

Interview with Durga Sob

Durga Sob was just 10 when she realized she was from the Dalit, or 'untouchable', class of Nepal: 'I drank from a water pot that other people used, and by sharing this water, I'd made it 'unclean'. I was screamed at and chased away. I told my mother and she said: "God made us Dalit, that's just the way it is." It was then that I knew the pain of being a Dalit, and had to do something to change things.' The injustices experienced during her childhood in the remote village of Silgadi in western Nepal inspired Durga to found the Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO) to fight against caste and gender. Durga is an inspiration to all women who seek to challenge discrimination and work towards a more just society.



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

My father was a goldsmith and an inhabitant of Silgadi, Doti district, the remote village in the far western region of Nepal where I was born 3rd July 1966. I was born into a society that was 'backward'¹, lacking in development and with low levels of awareness within society and low levels of education. Generally at that time the culture of polygamy was not controversial. My father had two wives and I was the daughter of the middle one. He used to live in Bajhang District where he was an ironmonger working with gold and silver. My father had ten alive children from his two wives. My mother gave birth to more than ten children but now we are 4 children, myself, two brothers and my sister. My childhood was full of struggles and scarcities. At that time sons were prized above daughters. Once I was not breastfed for 3 days due to the pressure from the other

¹ 'Backward' is a term which is commonly used in Nepal and we have left it here as it is the word used by many of the participants. For a further discussion in terms of framing discourses around development in Nepal see Nanda Shrestha (1995) *Becoming a development category*.

family members. The focus was on feeding my brothers. When I look back at my childhood I can say that I was faced with many struggles from an early age just because I was female.

There was hardly any access to education or transportation, electricity or telecommunication facilities. My parents were both unable to read and write; however my brother, who was working in Kathmandu, was educated. At that time education was not seen as being important amongst the socially excluded groups such as mine, and neither boys nor girls from my caste were ever sent to school. I don't quite know where my parents got the idea from to send my brother and I to school. At that time it was not common to send daughters to school. It was only later that I found out that my brother had convinced them to send me to school. My elder sister was also educated and passed her School Leaving Certificate. Sadly, she died at a young age on her way to attend an examination of Public Service Commission (PSC) at Dipayal. She was washed away by a flooded river while crossing it.

I was the only girl in my school from the so, lower caste (Dalit) society. I was a hard-working student but I was never encouraged by my teachers because I was a lower caste female. I remember being very competitive even in primary school. I knew I was a good hardworking student but I felt isolated and marginalized not only by my teachers but also by my classmates. I was a forgotten victim of the prevailing untouchable caste system. Nobody wanted to play with me. I was not allowed to enter the houses of the children from the higher castes. Children used to sit far away from me. I was physically excluded.

I remember as a child that I always had a strong personality and often acted as a leader. I feel proud to say that even when I was in grade 7, when I was about 16 years old, I used to run classes for other girls in my village who were excluded from school. Because of this the girls were able to benefit from some informal education and after my classes many of them were able to read and write. I didn't just teach my friends but I also used to deliver classes for the mothers in my village in the evenings, aiming to teach them at least to be able to write their own signature. I was also active in my society in maintaining the environment. From an early age I used to lead community groups in social work activities. Luckily, despite the trend for girls to get married in my community at the age of thirteen or fourteen, I was fortunate enough to avoid getting married young.

As one of the key founders of the Feminist Dalit Organisation, can you tell us what your inspiration was and who has supported you on your journey?

My direct experience of being excluded by the traditional social systems and norms motivated me to challenge the system and wash all these prejudices away. I was also inspired and supported by my

mother who was convinced by my brother in Kathmandu to send me to school as I mentioned before. So I guess my mother and brother both equally inspired me. As a child I always dreamed of being a great woman but at that time I didn't know what profession would be the best to pursue. I used to think that it would be important to marry a great person if I wanted to pursue a good career.

After I had taken my School Leaving Certificate (SLC) whilst I studied for my intermediate level I was inspired by my teacher history Durga Shrestha. She was a good teacher and taught us History very well and I used to dream of becoming a history lecturer at Padma Kanya College in Kathmandu.

Many people have supported me and inspired me over the years. When I was applying for Padma Kanya college (PK college) I was helped by members of the Free Student Union. Later on I was also inspired by Hira BK who took me to work at Action Aid-Nepal on the Daily Wages System programme. Robin Morgan, a feminist writer from the United States, also had a great influence on me and my career.

I got married at the age of twenty six to my husband who is from Dang. We fell in love and then our parents arranged for us to get married so we say we had a love-arranged marriage. At that time he was a gold medallist from Russia, but couldn't find work for the first two years of our marriage. It was frustrating at the time, but after we settled in Kathmandu my family and my husband have been a great support to me. I would not be in the position I am in today without the support of my husband Dandiram Bishwakarma, my family and well-wishers.

So education has played an important role in your life, can you tell us more about your education?

After I had passed my SLC degree from Doti, I came to Kailali for further education. I got admitted to Kailali Campus for PCL level in Management Studies. During my studies I used to teach at a local primary school to earn some money to live off; however I was not given a regular salary. I enrolled onto an evening class to improve my English, as at that time my English was very poor. Looking back I had a very busy schedule. In the morning I used to go to college for my formal education, then to school as a teacher and again to take English classes at evening.

I couldn't complete my intermediate level there, so I came to Kathmandu in 1987 and passed the intermediate level through private exams. With the help of the student union I gained admission into Padma Kanya Campus in Kathmandu and completed my graduate courses in Political Science and History. It was after this that I became active in various acts of social and political work.

Currently I completed my postgraduate degree in Sociology at the Central Department of Sociology in Tribhuvan University.

Can you tell us more about your present position and other work that you have been involved in?

I am the Founder and President of the Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO) which started in 1994. It is the leading organization on caste and gender- based discrimination (focused on Dalit women) in Nepal. As President of this organization I am responsible for strategy direction, mentoring, networking, policy level advocacy and lobby, planning, evaluation, supervision and monitoring FEDO's programmes as well as developing policies. I am also responsible for organizing and attending different meetings, seminars, workshops, interaction, and training sessions. We also lobby and network with government agencies, private agencies, International and National Non-Government Organisations (INGOs and NGOs) in order to realize our aims

I was also the Member Secretary of the Government's National Dalit Commission, from 2002 to 2004. The Commission has been responsible for promotion of equal rights and social, cooperation with Government Organisations (GO's) NGOs, INGOs and civil society to create a favourable environment for the promotion of Dalit rights and upliftment (empowerment). It also carries out action research on policy issues, which address the strategic needs of Dalit's with the view to advance the status of Dalit's for a more equitable society and promotion of democratization by broadening the base of Dalit's participation in public life and supporting the full and equal participation of Dalit's in power structures and decision-making at all levels. Being the Member Secretary, I was responsible for taking charge of day-to-day administrative and financial management of the Commission, coordinating with other ministries, donor community, civil society and international Human Rights organizations. I participated in meetings, took minutes, and approved minutes which were all central to the Commission's performance.

Before this, I have also worked with the sponsorship office in Action-Aid Nepal, as a secondary school teacher in Jyoti Boarding English School and as an Education Facilitator in the Seti project in Doti, Silgadi. I have a number of alliances and networks that I am a member of; including the National Development Council, His Majesties Government, the Former President of Dalit NGO Federation (DNF), a network coordinator of Shantimalika (Women for Peace) and a Steering Committee Member at the Social Summit 2000. I also act as a member on a number of other committees such as the Women's Alliance for Peace, Justice and Democracy (SANKALPA), the National Women Peace Talks Committee who engage in meetings with the Government, the National Election Observation Committee (NEOC) and I am an Executive Board Member of the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) and Vice Chair of Dalit Asia Rights Forum (ADRF). I am an Executive Bureau Member South Asia for Human Rights and an Advisory Board Member for the

Nepal Children's Scholarship Endowment Program as well as playing as a board member and advisor in other numbers of the development organisations/institutions

As a lifelong advocate for the rights of Dalit women, I founded the Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO). I have been serving as the President of this organization since 1994 to the present has meant that I have had the main responsibilities for coordinating FEDO's programming, activities and policies as well as for organizing and attending various high level meetings, seminars, workshops and trainings. Currently, I serve on the Board of Directors of the International Movement Against all Forms of Discrimination and Racism- Japan (IMADR), I am a member of the National Development Council (government body), and formerly acted as an executive member of the NGO Federation of Nepal. I am member of Access to Justice Commission. My papers and articles have been printed in local, national and international publications on a regular basis.

I have had the opportunity to attend workshops and present papers in preparation for both the Third and Fourth World Conferences of Women and to participate in the NGO forums at the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing, as well as the Beyond Beijing +5 and Beijing +10 Conferences, and the World Congress against Racism Meeting in Durban. Through my work as part of the National Election Observation Committee I continue to seek respect for Dalit and women's rights to fully participate in post-conflict peace-building process in Nepal. This advocacy is also carried out through my work as a core member in the Women's Alliance for Peace, Power, Democracy and Constitutional Assembly, and a national network of Women for the Peace-building Process. This wide range of experience has also meant that I have been involved in numerous creative and innovative approaches to secure sustained funding for initiatives that focus on social inclusion, participation and human rights of women who have been systematically excluded both in the past and today in post conflict Nepal.

During my all these works I was helped and supported by my mother and brother. When I started working I was very much helped by Dandiram Bishwakarma, my husband and my mother.

What are the main achievements in your life and the main challenges you have faced?

If I talk of my personal achievements then being an empowered female in Nepal is a great achievement especially in the context of Nepal. I have already mentioned that I am the former president of Dalit NGO Federation (DNF) and had contributed to the upliftment and empowerment of Dalit's in general and this is, I feel a significant achievement. Similarly I was able to serve different

marginalized women, mainly from Dalit communities who have been excluded in our society. I like to think that I have done something to help improve the situation for these women.

Through my work at FEDO, we have been able to educate and raise the awareness amongst Dalit females of their rights and work towards their empowerment. I am very happy to inform you that one of our members, Kalawati Paswan, has become a Government Minister in Nepal.

I had to work hard and fight to establish the issues of Dalit's in the minds of different political parties. I feel that I have succeeded in this to some degree and feel that I have been successful in my work. Those who worked at the administrative and legislative level weren't ready to hear about Dalit issues, but now they are more aware through my efforts and through the work of FEDO and other organizations. Now I am working at the grassroots level to raise awareness of gender equality issues and I believe I can achieve my goals. Dalit females are now practically equal citizens in our society and I am proud to have played a part in this change.

Talking about the main challenges I have faced, well it has been very hard to work for the promotion of Dalit rights in a country like Nepal. Female activists face grave risks to their lives and property as there is a lack of security. We are currently working to reduce and abolish violence against women. It has become a serious issue and one that needs challenging because the number of cases of violence against women are increasing day by day. The political instability of Nepal and misuse of people by politicians in Nepal is another vital problem for the development of Nepal. Politicians need to work for the people and not just use them to gain office. This problem needs addressing.

What are your plans for the future?

The main objectives I have for the future are as follows:-

I plan to continue working on women's issues in a more effective way and continue to work to establish the rights of Dalit women and other women.

I want to establish the knowledge centre and girls hostel for Dalit and marginalised women.

I also plan to work to promote social inclusion.

We have much more work to do to guarantee the rights of females within our society. If I get support and help from other sectors then I plan to reach out to policy makers.

I am fully confident that I am able to work in an administrative position to handle and run the country in an effective and well managed way and I plan to take part in the politics of Nepal.

Can you give us your suggestions for women in Nepal or share some advice for those who are inspired by your work?

We should make all females feel that they have the capacity to do something positive within society and within the nation.

All females should feel that they are equal citizens of this country. I want to say to all women that we are equal to men and we should not forget this!

All females should be able to challenge any violence towards them.

Women educators should create a different syllabus for female education in Secondary and Higher Secondary education that helps promote a more equitable 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.