

Interview with Lily Thapa

After becoming a widow at the age of 29 Lily Thapa, with the support of her mother, continued her education by studying Gender in Sweden. She now lectures at Tribhuvan University but is better known for her work promoting the rights of widows in Nepal. She was the founder of Women for Human Rights in Nepal and won the Ashoka Fellow for the Best Entrepreneur Award in 2007 for her work in this field.



Women for Human Rights

This organisation is a single women group (WHR), established in 1994, is a Non-Governmental Organization actively working for the human rights of the single women (widows) in Nepal. It has been dedicated to create an active network of widows across the nation, regional and international level. WHR aims for an equitable society where widows are respected and can live in dignity with sufficient social, cultural, economic, legal and political rights. WHR focuses on five working areas which are Socio-Cultural Empowerment and Movement, Economic Empowerment and Mobilization, Justice, Human Rights and Peace, Local Governance and Institutional and Organizational Development with 99% focus on widows.

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

I was born to a middle class army family. My father Human Singh Basnet was an army General and mother Baba Basnet was a typical housewife. I am the eldest child amongst five children of my parents. I spent my childhood in a joint family so there were about forty children in my extended family who were the same age as me. I was quite lucky and I passed my childhood having lots of fun visiting various parts of the country. Since I was in a joint family I spent a lot of my childhood playing with my friends who were a similar age to me. After passing my school leaving certificate I went on to gain a Masters in Sociology from Tribhuvan University and then completed my post graduate studies in Gender Studies from Luleo University in Sweden.

What were your ambitions when you were younger and who has inspired you?

When I was a child I wanted to become a successful teacher and I am happy that that is my profession now. My mother has always been my main source of inspiration. My life story is a little bit different as I married an Army doctor when I was seventeen and had my three sons at the early age when I was nineteen, twenty and twenty two respectively. Unfortunately my husband died I was twenty nine in the Gulf War of Iraq in 1991. So at a young age I became a widow. The perception of the society and the personal attitudes of people in society are very negative towards widows in Nepal. The attitudes are very conservative and negative which makes it hard to be a widow, especially a young widow in Nepal. My mother revolted against the society and took me back to my maternal home with my three children. At that time my youngest son was only three years old. It was my mother who encouraged me to continue my education and go to Sweden to study. I went to Sweden to do Women Studies and my mother cared for my three sons for me in Nepal. So my mother has supported me and made a great contribution to the position that I am in today.

Can you tell us about your work and your present position?

At present I am acting as president of "Women for Human Rights" and I am founder president of the institution too. I am also currently lecturing at Tribhuvan University. My main focus of the work is to serve widows of Nepal through my work at the Institution of Women for Human Rights. I started this organization in 1995 to serve single women in Nepal and now its members have grown to 140,000 women in all of Nepal's seventy five districts and development regions. We now have regional offices in five development regions of Nepal.

When a woman in Nepal becomes a widow, she not only has to suffer the loss of her husband but she also has to face many prejudices in society. There are special conservative and different traditional rules that apply to her. She is not only considered as different from other women as she has no husband but is also considered as a carrier of bad luck within society. Typically among Hindus, widows are told they must stay in their husband's family home with strict rules and regulations applied to them as to what they can and can't do. They are stigmatised within society. In addition, the women are considered inauspicious and they are not allowed to participate in many religious functions. They are not allowed to wear red clothes as this colour is a sign of being married and is considered to be a lucky colour.

Now I am working to address this problem within our society as it marginalizes women who, through no fault of their own, have become widows. We work in a sensitive and respectful manner using our

connections within communities to identify and contact widows. We send a trained social mobiliser to their homes to invite them to a meeting. The single women who participate in these meetings realise that they are not alone. With my fellow colleagues in the office I have started advocacy campaigns, savings and credit programs, and created partnerships with other local civil society organizations and government agencies. I am helping to put the issue of widowed women in Nepal onto the government agenda. This office has initiated such programs such as 'Red Colour' program to encourage widows to wear red clothes in Nepal. In similar ways many widow groups have become organised and they are engaged in different economic and social activities like the catering business, agro farming, and handicraft production.

Through my work the issues surrounding single women have been addressed by government plans. I consider this as positive steps for the advancement of single women. I have received help and encouragement from various individuals and organizations. My mother has always helped me to live a full social life and to follow this work. Rita Thapa also inspired me by encouraging me to establish an organization to work for the widows. She provided US\$1000 from the Global Fund for Women to establish this organization which is something I will never forget. She helped me to understand how to establish and organize an institution based on the experience of TEWA (an organisation committed to promoting equitable justice and peace that was founded in 1996). Today my organisation is getting lots of support from international agencies which help with the day to day operation of the office.

What are your main achievements and what challenges have you faced?

One of the great achievements I believe I have achieved for the widows institutionally are that the issues of widows have now been recognized and have been addressed by the government in their planning and budget formation. Many policies that are widow friendly have been passed by our parliament. Nowadays it is much easier to gain access to a passport and other official documents for widows compared to before. Monthly allowances are also being provided to widows now by the Government. The main achievement in my opinion is that our office has provided a role model for widow empowerment for the rest of the world and not only in Nepal, and this has been achieved by us women ourselves as widows in our society.

With regard to the main challenges the greatest one we face is changing the negative perception and believes of people within this society. It is very challenging work to get rid of these types of traditional and conservative cages. It is also rather challenging work to collect the resources for the work of widows.

What are your future plans?

I plan to reach all the Village Development Committees of Nepal through our institutional network to serve widows till 2015. We are requesting that the United Nations appoints a special reporter for widows. WE are jointly working with an organisation called Sankalpa to help us reach and serve many minorities, disabled, single women, and more. I have future plans to continue and extend such joint programs.

Do you have any suggestions for women in Nepal?

If the cause is right, then the means will come. Also I'd like to share this, Heal the Past, Live for the Present and Dream about the Future.

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