusivity has also been proposed for adoption in the federal and provincial council of ministers. Specific reservation through affirmative action is not, however, guaranteed. Whilst proportional, inclusive representation is recognised as a fundamental right, the mechanisms to enforce this right are not set out. However, there are a variety of laws that address women's rights to participation, rights to property, rights to family, and right to freedom from gender based violence as well as the rights of indigenous and disadvantaged groups as full and equal citizens.

Below we review some of the main laws and legal procedures in Nepal that currently seek to prevent discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, ethnicity and other social criteria.

#### **Local Self-Governance Act, 1999 (2055 BS)**

The Local Self Governance Act, 1999 is an important piece of legislation upholding the principle of subsidiarity: of decisions being made as close as possible to where the impact is felt. It prioritises the voices of local people in local planning, and specifically calls for benefits to be targeted towards women, children, and marginalised communities. In the process of formulating their plans, Village Development Committees (VDCs) are expected to ensure high and representative local participation, and to prioritise local labour for development work. The Act is of relevance to the trail bridge programme as it obliges VDCs to ensure that any trail bridge work is planned and executed in a participatory, socially inclusive manner.

#### **Right to Information Act, 2064 BS (2007)**

The Right to Information Act, 2064 (2007) makes the government agencies accountable to the citizens of Nepal. The main objective of the Act is to make the functioning and activities of the State open and transparent towards the public. It aims to improve citizens' access to information of public importance, held in public bodies, in a simple and easy manner. It also authorises the protection of sensitive information, the release of which could have an adverse impact on the nation and its citizens. Clauses 3, 4, and 7 ensure the rights to information of all citizens, and define the

responsibilities of the public body to disseminate information. Thus if any citizen felt that a decision over the trail bridge programme had been made in a secretive manner, they could invoke the Act to receive full information.

### **National Foundation for Upliftment of Adivasi/Janajati Act, 2058 BS (2002)**

The National Foundation for Upliftment of Adivasi/Janajati Act, 2058 (2002) is one of the key legislative frameworks relating to Nepal's indigenous peoples. The Act identifies and legally recognises 59 indigenous communities, who are officially referred to as Adivasi Janajati (Indigenous Nationalities). According to the Nepal Federation of Adivasi Janajati, 10 of the 59 Adivasi Janajati are "endangered", 12 "highly marginalised", 20 "marginalised", 15 "disadvantaged" and 2 are "advanced" or better off on the basis of a composite index consisting of literacy, housing, landholdings, occupation, language, education, and population size. As far as the trail bridge programme is concerned, the Act lends support to locating trail bridges in areas populated by Adivasi Janajatis, and reinforces the importance of their full inclusion in planning and building processes.

### **Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offense & Punishment) Act, 2068 BS**

The Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offense and Punishment) Act, 2068 protects the right of every individual to live in freedom with equality and human dignity by creating an environment in which no discrimination is practised on the grounds of caste, race, descent, community or occupation – whether in the name of custom, tradition, religion, culture, rituals or any other reason. Additionally, the Act ensures that such discrimination is a crime punishable under the law. Awareness of this Act, and respect of it, is weaker in remote areas than in more urban parts of the country. Clearly its provisions must be upheld in the trail bridge programme.

### **Social Protection Program Operational Procedure, 2016**

The Social Protection Program Operational Procedure, 2016 (hereafter Procedure 2016), sets out the rights of the weakest, marginalised, and poorest citizens to social protection. It identifies six different categories of people as those eligible for allowances, notably:

- Elderly people
- Endangered Indigenous and Ethnic People
- Single women
- Widow
- Invalid or disabled persons
- Children below 5 years of age in the Karnali region and from Dalits families

The Procedure 2016 also requires the VDCs and municipalities to report their records on the targeted people to the District Development Committee (DDC) and DDC to the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development. Whilst there is no direct link between this Procedure 2016 and the trail bridge programme, any benefits to the disadvantaged groups accrued through the programme are a positive achievement.

### **13th National Plan of Action (2070/071-2072/73)**

The 13th National Plan of Action includes a section dedicated to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. Two objectives are stated, notably

- to strengthen gender roles in promoting economic, social and political empowerment of women from all communities, class and geographical regions; and
- to end discrimination and gender-based violence against women.

In order to fulfil these objectives, three strategies are set out:

- promoting the meaningful participation of women
- conducting a programme to end gender based violence and
- capacity building of marginalised women through their training, the promotion of living standards and the provision of protective measures and services.

Thus the Plan can be invoked as another mechanism upholding gender equality and women's empowerment through the trail bridge programme.

### **International Commitments**

Nepal has ratified a number of international conventions and treaties committing the country to the promotion of gender equality. Some of the key instruments in this respect are:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination,
- The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which is considered as the international manifesto to unconditionally uphold women's human rights, established in 1991.
- ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, 1989 (No.169).

These international commitments require consequent action. For example, as a State party of the ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, 1989 (No.169), Nepal is required to consult with the concerned peoples through appropriate procedures and, in particular, through their representative institutions, whenever legislative or administrative measures are being considered that may affect them directly. It is further required that indigenous and tribal peoples shall, wherever possible, participate in the benefits of natural resource utilisation activities and shall receive fair compensation for any damages that they may sustain as a result of such activities. The convention also includes a clause on relocation, clearly stating that the free and informed consent of indigenous people must be given for this to occur.

Similarly, CEDAW is one of the major international conventions that ensures the rights of women and defines the term *non-discrimination* against woman. CEDAW obligates the signatory State to take affirmative measures to protect, promote and fulfil the rights of women. The convention urges the State to take appropriate measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women in the political, private and public life of the country, providing equal opportunities, access, benefits and treatment to men. Particular aspects mentioned are voting in all elections and public referenda and being eligible for election to all publically elected bodies; participation in the formulation of government policies and the implementation of these policies; and participation in non-governmental organisations, private companies and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country. CEDAW follows three major principles of substantive equality, non-discrimination and state obligation. Nepal ratified CEDAW in 1991 without any reservation and declaration and with the commitment to accept the principles and standards set for the advancement of women's human rights. The ratification of CEDAW has obligated the Government of Nepal to develop policies and practices that in no way discriminate women. Furthermore, there is a requirement for periodic reporting to the CEDAW committee every four years, both by the government itself and through shadow reporting by civil society. The committee has urged Nepal to make the required changes progressively.

For the trail bridge programme, all these international commitments add support for a gender responsive, socially inclusive approach.

## **4.2 Trail bridges under Nepal's legal framework**

The trail bridge programme is framed not only within an infrastructure policy, but also by a set of guidelines and regulations that are briefly reviewed below.

### **Local Infrastructure Development Policy, 2004**

The Local Infrastructure Development Policy, 2004 is the guiding document for local infrastructure development – trail bridges being covered under rural transportation. The policy prioritises infrastructure projects that serve many citizens; benefit Dalits, Janajatis and disadvantaged populations; contribute towards poverty alleviation; can secure local contributions; utilise local resources; and can be completed efficiently. Whilst all these priorities are rooted in concepts of good governance, they are not necessarily mutually reinforcing nor even always mutually compatible.

The Policy aims to increase the access of marginalised groups, including women, to social services and economic opportunities. Accordingly, women's participation in infrastructure planning, implementation, and monitoring is encouraged. After completion of a project, the policy instructs officials to analyse the project's costs and benefits, including increased access to resources and benefits for women and marginalised groups, and to raise awareness about these benefits.

### **The Trail Bridge Strategy, 2006**

The Trail Bridge Strategy (TBS), 2006 sets out the practical aspects of the policy, in terms of how to plan, build, and maintain trail bridges. It also specifies the goal of increasing the access of local communities to social and basic services, economic resources and opportunities, and particularly mentions women, Dalits, ethnic communities, the disadvantaged, discriminated and marginalised groups. The major focus of the strategy is to build trail bridges at convenient and feasible locations for greater mobility. It adopts a 'community approach' to short trail bridges (spanning less than 120 meters) by delegating the building and maintenance to local bodies through users' committees. These users' committees are expected to implement trail bridge building with technical support from local NGOs, District Development Committees, and technical assistance providers. Under the strategy, at least 30% of users' committee members must be women, and men and women must be paid equally for equal work.

### **Trail Bridge Sector Wide Approach Frameworks- I and II**

Trail Bridge Sector Wide Approach (TB SWAP) Framework-I (2009-2014) is a key policy document that sought to promote a coherent, government-led process to plan, implement, and maintain all trail bridges in the country.

Based upon the Trail Bridge Strategy, 2006, the policy document outlined the involvement of women in terms of 'participatory inclusion' in users' committee and during trail bridge construction. As the sub-sector has adopted a 'community approach' to building short span trail bridges since the promulgation of the Trail Bridge Strategy (2006), users' committees implement trail bridge building processes, through the technical support of local NGOs, District Development Committees/District Technical Offices and technical assistance providers.

The document has working principles on representation of women in users' committees (at 33%), reservation of at least one key position for a socially discriminated group, physical presence during meetings (at 33%), priority in employment earning opportunities (50% of employment is targeted towards disadvantaged groups, which include women), and equal wages for equal work. These principles established the necessary directives required for ensuring fair representation in decision making bodies and opportunities for short-term employment.

Under the Trail Bridge Sector Wide Approach Framework-II (2014 – 2019), regional technical assistance is outsourced to NGOs and to consulting firms. Gender mainstreaming provisions are

broadly similar to those in the preceding framework, though the commitments have been increased with regards to ensuring the representation of women in the users' committees. For example, the representation of women has been set at a minimum of 40% (compared to the 33% set by Framework-I), while other indicators such as proportionate representation of discriminated groups within the users' committees as well as within decision making positions (at least one individual from a discriminated group) have been continued.

Equal pay for equal work (for men and women) has also become a well-established norm and has been continued under the Trail Bridge Sector Wide Approach Framework-II.

### **The Trail Bridge Sector Wide Approach-Directives, 2009**

The Trail Bridge Sector Wide Approach- Directives, 2009, were elaborated for the implementation of the TB SWAP Framework-I. Whilst having inclusive intentions, such as ensuring at least 50% of the employment generated is targeted towards discriminated groups, no special provisions are stated for proactively implementing such provisions. For example, although women-friendly construction sites, with provision for child care, is emerging as good practice in some public works programmes, the document is silent on such matters. Similarly, whilst training and capacity building would be an obvious need for women, no targets are set for women participants. Past observations indicate that while some women may attend trainings, the fact that most participants are men, and often engineers, means that the women are marginalised and often benefit less from the trainings than the men.

#### **Box 2: Maintenance of trail bridges**

Maintenance of trail bridges consists of routine maintenance, major maintenance and rehabilitation. Routine maintenance comprises the works that are within the capacity of the local people; for instance cleaning of bridge, tightening nuts of deck etc. Routine maintenance is implemented by bridge maintenance committee. Bridge maintenance committee is formulated according to the provisions of trail bridge maintenance directives of the DoLIDAR which requires at least 40% women in the committee. A bridge warden is assigned by bridge maintenance committee for routine maintenance who in turn is remunerated. Major maintenance and rehabilitation are the responsibilities of the DDC.

The directives give priority to women and Dalits as Bridge Wardens for routine maintenance. They are provided with basic routine maintenance skills, tools and nominal fees (currently NPR 6,000, approximately US\$ 60, per year).

### **The Guideline of Users' Committee, 2012**

The Government of Nepal has developed the Guideline of users' committee, 2012 (hereafter "the Guideline 2012") for the formulation, operation and management of users' committees. Issued to all district development committees and municipalities, this goes further than the trail bridge strategy in its recommendations on gendered representation. For example, the Guideline 2012 requires that at least 33% of participants in trail bridge users' committees must be women; that at least one of the key posts (Chair, Secretary or Treasurer) must be held by a woman; and that the five-membered monitoring committee should include at least two women. However, the Guideline 2012 has not yet been revised as per the provision of the Constitution of Nepal, 2015.

### **Non-Government Organisation Selection Guidelines, 2007**

The NGO Selection Guidelines, 2007 support the District Development Committees in selecting the local NGOs that can provide technical and social assistance to the users' committees in the construction and maintenance of short span trail bridges. These guidelines include prerequisites for suitable NGOs, selection procedures, and details of the activities that the NGOs are expected to

conduct. A major weakness of the guidelines is that they are very broad and do not specifically address how NGOs are to mainstream gender equality within the trail bridge sub-sector.

#### **Public Hearing, Public Review and Public Audit Guidelines, 2064 BS**

These guidelines contain the procedures, activities, issues, and reporting formats required for undertaking public hearings, reviews and audits, along with the displaying of hoarding boards within the trail bridge building process. These guidelines seek to foster social accountability by engaging local communities in the building and maintaining of trail bridges. The incorporation of these measures indicates that the sub-sector is committed towards enabling the beneficiaries to stay informed. Nevertheless, to implement these measures, both the Government of Nepal and Technical Assistance providers must take proactive steps.

#### **Social-Organisational-Support Manual, 2007 (Second Edition)**

As part of a 'community approach' towards building Short Span Trail Bridges, the aim of this manual is to engage local bodies such as District Development Committee and Non-Government Organisations. The manual acknowledges that "the biggest challenge in community bridge building has been (to ensure) the active involvement of all the concerned considering the existing diverse social stratification as well as the poverty and gender..." (SOS, 2007:6) and directs the NGOs/DDCs to ensure that women and marginalised groups in particular are included in the trail bridge building processes.

The manual lays out the steps for forming users' committees and for ensuring that they are proportionately representative of the beneficiary population, including women. This percentage is less than TB SWAP Framework-II (2014-2019), indicating the need for an update (which is in process). The manual also instructs the NGOs and DDCs to provide childcare for women participants. In addition, it requires that the NGO/DDC personnel maintain Project Books, mobilise material and human resources, moderate conflicts, and encourage active participation of women users' committee members.

#### **Post Bridge Building Assessments (2010-2015)**

Each year, external reviewers conduct Post Bridge Building Assessments on the outcomes of Short Span Trail Bridges. The PBBAs distinguish six key activities: going to schools, visiting health services, performing household chores including accessing farmland, going to markets, attending social functions and going to work (employment). A review of the PBBAs since 2010 indicates the increased use and benefits from the trail bridges. In addition to use of bridges for the key activities listed, respondents reported increased safety in river crossings, including saving lives; and time saving. On average, in a two-way journey the use of a trail bridge was calculated to save from 40 minutes to 68 minutes. As noted earlier, within these overall benefits, there are clear differences in how men and women use trail bridges. In summary, the key ways in which gender is mainstreamed in the trail bridge programme is outlined in text box 3.

**Box 3: The main gender mainstreaming and social inclusion elements in trail bridge construction**

**Pre-construction Phase**

- A public hearing is conducted, to which all potential users – men and women – are invited
- Users' committees are formed, having at least 40% of women
- Women users' committee members are provided with Demonstration Model Bridge Training

**Construction Phase**

- Community Leadership Trainings are conducted for women users' committee members
- Employment opportunities are targeted towards disadvantaged groups, including women
- Equal pay for equal work is upheld, and all labourers are covered by a group accident insurance policy
- Public reviews may be called to assess progress, and explain any deviations from the plan
- A public audit is conducted on completion, presenting the full expenditure

**Post-Construction Phase**

- Women are prioritised as Bridge Wardens for routine maintenance
- Inclusion of 40% women in bridge maintenance committee

To conclude this section, the policy framework in Nepal as related to infrastructure development and the rights of women and disadvantaged groups provides considerable scope for both participation and the enjoyment of benefits based on the provisions. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal makes even stronger demands in this regard; as a consequence, various commitments need to be updated. Nonetheless, there is still room for further policy improvements towards a more gender transformative agenda, and it is hoped that the current research will provide practical insights in this regard. In addition, whilst government policies are explicit about gender aspects regarding the community approach for short span trail bridges, they are silent with regard to the contracting approach used in Long Span Trail Bridges.

### **4.3. Academic/development literature on Gender and Social Inclusion**

A review of existing literature indicated that whilst there is no shortage of policy and project advice on the ways to mainstream gender into rural infrastructure programmes/projects (OECD, 1997; OECD, 2004; AFDB, 2009; World Bank, 2010; ADB, 2013), literature specifically discussing trail bridge programmes/projects and gender issues is distinctly limited.

#### **Approaches to integrating gender into rural infrastructure programmes/projects**

The Women in Development (WID) approach of the 1970s first emerged with the aim of integrating women into development. It urged development agencies to invest in and include women in the workforce and increase their productivity so as to improve their lives. Critics, however, argued that women's contribution to economic growth overshadowed women's demand for gender equality (Razavi and Miller, 1995); while others pointed out that the approach focused solely on the public sphere and failed to understand the dynamics of the private sphere - downplaying women's role in household production (Koczberski, 1998).

Following this, the Women and Development approach emerged to remove women from patriarchal hegemonies. The approach emphasised the distinctive nature of the roles that women play in society, arguing that merely integrating women into development would only serve to reinforce existing structures of inequality. Thus, women-only development projects were recommended. Critics of this approach were quick to point out that women-only projects would struggle and ultimately fail due to their marginalised status and small scale. In addition, it was argued that the approach tended to view women more as 'a class', and failed to pay enough attention to the fact

there are differences between women such as caste, ethnicity, age, religion, etc. The latter perspective was later elaborated by feminist intersectionality (Thompson, 2002).

The Gender and Development (GAD) approach later emerged as a way to understand the different contexts of men and women, to challenge structures that had marginalised women, and to address the differential power relations between them. This approach recognises that there are social, cultural, economic and political factors that determine how men and women participate, control and benefit from programme/project resources (World Bank, 2005). As such, 'gender equality' is recognised as both a 'condition for development' and as a 'development goal' in itself (Otzelberger, 2011).

Against the background of these perspectives, there have been increasing efforts in recent years by various institutions and organisations to design (and analyse) development interventions to mainstream gender into their programmes and projects. This is particularly the case for the transport sector, which has long been viewed to be gender blind - with most "... (assuming) that women and men will automatically benefit from new infrastructure, without due acknowledgement to the full range of social and economic impacts, both beneficial and negative" (OECD, 2004).

There is growing recognition that men and women often do not have equal access over infrastructure. This is true even when women and girls in rural areas spend more time and effort on mobility to conduct household chores (such as accessing water, collecting firewood), accessing health facilities (for themselves and their families), and face greater risks while travelling, amongst others (FAO, 2010; ADB, 2013, ICRW, 2005).

Furthermore, due to the multiple gender roles that women have to play in the reproductive, productive as well as community spheres, they are most likely to also experience 'time poverty' (ICRW, 2005; World Bank, 2010, ADB, 2013). Thus the need to juggle numerous tasks on a daily basis impacts significantly on women's mobility and the benefits that they can derive from the new developments. Hence, the opportunity costs of poor transport systems are disproportionately borne by women, who cannot afford to lose time. Conversely, when appropriate and well-designed systems are implemented, it can make a significant difference to a women's ability to undertake household chores; access services and employment opportunities; as well as increase social interactions (ADB, 2013).

One method of designing and implementing such projects has been to develop guidelines and toolkits to integrate gender issues. Amongst the numerous guidelines available, the BRIDGE gender group at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex has prepared a 'cutting edge pack' on Why Gender Matters in Infrastructure published by OECD (OECD, 2004). This makes a range of points about the importance of women's participation in infrastructure planning, construction and maintenance. Although dated 2004, its provisions remain pertinent.

The BRIDGE authors observe that although donor agencies state that gender equality is critical to project sustainability, they '...often experience very real difficulties translating their political and policy commitments into practice on the ground' (OECD, 2004). The guideline therefore highlights eight 'key success factors' to make this "translation" to practice. They include:

- Incorporating gender-specific objectives into the project design;
- Using sex-disaggregated data to develop gender strategies;
- Involving women through consultations, participation and decision-making;
- Ensuring participation and decision-making;
- Developing gender-specific strategies to maximise the benefits for poor women and addressing the impacts on their lives and livelihoods;
- Providing sufficient project resources;
- Developing a shared vision for women's empowerment; and
- Monitoring gender objectives of the project.

The World Bank also has similar recommendations on ‘Making Infrastructure work for Women and Men’ - a review of infrastructure projects funded over 1995 – 2009 (World Bank, 2010). Highlighting the importance of consultations and targeting women, the review notes that infrastructure projects provide promising contexts for pursuing gender equality by reducing three significant barriers to women’s empowerment (World Bank, 2010: 34):

- scarce free time;
- exclusion from local economic opportunities; and
- low presence in important decision making arenas.

Taking the example of a water project in Peru, the review points out that although additional costs were required in the beginning to initiate and train women in construction and maintenance, the returns were greater in terms of sustainability of the water pumps.

Meanwhile, the Asian Development Bank in its ‘Gender Toolkit on Mobility’ has produced a short list of recommendations on mainstreaming gender (ADB, 2013). Significant recommendations include: ensuring employment for women during construction and maintenance; improving labour conditions; and providing newer and wider training opportunities to women in transport related ancillary work (such as vehicle repairs).

It may be noted that the literature focuses squarely on women, because they are seen to be the most vulnerable, in need of support. However, ignoring the needs and perspectives of men can lead to an ‘incomplete’ understanding of the complex and dynamic relationships between men and women (at household and community levels). This will in turn affect the achievement of the overall gender goals. Critics of studies and recommendations focusing only on women therefore argue that a much more nuanced understanding is needed, including men - recognising that women are part of families and societies, and cannot be isolated from them (Demetriades et al, 2008).

### **Mainstreaming Gender in Bridge Projects in Nepal**

In the majority of the documents reviewed, bridges receive very marginal discussion (if at all) as one form of rural, locally-important, but relatively minor, infrastructure.

For example, in the Asian Development Bank’s Gender Toolkit, rural bridges are seen as an ‘add on’ to road networks, which can lead to significant time and cost savings by linking communities with service centres. The document notes that bridges can provide sources of employment during construction and maintenance and may also lead to new income opportunities for women if their access to markets improves (ADB, 2013). Another point made is that bridges often become informal market hubs, especially used by women, and that providing shelter for the sellers and easy access for customers is therefore desirable.

Though no academic literature pertaining specifically to the involvement of women during trail bridge construction was identified, a broader review of labour-based road programmes in Nepal indicated that women’s participation in wage-earning activities had had an empowering effect. In a series of variously authored chapters on Gender, Roads and Mobility in Asia, Hada (2012) reports on the positive effect on gender relations brought about through the equal treatment of women and men labourers working on the SDC-supported Lamosangu-Jiri road.

Hada (2012) notes that interventions by the District Roads Support Programme went beyond ensuring fair pay and decent working conditions for the labourers, to include other interventions such as savings and credit schemes. As a result, “the women in the road corridors have been significantly empowered.” At the same time, the author also comments that, “the benefit of construction of roads using the labour-intensive approach was felt by poor women and men. However, the economic opportunities created from developments following the road construction went mostly to middle-class men who owned businesses”. Such lessons also have relevance for the trail bridge programme, especially as the same donor-funding agency (SDC) is involved in both the projects. Nevertheless, there are significant differences in the nature and scale of the two

infrastructure programmes; the employment earning opportunities during trail bridge construction are generally far less than that of the roads programme, which was calculated to be on average 98 person-days for a local labourer (Starkey et al, 2013).

Shrestha (2012) also comments on the positive impact of trail bridges on health outcomes. Using figures derived from the HELVETAS trail bridge programme, Shrestha points out that on average a bridge saved 30 minutes' time in crossing a river – a saving that could make the difference between life and death in the case of a snake bite. (Of course this assumes that a health post with appropriate anti-venom would be available on the other side of the bridge, which may often not be the case). The same author, quoting the HELVETAS study, attributes trail bridge construction, in part, to a reduction in maternal mortality through better access to health services. She adds that in a survey of trail bridge use, 90% of local respondents considered that there had been an improvement in immunisation campaigns due to more ready access for health staff. One point made clear from the chapter is that attributing improved health outcomes directly to trail bridge construction is difficult, although their contribution to these improved outcomes is obvious to all concerned.

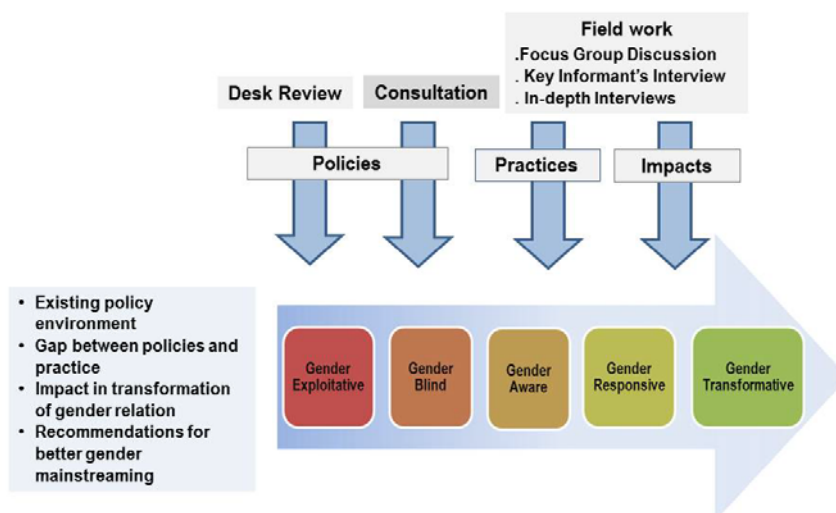
To conclude the review of available literature, the observations and recommendations are neither surprising, nor provide any really new policy insights that could be incorporated into current trail bridge policy in Nepal. However, it is clear that there is a need to think creatively about encouraging the greater engagement of women of all social groups in trail bridge planning, construction, maintenance and use – with the goal of transformative change in gender relation.

## 5 Methodology

### 5.1 Research Design

The study was a qualitative piece of research, based on information collected from various stakeholders. It focused on Short Span Trail Bridges (SSTBs) as they are constructed using the community approach, under which there are explicit gender requirements. Furthermore, SSTBs constitute about 90% of all trail bridges constructed. One Long Span Trail Bridge was included in the field research just as a comparison. The study adopted a broad methodological framework shown in figure 3 below.

Figure 3: The methodological framework of the research



Following the desk top review of relevant policies, laws and regulatory documents, consultations were held with key policy makers, policy enforcers and policy advocates in Kathmandu. This helped to guide the rigorous preparation of the tools used in the field. The detailed research process is described below.

### 5.2 Selection of Bridges

The study covered nine SSTBs (both already constructed and under construction) and one LSTB (constructed). In the case of constructed trail bridges, those built during the period of TB SWAP framework-I (2009-2014) were selected. The selection also deliberately encompassed all three ecological regions of Nepal, that is, mountain, hill and terai (plain). The LSTB, that of Kakahare in Kaski district, was selected for proximity to one of the other SSTB to facilitate data collection. It transpired that the site had originally had a SSTB, constructed using the community approach, but after this original bridge was destroyed by floods, a different design was introduced, making it into a LSTB.

Since the research also sought to assess whether the presence of a critical mass of women in users' committees affects the power relations with men, the sampling was conducted in such a way that there were a combination of completed trail bridges with more than two thirds (>66%) women members in users' committees; and a completed trail bridge with less than one third (<33%) women members in users' committees.

**Table 1: Selected trail bridges for the Study**

Selected Short Span Trail Bridges					
District	Ecological zone	Features of selected trail bridge	Completed - 1	Completed -2	Under construction
Morang	Terai	Selected trail bridge name	Adarsha	Kumbigaudaghat	Fakland Tapu
		Date of Completion	2011	2013	-
		% of women in user’s committee	100%	33%	46%
Arghakha nchi	Hill	Selected trail bridge name	Bahakati	Nayabasti	Bhorle Ghat
		Date of Completion	2011	2013	-
		% of women in users’ committee	100%	27%	45%
Darchula	Mountain	Selected trail bridge name	Chhola Bagar	Malekhata	Sajani
		Date of Completion	2014	2012	-
		% of women in users’ committee	67%	27%	33%
Selected Long Span Trail Bridges					
Kaski	Hill		Kakahare		

### 5.3 Research Tools

The main research tools used were in-depth case studies, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and consultations. The research tools were prepared based on the literature review and consultations with various stakeholders.

In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the tools, they were pre-tested at two trail bridge sites – one completed (Nau Kilo bridge, Dhading District) and one under construction (Ghatte Khola, Sindhupalchok District). A number of small modifications were made following these pre-tests.

### 5.4 Data Collection

The research data was collected both at the selected trail bridge sites and at the district level. At the trail bridge sites, focus group discussions were conducted with the users' committee members and labourers, both men and women separately. Afterwards, 27 in-depth case studies were prepared with a number of women and their family members. They were selected to encompass users' committee members (from discriminated and non-discriminated groups), labourers (who were employed during trail bridge construction), general beneficiaries, bridge wardens (who are responsible for routine maintenance) and women who had taken Community Leadership Trainings. Given that it was difficult to find women belonging to the last two categories in the original sample bridges, women from other bridges were included. Table 2, below, provides an overview of the case studies. In one case, a woman from a discriminated group holds both the users' committee member and bridge warden position. A case of a woman from the LSTB, who belongs to a non-discriminated group, is also included.

**Table 2: Overview of In-depth Case Studies Collected**

	Type	Completed bridge	Under-construction bridge
1	Women User Committee members from discriminated groups	4	1
2	Women User Committee members from non- discriminated groups	5	3
3	Women who were employed as labourers during trail bridge construction	2	1
4	Women who are general bridge users	4	1
5	Women who are bridge wardens	3	0
6	Women who have taken Community Leadership Trainings	0	3

A total of 20 focus group discussions (FDGs) were conducted with users' committee members, both men and women, separately. These included 10 FDGs with women and 10 with men.

In addition, key informant interviews were conducted with the relevant government officials (Local Development Officers, Women Development Officers, District Technical Engineers), NGOs (Chairpersons, Social Mobilisers), and fabricators of trail bridge materials.

## **5.5 Method of Analysis**

All collected data were compiled in an excel sheet, allowing for ready comparison between questions pertaining to different themes (i.e. participation, economic opportunities, gender roles, access and opportunities, women rights and social cohesion). Furthermore, as far as possible information obtained from one source was validated from other sources.

This report draws upon this body of information, quoting key informants where pertinent, as well as the case studies of women. Where available, quantitative information derived from secondary sources is also included.

As a qualitative piece of research in a small sample of trail bridges, the findings of this study cannot be claimed to be generalised to all trail bridges. However, we believe that they provide an in-depth, nuanced understanding of gender roles and relations in various settings. Where available from secondary sources, we have included reference to relevant quantitative information in our analysis.

## **5.6 National workshop for validation of findings**

A national workshop was held on 6 February 2017, to which key stakeholders from the Ministry, SDC along with other donors, academicians and organisations working on women's rights and rural infrastructure were invited. Following a presentation of the research and some of the key findings, participants were asked to write their comments and suggestions on cards, which were then clustered and discussed in a final session. Specifically, they were asked to respond to three main questions.

- Did we miss anything in our analysis?
- Do you agree or disagree with our findings? Please indicate why.
- What practical steps can be taken to render the trail bridge programme gender transformative?

With regard to the first question, participants were of the opinion that nothing major had been missed. Those who made any suggestion noted that the bridge sample size was too small to be representative and should have been larger. However, it had already been noted that the sample size was deliberately small and qualitative, and had not been intended to be statistically significant. Other participants strongly supported the methodology, and the nuanced findings brought out from the approach of in-depth interviews.

The responses obtained to the second and third questions were interlinked, and only re-emphasised our own analysis. No participant strongly contested the findings, although from those with a technical background, there was some questioning about the degree to which infrastructure programmes can be answerable on social issues. Here the opinion voiced was that trail bridges must be technically sound, and that other issues are secondary. Of course this comment goes to the root of how development processes are perceived. As argued from the beginning of this research, development and social change are integrally linked. Development interventions represent an opportunity to change existing power relations between men and women and between individuals of different social status – or to ignore them and thus effectively bolster the status quo.

As the comments received in the national workshop have been integrated into the chapters on our findings and conclusions, we only briefly outline the key issues raised below.

- **Migration** is a key issue influencing participation. The increase in the number of women in users' committees may well be due to the absence of men. This being so, when the men return, women may be again pushed out of such positions. [Note: We found no evidence of the latter being the case, but probably individual family circumstances vary greatly.]
- **Numbers** of women in committees are not a true indication of participation. Experience elsewhere, such as in Doti district, is that the same woman may often be found in many different committees. This is not effective representation. The focus should be on equality and whether it is ensured or not.
- **Workload:** Participation in committees also increases the workload of women. This can even be exploitative.
- **Turning wages into productive assets:** Conceptually we understand that wages should be used to gain productive assets, but this is not always necessary. A woman is also fully justified to spend the money she earned on her own needs and fulfil her desires – especially if it was her first income. The next time, she may be supported to make productive use of it.
- **Economic empowerment** is linked with increased self-confidence. Probably the labourers are not at this stage but the programme could at least generate sensitivity and make women more self-reliant. Also, the family respects and supports women when they are economically engaged and their opinions are heard. Thus it is important to give them skills to earn better wages; this should be prioritised.
- **A critical mass** is required for societal change. Unless there is critical mass of women and supportive men, their voices will not be heard.
- **Mobility and access** are important from a gendered perspective; all infrastructure work should take this into consideration.
- **Breaking gender stereotypes:** More should be done to support women to take the chair position rather than the treasurer, and for labourers to gain skills so that they can work as skilled labour.
- **Men's engagement** in household chores will help women to come out in public spaces, and is slowly starting to take place.
- **Sectoral policy framework:** It is our duty to follow through on the commitments made and we should do so.
- **The gender continuum:** It is a useful self-reflection to consider what actions are gender aware, and what are gender transformative. The Trail Bridge Programme needs to work further on this, to define an approach together as a team, and transform it into action. The study provides a good opportunity for reflection.
- **Governance:** A further analysis of the governance of these trail bridges would be very interesting: how do they look in terms of transparency, accountability, responsibility and effectiveness. A comparative chart or figure would be interesting.

**Long Span Trail Bridges:** How is the representation of women in the contractor based engagement? Does the policy and practice vary, or it is same? (Note: as mentioned in chapter 3, the trail bridge guidelines are silent with regard to community involvement in LSTBs, the entire process being left in the hands of contractors. See also case #17, of Sita Parajuli).

## 6 Findings

Although the broad context of this research is set out in the introductory chapter, in discussing the findings, we feel it necessary to first reiterate a number of important issues that emerged as having a particular influence on the situation and perceptions of our interviewees. These are:

- The huge level of male labour out-migration
- Far greater schooling opportunities for the young, including girls, than was available to their parents
- A general spread of development interventions and an increase in public awareness about them
- A questioning and breaking down of caste norms - at the same time as lingering adherence to traditions and culture, particularly amongst older people who continue to exert pressure and influence on the middle generation.

Whilst these are all general trends in Nepal, there are local specificities.

In the case study areas, almost every household met had at least one male member absent on labour migration. The effect on women left behind appears to depend greatly on their personal circumstances. A number of officials interviewed were of the opinion that the absence of men pushes women into public spaces, and also frees them from some of the drudgery of agricultural labour, as they can rely on remittances. At the same time, almost all the village women interviewed complained of an increased workload at home. This limited their opportunities to participate in development interventions, or meant that their workload became even heavier if they did. This aspect is discussed in more detail further below (section 6.2).

*“Migration of the husbands has both negative and positive aspects — because there is no one at home, they are bound to be independent, but at the same time they have more burden work to shoulder. Also, there are lots of barren lands now and working in the field has become a social embarrassment. They don’t see the need to work in the field as their husbands provide them with monetary support.”* Durga Bhandari, WDO, Morang District

With regard to education, there has been a huge change in opportunities over just one generation. Many women over the age of 30 or so either never went to school, or attended very few classes; their resulting low level of literacy clearly limits their ability to take up committee positions, as does a general lack of self-confidence. The difference with the younger generation is stark.

*“Girls have started to give speeches in front of crowds - they have started opening up. They [Girls in the past] could never speak in Nepali [this not being their first language]; now they are so fluent and confident in front of a crowd.”* Shobhakar Regmi, Local Development Officer, Ravati Raman Parajuli, DTO Chief, Morang District

In addition to increased educational opportunities, a variety of development interventions have reached even remote areas, and public awareness with respect to their rights as citizens has grown markedly. This awareness and political consciousness may be partly attributed to the political upheaval wrought through Nepal’s civil conflict. Whilst that violence cannot be condoned, it did bring about a questioning of power structures and, amongst many, an increased consciousness of personal identity. Other influences on public awareness include returning migrants bringing ideas from other countries; and access to what is now a vibrant Nepali media bringing news and outside ideas. Amongst educated interviewees, in particular, there were reports of men becoming more open to sharing household chores in order to support their wives’ working outside the home. This again is discussed with particular reference to our findings further below (section 6.3).

*“In the villages men have started helping with household chores, and women have started going to work outside their house. This means there is more mobility; even at birth, the female child is not discriminated against although the preference is still for a male child.”* Durga Bhandari, WDO, Morang District

Yet some communities are more resistant to change than others. Amongst the case study trail bridges, the communities of those situated in the terai were described as far more traditional than those in the hills (despite better media access in the plains). The most educated women tended to be found amongst Brahmin, Chhetry and Thakuri communities, but such women also reported feeling particularly constrained about speaking out in public meetings, due to traditional expectations of women's behaviour (see the case #15 of Sharada Pandey).

*"In the terai, people are more reluctant to step outside their home for the development of society. The way the social structure is, our policy cannot reach them anyway. We have started enrolling such women for in-house training."* Shobhakar Regmi, Local Development Officer, Ravati Raman Parajuli, DTO Chief, Morang District

*"It is still difficult for women to come out of the house due to lack of education and also due to the tradition, although this may not be the case for educated people. In some users' committee meetings they even sit separately from men. However, in the hills, women are the ones doing everything, shouldering responsibility."* Shobhakar Regmi, Local Development Officer, Ravati Raman Parajuli, DTO Chief, Morang District

The rest of this chapter analyses the way in which trail bridges specifically contribute to promoting development - in a gender aware, responsive, or even transformative manner. For this, the team found it useful to structure the analysis according to the seven key "drivers of change" identified by the UN High Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) (2016). Despite the title, referring specifically to economic aspects of empowerment, the High Panel's recommendations actually cover women's empowerment more widely. Below each driver of change is considered in turn, although in a different order to that used by the High Panel.

## **6.1 Tackling adverse gender norms, promoting positive role models**

Most officials interviewed in this research were of the opinion that the trail bridge programme impacts men and women equally; thus by definition it does not challenge existing gender norms. However, one WDO stated that given the limitations posed on women by their lesser mobility than men, they stand to gain particularly from bridges – with increased mobility opening up new opportunities for them.

*"Easy access definitely increases their [women's] mobility, which brings various opportunities. They can participate in different programmes which builds their confidence level. They can gain education, which brings opportunities. If they have access to different opportunities, then they can learn, get confidence and thus be able to speak out."* Bishnu Maya Paudel, WDO, Darchula District

Whilst this is an optimistic viewpoint, existing data from Post Bridge Building Assessment studies indicates, as previously mentioned, that it is men more than women who use trail bridges for economic activities.

### **6.1.1 Reducing sexual violence and harassment**

One important way of impacting on negative gender norms would be to reduce women's vulnerability to sexual violence and harassment. This was however only mentioned by respondents at one bridge.

*"Women can now freely walk alone, be it early in the morning or at night."* Tulasa Pokhrel (42), Adarsha bridge users' committee member, Morang (case # 20)

*"It has become easier and also safe for us to travel at night".* Danda Kumari Ghimire (68), Adarsha Bridge users' committee member, Morang (case # 5)

The research team explicitly enquired about sexual harassment in the context of provisions to minimise the risk of it at construction sites. However, the following reply is typical of those received.

*“There is no provision to decrease the sexual harassment. Because people are from same community such incidents have not taken place.”* Homnath Timelsena, Technical Coordinator and Narayan Prasad Dagi, Technical Officer, SEWAC Nepal

In fact, studies around the world show that sexual harassment and violence is far more likely to be perpetrated on women by men whom they know than by strangers. Since it is not a topic that is readily admitted or discussed, a longer-term investigation would be needed to determine whether or not such incidents are occurring at trail bridge construction sites.

### *6.1.2 Conforming with expectations of women’s behaviour*

Our research provides no conclusive findings on whether or not the trail bridge programme made a difference to prevailing gendered norms. The situation varied from bridge to bridge, as well as between the perceptions of the individuals concerned. In a number of users’ committees (most notably Sajani and Bhorleghat), it was clear that guidelines on women’s participation had been simply adapted to fit existing norms, rather than challenging them. Women respondents seemed to accept their passive role - as typified in the comments below.

*“In some cases, women are alone at home as their husbands have gone to India or other countries for work. So they have to look after the children, the elderly, and the cattle. On top of this, they have little education. Thus, women’s participation in development activities is low and passive. Men generally take the lead, particularly in construction as this is still considered a man’s job. Women members are on the Committee and in bridge construction just to fulfil the quota.”* Bimala Dhami, Sajani bridge users’ committee member, Darchula (case # 3)

*“It is easy to talk about women’s rights in a training, but in practice it is very difficult....I would like to express myself in the meeting, but when I see other women keeping quiet, I cannot speak up for fear of being accused of being talkative. Most of the men of the Committee are my relatives; some are my jetthajoo”* (Jetthajoo are the husband’s elder brothers or cousins, with whom interactions are traditionally supposed to be particularly deferential.) Sharada Pandey, Bhorleghat bridge users’ committee member, Arghakhachi (case # 15)

We noticed that it was particularly women belonging to Brahmin or Thakuri castes who expressed concern about societal pressure to conform to gender norms; this may be related to a desire to retain caste distinctions that have traditionally given greater prestige and power. Yet a Dalit woman, Sita Pariyar, also expressed a similar concern, in this case possibly alluding to generational differences in perceptions amongst her male family members.

*“Demanding women’s rights creates a rift in the family, to some extent a woman should behave as men expect of her”* Sita Pariyar, Nayabasti bridge users’ committee member, Arghakhachi (case # 18)

Although Sita gained a degree of freedom when her husband and children separated from her parent’s-in-laws home, it is apparent that she did not have, nor expect to have, an equal status with her husband.

### *6.1.3 Challenging expectations of women’s behaviour*

Despite the above, in some users’ committees we found references to small ways in which the programme has directly contributed to tackling adverse gender norms and/or promoting positive role models, at least for particular individuals. To have a real impact, these would need to be proactively encouraged. For example, Basanti Samanta makes a strong women’s role model – yet she reported that within the users’ committee, she was being side-lined by the male members.

*“I am proud of his [husband’s] support, and the example that we have set to our children. Our sons and daughter take part in the household chores and at one point my elder son said, ‘We should not think of marrying our sister too early as others do, she should study first.’”* Basanti Samanta, Sajani bridge users’ committee member, Darchula (case #1)

Another example of a positive role model is Chandrawati Kumal, whose family were particularly supportive. Her comment with regard to her mobility is significant.

*"There were times when I had to travel to Sandikharka, the district headquarters, for official business with other male members of the users' committee and I was apprehensive about how this would be viewed by my joint family and in-laws. However, they never complained."* Chandrawati Kumal, Treasurer, Nayabasti Bridge Users' Committee, Arghakanchi (case # 4)

The importance placed on a woman's reputation, which must be free of any possible implication of sexual infidelity, means that many women are either prohibited from travelling with men who are not direct relatives, or themselves fear to do so. Breaking down such suspicions and constraints contributes towards gender transformation; it is therefore important that users' committee members are encouraged accordingly through engaging social process.

For some women, the opportunity to earn as wage labourers is also a way to take a stand against gendered norms and lead a dignified life, as in the case of Sunita Sherpa – see also section 6.3.

*"If I earn then I won't have to be dependent on my husband and he can't tell me what to do."* Sunita Sherpa (32), labourer, Faklandtapu Bridge, Sunsari (case # 19)

Overall, the team found that there is potential for the trail bridge programme to tackle adverse norms and promote positive role models in a pro-active manner. However, to be effective, this requires deliberate facilitation and continuous engagement – which would be expected of the local NGO in charge of such matters. Unfortunately, in most cases, this support was inadequate.

#### 6.1.4 External role models

One further obvious way in which to challenge the perception that *"construction is men's work"* and somehow too complicated for women is through the employment of women engineers. The comment of engineer Bina Khanal is indicative in this respect.

*"In the beginning when I go to the field, the community people don't believe that I'm an engineer. They expect an engineer to be a man. But after interacting with them, they accept me and they are so happy that I have come all the way to their village to work with them.....Village women comment to me that they never got the chance to have an education, but they wish that their daughters could become engineers like me."* Bina Khanal, Technical Coordinator, Trail Bridge Programme.

Unfortunately the sample trail bridges in our study were not served by a female engineer, so we were unable to ask local opinions on this matter. However, one of the Community Leadership workshop participants interviewed (from a non-case study bridge) did volunteer a comment that chimes with that of Bina Khanal. Given that she is a Dalit woman, Samni Sada's observation is particularly striking.

*"Seeing women engineers is inspiring. I feel that if women are committed, they can achieve their desires in life."* Samni Sada, Community Leadership training participant and users' committee Treasurer, Ranipokhari Trail Bridge, Sunsari (case # 24)

## 6.2 Reduction and redistribution of women's engagement in unpaid care work

The heavy burden of work undertaken by and expected of women was a constant theme throughout this study. For some it meant that additional responsibilities were impossible; for others, it meant that such responsibilities came at the cost of an even greater workload. The team met a number of women whose household engagements clearly kept them from participating actively in bridge building activities, despite an interest in so doing. An extreme example is Kumari Majhi (case # 8), for whom the dual circumstances of an absent husband and a sick elderly relative rendered engagement in the users' committee impossible.

### 6.2.1 Redistributing unpaid care work

*"My husband takes leave if I need to go far to participate in trainings"* Basanti Pal, Chholabagar users' committee member, Darchula (case # 27)

The women in our study who were able to participate actively in bridge construction – as labourers, or as users' committee members - were generally supported by their families in so doing. Husbands were particularly important in this regard, both in moral support (insisting on their wife's engagement outside the home, sometimes even when other family members were against it) and in practical support – helping with household chores, especially cooking. Notable examples in this regard were the husbands of Basanti Samanta, Basanti Pal, Sita Pariyar, and Chandrawati Kumal.

*"People saw that she was capable, and thus asked her to become a part of the Committee."* Ek Bahadur Kumal, husband of Chandrawati Kumal, Nayabasti, Aghakanchi (case # 4)

Indeed, the team gained the sense that some men have realised that positioning their wives in committees is a good way of gaining information about development activities and thus potential benefits. To this end, they are willing to support their wives in domestic matters. The comment of Basanti Pal's husband is pertinent in this regard.

*"Now each and every policy is in favour of women or has provision of the involvement of women. These days there are women facilitators who encourage other women to take part in development activities, thus increasing involvement of women in the development works".* Uttam B. Pal, husband of Basanti Pal, Chholabagar users' committee member, Darchula (case # 27)

For women living in joint families, the redistribution of domestic chores tended to fall to other women in the household – although it was reported that this was willingly done.

*"[The other women in the family] would tell me, 'Elder sister, you go to your meetings and we will take care of the meals'."* Chandrawati Kumal, Nayabasti UC, Aghakanchi (case #4).

Nevertheless, one can wonder about the possible opportunities foregone and the additional work borne by these women. Simply shifting tasks to other women is not a real solution; a reduction and redistribution in the work itself is needed.

### **6.2.2 Reducing unpaid work**

*"Women will also get easy access to fodder/grass that is available only on the other side of the river."* Bimala Dhami (33) Sajani bridge users' committee, Darchula (case # 3)

*"Women's workload has also decreased as now they can go to the grinding mill across the river."* Govindi Odha, Chholabagar bridge general user, Darchula (case #7)

There is some indication from the testimonies of women in focus group discussions and amongst the case study women that trail bridges contribute to reducing the drudgery of unpaid work. This is particularly through making access to fodder and fuelwood resources easier; readier access to mills for grinding flour, to fields, and to shops on the other side of the river was also mentioned. However, it must be noted that this is essentially a side effect of the programme – and one that in the case of natural resources, could potentially lead to conflict if access is contested. Careful facilitation would be needed if this is the case. According to anecdotal evidence from other trail bridges in which the TBSU has been involved, mediation is sometimes necessary if different communities claim rights to forest resources on the opposite sides of the river.

### **6.2.3 Sensitivity to the demands of women's role in unpaid care work**

*"I would like to be involved in different development activities, but I just don't have the time."* Dhana Laxmi Pal, Chholabagar users' committee member, Darchula (case #10)

*"Sometimes I would get up at 4 am to ensure that I completed all my domestic chores such as cleaning the house, feeding the cattle and cooking food, in order to make it to the users' committee meetings."* Sita Parajuli, Ex- users' committee member of Kakahare Bridge, Kaski (case # 17)

*"It was difficult and challenging to be a users' committee member. I did not have enough time and there was no one to look after my ailing father-in-law."* Bikma Lohar, Chholabagar users' committee member, Darchula (case #2)

Although adjustments in women's other work were made by some families to facilitate the participation of women in users' committee, there was little evidence of this being taken into account or accommodated in bridge construction processes. The only exception was with regard to the timing of users' committee meetings, which in some cases were deliberately made "women friendly".

Interviewees were systematically questioned about provision for child care, since this was recognised by the research team as an issue that could limit women's participation. The only situation in which this was said to be deliberately provided was in the case of training for women in model bridge building and in leaderships skills (supported through the TBSU).

*"There is provision for training on women's leadership to increase women participants. To increase the women participants in this training, child care is also available but there is no provision of a separate budget to increase the participation of women and the backward community."* Homenath Timelsena, Technical Coordinator and Naraya Prasad Dagi, Technical Officer, SEWAC Nepal

Provisions to accommodate child care at construction sites were only mentioned in the case of Chholabagar bridge.

*"Women with small children were provided time to breast feed their babies at home. This has been practiced from a long time back, and we continued it. No one protested about it."* Yasoda Lohar, Chholabagar bridge, Darchula (case # 21)

*"Women were given a break from 12:00pm to 2:00 pm to cook food and eat, whilst breastfeeding mother were allowed breaks to attend to their babies."* Bikma Lohar, Chholabagar bridge, Darchula (Focus group discussion).

A technical official also commented that

*"Women with small children are not discriminated against during the construction process."* Mr Narayan Paudel, Programme Coordinator, REMREC Sitara JV

However, a lack of discrimination is of course at best gender aware, and certainly not gender responsive. It was striking how all concerned – women and men, officials and NGO staff – simply accepted that women labourers would somehow take care of their children regardless, and that no provision of support was necessary.

#### **6.2.4 Exploiting the demands of women's role in unpaid care work**

A number of the women committee members interviewed complained of meetings being organised at little or no notice, at times that were difficult for them. This appeared to be a common way of men side-lining women from decision-making. For example, Basanti Samanata (case #1) claimed that the chairperson and other committee members organised meetings without informing her because she kept insisting on the importance of giving opportunities to local labourers and women. (The research team learned that through employing outside wage labourers at a lower daily rate, the committee members sought to use the money saved to cover the sum required as local contribution towards the bridge construction). Once again, this demonstrates the need for greater external facilitation and monitoring to stop such an undermining of due process.

### **6.3 Increasing women's assets**

Trail bridge construction provides women with opportunities to increase their financial assets in two ways: directly, through wage labour; and indirectly, through improved access to markets and jobs once the trail bridge is completed.

#### **6.3.1 Wage labour: equal pay for equal work**

The team found widespread awareness amongst officials and local people of the requirement for women and men to be paid equally for equal work. Furthermore, this was respected at all the trail bridge sites. Wages generally followed the local district norms (which vary somewhat), under which

there is a huge difference between rates for skilled and unskilled labour. Thus for example, at Cholahagar bridge daily wage rates were NPR 300 (approx. US\$ 3) for unskilled labour and NPR 500 (approx. US\$ 5) for skilled labour. At Malekata, the corresponding rates were NPR 425 (approx. US\$ 4.25) and NPR 775 (approx. US\$ 7.75).

According to information collected in focus group discussions (see figure 4), women were always employed as unskilled labour – rightly, in that they lacked the necessary skills. (Skilled work is classed as bridge fitting, but also certain aspects of bridge excavation and cement mixing). However, this meant that women’s earning capacity was markedly less than that of most men.

*“Women labourers are unable to participate in skilled work because they are not trained. They only worked as load carriers and as unskilled labour.”* Govindi Odha, Chholabagar bridge, Darchula (case # 7).

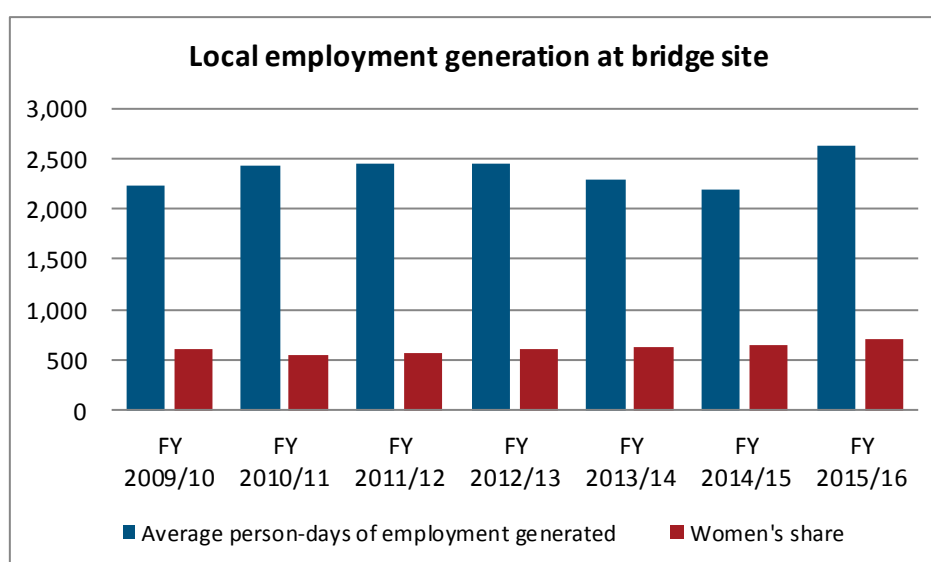
**Figure 4: Level of engagement of women labourers during bridge construction**

	Excavation of bridge foundation	Local material collection	Bridge fitting	Cement Work
Adarsha	High	High	No women	No women
Khumbigaudaghat	Medium	Low	No women	Low
Cholahagar	No women	High	No women	Medium
Malekhata	Low	Medium	No women	Medium
Nayabasti	Low	Medium	No women	No women
Bahakati	Low	Medium	No women	No women

Source: Women Focus Group Discussions in completed trail bridges

Turning to secondary sources, it is apparent that nationally, the proportion of wages earned by women labourers on trail bridge construction has remained broadly constant over recent years, at 25-30%. In fact, if the amount actually earned was calculated, it would be even less, given that these figures show days worked and do not differentiate skilled or unskilled labour.

**Figure 5: Local labour generated in bridge construction**



Source: TBSIS

In a number of focus group discussions, women mentioned the importance of wages in being able to pay off loans, thus relieving them of worry. However, for those experiencing particular financial difficulties, working on bridge construction also put them into initial debt, as they had to take a loan to cover the period before their first payment.

*“We were paid after 14 days, which made it difficult for me as I incurred debt!”* Sunita Sherpa, Labourer, Fakland Tapu bridge, Morang/Sunsari (case # 19)

In remote areas, in particular, the opportunity to earn a regular wage over a substantial period of time (generally at least 40 days) is a novel one for some women, resulting in them having more cash in hand than they are used to. Yet they do not always have a clear idea of how to transform their wages into long term assets. For example, asked what they would do with the money that they had earned, Dalit labourers Yasoda Lohar and Siddhi Devi Dhami (both aged well over 50) replied that they would spend it on clothing and food. This is of course their choice, but there was no support available through the bridge building programme to guide them on other asset-building possibilities. In both cases, wife and husband alike worked as labourers, and there would have been potential to pool family earnings. This was apparently not considered; depending on the family relations, it may or may not have been a missed once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

*"I have never made so much money in my life!"* Yashoda Lohar, Chholabagar bridge, Darchula (case # 21)

*"As unskilled labourers we were paid equally NPR 300 per day, and our [women's] work was comparatively easier. I worked for 42 days and received NPR 12,600 [approx. US\$ 126] in cash. This is the largest amount of money I have ever earned."* Siddhi Devi Dhami, Malekatha Bridge, Darchula (case # 16)

Once trail bridges are complete, there remains a limited opportunity for wage labour as bridge wardens. According to the guidelines, priority for this position, for which an annual amount of NPR 6,000 (approx. US\$ 60) is paid, should be given to women and/or disadvantaged individuals. Although it is considered by government staff to be a desirable position, the (albeit limited number of) interviews that we undertook led us to question this assumption. Here we quote Sangita Ghimire, a 35 year old Brahmin woman who recounts how initially, the sweeping and cleaning work (a traditional occupation of Dalits) made some people think less of her.

She heard comments such as, *"Who works as a sweeper for only NPR 500 (monthly)?"* and *"Being a bridge warden is the equivalent of being a sweeper (a derogatory term was used) cleaning the road"*. *"Everyone has their way interpreting things, but no work is of greater or lesser value to me. That's how people felt earlier. The bridge has made everyone's life easier, and once they began to notice how much hard work is required to maintain it, they changed their stance. Now they say, 'so much effort goes into this, you should ask for a rise!'"* Sangita Ghimire, bridge warden, Adarsha Bridge, Morang (case # 14)

In Sangita's case, the main positive aspect of being bridge warden seems to have been the confidence that she gained from undertaking a training. However, it is less clear that the work is financially rewarding, given the amount of time that it takes (see the full case study, # 14).

*"This was the first time I left my house for another place. I was scared initially, anticipating what was to happen, but when the training began I was at ease. I can now go anywhere I want with confidence, and put my views across without hesitation."* Sangita Ghimire, bridge warden, Adarsha Bridge, Morang (case # 14)

In the case of another bridge warden interviewed from a non-case study trail bridge, the benefits of being a bridge warden seem even less clear. Sabita Duwal complained that the job was frustrating and that she had effectively given up her tasks. Furthermore, she claimed that in the first year of her responsibility, she spent her entire wages on repair work.

*"Nobody listens to a woman! I tried, but it was only when my husband scolded them that they listened"*. Sabita Duwal, Bridge Warden, Punyamata Bridge, Panauti (case # 22)

In contrast to these comments which raise a question over the amount paid to bridge wardens, the warden of Chholabagar bridge, Bikma Lohar, was very happy with her nomination and future wage. However, she had only been in the post for two days, and could thus say little about the work entailed – neither had she yet received training.

### 6.3.2 Increased economic opportunities following bridge construction

*"I can go to the weekly and other markets on my own, even during heavy rainfall, which I couldn't in the past."* Danda Kumari Ghimire, Adarsha Bridge users' committee member, Morang (case # 5)

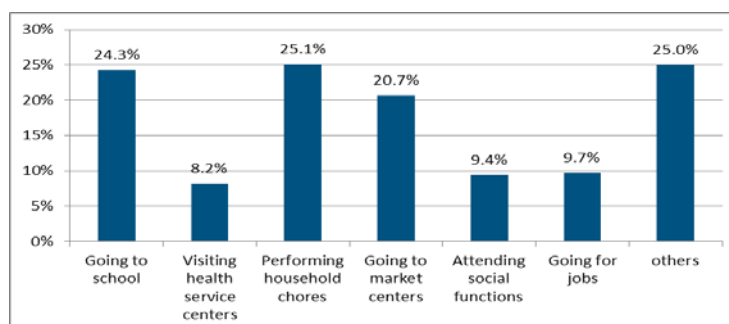
*"The bridge has made access easy and supported me to expand my business. Although new facilities have not been developed so far, it has become easier for children to commute to school. Simple tasks such as buying groceries have become feasible, and the increased accessibility to the market means that we can sell local produce with ease."* Pranita Rai, Adarsha Bridge user, Morang (case # 13)

Information on the utilisation of trail bridges after construction is available from Post Bridge Building Assessments (PBBAs) (see section 4.2). As shown in figure 6, these indicate that over one fifth of those using the bridges are doing so for economic purposes. The percentage of men and women engaged in each activity is broken down in figure 7. Here it may be seen that although men represent 58% of those going to markets, at 42% there is still a significant proportion of women buying or selling goods by use of the trail bridges. Relating this to the study sites, the opportunity for women to engage in business opportunities arising from improved access to markets was indeed mentioned by women at a number of bridge sites, especially Adarsha and Chholabagar. In the latter case, where proximity to a hydro-electric site is opening up a significant market, people do not even need to cross the trail bridge to sell their produce; buyers come to them.

*"These days, contractors come to the village to buy vegetables, fruits, honey, goats, and grains. Also with the Chameliya hydro-power scheme on-going, villagers need not be worried about selling their produce, because there will be a ready market. We can now even sell kubindo (wax gourd); no one ever thought this was possible."* [In the past, the vegetable was thought to be useless and was either thrown away or fed as fodder to animals]. Dhana Laxmi Pal, Chholabagar bridge, Darchula (case # 10)

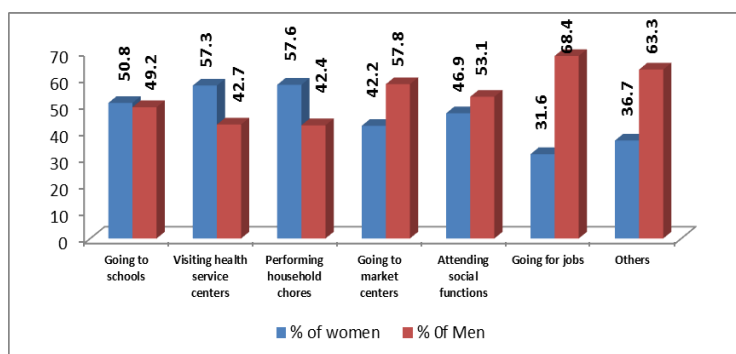
Returning to PBBA figures, of those persons using the trail bridges to go to work, 32% are women. The study team also found other reported examples of work or opportunities that became available to women as a result of trail bridge construction. The most notable is Chandarawati Kumal, who became Secretary of a local Agricultural Cooperative. Basanti Pal (case # 27) also reported becoming member of the Ward Citizen Forum as a result of her membership of the Chholabagar bridge users' committee; although not a paid position, this would give her better insight into and access to on-going development initiatives. In another case, Ganga Khanal (refer to case # 6), chairperson of the all-woman Bahakati users' committee stated that since the construction of the bridge, she has become the chairperson of a 'mother's group', which concentrates on household savings and creating a revolving fund for low interest loans.

Figure 6: Use of Trail Bridges



Source: Post Bridge Building Assessment

Figure 7: Use of Trail Bridges by men and women

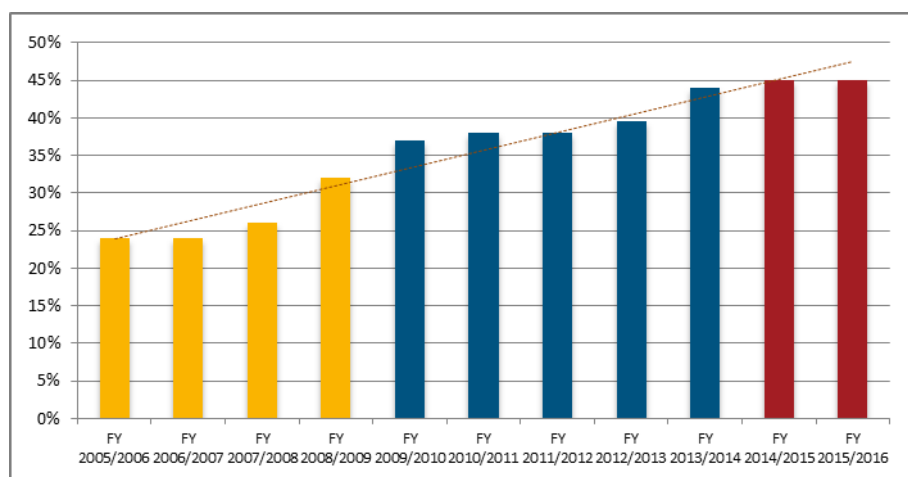


Source: PBBA, 2011 - 2015

#### 6.4 Increased visibility, collective voice and representation of women

The provision of quotas to ensure the participation of women and disadvantaged individuals in users' committees was found to be widely known by officials and local people alike, and to be followed. That is, it is respected in terms of numbers. Some officials seemed unaware that the quota was recently increased from 33% to 40%, but in any case, the percentage on the ground now exceeds the quota. Recent figures show that the average participation of women in trail bridge users' committee stands at some 45%.

Figure 8: Women's representation in Users' Committees (Fiscal Years 2005/6 – 2015/6)



Source: TBSIS

The very fact that it is mandatory to include at least an individual from discriminated group, with priority to at least one woman, in an executive position was appreciated by some respondents – both women and men (see the comment of Uttam B. Pal, husband of Basanti Pal, case # 27) - as sending a clear message.

*"The traditional view towards women is changing as they are in a key position in any committee."*  
Pranita Rai, Adardaha Bridge user, Morang (case # 13)

Similarly, even though the functioning of the Chholabagar Bridge users' committee was contested, for Dalits it was clearly important to have representation.

*"Bikma Lohar and Nira Lohar were appointed as members of the committee. They played an important role in ensuring our people's participation in the programme. Being appointed as members of this group, they represented our community and kept our thoughts and voice in the group."*  
Govindi Odha, Chholabagar general user, Darchula (case #7).

#### 6.4.1 Manipulation of quotas for women

Despite the above comments, a significant finding of our research was that the percentage of women in a users' committee is not what determines the degree to which women can exercise their agency (voice). Indeed, we found evidence of quotas being used by men to place women whom they believed they could manipulate in both executive and general users' committee positions. This might be done by male relatives, or male users' committee members (sometimes the two being the same). The most blatant example was in Bhoreleghat users' committee, where the woman appointed as treasurer, Mina Kumal, was both shy and illiterate, and had no wish to take up the position. A fellow committee member, Sharada Pandey, openly explained how she had been asked by the Chairperson to join the committee in a bilateral conversation outside any official meeting. This invitation seemed, furthermore, linked to her known political affiliations to the Nepali Congress Party.

*"I was not interested to be the Treasurer of the committee, but the Secretary of the committee insisted and I couldn't say no."* Mina Kumal, Bhoreleghat users' committee Treasurer, Arghakhachi (case # 11)

The following comments indicates a similar situation in two other trail bridges,

*"Behind the scenes, the selection was already done, although the nominees were announced for [the sake of] formality. As no one opposed, the procedure was smooth".... "We were informed about the policy of involving women members in the committee and that one woman had to be in a key position; all of us agreed to abide by the policy."* Dhana Laxmi Pal, Chholabagar bridge users' committee member, Darchula (case # 10).

*"Women members of the users' committee did not know about their involvement in the committee. They were made committee members to fulfil the quota, but they were not given any responsibility and they didn't participate in the meetings. So this didn't lead to any changes with regard to the role of women. The President of the user group took all the decisions alone and bridge construction was not a collective effort."* Laxmi Joshi, Malekatha Bridge general user, Darchula (case # 9)

#### 6.4.2 Opportunities for women to exert their agency

Although the above examples are negative, we also found positive cases of women expressing satisfaction about transparent and open procedures that gave them the opportunity to participate fully. Interestingly, the most positive account comes from the trail bridge with the lowest percentage of women in the users' committee, Nayabasti. In this case, users' committee member Chandrawati Kumal (case # 4) reported that she was always given adequate notice of meetings, allowing her to arrange her domestic chores; that other (male) users' committee members listened to her views; and that she was able to influence decisions – notably in prioritising labour opportunities for single women during the construction.

To support women users' committee members in understanding the bridge construction process and participating fully in meetings, they are offered training in model bridge construction and in leadership. Unfortunately, not all eligible women are able to participate – for reasons that include distance from home or family concerns or other existing commitments on the dates that the training is offered. Few of the women interviewed from the sample trail bridges had attended a training, so we also interviewed women from other trail bridge users' committees to gain a better insight into the effects of the programme. All whom we interviewed were very positive about the experience, and the confidence that they had gained as a result. We suggest that such training opportunities are made more widely available, and that attending them should be mandatory for users' committee members. Training for both men and women – in separate groups and together – could help break down gender stereotypical attitudes.

*"Now I can communicate, air my views in a mass meeting, and I am not afraid to travel to the district headquarters alone. My husband and family have changed their perception of me. My husband now says that I can do many things on my own."* Manisha Khalin, Treasurer, Kalsing bridge, Ilam district (case # 25)

Within the sample of nine trail bridge users' committees, two were all women committees. This could have been an opportunity for women to exert their collective voice to the full. However, in one, Bahakati, the all-woman composition appeared to have been a way for a local contractor to take full control of the construction process. The women were simply left to ensure the transportation of the local materials to the site (see the comments of Ganga Khanal, case # 6)). In the other case, Ardasha, the women struggled on their own to obtain good quality construction materials, and had to seek help from their male relatives. They were also accused of incompetency and financial mis-management due to mistakes that they made through lack of knowledge (see case study Tulasa Pokhrel). This noted, a participant in the male focus group discussion made the following comment,

*"Women taking the lead was essential because men couldn't commit the time, they had jobs to attend to. Also women are more vigilant and much closer to their homes; this made the task efficient."....."If men from the community had formed a users' committee, there would have been an ego clash between them; this is not the case with women. There is trust between women, they intensively monitored [the work] and there was never a case of dispute amongst them".* Ishwor Pokharel, Adarsha Bridge user, Morang

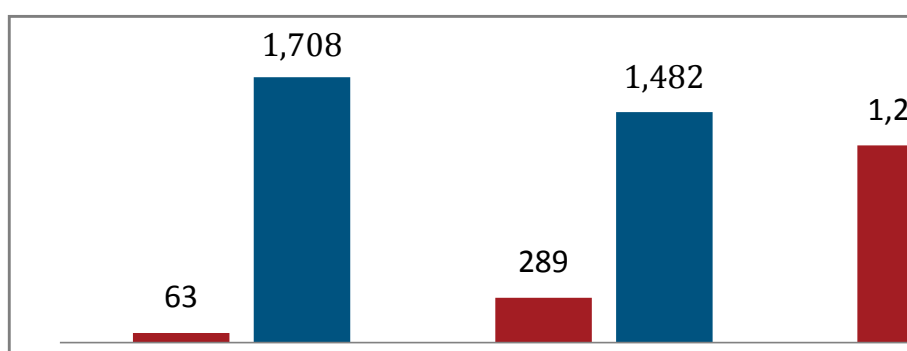
Especially in the light of this observation, which was supported by others, it would be wrong to conclude that all-women users' committees are ineffective. However, they are likely to require particularly good technical facilitation, as well as acceptance, support, and respect from local men.

The research team noted that in none of the nine case study trail bridges was any sharing of experiences with other users' committees mentioned. This could have been an opportunity to avoid mistakes and to gain ideas and motivation.

### 6.4.3 The phenomenon of women treasurers

A final point of note in this section is the type of executive position most commonly occupied by women. Figures from 2009 indicate that women are more usually elected to treasurer than other positions, with chairperson being particularly uncommon. These seem to reflect a widely voiced belief that women are more trustworthy than men with regard to finances. It may also be linked to the fact that the chairperson and secretary are more commonly expected to travel to district headquarters, and for women this may be difficult (see observations on women's mobility, section 6.1).

Figure 9: Number of Women and Men in Users' committee Executive Positions since 2009



Source: TBSIS, (Completed bridges only)

### 6.5 Changed public sector employment and procurement practices

As a government programme, trail bridge construction is of course influenced by public sector employment and procurement practices. At the same time, any change to such practices would require a much wider government response than simply related to trail bridges.

Our interviews with key informants at district level confirmed original assumptions that the construction sector is male-dominated; furthermore, most officials met belonged to non-

discriminated groups. Their general attitude to gender and social inclusion issues may be described as “politically correct”, without expressing major concern. When pressed, most accepted that social matters received little consideration due to limited time and resources.

*“The DDC has so many works to do! If we have time, we go for monitoring, but in the case of the social inclusion part, we have not visited the field to make sure about these issues.”* Madan Raj Joshi, Acting DTO and Sahadev Rayamajhi, Local Development Officer, Darchula District

One way in which to increase awareness of gender and social issues amongst government engineers would be to ensure that such matters are included in both initial training and in subsequent in-service training. To some extent, this has been recognised and is already the case as far as current training is concerned – although social issues are still given little weight. The government also aims to encourage women to take up engineering through quotas. This is resulting in a gradual increase in the number of young women engineers, although not all of them are willing to spend much time in district postings, working in the field. Although it should not be assumed that women engineers automatically be more responsive to social issues in the field, it is likely that their presence on construction sites will trigger a questioning of stereotypical expectations of women’s roles.

*“Government officials generally assume that I have an administrative function, they don’t expect me to be an engineer. But these days, things are gradually changing in comparison to how it was when I passed out of my college 10 years ago. Now I’m starting to see a few women engineers out in the districts – still few, but at least some. Actually most women engineers tend to work in the department or ministry rather than taking up field positions.”* Bina Khanal, Technical Coordinator, Trail Bridge Programme.

## **6.6 Changed attitudes in business towards women**

The businesses involved in trail bridge construction are those supplying the steel rope and bulldog grips, fabricated steel parts, and cement. The research team visited two fabricated steel parts suppliers to gain an insight into their employment practices and conditions. Neither had any awareness of the gender provisions mentioned in the trail bridge guidelines. One, Dhirendra Yadav, Head of Department for Bridge and Structure, reported employing only men, with the exception of a few women cleaners.

*“There are no women employees here as the nature of the work is manual, and the requirement is to carry heavy loads. Also the environment for women to work is not suitable, because there are 1,000 men workers here. However, women are employed as cleaners; this doesn’t lead to any problem for them while working.”* Dhirendra Yadav

Malika Engineering and Workshop Private Limited in Dhangadhi, Kailali District reported employing a few women – notably, the wives of their male workers.

*“This year we have 20 workers, among whom six are women. These women are wives of our workers, whom we have trained so that they have become skilled. The training was to cut according to measurement and design, to use a drill machine to make hole in steel, and to help in welding works.”* Jeet Bahadur Shah, Malika Engineering and Workshop Private Limited.

In this case, the factory premises included neither separate changing facilities for men and women, nor separate toilets, nor any provision for child care or similar facilities. Both the businesses reported giving their workers orientation on health and safety, and minimal protective clothing; however, they did not have accident insurance.

## **6.7 Revision of laws, rules and regulations that discriminate against women**

Overall, the research team found strong awareness of the legal aspects and guidelines that aim to support women’s engagement in the trail bridge sector. The main exception was with regard to private suppliers, as mentioned above. In most respects, the legal provisions are quite progressive in their gender requirements, although in the case of Long Span Trail bridges the guidelines are silent.

Here the work is solely in the hands of contractors, who have no obligation to inform the community about their activities or to engage them in any way. In the case of the one long span trail bridge included in our study, this was of particular regret to the users – who had previously worked together on a short span trail bridge, and expected a public hearing to be organised, at very least (see case study of Sita Parajuli). It seems strange that such a hearing is not required, as it could also be of benefit to the contractor, in gaining local support.

Despite the quite progressive legal provisions, it was clear in the case study trail bridges that even if the “letter of the law” was broadly respected, the spirit was often not. There is considerable potential both for a tightening of the guidelines and, especially, better facilitation and monitoring of users’ committees at both the time of formation and during implementation. In this the local NGOs could be expected to play a much stronger role. These aspects are discussed in the final chapter.

## 7 Conclusions

### 7.1. Towards gender transformation

In this research, we set out to consider the extent to which the rights of women, including disadvantaged women, are upheld through the trail bridge programme. We further aimed to determine where the provisions of the programme sit on the continuum between being gender exploitative and gender transformative (see figure 10). Fortunately, no example of blatant gender exploitation was found, although further consideration might be given to the wages paid to bridge wardens, and whether this is really sufficient for the work entailed. The requirement for 40% women sends a clear and positive message, especially as it is higher than the 33% quota indicated in the interim constitution. Equal pay for equal work is another affirmative action, as is the offer of community leadership training with a focus on women - even if it is not available to, or not taken up by, all women. The main gap that we identified is the lack of any clear attempt to minimise an increase in women's workload caused by participation in trail bridge construction.

This noted, even though the legal provisions are quite gender responsive, the way in which they are interpreted in practice is often at best only gender aware. This is especially in the cases that women were nominated to committees in name only, either deliberately selecting women who were unable to perform the functions expected of them, or impeding them from voicing their opinions and using their agency.

In the rest of this chapter, we set out five ways in which the trail bridge programme could be made more gender responsive in practice, and ultimately gender transformative.

Figure 9: Gender continuum

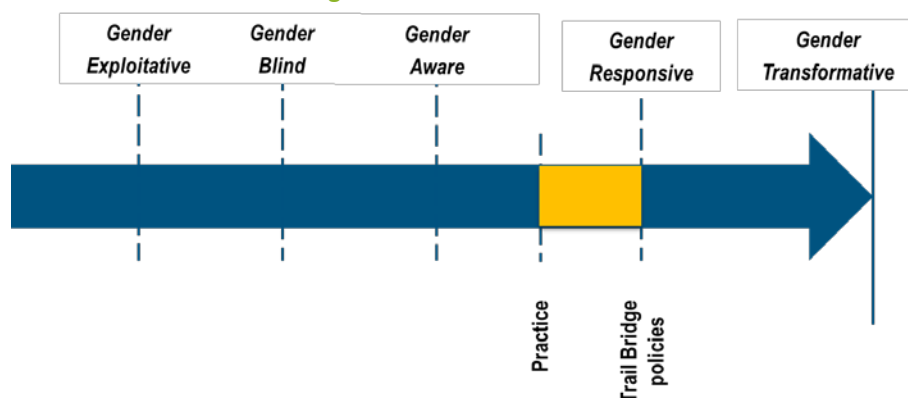


Table 3: Definition of components of Gender continuum

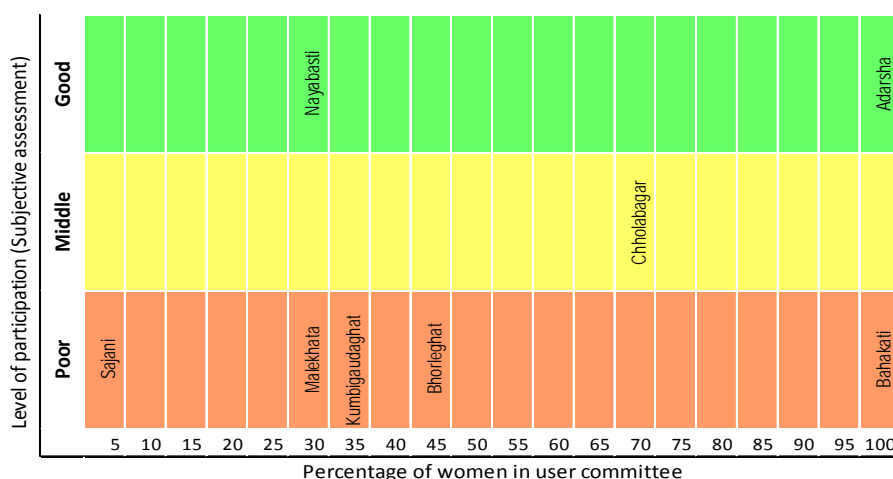
Exploitative	Blind	Aware	Responsive/ Accommodative	Transformative
Take advantage of the rigid gender norms and existing imbalances to empower and to achieve the programme objective	No prior consideration of how gender norms and unequal power relations affect project objectives or how these impact differentially on women and men	Consciously address gender constraints and opportunities and plan a gender objective	Acknowledge the role of gender norms and inequalities and seek to develop actions that adjust to or compensate for them. No active attempt to change gender norms and inequalities	Encourage critical awareness of gender roles among men and women; promote the position of women; challenge the distribution of resources, responsibilities and power between men and women.

## 7.2. Addressing the burden of unpaid care work

Our research indicates that in terms of quotas, the provisions for women’s engagement in trail bridge users’ committees are largely known and implemented. This is a positive finding. However, the percentage of women in a users’ committee is not what makes the difference to their active participation – what makes the difference is family support, support from other users’ committee members, and community awareness. Lying behind this is recognition of women’s burden of unpaid care work, and a willingness to reduce, redistribute or at least make accommodation for it - thus supporting women in meaningful representation.

The team started with the assumption that trail bridges with a higher percentage of women would be more “women friendly” and essentially represent a move towards gender transformation. This assumption was not confirmed (see figure 11). The users’ committees in which women were able to exert their agency to the greatest extent (assessed as green or “good”), Nayabasti and Adarsha, fell at two ends of the spectrum of women’s representation in the users’ committee. Amongst users’ committees in which women had very little power to determine matters (assessed as orange or “poor”), one, Bahakati, had 100% women’s representation. We found that it was not numbers of women in the committee that mattered, but the extent to which community members respected women’s engagement and indeed took steps to support it. In particular, it was the husbands of the women users’ committee members who facilitated their active participation, by being willing to help with domestic chores or otherwise promote their engagement. Similarly, simply by organising meetings at a time of the day convenient for women, and giving proper notice in advance, other users’ committee members rendered women’s participation much easier.

Figure 11: Level of women participation



The team also gained the impression that it is not always the most appropriate women who become users’ committee members (sometimes deliberately as a result of manipulation). A number of women who would probably have made good committee members, being educated and dynamic, stated that they could not afford the time to attend meetings and had thus not put their names forward. How women’s engagement in community decision-making can be better supported in practice requires serious thought, and goes beyond trail bridges to other aspects of rural development. We suggest that at very least it should be a matter discussed openly with the community, seeking the suggestions of men and women alike. Here we suggest a process such as REFLECT, in which participants are encouraged to come up with suggestions and actions themselves. This would have to be facilitated by local NGOs. Another possibility could be to require the husbands or family members of women selected for committee positions to publically commit to helping them with domestic chores so that they are able to devote adequate time to the committee without incurring additional work.

## 7.3. Ensuring pro-active social facilitation

### 7.3.1. Women's leadership training

The trail bridge programme supports women's full participation and leadership through the Community Leadership trainings. Yet these trainings are only available to some women in some bridges. As the research team had difficulty in locating women from the nine case study trail bridges who had attended a training, three women participants from non-case study trail bridges were also interviewed. All confirmed that they had found it helpful, with a Dalit participant, Samni Sada, being particularly enthusiastic.

*"The training boosted my confidence and made me more aware of my rights and duties. I gained knowledge and skills with regard to trail bridges and leadership, which has helped me to be a strong person - especially in taking decisions. I have attended five users' committee meetings in total so far. My presence in the meetings has been effective as I was able to put forth my opinions, and to take part in discussions and the decision making process."* Samni Sada, Community Leadership training participant and users' committee Treasurer, Ranipokhari Trail Bridge, Sunsari (case # 24)

*"Now I can communicate, air my views in a mass meeting, and I am not afraid to travel to the district headquarters alone. My husband and family have changed their perception of me. My husband now says that I can do many things on my own."* Manisha Khalin, Kalsing bridge, Ilam (case # 25)

Nevertheless, a single training programme alone may not always be enough to give women the confidence to speak out; follow-up support during bridge construction remains important, as the following comment illustrates.

*"We learned that information boards need to be erected at the sites to ensure transparency. When I told the chairperson about this requirement, he said that he would do it – but it still hasn't been achieved".* Goma Adhikari, Community Leadership training participant, Bagenighat Trail Bridge, Kapilvastu (case # 26)

A more extensive leadership training programme, coupled with subsequent field-level support, would help to ensure more inclusive, gender-balanced decision making. We agree with the suggestion of Samni Sada in this respect.

*"I feel that this type of training should be provided to all the executive members of users' committees - men and women. That is, the Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer."* Samni Sada, Community Leadership training participant and users' committee Treasurer, Ranipokhari Trail Bridge, Sunsari (case # 24)

### 7.3.2. External facilitation and monitoring to challenge social inequities

A recurrent remark in the preceding chapter was that amongst those users' committees that functioned poorly, better facilitation during formation and implementation would have been a means to ensure more inclusive functioning. The current system of community-based trail bridges requires both social and technical facilitation to be conducted by a local NGO. Six percent of the total cost of the trail bridge is allocated to this facilitation, technical and social aspects equally (3% each). Yet discussions with NGO staff revealed that they place far more emphasis on technical issues than social issues, as this is the focus of the current monitoring system. The only social criteria in the monitoring system are fulfilment of the users' committee quotas, and completion of the public hearing and public audit. In addition there can be as many public reviews as necessary, but these are not monitored. The quality of the social process is not assessed, whereas the quality of the technical work is carefully controlled.

Although the role of the NGO is clearly specified, in at least one case, that of Bahakati bridge, it seems that it was possible for district officials to step in and determine matters themselves. Indeed, the claim that district officials instructed the community to form an all-woman committee and give the work to a contractor seems a clear breach of policy (see the comments of Ganga Khanal, case #

6). This particular example suggests that NGOs are not always empowered to conduct their designated function.

*“We make sure that there is involvement of women in the committee and also in one of the executive positions at the time of planning. During construction and maintenance we also make sure that poor people and women get the opportunity of labour.”* Purna Bahadur Mahar, President, Social Welfare Society, Darchula

The limited attention paid to social processes carries on up the line of responsibility, with regional coordinators, district level development staff and TBSU staff all admitting that this is a weak area.

*“A few of the staff require further capacity building trainings to have a better understanding and to clarify questions related to implementing issues regarding social inclusion”* Mr Narayan Paudel, Programme Coordinator, REMREC Sitara JV (Regional Technical Assistance Provider)

*“There is no dedicated person to handle the social matters although when visiting the field, the technical officers settle social matters as per the need. Last year the technical cases of nearly 100 bridges were handled and along with this social matters were also monitored.”* Prakash Bamm (Technical Officer) and Saran Bishyokarma (Trail Bridge engineer), TBSU

*“...the social part is somehow weak. We do not have social staff to take care of the social issues in the DDC and in the DTO.”* Madan Raj Joshi, Acting DTO and Sahadev Rayamajhi, Local Development Officer, Darchula District

Social facilitation should not only guard against manipulation and other improper practices; it should also support the active challenging of negative caste, gender and ethnic stereotypes and norms. This seems to require much more emphasis. We suggest that the social monitoring process should be reviewed, and better tools introduced.

#### **7.4. Improving opportunities for disadvantaged women and men**

The requirement in the current trail bridge guidelines that disadvantaged women and men should be given priority in local employment/wage labour opportunities seems to be well known and largely implemented – albeit not in all cases. As noted above, external facilitation should be the means of ensuring full implementation. In addition, our research revealed at least three ways in which disadvantaged women and men - particularly women – could reap greater rewards from wage labour opportunities on trail bridge construction.

##### **7.4.1. Avoiding debt**

At present, payment for community-based construction work is made on the basis of certified progress. That is, the labourers must work for a substantial number of days – normally at least 14 – before they get paid. For those who are living in quite precarious financial circumstances, especially single women who lack any support from men, it is not possible to survive this period without a loan. Given local rates of interest, which are usually at least 18%, this can make a significant cut into their eventual earnings. In the case of contractor-based construction, a “mobilisation fee”, effectively an advance payment, is given. One may ask, why should the same not apply to community-based work? We suggest that with proper monitoring, it could - and that this would have real potential benefit to labourers.

##### **7.4.2. Skills training for better wages**

No woman working on a bridge construction site covered in this study qualified to be paid as a skilled labourer. Women’s earning potential was significantly lower as a result. Training women labourers in such skills would give them the opportunity to earn not only more in their local bridge construction, but also potentially elsewhere in future. There could even be a possibility to request private sector suppliers of bridge components to conduct such training as part of the services supplied. It is of note that Malika Engineering Private Limited already has experience in training

women to become skilled workers. Preliminary lessons could be learned from them, with a view to wider replication.

### **7.4.3. Transforming wages to assets**

The choice made by labourers as to how they spend their wages should be theirs. Nevertheless, it should be an informed choice, and the impression gained from field discussions was that labourers were not always aware of how to best to turn their earnings into assets. There are many training programmes available in rural areas on these issues, and an obvious link to make would be with the Women Development Office or local women's rights organisation, which supports many such programmes. Another possibility could be to require local NGOs to provide such input specifically to trail bridge labourers.

## **7.5. Learning from other relevant experiences**

### **7.5.1. Learning from other trail bridge users' committees**

With over 6,500 trail bridges existing across the country, the vast majority constructed through the community-based system, there is a lot of experience to tap. Even limiting this experience to trail bridges built in recent years with the strong engagement of women in the users' committee, there is still much potential to exchange and learn. As one respondent noted,

*"It was our first time and we didn't know what to do, but we will be more active if another opportunity comes."* Ganga Khanal, Chairperson, Bahakati bridge users' committee, Aghakanchi (case # 6)

Making mistakes is part of learning – but it is also best to avoid obvious mistakes. Peer to peer learning is widely practiced and appreciated in Nepal, and could be integrated into community-based trail bridge training. In particular, dynamic members of other users' committees, especially women, could be invited to participate as resource persons at the time of the model bridge training.

### **7.5.2. Learning from other types of user groups**

A number of members of the research team were struck by the similarity of users' committee governance processes to those of other user groups and committees that manage resources such as community forests and water supply systems, as well as mothers' groups (of which some interviewees spoke). Both Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) and Water User Groups are permanent structures (in the case of CFUGs, legal entities), and thus not directly comparable with temporary institutions such as a trail bridge users' committee. Since governance practices for permanent entities must be particularly robust, much attention has been given to developing a variety of tools to ensure, through good facilitation, that this is the case. It is curious that at local level, no learning from other experiences of committees was mentioned (although it was also not specifically asked). For NGOs facilitating social inclusion in trail bridge users' committees, there would be much potential to borrow and/or adapt good governance tools developed for user group and users' committee facilitation in these other sectors.

## **7.6. Improving district level coordination**

In our discussions at district level, it became very clear that there is little coordination between the different government bodies, particularly between those mandated with technical functions such as the DTO (District Technical Office), and those mandated with social functions such as the WDO (Women Development Office). The latter expressed particular isolation, although being informed is also a two-way process, in that WDO staff have a right to attend monthly district meetings and hear about on-going development activities.

*"I have no idea about it [gender provisions in trail bridge construction] because no one invites me in this type of activity."* Bishnu Maya Paudel, WDO, Darchula

Currently such technical - social coordination is not mandatory, but especially given the major changes ahead with Nepal's administrative restructuring, ways of promoting better coordination would be worth further consideration.

To conclude, it is natural that a focus is given to technical aspects of trail bridge programme implementation, given that the success of a bridge literally stands or falls on technical criteria. Furthermore, compared with social processes, it is relatively easy to control technical criteria. Social aspects of community-based trail bridge construction have thus been relegated to secondary consideration, even though the link between sound community ownership and good subsequent maintenance is well recognised. The important contribution of trail bridges to overall rural development is also being limited to less than its full potential by failing to support women's empowerment in an adequate manner. We have shown that while the policy and guidelines for the trail bridge programme may be considered gender responsive and socially inclusive, in the case study trail bridges here described, implementation of the guidelines often fell short of expectations. We hope that the findings of this research will stimulate a rethinking of current field practice to render it truly gender responsive – and ultimately gender transformative.

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## **9. Annex: Case Stories**

## Case # 1.

### An accidental but determined role model

*Basanti Samanta (37), Secretary, Sajani Trail Bridge Users' Committee  
Bhagwati VDC, Darchula District*

"We need to hold a meeting at which we discuss this and take the decision together; only then I will sign the cheque," said Basanti Samanta, when asked to put her name to the payment of trail bridge construction materials. It was in fact only at this moment that she learned that she had been appointed Secretary of the Sajani Trail Bridge users' committee. It appears that she was selected in order to fulfil quota requirements – but Basanti does not intend to be a passive committee member. According to her, *"Women in this village are still not that active, but neither have they been given the opportunity to be so. When it comes to development activities, it is only men who take the lead and make the decisions. Women still lag behind in active participation"*. This particular community is a fairly homogeneous one of Chhetris; the differences of opinion are more at a personal level.

Both Basanti and her husband, Kisan Singh, completed schooling up to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. They have three children, all of whom go to school. It was her husband who encouraged Basanti to work as a social mobiliser at the Women Development Office, despite the disapproval of his parents. At that time, *"Both of us were jobless, we had to take care of our children, and when she got such an opportunity, I did not want her to lose it."* His father-in-law and brother-in-law always supported his decision in this regard, which helped him to counter the objections of his parents. According to Basanti, *"Now I have become old enough to have some liberty, but earlier on I had a tough time."*

Kisan Singh works as a wage labourer, whilst Basanti is a VDC social mobiliser. Although she feels a little embarrassed that her husband is a labourer and stays at home to do the housework, she says, *"I am proud of his support, and the example that we have set to our children. Our sons and daughter take part in the household chores and at one point my elder son said, 'We should not think of marrying our sister too early as others do, she should study first.'"*

Basanti is one of three women out of the nine members in the bridge users' committee, and has attended some four meetings so far. She was absent from the rest as she was not informed about them. Whenever present, she has been speaking out about the importance of giving opportunities to local labourers and women; for this reason, she claims, the Chairperson and other committee members have not informed her about the meetings. *"Whenever I knew about a meeting, I took part in it"*.

## Case # 2.

### Rallying others in the bridge construction

*Bikma Lohar (49), Users' committee member and Bridge warden  
Cholabagar Bridge, Dethala VDC, Darchula District*

Thinking back to the time that the news of the trail bridge construction first circulated, Bikma Lohar says that she was elated, and eager to play her part. At the village gathering when the users' committee members were nominated, she was happy to have her name suggested, and also subsequently as bridge warden. *"Women's participation was necessary, so they nominated me."* The latter nomination occurred very recently, only two days ago, so she has not yet received any training. Nevertheless, she has already started cleaning and maintaining the bridge.

Bikma played an important role during the bridge construction, as she participated regularly in the users' committee meetings and then informed other Dalit women about what was happening. She also voiced the opinions of women from her community in front of the users' committee. According to other Dalit women, it was she who encouraged and motivated them; *"Bikma didi [elder sister – respectful title] is the only reason we came to work."* Bikma also felt that women were given work that they could perform, respecting the constraints imposed by their household chores. *"Women were given a break from 12:00pm to 2:00 pm to cook food and eat, whilst breastfeeding mothers were allowed breaks to attend to their babies."* However, she felt that it would have been good if there had been some training for women, because *"they (women) worked equally as men, but due to lack of skill they earned less than men."*

Bikma is not critical of the users' committee activities, in contrast to the comments of others such as Bimala Joshi and Sharada Pal. She valued the experience of working with the other members. According to her, *"I got support from them without any conflict, and the decisions were taken collectively."* She considers that the budget and expenditure of the bridge was handled in a transparent manner. However, this was the first time that she has had such an experience, and she was clearly proud of the very fact of being selected for the committee. It is possible that for this reason she was either unaware of, or unwilling to mention, anything negative.

Working in the committee definitely increased Bikma's workload, as there was no-one to help her at home. *"It was difficult and challenging to be a users' committee member. I did not have enough time and there was no one to look after my ailing father-in-law."* Her husband has left her and gone to India, so she alone takes care of everything – caring for the old people and her two daughters, and undertaking all the household chores. The income of bridge warden will be a welcome support for her.

### Case # 3.

#### Accepting imperfect processes for the sake of development

*Bimala Dhami (33), Users' committee member*

*Sajani Bridge, Bhagwati VDC, Darchula District*

In Bimala's view, development activities are dominated by men. *"In some cases, women are alone at home as their husbands have gone to India or other countries for work. So they have to look after the children, the elderly, and the cattle. On top of this, they have little education. Thus, women's participation in development activities is low and passive. Men generally take the lead, particularly in construction as this is still considered a man's job. Women members are on the Committee and in bridge construction just to fulfil the quota."* However, she feels that things are gradually changing, citing the example of women taking charge in the savings and credit programme.

Bimala completed schooling to 11<sup>th</sup> grade and is a facilitator of the Pahal programme (a USAID-supported agricultural project) in Bhagwati VDC. She lives in a joint family with her in-laws and three children; her husband is absent, working abroad. She took part in the village gathering at which the villagers selected the executive members of the Committee, but has not been able to attend many of the other meetings because she lives on the other side of the village. Nevertheless, her in-laws and children are supportive of her attending such events, and take care of the household chores in her absence.

Bimala is aware that there is a conflict between the Chairperson and the Secretary of the users' committee (see Basanti Samanta). *"However, we desperately need this bridge so we don't want to disturb the process. Besides, we are only a few months away from completing the construction".* Once the bridge is there, *"Women will have easy access to different opportunities such as the market, health facilities, capacity building programme, information and so forth. We will be able to reach fodder grass that is only available on the other side of the river, and our children will also be able to get to school easily".*

## Case # 4.

### The importance of a supportive family

*Chandrawati Kumal (35), Treasurer, Nayabasti bridge Users' Committee  
Sidhhara VDC, Arghakhanchi District*

Chandrawati Kumal is currently the Secretary of a local agriculture cooperative, with responsibility for day-to-day management. It is a position that she enjoys, and which she credits her experience in 2013 as Treasurer of the Nayabasti users' committee as having helped to secure. She now crosses this bridge daily to reach her office and comments that, *"it gives me immense satisfaction to know that I was actively involved in its construction"*.

Prior to the trail bridge construction, Chandrawati worked in a voluntary capacity as a Community Health Worker. Her good performance in this position may have motivated her neighbours to suggest her involvement in the trial bridge construction. In the beginning she was reluctant to accept such an important position, and recalls *"I was nervous at first, but, at the back of my mind, I thought 'I will learn on the job', so I took the position."* Her husband, Ek Bahadur Kumal, says that he had faith in her abilities from the start, *"People saw that she was capable, and thus asked her to become a part of the Committee."* The Secretary of the users' committee (UC) was also supportive.

Chandrawati recalls that her husband never forbade her to go to the meetings nor criticised her for devoting her time to overseeing the process. Furthermore, *"There were times when I had to travel to Sandikharka, the district headquarters, for official business with other male members of the users' committee and I was apprehensive about how this would be viewed by my joint family and in-laws. However, they never complained."* Indeed, she had help from other women in the family, *"They would tell me, 'Elder sister, you go to your meetings and we will take care of the meals'."* Within the users' committee, members were considerate in convening meetings with a day's prior notice, giving her time to arrange other chores. Although at first she was shy about expressing her views, as she gained confidence and spoke out, she found that the others listened. She is proud that she was able to prioritise labour opportunities for single women during the construction.

For Chandrawati, having a supportive family was the key to her active engagement in the bridge users' committee- and to opening up her current employment opportunity.

## Case # 5.

### Changes in daily life wrought by a trail bridge

*Danda Kumari Ghimire (68), General member, Adarsha Bridge users' committee, Morang District*

Danda Kumari Ghimire has seen a lot of changes since the trail bridge was constructed. It has become easier for children to reach their school and for people to go to hospital, *"at least they don't drown anymore"*. Another important change for women is the sense of feeling safe when travelling; *"it has become easier and also safe for us to travel at night"*. Along with this, people in the community have been able to establish small businesses. In her case, her mobility from home to the weekly market has eased. *"I can go to the weekly and other markets on my own, even during heavy rainfall, which I couldn't in the past. Also the frequency of my visits to my relatives has increased."*

This noted, Danda has concerns about the bridge condition, *"it is unstable and needs monthly monitoring"*. She believes that those living in the area should be willing to contribute to development work, but no-one took the initiative until the women decided to take on the bridge construction. She herself even donated a part of her land towards it, whilst her daughter-in-law, as users' committee Chairperson, struggled for seven years to get it completed.

Danda is a widow, but is happy to live with her daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. Her son is absent, working in town, and rarely returns home, but he does regularly send money. Danda considers that the traditional roles of women and men remain largely as they have always been; however, now when a wife asks for help, the husband generally obliges. *"I have seen many husbands supporting their wives in household matters, but still a woman at home bears all the responsibility."*

## Case # 6.

### Leaving the decisions to the contractor

*Ganga Khanal (46), Chairperson, Bahakati Bridge Users' Committee, Kandaha VDC, Aghakhanchi District*

The Bahakati Bridge users' committee was exceptional in comprising nine women of different ethnicities. However, rather than this being an indication of women's empowerment, it was more a case of manipulation. As chairperson, Ganga Khanal explained that district staff had told them to form an all-women's committee to manage the construction process, and to leave the construction itself to a local contractor - who was also a politician.

Local men confirmed this story, stating that they were neither aware nor consulted about the work, and that the contractor was outsourced. They did not question this arrangement, as they themselves had no experience in trail bridge building. They trusted the contractor, who originated from the same village. Ganga explained that during the construction process, the technical details regarding the site selection and the overseeing of the construction work were left to the contractor. Their role as users' committee members was to ensure that the construction materials, mostly steel parts, were transported to the bridge site along with bamboo poles for the erection of the truss bridge.

Since the construction of the trail bridge, Ganga has become the chairperson of a 'mother's group', which concentrates on household savings and creating a revolving fund for low interest loans. The bridge has brought significant benefits for farming and access to services such as the tailor on the other side of the river. Ganga is therefore positive about the experience, and considers it a learning process. When asked whether she would do things differently another time, she replied, *"Yes, it was our first time and we didn't know what to do, but we will be more active if another opportunity comes."* Probed further, she specifically mentioned that she would ensure employment opportunities for local women and men. *"Nearly all the households in our village have at least one male member working as a migrant labourer abroad. Only women, elderly, and children are left behind, and development projects tend to overlook their abilities when infrastructure activities are implemented."*

## Case # 7.

### Gradually changing social norms

Govindi Odha, General user, Chholabagar Bridge,  
Dethala VDC, Darchula District

As a Dalit woman, Govindi Odha knows what it feels like to be discriminated. However, in her opinion *“The system of untouchability is decreasing between Dalits and non-Dalits. Also women are no longer confined to household chores, but have started buying household goods from the market and dropping children to school. They are also getting involved in development works and working on a daily wage basis.”*

The construction of the trail bridge has added to the general changes in society. *“Students can now go to school without a chaperon as they don’t need help to cross the river, and the village is connected to the road, leading to access to health centres. Women’s workload has also decreased as now they can go to the grinding mill across the river. The bridge has helped women to sell home produced goods such as honey and vegetables. Moreover, skilled labours are getting employment opportunities throughout the year. My husband is getting work from across the bridge now, and because of this he’s no longer forced to migrate to India for work.”*

Govindi is aware that women have been involved in the users’ committee, but she herself could not participate as her husband is working, so one member of the family has to be home. Nonetheless, she attended the first gathering at which the bridge budget was discussed along with the selection of the users’ committee members. She also participated in the last gathering, in order to know about the expenditure. Thus she is aware that there was no discrimination in wages between men and women labourers. She is also comments with evident satisfaction, *“Bikma Lohar and Nira Lohar were appointed as members of the committee. They played an important role in ensuring our people’s participation in the programme. Being appointed as members of this group, they represented our community and kept our thoughts and voice in the group.”*

Despite of this, Govindi observes that women still face many challenges. *“Women labourers are unable to participate in skilled work because they are not trained. They only worked as load carriers and as unskilled labour.”*

## Case # 8.

### The limits imposed by domestic demands

*Kumari Majhi (38), General Member, Kumbigaudaghat Bridge Users' Committee, Amardaha VDC, Morang District*

As a general member of the trail bridge users' committee, Kumari expected to play a significant role – having experience of attending meetings for other development initiatives, and being used to speak out in public. Her family has always been supportive of her engagement outside the home, and she was known in the community as a socially active person. However, as things turned out, she was barely able to contribute to the bridge construction. Shortly after her nomination to the committee, her father-in-law fell ill, and her husband went to work overseas. This left her as the sole person responsible for their two school-going children, a sick elderly person, and the farm. She had no time for anything else.

Nevertheless, the bridge has influenced her life in a positive manner. *"Mobility is now much easier; when it is dark it was scary to cross the old bridge, but now this is simply not an issue"*. She also points out that access to facilities such as the health post, government offices and school is much better, as all these are on the other side of the river.

## Case # 9.

### No change in women's role

Laxmi Joshi, General user,

Malekatha Bridge, Darchula District

In the past five years or so, Laxmi has observed many changes. Electricity has come to the village. There is a decrease in the tradition of caste discrimination, and even the tradition of *chaupadi* [when women are forced to stay in a cattle shed while menstruating] is diminishing. Women are involved in other activities apart from household chores, and they are independently going to the market and dropping children off to school.

As a Brahmin woman, Laxmi need not worry about how to run her household. The family has enough land for a comfortable life from agriculture, with an annual income of some NPR 285,000. She participated in the construction work as *"it was compulsory for one member in the family to participate. However, I was not interested to get further involved as there was conflict and dispute among the villagers during the construction period"*.

Laxmi is aware that some women worked as unskilled labours, and that there was no discrimination between the wages paid to men and women workers. This aside, women were not provided with equal opportunities. *"Women members of the users' committee did not know about their involvement in the committee. They were made committee members to fulfil the quota, but they were not given any responsibility and they didn't participate in the meetings. So this didn't lead to any changes with regard to the role of women. The President of the user group took all the decisions alone and bridge construction was not a collective effort."* As a result, she did not attend any user group meetings.

## Case # 10.

### Decisions made behind the scenes

*Dhana Laxmi Pal (28), Secretary, Chholabagar bridge Users' Committee, Dethala VDC, Darchula District*

Dhana Laxmi Pal states what she considers to be obvious: *"In most cases, men lead the various committees organising development work, and it is no different in this village"*. However, she is also beginning to question this reality, and suggests that the main cause is women's lack of time, as in her own case.

Dhana participated in the village gathering to discuss the trail bridge construction and in the selection of the committee members, which resulted in her being chosen as secretary. According to her, the committee membership was a forgone conclusion *"Behind the scenes, the selection was already done, although the nominees were announced for formality. As no one opposed, the procedure was smooth"*. She added, *"We were informed about the policy of involving women members in the committee and that one woman had to be in a key position; all of us agreed to abide by the policy."* Of the other women members, she noted that she is the only educated one – with the result that it is hard for the others to be actively involved in decision-making. And even if they are interested, they may, like her, be overloaded with housework. She herself is a teacher in Satya Prakash Higher Secondary School, and mother of two. She lives in a joint family, and juggles her time between household chores, care of her children and the family, and work. *"I would like to be involved in different development activities, but I just don't have the time."*

Dhana nevertheless fully acknowledges the benefits that bridge has brought to its many users. For Dhana personally, the journey to school has been reduced to minutes rather than an hour's walk, and her husband has been able to open a shop on the other side of the river. *"These days, contractors come to the village to buy vegetables, fruits, honey, goats, and grains. Also with the Chameliya hydro-power scheme on-going, villagers need not be worried about selling their produce, because there will be a ready market. We can now even sell kubindo (wax gourd); no one ever thought this was possible."* [In the past, the vegetable was thought to be useless and was either thrown away or fed as fodder to animals]. In her perception, development brings many positive changes - sometimes in unexpected ways.

## Case # 11.

### Vulnerable to manipulation

*Mina Kumal (33), Treasurer, Bhorleghat Users' Committee,  
Pali VDC, Arghakhanchi District*

Mina Kumal never had any schooling, and was married at the age of 19. Her husband is currently working in Saudi Arabia, and she lives with their two children. The children both go to school, as *"all the younger generation do so"*.

The Bhorleghat bridge users' committee comprises nine members, out of which four are women. Mina is the only one from the other side of the river, and she was nominated as the Treasurer. She has no idea why. *"I was not interested to be the Treasurer of the Committee, but the Secretary of the committee insisted and I couldn't say no."* Whilst it is true that the bridge construction is yet to commence, it is striking that she has so little knowledge about the construction process or her role. Keeping accounts is impossible for her, given her lack of education, and she expresses no particular wish to learn.

Other villagers corroborated that *"The active men members in the users' committee initiated the bridge construction and formed the executive committee, including some women members. They appointed Mina Kumal as Treasurer as it was mandatory to have at least one woman in a key position."*

So far Mina has attended a few meetings, but there are times when she cannot, as *"meetings take place at short notice and this lack of notice makes it difficult for the women members to attend"*. When she does attend, Mina is too nervous to speak. Even when asked gently in the interview about the benefits of the bridge all she managed to say was, *"I don't know anything about all of this."*

## Case # 12.

### No awareness of the Users' Committee

*Pavitra Tamang (25), General user, Fakland Tapu Bridge, Itahari-3, Sunsari District*

Married with three children (two sons and a baby daughter), Pavitra Tamang works as a daily labourer, as does her husband. The young family lives on the far side of the bridge, and are elated about its construction. Until it is finished, there is no alternative than to cross the river by foot – which they need to do to graze cattle and to collect fodder, attend social functions, reach the market, the health post, and offices in the district headquarters. *“We have become used to crossing the river, it takes 30 minutes, but during the monsoon it’s scary, regardless how long it takes. We need the assistance of a man to cross the river, and during emergencies such as child birth it’s an ordeal. In future it will be safer for the children to go to school; before last Dashain [festival] the river was flooded and children couldn’t attend school for nine days.”*

Although she is a future user of the bridge, Pavitra is unaware of any users’ committee activities. *“I don’t know anything about this.”* Nevertheless, she is aware of wage labour opportunities for women at the construction site, *“but I don’t have any idea whether it is equal or not. I have never faced any discrimination and never faced a problem”.*

In Pavitra’s opinion, the mind-set of people is changing with regard to gender roles. *“We (women) carry the stone in the construction site, mix the cement and we earn, so the people have started to realise that women can work on a par with men. However, the situation is still far from being equal. Before going to work, I cook, feed the children, make them go to the school, and finish rest of the household chores.”*

## Case # 13.

### Gradual changes in society

*Pranita Rai (39), General user, Amardaha Bridge,  
Khumbigauda VDC, Morang District*

Pranita Rai juggles two jobs – running a shop and teaching at the local school, which together earns her some NRs 30,000 per month. This would not have been possible without the bridge, which allows her easy crossing of the river, and thus access to all the service centres on the other side. This is especially needed during the monsoon. *“The bridge has made access easy and supported me to expand my business. Although new facilities have not been developed so far, it has become easier for children to commute to school. Simple tasks such as buying groceries have become feasible, and the increased accessibility to the market means that we can sell local produce with ease.”*

Pranita is a working woman who also takes care of her husband, child and the household chores. She is conscious of changing attitudes in recent times, *“women have become aware now about their rights”*. However, Pranita has no idea whether women in the users’ committee had equal opportunities, as she was not involved. Still, she thinks that inclusion of women in such groups has helped them learn many things, *“There has been a change in the way that women think, it has increased unity, and the realisation of collective strength has increased. There is a feeling that even women can accomplish anything.”* At the same time, challenges remain, such as the need to take permission from every family member before being able to participate in outside activities. She reiterates that she never participated in bridge user group meetings as she rarely crossed the path before the bridge was constructed. Yet she feels that, *“The traditional view towards women is changing as they are in a key position in any committee.”*

## Case # 14.

### Taking pride in her work

*Sangita Ghimire (35), Bridge warden,  
Adarsha Bridge, Morang District*

Sangita Ghimire recalls that when the users' committee called for names for the post of bridge warden, she raised her hand. Others were reluctant. *"Everyone thinks for themselves, that is natural, but I feel one should do something for others too. With this thought I raised my hand in the meeting and I was selected,"* she explained. Since then it has been four years that she has been cleaning and taking care of the bridge. During the first year, she devoted time to the bridge frequently, but after that it has been limited to Saturdays. *"I don't have time to spare these days as I cook at a boarding school,"* she says.

Sangita receives NRs 6,000 annually for her work as a bridge warden, most of which she spends on household expenses, or on her children's school fees. *"I try to contribute as much as possible."* She laughed at the idea of spending the money on herself, and said, *"That has not even crossed my mind, but now I think I should, next time I receive the amount."*

Sangita is proud of what she does, but initially she faced considerable disapproval within her community. Being a Brahmin but undertaking sweeping and cleaning work made some people think less of her. She heard comments such as, *"Who works as a sweeper for only NRs 500 (monthly)?"* and *"Being a bridge warden is the equivalent of being a sweeper (a derogatory term was used) cleaning the road'."* *"Everyone has their way interpreting things, but no work is of greater or lesser value to me. That's how people felt earlier. The bridge has made everyone's life easier, and once they began to notice how much hard work is required to maintain it, they changed their stance. Now they say, 'so much effort goes into this, you should ask for a rise'."*

When Sangita volunteered for the work, she didn't know what it would entail. She was taken to Dharan, Sunsari District for a two-day training. *"This was the first time I left my house for another place. I was scared initially, anticipating what was to happen, but when the training began I was at ease. I can now go anywhere I want with confidence, and put my views across without hesitation."*

Maintaining the bridge is not easy, especially during the monsoon. *"For four months the bridge needs continuous maintenance and cleaning. It takes an hour to remove the algae, and I have to cut the branches that fall on the bridge. This is more of a man's job and it's difficult, as I'm not used to using a sickle anymore. But I saw how people used it, and learned from them. I've never asked for help from anyone. Besides, this bridge was the result of women's determination."*

## Case # 15.

### Bound by social norms but eager for change

*Sharada Pandey (30), Users' committee Member,  
Bhorleghat bridge, Pali VDC, Arghakhachi District*

Sharada Pandey recalls the way in which she was nominated as a member of the bridge users' committee as being somewhat unusual. She was unaware that such a Committee was being formed in her village, and like any other day, she was washing clothes at the public tap. The President of the Committee approached her and asked her to become a Committee member. He did so knowing that she was affiliated with the student wing of Nepali Congress when younger. Sharada realised immediately that the position would provide her with an opportunity to develop her leadership skills. With the blessing of her father-in-law, Subhan Singh Pandey, she happily accepted the offer, although she admits that she had no idea what it would entail. She assumed that the Chairperson and Secretary would do all the pertinent work, and is candid that even now *"I am still not clear about the role of the members, RTAP, NGO, and TBSU."*

Sharada was educated up to grade 9, but was then forced to marry. Now with four children, she lives with her in-laws; her husband is working in Malaysia. Having once participated in a training conducted by Women Development Office, she has an understanding of women's rights. However, she comments *"It is easy to talk about women's rights in a training, but in practice it is very difficult. Look at me, I got married at the age of 15 and became a mother when I was merely 16 years old. I wanted to study, but my parents insisted on marrying me immediately after I menstruated for the first time. I gave birth to my second daughter when I was 19 years old and the women in the village began to torment me, saying that 'you must give birth to son otherwise your husband will abandon you'. Nonetheless, my husband and my father-in-law never demanded a son. I became pregnant for a third time and again gave birth to a daughter. In a fourth attempt, I finally gave birth to a son. I was so young and susceptible to the talk of others that I could not avoid getting pregnant four times just to give birth to a son. The mentality in our society is still the same."* Nevertheless, she added that *"having been trained on women's rights I have become conscious of my daughters' rights and I do not want them to experience what I went through"*.

With regard to the bridge users' committee, Sharada comments that after its formation in May 2016, meetings have been conducted three to four times. She attended two meetings, but was unable to attend the others due to short notice. She comments, *"I would like to express myself in the meeting, but when I see other women keeping quiet, I cannot speak up for fear of being accused of being talkative. Most of the men of the Committee are my relatives; some are my jetthajoo"* (In this she is referring to them being her husband's elder brothers or cousin, to whom Brahmin women are traditionally not expected to speak, or certainly not challenge, in public).

The example of Sharada and the appointed Nayabasti bridge users' committee Treasurer, Mina Kumal, clearly indicate an attempt to select women who can be easily manipulated. Perhaps in the choice of Sharada, this will not be so easy. She expresses determination to help women once the construction begins, *"I will motivate women members of the community to contribute to the bridge construction and I will ensure that equal wages are paid for equal work. And I will not allow any mistreatment against women."*

At a personal level, Sharada is excited about the bridge construction as her parent's village is on the opposite side of the river. Once the bridge is built, it will be possible for her to celebrate Teej (a women's festival) with them. *"I could never celebrate Teej at my parents' house in the 15 years of my marriage; now I will be able to!"* This aside, she is also aware of the opportunities that the bridge will bring. *"People living on the other side will have many advantages from the bridge as the main market, health post, and VDC office is on this side of the river. They will have easy access once the bridge is constructed, plus vegetables and honey will be easily accessible. I can't wait for the construction to finish."*

## Case # 16.

### Earning her own money

*Siddhi Devi Dhami (53), Labourer,  
Malekatha Bridge, Darchula*

Siddhi Devi Dhami works as a daily agricultural labour, as does her husband, Kalyan Singh Dhami. Although the couple are illiterate, they made sure their two daughters, now both married, received an education. When Siddhi heard about the construction of the bridge, she was eager to participate, especially as the construction site was near her house. As an unskilled labourer, she mixed the cement and carried it to the construction site. Men on the other hand would undertake skilled work such as breaking the stone, excavating the foundation, and fitting the bridge. There was no gender discrimination in the wages, neither was it unsafe or uncomfortable working with the men, because her husband worked at the same site. *“As unskilled labourers we were paid equally NRs 300 per day, and our [women’s] work was comparatively easier. I worked for 42 days and received NRs 12,600 in cash. This is the largest amount of money I have ever earned.”* For the first time she bought clothes for herself and food for the family with her own money.

Siddhi says that her confidence has increased as a result of her involvement in the construction work, as has her mobility. *“I can now go to the market on my own and return home on time”.*

## Case # 17.

### **Demanding a voice in bridge reconstruction**

*Sita Parajuli, Users' committee member,  
Kakahare Long Span Trail Bridge, Kaski District*

The Kakahare trail bridge was damaged by floods in 2014 and is currently being reconstructed. Sita Parajuli was an enthusiastic member of the original users' committee, and questions why community engagement has not been sought in the reconstruction process. The reason is that as a long span bridge, with a somewhat complex technical design, government regulations now stipulate that such bridges should be constructed by a contractor rather than by the community.

Sita recalls that when the first bridge was constructed, she and her fellow users' committee members *"worked very hard overseeing the work till late in the evening. Sometimes I would get up at 4 am to ensure that I completed all my domestic chores such as cleaning the house, feeding the cattle and cooking food, in order to make it to the users' committee meetings."* It was therefore a major blow when bridge was washed away in a flood. The bridge had made a major difference to those living on the right bank, particularly students who now have to take a detour of over one hour or risk their lives crossing the river to reach the Siddhibara High School.

When reconstruction work began, Sita arrived at the site, expecting to have some involvement. According to her, she and her fellow members had successfully completed the earlier bridge, which they had been told was technically sound. Furthermore, during the first construction process, they had conducted public hearings to share information and gather public support. *"Why don't you organise a public hearing?"* she asked the contractor. She has now understood that the contractor is not obliged to do so. Nevertheless, she commented that she personally will continue to keep an eye on how things go at the site.

## Case # 18.

### Generational differences in the perception of women's role

*Sita Pariyar (33), General Member,  
Nayabasti bridge, Arghakhachi district*

Sita Pariyar is an enthusiastic proponent of the Nayabasti bridge. According to her, *"Before, we used to face a lot of risks in crossing the river, especially during the monsoon. So, when I found out that a bridge was going to be built, I was really excited and wanted to be a part of the process."* She points out that the bridge allows safe access to schools, the market, and the health post. It is easier for women to go to the bazaar for business, and for pregnant women to give birth safely.

A meeting was held in the village in advance of the bridge construction. Sita attended, and when volunteers for users' committee membership were sought, she put her name forward. At this time she had no real idea of what such a position would entail, having never participated in any other development project. Nevertheless, her name was accepted as a general member. The members were designated various tasks, her responsibility being to check whether or not the labourers completed their work as required. She did her job diligently, but it was time consuming, and this created problems at home. She found it hard to balance her household chores with the time needed to oversee the bridge activities, and her father-in-law started to complain. *"He thinks a woman should only take care of her family, so after a while I just found it easier to stop going to the construction site rather than hearing him constantly complain,"* explained Sita. She further observed that her father-in-law was voicing a common perception in her community, that *"women will become bad if they start working outside their homes"*. She too is influenced by such ideas, stating that, *"[demanding] women's rights create a rift in the family; to some extent, a woman should behave as men expect of her."*

Whilst the bridge construction was on-going, Sita, her husband and their children moved into a place of their own. In her words, *"it was such a relief!"*. Her husband, who was working as a skilled labour at the site, was supportive of her involvement in the users' committee, so she could return to this work unhindered. It further helped that her new home is only three minutes away from the construction site, making it easy for her to oversee the construction work and keep records of who came to work and who didn't. She would go to the site after eating her morning meal and return home in the afternoon in time to prepare the dinner. Being able to simply decide matters with her husband, without the influence of her conservatively-minded in-laws, made all the difference.

## Case # 19.

### An independent woman

*Sunita Sherpa (32), Labourer,*

*Faklandtapu Bridge, Sunsari and Morang District*

Sunita Sherpa earns NPR 400 per day as a labourer on the bridge construction, and her priority in spending what she earns is her children's education. She herself only studied to grade 2, and wants better for her two daughters, aged 11 and 8. Her husband is away in India and "prefers to stay there" but he sends home money regularly. As such, it is not essential for her to work, but she comments, *"If I earn then I won't have to be dependent on my husband and he can't tell me what to do."* She stays with a relative, so doesn't need to pay rent, and has managed to save, she says, NPR 10,000 so far. She grins as she adds, *"I need to keep some money for myself"*.

Sunita is always on a lookout for work, and heard about the trail bridge construction from a neighbour. She has already been working on it for three months, and affirms that there is no discrimination between women and men labourers. The wage is according to each person's work, although according to her, the men carry heavier loads than the women, but get paid the same. She also works when menstruating. *"It was never a problem for me, I never stopped working just because I was having my period."* She has gained respect for her hard work from others in the community.

Sunita's daughters are old enough to manage for themselves. *"My elder daughter is a lot of help, she cooks, feeds the younger one, and they go to school. I don't have to worry when I'm at work."* She did have a challenge at the beginning, when *"we were paid after 14 days, which made it difficult for me as I incurred debt"*. Nevertheless, she dealt with this, and sees construction as attractive work. She has also worked as an agricultural labourer, but this is only seasonal, and the trail bridge *"pays me more"*.

Sunita is optimistic that *"once the bridge construction is complete, we will have access to everything and naturally this place will develop"*. Of course her current opportunity of paid labour will then be over. On this she says, *"I don't know what I will do, but I will keep working, because women need to earn to end discrimination we face in our day-to-day lives"*.

## Case # 20.

### Women taking the lead

*Tulasa Pokhrel (42), General Member,*

*Adarsha Bridge, Morang District*

The Adarsha Bridge users' committee was formed entirely of women. According to Tulasa Pokharel, *"Women always, unanimously, wanted to do something for the betterment society and to set an example that women are not inferior to men. So when the men from the community approached us regarding the bridge committee, we accepted the responsibility."* She added, *"There weren't any criteria for nomination, since all women were in the existing mother's group; we just nominated each other."*

According to Tulasa, there were no disputes within the committee, although they did face various challenges. Initially they had problems in obtaining construction materials, as they they had no idea about assessing the quality of materials. As a result, they purchased poor quality stones. Following this, they consulted with the men of their families, who advised them without any fuss. However, other people in the community accused them of being incompetent, and of mishandling the finances. *"This accusation didn't demoralise us or forces us into giving up the responsibilities that we had taken on. In the pubic audit, we clarified all the expenses made during the construction, with a break-down of every financial transaction."* The bridge construction was completed within the stipulated time, and the benefits are now enjoyed by the entire community. Tulasa reported with satisfaction, *"Women can now freely walk alone, be it early in the morning or at night."*

## **Case # 21.**

### **Earning more than ever before**

*Yashoda Lohar (Dalit) (59), Labourer,  
Chholabagar bridge, Dethala VDC, Darchula District*

Yashoda has worked as a labourer all her life. She lives with her husband, son and two daughters-in-law, her other son being absent on labour migration in India. There are also two grandchildren, one of whom is at school. She, her husband and her son all worked on the bridge, the construction site being close to their home. This was very convenient, said Yashoda, as it meant that she could take a break at lunchtime to cook the family meal. Being paid NPR 300 per day for 40 days, Yashoda managed to make a total NPR 12,000 from her work on the bridge; *“I have never made so much money in my life!”* she said. Slightly overwhelmed by such good fortune, she intended to use the money, she said, for general household expenses – for new clothes and for food.

Yashoda’s husband Gopal has also appreciated the opportunity to work on the bridge. Now 63, he used to go to India as a labourer, but it is far better to have paid work just on their doorstep. He too gained NPR 12,000 for 40 days of labour. Apparently each member of the family decided for themselves how to spend the money, rather than pooling it together.

## Case # 22.

### Disillusioned with bridge warden work

*Sabita Duwal (41), Bridge warden,  
Punyamata Bridge, Panauti District*

Sabita Duwal's husband was present at the general meeting at which she was selected to become bridge warden. She herself was not present, but he informed her. *"I didn't have much work then so I took the responsibility,"* she said. Her nomination made sense as their house lies close to the bridge. That was almost three years ago, and at first Sabita took care to clean the bridge, maintaining it through hiring skilled workers and spending her annual income of NRs 6,000 for this purpose. However, now she has stopped doing so, as she considers the bridge to be on the verge of collapse. *"We have asked for help numerous times. Sometimes they say there is no budget, sometimes there is some other excuse. I can only do so much and now I have starting working elsewhere, which gives me less time to look after the bridge"*. The amount that she receives as a bridge warden is now spent on groceries.

Her husband often helped with the bridge work, but she got fed up seeing the attitude of the people using it. She kept requesting them not to drop litter and to help keep it clean, but no one would listen. Even when workers were in the act of cleaning, she had to be persistent with them to get them to do their job. They would not listen to her, and her husband had to step in. *"Nobody listens to a woman! I tried, but it was only when my husband scolded them that they listened"*.

Sabita now has a different job, and both her children doing well in their studies. Thus her family situation is good, but she regrets the condition of the bridge.

## Case # 23.

### An inspiration to all

Parbati KC (50), Bridge Warden,  
Roshiko Bridge, Balthali VDC, Kavre District

Parbati KC was married at the age of 18 and bore a son, but when she was 21 her husband left her for another woman, and went to live with his new family. She has had no contact with him since then. Parbati never expected any help and has raised her son all by herself. *“Those were depressing days, but I did not let that bother me. My only concern was my son and how I would raise and educate him. I did everything in my power to give him a good life by rearing cattle and selling milk, amongst other things. I have always known that I could work hard and that was all I needed to stay strong.”* Her son is now a Bachelors graduate working in Kathmandu, which is one of the sources of income for the family other than farming.

Although her life was already busy, being selected as a bridge warden appeared to be a good opportunity. During the bridge construction she had worked as an unskilled labourer, and seeing her situation, the VDC chairman asked her if she was interested in the warden position. She agreed, thinking she would be able to earn some money. This was four years ago. Since then, she has combined the cleaning and maintenance of the bridge with her farming activities. There is a huge footfall, and passers-by sometimes throw garbage and swing the bridge. *“I scold them, but at times they answer back rudely. Other than that it is not difficult. I clear the branches that fall on the bridge, and if a screw or two become loose I ask my neighbour for help.”* However, she claims that she has still not received any money or training for the job. She appealed to the chairman, but *“Although they keep saying I will get it, so far I’ve received nothing”*. Nevertheless, Parbati continues to take care of the bridge, because, *“This is a responsibility entrusted by the society and I will continue to do my duty”*.

## Case # 24.

### Empowered through training

*Samni Sada, Treasurer, Ranipokhari trail bridge Users' Committee,  
Bakloura VDC, Sunsari district*

Coming from quite a poor Dalit family, Samni Sada lives with her husband and son. Although she only studied to class 3, she is nevertheless very active in her community. She is involved in the local Community Forest User's Group, the Drinking Water User Group, and is the Chairperson of a local organisation called Nari Sanstha. Having been selected as treasurer of the Ranipokhari Trail Bridge users' committee, she participated in the Community Leadership Training organised by TBSU from 7<sup>th</sup> June to 9<sup>th</sup> June 2016 at Dharan.

According to Samni, *"The training boosted my confidence and made me more aware of my rights and duties. I gained knowledge and skills with regard to trail bridges and leadership, which has helped me to be a strong person - especially in taking decisions. I have attended five users' committee meetings in total so far. My presence in the meetings has been effective as I was able to put forth my opinions, and to take part in discussions and the decision making process."* She added that there were no major issues in the users' committee meetings so far. *"All the members of the users' committee were in agreement and decisions were taken in consensus."*

Ranipokhari bridge is being built over Seuti river, and will allow the community on the far side to access markets. The users' committee is made up of nine members, of whom four (44%) are women. The first of phase of construction work has been completed and materials have been handed over to the users' committee. Samni claimed that she has also worked on the construction site as a labourer, but did so in a voluntary capacity.

Samni believes that both men and women have a role to play in development work. *"I feel that this type of training should be provided to all the executive members of users' committees - men and women. That is, the Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer."* As a final remark, she commented that, *"Seeing women engineers is inspiring. I feel that if women are committed, they can achieve their desires in life."*

## Case # 25.

### Empowered in her community activities

*Manisha Khalin (33), Treasurer, Kalsing bridge, Nayabazar and Pyang VDCs, Ilam district*

Manisha Khalin regrets that she had little chance of education, and has only basic literacy. Nevertheless, she is an active member of the local community, being involved in the Mother's Group, the Citizens Ward Forum, and the lower secondary school management committee. She was also selected to become the Treasurer of the Kalsing trail bridge. This trail bridge is under construction, and will be primarily facilitate access to the local health post and market. There are 11 members in the trail bridge users' committee, and women's representation is lower than the amount stipulated in the current guidelines, being 36%.

When she was invited to participate in the trail bridge Community Leadership Training, Manisha's family members, including her husband, were not enthusiastic and tried to discourage her from attending. However, she was adamant that she should go, and eventually succeeded in convincing her family.

Following her participation in the training, Manisha feels that her self-confidence has increased. She comments *"Now I can communicate, air my views in a mass meeting, and I am not afraid to travel to the district headquarters alone. My husband and family have changed their perception of me. My husband now says that I can do many things on my own."*

Manisha has attended six users' committee meetings to date. Materials such as the steel deck and bulldog grips have been delivered. Manisha says that she listens carefully to discussions during meetings, and if she does not agree on certain issues, she gives her reasons, explaining them to others. The decisions in the users' committee meetings are taken with everyone's agreement. She feels that she has gained the trust of the entire users' committee members and the villagers. However, she is also aware that some of the so-called elite living on the other side of the river do not participate in meetings.

Manisha has herself worked as a labourer at the trail bridge construction site, breaking stones. Payment is conducted on a quantity basis; thus, she says, there is equal pay for equal work and no one is discriminated on the basis of gender.

Manisha feels that the Community Leadership Training should be offered not only to users' committee members, but to all the women of the village, as this kind of training helps to bring out women's hidden talents. She suggests that follow up studies are done to assess the impact of the training. She strongly believes that men and women need to work together for any kind of development, and that as part of this, men need to help in domestic work as well.

*"My parents were poor and could not afford to educate me. If I had had the opportunity to study then I could have become an engineer too. But at least I will educate my two daughters as far as possible."*

## Case # 26.

### Empowered enough to make others accountable

*Goma Adhikari (40), Community Leadership Training Participant, Bagenighat Bridge users' committee member, Kapilvastu District*

A middle-aged Brahmin woman, Goma Adhikari was selected to take part in the Community Leadership training in Dharan in 2016. She recalls that the Chairperson asked her to attend as she is educated. *"I was told to take notes, so that I could later share my learnings with the others. It was the first training that I had ever attended, and I was a bit apprehensive about what was expected of me. But by the second day I realised that that I didn't need to be scared. The others [participants] were just like me and we had all come to learn."*

Goma remembers in particular the explanations regarding the roles and responsibilities of the users' committee members, and the support provided by the NGO staff. This knowledge was later useful once the construction of the trail bridge got underway. She also remembers being highly impressed by a fellow participant. Her name was Kusum Chaudhary, and according to Goma, *"She was fearless, talking with the sirs and asking questions."* Goma later found out that Kusum had taken numerous trainings and she assumes that this is how she got her confidence.

When asked whether the training had made a difference to her and to her interactions with the other users' committee members, Goma replied that it has been mixed. On one hand she has a better idea of what needs to be done, but on the other, it is sometimes not so easy to implement what she learned. She explained that, *"We learned that information boards need to be erected at the sites to ensure transparency. When I told the chairperson about this requirement, he said that he would do it – but it still hasn't been achieved"*. Goma also admitted that she could have insisted further on the matter, but had not done so.

## **Case 27:**

### **Accepting a passive role**

*Basanti Pal (45), General Member, Chholebagar bridge User Committee, Darchula District*

As a Thakuri woman, Basanti Pal does not undertake manual labour such as farming, fodder collection, grinding cereal grains, or carrying heavy materials from the market. These tasks are done by Dalits in their village. Thus compared to many rural women, she has quite a comfortable life. She lives alone with her husband, Uttam B Pal - their three children being away from home (two sons who are studying in Kathmandu, and a married daughter lives in Dhangadi). Her daytime occupations comprise housework, caring for the cattle, and watching the crops which are vulnerable to attack by monkeys. Yet she does not always attend User Committee meetings, stating that "My husband works as a teacher, and I am busy with household chores so I cannot participate much... When my husband is home [on Saturdays, and public holidays] I can manage to be in the meetings". It is apparent that Uttam supports Basanti's engagement in community activities outside the home, seeing women's involvement as a significant development trend. He commented, "Now each and every policy is in favour of women or has provision of the involvement of women. These days there are women facilitators who encourage other women to take part in development activities, thus increasing involvement of women in the development works". Basanti also reports that "My husband takes leave if I need to go far to participation in training or planning workshops".

Basanti claims that when her name was put forward to be a User Committee member, she accepted willingly. Nevertheless, her limited engagement in the work corroborates the comments of Dhana Laxmi Pal: the membership was decided by influential men in advance. On paper, the User Committee composition is socially inclusive, with three Dalits (including a Dalit Treasurer) and six women. Yet the real practice has been otherwise. The Dalit Treasurer is effectively illiterate, knowing only to sign his name, and decision-making has been controlled by the Chairman and a few other men.

It may be noted that Basanti's position as a User Committee member has now led to her becoming a member of the ward citizen forum.