

Interview with Sumitra Manandhar Gurung

Sumitra Manandhar Gurung has over 30 years' experience of working with integrated rural and development programmes, micro-credit, natural resource management and community participation of experience. She focuses on the inclusion of marginalized groups in the constitution making process in Nepal and had served as a member of the Screening Committee of Social Inclusion Research Fund (SIRF). Sumitra is also currently CEO of Mahila Sahayatra Microfinanfe Bittiya Sanstha Ltd., promoted by 100 women and four commercial banks dedicated to serve the remote areas of Nepal. She was also a co-founder and Chairperson of LUMANTI Support Group for Shelter (a non-government organization dedicated to the alleviation of urban poverty in Nepal through the improvement of shelter conditions. In addition to this she is a Steering Committee Member representing Civil Society in UNDP's Collaborative Leadership Development for Peace Process.



Can you tell us about your family background and your childhood memories

I was born in 25th October 1954 as the fifth child and second daughter of my parents Tirtha Narayan Manandhar and Narayan Devi Manandhar. I have one younger sister, so we are six children in total; three brothers and three sisters. My parents are local inhabitants of Kathmandu. My father completed his School Leaving Certificate, which at that time was impressive because very few people had formal education. My mother had no formal education, but could read religious scripts. It's interesting to note that all three daughters of my parents have completed our doctorate level of study, and one of my sisters is a medical doctor.

My grandfather was the first person to start a bicycle business in Kathmandu. I have heard that my grandfather was very revolutionary, and was the person who broke the trend of not educating daughters by sending his daughters to school for formal education. My grandfather had also helped

towards establishing democracy in Nepal by standing against autocratic Rana Rulers¹. He was a very social person. He made a great contribution in establishing the first co-educational school in Kathmandu, which was named Shanti Nikunja School. My grandparents were very religious and influenced by the habits of their parents. My father was also very socially, educationally and religiously active and aware. Our family is Buddhist and my father was very active at Anandakuti Bihar and other places which have a social and religious importance and value. Another important aspect of our living style was that we lived together as a family.

My parents did not differentiate between their sons and daughters, so I had equal rights with my brothers in my childhood. We didn't face any hardships or scarcities in our childhood from our parents. My routine was to go to school, come home, study, and then have free time. I grew up in Kathmandu, and was given full access to education and had a very positive childhood experience. I don't recall what my ambition were when I was a child. As we lived in Kathmandu, there was no outdoor work for us to do, such as looking after livestock as there is in village areas. I had good opportunities to study. I didn't care about household chores and I thought that my work was only to read and write at that time. After my intermediate level I was somewhat interested in medical science, which my sister pursued, but it was Geography that grabbed my attention and is what I chose to study over medicine.

My grandfather and father had a great role to play in encouraging my studies and creating a positive supportive environment and my mother also encouraged us all to study. So my parents were my main source of inspiration. Similarly my elder sister had always inspired me. Another person who inspired me was my English tutor, historian Bhuwanlal Pradhan who was a really effective teacher.

Can you tell us a little bit more about your educational journey?

After I had completed my SLC degree from Shanti Nikunja School in 1970, my father admitted me to Ratna Rajya Campus to study home science, but I had shown a strong desire to study Geography. So I decided to go to Patan Multiple Campus to study Geography at intermediate level, which I completed in 1973. By 1975 I completed my BA in Humanities and Social Sciences from Tri-Chandra College, Kathmandu. After this I took a Masters in Geography at Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal in 1978. My thesis was on 'Suburban Residential Development in Kathmandu'.

After completing my Masters, I gained a United Nations University Fellowship for a training programme entitled 'Highland-Lowland Interactive Systems' at the University of Colorado, Boulder in 1979.

Similarly, I had completed a MSc. in Human Settlements Planning from the Asian Institute of Technology; Bangkok in 1982. My thesis was entitled 'The Low-Income Housing Delivery system in Kathmandu, Nepal'.

In 1988, I completed my Ph.D in Geography from University of Hawaii at Manoa, USA, entitled 'Beyond the Myth of Eco-crisis in Nepal: `Local People's Responses to Pressure on Land in the Kakani Hills'.

A number of training courses have been extremely beneficial to me over the years such as gender-related training (1995/96) and the insights this gave me into the activities, plans, programs and laws through the lens of gender and development. It also encouraged me to work with women from marginalized groups and to keep them as a top priority. Others I have found useful include the Training on Practice of Appreciative Inquiry (Aug. 2000) and Leadership Development (1996) provided by Karuna Management. These sessions helped me to develop an appreciative attitude in my life and broadened my experience of leadership in organisations as well as in my personal life.

More recently I have participated in a number of professional training courses ranging from a Training Course on Constitution Making in Asia as a participant at the International Network on Constitutional Development which was supported by the UNDP's Regional Centre in Bangkok and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. In Greenland I was a participant on a training course named 'Indigenous peoples in the international system' by the International Training Centre for Indigenous Peoples (ITCIP).

I think I am lucky to have had these opportunities and to be exposed to different knowledge and skills as these are greatly needed in present day Nepal. In August 2001, I went Sri Lanka to enhance knowledge on 'Lobbying and Strategy' Workshop in preparation for WCAR (World Conference against Racial Discrimination). This workshop gave me an insight into how law and development are interrelated for the up-liftment of status of women, especially in Asia and the Pacific.

Who or what has inspired you in your education and career and what challenges have you faced?

As I mentioned before, I had a very supportive family from an early age. Not only in my childhood, but both before and after marriage my family supported me in my education and especially in my Higher Studies. It was only at the time of my marriage that my family, especially my parents, were not as supportive, but this was because I decided to marry outside of my caste. In 1981, instead of having an arranged marriage, I had a love marriage to Chandra Gurung who was from Sikles, Kaski, in Mid-Western Nepal. We married without the help and support of my parents. But we were

supported by Sangita Manandhar and Ramesh Manandhar at Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok. I was also supported by the professors of my husband during our engagement ceremony that took place whilst we were studying. After some years of marriage in 1985, we came back to Nepal and my parents gave their support and help to both myself and Chandra. Their support was important and helped me build my own self confidence and helped me in my professional career. We had two children; a son and a daughter. In 2006, my husband Chandra Gurung died by helicopter crash in Taplejung District. Today my son and daughter assist me and are an important part of my life. They are fulfilling my dreams of serving in Nepal than defecting to another country for works.

Can you tell us about the work you have been involved in and what you are currently doing?

After my completion of post-graduate degree, I have been involved in different professions such as an ethnographer in the UNESCO 'Mountain Hazard Mapping of Kakani' project from 1979-1981. I was also employed as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at the Department of Geography, University of Hawaii, in the mid-1980s and acted as a research intern with the Environment and Policy Institute, East-West Centre, Honolulu, Hawaii, from January 1987 to April 1988.

After the completion of my Ph.D., I have been involved in different integrated rural and urban developmental programs, natural resource management and community participation, through the perspective of social inclusion. I have worked for a number of organizations including Plan International and ICIMOD². At Plan International I served as Nepal's representative in Region of South Asia's Gender Action Plan (GAP) team. I was responsible for developing methods and strategies to internalise gender perspectives in mountain resource management and ICIMOD's research and policies for the region of Hindu Kush-Himalaya (Myanmar to Afghanistan) supported by the Ford Foundation.

At Plan International in the mid-1990s I developed, planned, implemented, and supervised a variety of infrastructure projects, education, livelihood, habitat, reproductive health and integrated programs with staff and community organizations targeted to children, adolescent girls and women using participatory processes to benefit 17000 families and their communities in the remote mountain areas. I also conceptualized, designed and organized 4 days residential Children's

² The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, ICIMOD, is a regional knowledge development and learning centre serving the eight regional member countries of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas.

Convention for 3350 children and mothers held at Huprachaur, Hetauda. Other programs include: adolescent reproductive health projects; indigenous herbal medicine projects, etc. I used my Geographical knowledge to adapt a Geographical Information System for community based participatory monitoring purposes.

Presently, I am the Chief Executive Officer of Mahila Sahayatra Microfinance Bittiya Sanstha Ltd. which is a microfinance banking organisation targeted to serve women and youth in the hills and mountains of Nepal. I am also the Chairperson of the National Coalition against Racial Discrimination (NCARD) and I have been serving as an Independent Development Consultant too. I serve on a number of committees, for example, I have been a Steering Committee Member representing Civil Society in UNDP's Collaborative Leadership Development for Peace Process since March 2010; I have acted as the Chairperson of Loktantrik (Democratic) Health Relief Fund (LHRF) since 2007; and I am also one of the founding executive member of Sankalpa, Women's Alliance for Peace, Power Democracy and Constituent Assembly (WAPPDCA), since 2006. I am also a member of the Sub-Committee on Indigenous Peoples formed under the Reservation Management and Advisory Committee of HMG and the Chair of the National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Peoples in Nepal (NFDIN). In 2004 I was appointed as an Advisor by the council of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN).

During my professional career, I have been greatly helped by my husband Chandra Gurung. Ramesh Manandhar was also of great support for my inter-caste love marriage. Similarly, I have received good help and support from my elder sister. I shouldn't forget my History teacher, Bhuwanlal Pradhan, for his inspiring lectures.

What do you consider to be your main achievements and what challenges have you faced?

I have over twenty years of experiences in integrated rural and urban development programs, natural resource management and community participation, through the perspective of social inclusion. I was involved in the field as a team leader, manager, consultant in multi-disciplinary teams, developing and implementing, evaluating and advocating strategic programs & policy reforms to change the position of the deprived and marginalized groups for alleviating poverty and ensuring their dignity in society. I have been engaged in the last 7-8 years in ensuring inclusion of the marginalized groups in the constitution making process. I have contributed to designing micro-credit programs and widening access to credits with the landless communities to ensure rights to land and shelter through policy reforms through my work at LUMANTI.

I feel one of my key skills is in working with multi-disciplinary teams to establish partnerships between civil society government and non-governmental agencies as well as multilateral and bi-lateral donor agencies³. I have managed and worked in various community projects, in India and Nepal to promote gender equity at all levels from practice to policy to help promote the social inclusion of the marginalized groups I think that I have contributed to the promotion of marginalized and 'excluded' communities, through my work, which is my main achievement.

I have been awarded a number of grants, honours and fellowships. Some of the awards that I have received over the years have been the Nava Devi - Karuna Award, Celebrating Womenhood, the Rashtra Bikas Sewa Samman by Civil Voice for Peace and Development and the Shanti ra Bikas ka lagi Nagarik Aawaj. I have been supported by a number of fellowships and grants over the years, the first being the United Nations University Fellowship for Advanced Research and Training in Mountain Geo-Ecology at the University of Colorado in 1979. In the 1980s I received an Altrusa Grant in Aid Scholarship Graduate studies in University of Hawaii and a research fellowship at ICIMOD to support my field research for my doctoral thesis.

Since October 2000, I have been the President of the National Coalition against Racial Discrimination (NCARD), which is an Alliance of Organizations formed by victims of racism⁴. Finally, I was also a Trustee of Nepal Vipassana Meditation Centre, Dharma Shringha, Muhan Pokhari, Budhanilkantha, Kathmandu from 2001- 2005 and Dhamma Pokhara, since 2008 to 2010.

About the challenges I have faced, well we face many challenges in life. Moreover, in developing countries like Nepal, one of the main problems is a lack of social security. Political instability has of course brought with it many challenges and has had a negative impact on the rate of development which is the next most important challenge for us all in Nepal. I have mentioned before that I have been Trustee of Nepal Vipassana Meditation Centre, Dharma Shringh, Muhan Pokhari, and Budhanilkantha for over ten years. This Vipassana Meditation has helped me to face all the challenges in my life. Due to this I feel that the challenges I have faced have not been obstacles for my ongoing career.

And what plans do you have for the future?

³ As well as organisations mentioned in this interview Sumitra has worked with Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), Asian Development Bank, AusAID, DFID, European Communities, GTZ, ICIMOD, Red Cross Society, SNV, UNDP, UNICEF, USAID, and the World Bank

⁴ NCARD was formed to implement a Declaration and Program of Action in Nepal to follow up the World Conference against Racism (WCAR), in Durban, 200

My main short-term future plan is to work in the micro-credit sector to give all those from deprived sectors, and females who have been sexually abused, equal access to financial resources.

In the long term, I am trying to contribute towards establishing Nepal as a multi-nation state. '*Multi-nation*' in the sense that Nepal is a diverse country and we need to ensure that in all fields of development there is equal access to all communities, religions, castes and ethnic groups, regardless of age or gender, to the country's resources and facilities.

Can you share with us any suggestions or advice for women in Nepal?

I want to suggest that everyone gets all the bad cultural and traditional beliefs and thoughts and that people support community justified ideologies.

For the women who are active as feminist workers in different movements, I want to say: please be practical in your day-to day life and ensure that your programs are available to all women. For the women at the grassroots level, I want to pass on this message please give some time to think about the status of the women in Nepal and follow your dreams, if you want to work outside of the household then follow this goal.

Nepal's Constitution is currently being drafted. All females should be aware of their rights and be ready to fight for equal rights in every sector. It can be disheartening that it is taking so long to draft the constitution but it is important that the constitution is prepared for and by Nepalese people and that it is then fully implemented.

Our country has many resources and yet so far we have not managed to put them to the best use. The resources we have should be used for the nation building process, which is the only way to be successful for Nepal's development.

Lastly, Nepal should be established as a multi-nation by respecting, protecting, and promoting the rights of every citizen, community, religion in order to have a more equitable and just society.

Qualitative Analysis in Action

Qualitative Analysis in Action provides open access to interviews undertaken with inspirational women of Nepal. In doing so it creates an environment where these women experiences can be explored, examining the gendered experiences of meanings of inspiration.