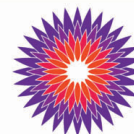




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# HER STORIES



**CDWN**  
CENTER FOR DALIT WOMEN NEPAL



# Ismita Harijan

"You can love me, you can hate me, but you can't ignore me," says 31 year old Ismita Harijan, an elected Dalit women representative from Jagannath rural municipality in Nawalparasi. "I'm not a perfect woman but I try to give my best when it comes to serving my people as a respectable figure in my ward," she says.

Ismita's journey began when she decided to run for election in 2017. She knew absolutely nothing about politics before she was elected. None of her family members were involved in politics. Madhesi women tend to be very passive. They don't ask questions, nor do they talk back to men and they never argue with men. That's how women are supposed to behave publicly in the Madhesi community.

"The position of women in politics has always been miserable, even though half the population is women," says Ismita. "Madhesi women's participation in every sphere of life is almost invisible."

She won her seat through sheer luck. "My opponent and I got the same number of votes. 713," she remembers. "The election committee had to choose one winner for the seat, so they did golapratha: putting two names in a box and drawing one. That was mine. That's how I won the seat by luck."

Her first days as a ward member were quite frustrating for her, but she was tireless and enthusiastic. She regularly went to the ward office and learned many new things through meetings and she was invited to a training organized



by CDWN where she learned about how to better perform her duties.

For example, she has a clear understanding of the value of her signature and won't sign any document before carefully reading it. And people are starting to take her more seriously. "People have started acknowledging my opinions," she says. "I am actually very satisfied now that people have started respecting me and the issues that I raise concerning Dalit communities," she says smiling. "People in my community keep on asking about development issues such as roads, water distribution and education. And these are things I have to think about these days. I should be able to answer their queries," she said.

Generally, Dalit women representatives in the Terai are very passive and are often deprived of the chance to perform their duties. Ismita recalls an instance when she had to sign her name to decisions made during a meeting, which she had attended but did not know much about.



"Since I raise women's issues in the ward, women come to me with their problems trying to convince me to allocating funding for them." And she has. She conducted a program targeting Dalit and marginalized communities in her ward using money she had included in the budget and she also found funding for livelihood skills trainings for women. Furthermore, she has been advocating for girls education and women's health programs in her community through several other projects.

Ismita was new to budgeting when she started, and as a result was criticized by her community for not raising issues of Dalit women. "Male committee members used to suggest that we focus on development issues, like roads and infrastructure," she recalls. "But I started insisting that awareness programs are equally important to bringing change to society."

"I am satisfied with my work. I am engaging with women and Dalit people," says Ismita. She thinks women feel more comfortable in the ward now that it has woman representatives. Ismita is making an effort to improve her society so that women and men are treated equally. In her opinion women are still second-class citizen and can't exercise their freedoms like men can.

Although she doesn't have much of an education, Ismita's social network is strong and her reputation is growing. Ismita used to think that only upper caste women could get a seat in local government since past ward committees never included Dalit women, especially Madhesi Dalit women. But she sees the changes that the Election Act is bringing to her community. "This historic representation of Dalit women has to be respected and their role should be

expanded to give them even bigger responsibilities.' Ismita says.

Ismita believes that the ward members need to carry out their duties even if they feel as though they don't have the proper skills. "Women should take the initiative instead of waiting for someone to instruct them," Ismita says. "CDWN has also provided me with a mentor whose aim is to strengthen our capacity by supporting EDWRs like me," she explains "I often call my mentor and share my problems; the problems can be personal and political sometimes. It's a great approach because it lets us interact with each other and talk about roles and responsibilities. I feel like I am learning so much about my work every day."

Ismita gets agitated as she describes the many stereotypes and criticisms of elected Dalit women representatives. There are some who claim that their presence on the committee is a gift given to them by senior leaders; others insist that they do not understand party politics because they lack formal education and don't belong in politics; still others want the EDWRs removed because 'they can't think critically or independently' and they only follow what others suggest. These attitudes, Ismita says, are really damaging because they discourage women from participating in future elections.

"We might not understand all the politics or responsibilities that we are supposed to, but everybody needs to understand that we are learning and we will grow by learning by doing," Ismita says. "Dalit women face discrimination every single day of their lives, but this only makes them stronger. Because of this and their unique capacity to solve problems with limited resources, their leadership is invaluable for Nepal."

## Saraswati Pariyar Nepali



"Unless a child cries, a mother does not know it is time to feed her. Likewise, our federal system does not act unless we demand solutions to our problems," says Saraswati Pariyar Nepali, an elected Dalit women representative in Butwal, Rupandehi in Nepal.

Along with more than 13,000 women across the nation, Saraswati was elected to the ward committee. "People need to raise their voices and ask questions to representatives like me, because people are the most powerful drivers of social development. Unless and until people bring their problems to us, we

can't help them promote social development” she says.

The PEER project, supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in four districts in Province 5, aims to give voices to women and marginalized communities by providing training to newly-elected Dalit women representatives. Saraswati was one of 300 women getting training through the Center for Dalit Women Nepal, a national non-governmental organization that works towards eliminating gender and caste-based discrimination.

Saraswati recalled when she first heard about the Election Act of 2015 that set a mandate to elect at least one Dalit women in each ward. Saraswati had never really been involved in mainstream politics before, but she knew she wanted to run for the position of ward representative. It was really difficult to convince her family to allow her in taking part in the election. But her husband, who has been working abroad for years, supported her decision and encouraged her to run.

"I was practicing my speech in front of the mirror every night at my house," Saraswati recalls. "I moved my hands a lot to get the attention of people, so I could make an impression on the audience. My daughter told me she was going to shoot a video of me while I was practicing because I looked like a dancer in front of the mirror," she goes on. "That comment really made me smile, and I kept practicing my delivery," Saraswati remembers.

However, the changes her new role has thrust upon her have not always been easy. As a Dalit ward member, Saraswati remembers those early days were quite challenging for her, having to balance the needs of her family with her new responsibilities to the community. Previously, Saraswati had had a

reputation for being a skilled seamstress, and she made her living sewing dresses for women. Women would often come to her house and give her fabric to make nice dresses for them. "But now, she says, "they also come to ask me about road construction, health issues and education."

It used to make her nervous when people came to her seeking advice, but she has embraced her new role, handling all manner of community issues. "People have a lot of expectations from me. I listen to them and try to find solutions," says Saraswati. "My life has been transformed since I was elected," Saraswati says. "Suddenly I have a lot of responsibilities towards the whole community. My family has accepted that reality."

Many of the skills Saraswati needs for her role as a leader and voice of a marginalized segment of society she is getting from the PEER project. Saraswati understands that although she finds herself in a position of influence, without the technical skills and the confidence to be an effective leader, she risks letting down her community. "Expectations in my community are very high, especially in the Dalit community which community I represent in my ward", says Saraswati.

The Center for Dalit Women Nepal, through the PEER project is helping women like Saraswati become informed and effective leaders in their community. "It was really difficult in the beginning," she says. Without the necessary skills, she felt out of place in her new role, but she devoted herself to learning about her roles and responsibilities. Now, along with 300 other recently-elected Dalit women representatives, Saraswati is attending a series of trainings that teach them the ins and outs of local governance, including planning and budgeting, persuasive speaking and how to write articles.

Saraswati feels more comfortable now. She learned about planning budget and allocation through trainings provided by CDWN, an area that was completely new to her. “All women should know about budgets and planning,” she adds. “It’s a really good skill that all women should have.”

This new knowledge helps her set aside a budget for women-related programming every year. Although shy initially, she now actively participates in local planning and budgeting. Last year, she managed to allocate a significant portion of the budget for education for Dalit women and an awareness program that highlights issues facing Dalits in the community. Saraswati is particularly proud of this last program. “It is so important to make more people aware of inclusiveness and development,” she says.

Saraswati has so far attended five rounds of training through Center for Dalit Women Nepal. She even went to a series of writing workshops where she has been learning about how to write articles and stories. She is particularly excited about creating her own stories and advocating for women’s and Dalit rights through her writings in the future.

At the same time, Saraswati realizes that she needs support. Speaking generally about women representatives, she raises the issue of how to deal with political struggles and problems within the ward. “There are times when representatives need to debate and compromise with other ward members,” she says, and she isn’t yet confident navigating political bias and other hurdles while dealing with other political leaders.

The new constitution and federal system is an important step in developing Nepal, but it is not enough. Real transformation will only happen when we

bring the changes into the people's lives in a way that improves their day-to-day lives. As Saraswati says, women's representation in local government alone is not enough. Women need to be leaders, not only in wards and municipalities, but at all levels of government. They should aim to run the central government and the nation!



## *Sangita Dhobi*

“There was a frantic search for Dalit women candidates to meet the requirements of the Local Election Act. I did not come from any political family background, but I knew some neighbors who had been active in party politics. I did not have personal connections which could have played an important role in securing access to an electoral seat.

“They say that women who already had ties to men with political power benefited the most. I was completely lost, but with the support of my husband I decided to run for the position of ward representative in my village, Behtani.

“Even though I won and became an elected Dalit woman representative (EDWR), there was still no guarantee of protection against gender and caste-based discrimination that women continue to face in my village. But people started paying more attention to my existence in the village. People used to avoid us Dalits, and didn’t even want to have tea with us at public events. But now people give me more respect, greeting me and asking how I am too.

“My life has changed in small ways from being a regular uneducated woman to respected representative.

“As an EDWR, my first objective to create a casteless society, where Dalit people are not criticized and shunned just because of their caste. But eradicating the caste system is not an easy job. We need to raise awareness



among our people. People are uneducated and have no idea what is right and what is wrong. Women, especially, are deprived of education. I am a fortunate woman who has the support of my family members and is working as an EDWR in my ward.

“Many male politicians make comments to us, like ‘Women can’t do politics. They are made for doing household chores.’ says Sangita.” In her opinion, politics requires power and money, and the freedom and time to go places in which only men can engage themselves in such environment.

For Sangita, the biggest struggle is to running expensive operations like road improvements, development and water programs. She has been trying to learn all these skills from other EDWRs. Her mentor, Hema Harijan, has been encouraging her to learn all those skills necessary to succeeding in politics. Mentoring is one of the activities conducted by Center for Dalit Women to build the capacity of EDWRs.

Sangita is tired of hearing the saying, “If there is a good husband, the family flourishes; if not, it won’t.”

Sangita feels that the mandate to include Dalit women in local government has symbolic value because it introduces diversity into the federal structure. But in her opinion, focusing on creating gender equality is more important in today's society.

Sangita had difficulties as in gaining the acceptance of her peers. In previous years, non-Dalit leaders didn’t even invite Dalit women like her to public functions and programs. She even struggled to participate and contribute to meetings. Still, she makes sure that others don't make decisions in her

absence. There is budget planning and allocation meeting every fiscal year, and Sangita has been successful at lobbying for budget allocation for programs for Dalit women. This year, two lakhs has been allocated for a women’s capacity development program through her initiative.

Dalit women representatives see their situation as a holdover from the past, with political elite looking down on them as though they were still their laborers. Hence, non-Dalit leaders do not think it necessary to share information with Dalits or listen to their views.

Gaura Nepali, a tireless worker for Dalit women for the past two decades and current chairperson of the Centre for Dalit Women Nepal, says, “Dalit women aren’t invited to meetings because they ask non-Dalit members to read out the minutes before they will add their signatures. They demand too many explanations. Consequently, Dalit women are deprived of their basic human rights while exercising their rights as people's representatives.”

What we are seeing is that while Dalit women representatives are becoming more aware of their positions and the power that comes with them, many non-Dalit leaders have also begun to push back in an attempt to preserve the status quo. As long as this situation exists, no one can claim that Nepal has become truly inclusive.



# Nanu Kumari Gandharva



Nanu Kumari Gandharva is an elected Dalit ward representative (EDWR) as well as a member of the Judicial Committee in Rambha rural municipality of Palpa district. She frequently goes to her palika and discusses problems and opportunities with other members in the ward. She has received a lot of praise for her participation in the Judicial Committee decision-making process. “I realize the value of my signature and I always work for the welfare of society,” she says. “I try every year to allocate funding to benefit women.”

Nanu Kumari is not only the ward member representing the Dalit woman. She is putting a lot of effort into creating a casteless society where Dalits are treated as human beings. She thinks Dalit women suffer twice: once because they are women and again because they are Dalit.

Almost three years ago, when Nanu Kumari was elected, it all seemed very surreal to her. She had never wanted to become a political figure and had never been into politics before. But the Election Act gave her the opportunity to run, and now she is a ward member.

At first, Nanu Kumari was unfamiliar with the restructured federal system and how things work in the ward committee. Her first year was quite unsuccessful in her opinion, because she could not perform her duties in a meaningful way. “I didn’t engage in one serious discussion with the other ward committee members,” she says. “I felt excluded from the decision making process.”

But Nanu Kumari learned as she went along, and kept asking the other ward committee members questions about her role. As an elected women representative, she has always felt that her contributions should be recognized, not only signature.

These days she has been entrusted with many responsibilities. She is a respected member of the Rambha rural municipality. She makes plans, implements and allocates budgets and asks other members for the welfare of her village. She has even been entrusted with the responsibility of being a member of the village judicial committee.

Nanu Kumari says Dalit women representatives need to take the initiative on

their own rather than asking for support from other members in the ward. But, she notes, they need skills development and trainings regarding leadership. That's how Dalit women are enhancing their knowledge and adjusting themselves in new federal structure of governance system.

Nanu Kumari thinks that if elected Dalit women get the training and other support that she has gotten, women can bring a lot positive changes to society. She has demonstrated her own ability to use government resources efficiently, improve the delivery of government services, and discourage corruption. "But the support of Dalit women needs to be scaled up to increase their performance in local planning, budget allocation, and local administrations and legislature," says Nanu Kumari.

Sometimes, Nanu Kumari feels that prejudice against women makes women feel vulnerable. Local prejudices reinforce the idea that women were born only to do household chores and have no place making decisions for society. Thankfully, this is not an attitude that Nanu Kumari experiences in her own home, unlike many women. Her husband is very supporting of her work and

helps her to understand the problems she faces every day. She feels proud to have such a nice husband in her life.

Nanu Kumari's husband says, People mock me, calling me her driver since I always give Nanu Kumari rides to the meetings and the ward office. People think I'm worthless, but to me, people who think that way are the worthless ones."

But her husband thinks helping his wife along every step of her life is worthwhile. He goes on, "My wife is just a Dalit ward member now, but I predict that she will be the chairperson in the next election."

Her husband's support motivates Nanu Kumari to succeed as a ward member. It inspires her to do more. In fact, she has been successful at allocating money for the welfare of the Dalit community in her ward and for the preservation of traditional practices and jobs of Dalit people.

Nanu Kumari has found that the other elected representatives have a very limited understanding of gender equality and social inclusion issues. To make representatives more sensitive and responsible they need to understand the need to act on issues of women's empowerment. "I am happy now when I get the chance to discuss issues like gender equality and women-friendly budgeting in my ward," she explains. "And nobody can ignore me and the issues that I have raised because I am a member of judiciary committee too!"

She adds, "Women have to know about budget planning and local political issues so that we can act strongly in a meaningful manner because attendance only is not enough," she says "Participation is a must for an inclusive society."



# Sabitri Devi Harijan



“Climbing to the peak of success is difficult for women, especially Madhesi Dalit woman like me. But I am continuing to climb all the same,” says Sabitri Devi Harijan, a 32-year-old elected Dalit woman representative from Bargadhawa, Nawalparasi.

Sabitri was very scared when some big political leaders asked her to take part in the local election. She was not comfortable joining political campaign for votes. She was not even educated; she had left school when she was in class three.

Her head was always covered by a veil, just like her life at home. She was not allowed to go out and make decisions about anything. Nobody was interested in her, not even her own family. She lived like a servant in her own home, doing household chores for family members. Except servants are paid.

“There is no respect for women who take care of children, do all the household chores, go to the fields and farm the family plot,” Sabitri says. “And in return for all our hard work, we are told that we are not as smart as men,” Sabitri says with a sigh. “It doesn’t matter how much effort I make. Women always fail in the eyes of society.”

In spite all these challenges, Sabitri has not let anything get in her way of succeeding as an elected Dalit woman representative. When her husband asked if he could nominate her as a candidate in the local election, she accepted it.

Her first days at the ward office were very difficult for her. She didn’t know how to act with people and knew nothing about navigating the formalities of bureaucracy. Her father-in-law had been killed during the Maoist conflict, so political leaders from the Maoist party wanted to pay their respects to her family by nominating her. Sabitri didn’t care about the politics of the party, nor was she comfortable doing what the Maoist party said. “But the chairperson of the ward organized a meeting and oriented me on women’s and Dalit rights and why they need my candidacy for the local election,” she recalls. The chairperson explained to her that as a representative, she would not only represent Dalit women in the local government but would also send a positive message to society, that Dalit women can be elected and can do things for social change.



In the end, the chairperson convinced Sabitri to run for office. He even supported her in the campaign and asked her what skills she needed to become a happy woman. Sabitri won the election and became the first elected Dalit woman representative in her ward.

The next day, people started to wave to her and greet her with respect and smiles, something that had never happened before. Sabitri began to get a lot of attention from people in her community, and she started listening to the public's concerns.

"I dropped out from school when I was in class three, but people are like books for me," Sabitri explains. "I learn from them and get so much important information from them." Sabitri talks a lot with local people so she understands whether she is succeeding as an elected woman representative. People often come to her house and share their opinions. Sabitri used to hate those kinds of conversations, but she thinks talking with people give her an easy way forward. She has realized that any sort of discussion is good for brainstorming and now finds it easy to talk to ward members. She even asked for funds for women and marginalized people in her municipality.

There are usually three meetings she attends at the ward office every month. Sabitri particularly loves discussing local development. They discuss issues like how do we increase the number of girls going to school? What kind of programs do women and Dalits need?

"It used to be that all my conversations were with my family members about what to cook for dinner," Sabitri says. "But now I have discussions with members of my community about what they need. It's great to be discussing

such important issues for my people," Sabitri says with a smile.

Sabitri has gone through five trainings run by Center for Dalit Women Nepal that have helped to clarify the roles and responsibilities of elected representatives and build their confidence. Sabitri is currently engaged in advocating for Dalit and women's rights in her community, and people are listening.

She feels a deep sense of responsibility to her constituents and makes it a point to visits people's homes to resolve disputes.

One area she would like to improve is public speaking. She likes the way big political leaders are able deliver speeches to large crowds, and she hopes to learn how to do it herself. "One day," she says, "I will give a speech in front of five thousand people on women's rights. I hope that day comes soon!"

# Shanta Nepali



“Don't you dare treat me like a second-class citizen! If you do, you will regret it!” Shanta yelled at one of her colleagues at the ward office when he tried to intimidate her. Shanta remembers many confrontations with men, not only at the ward office but also at home and around her neighborhood. Sometimes she feels Nepali women were born to fight with men. If they didn't fight with them, she reasons, they would have no rights at all in life.

At the age of 41, the undaunted Shanta Nepali was elected to the position of Dalit ward representative in Sandikharka in Municipality 10. And she wasn't nominated to run in the ward-level election just because she was a Dalit woman. She ran because she had spent her whole life in politics. Everyone who knows her in her community is aware that she is a fearless woman. Fearless in a way that shows that she doesn't feel inferior to men just because she is a woman. Fearless in the way that she doesn't blindly accept everything the male ward members tell her.

Shanta joined politics as a member of the Nepal Communist Party when she was a teenager. She was very active in the campaigns and protests organized by the party, whether the issue is domestic violence or citizenship in the name of the mother.

“I am not a good woman in the eyes of my society, because good women take care of the house, prepare food and do what men tell them,” Shanta says. “But I don't follow men, I follow myself,” she says with a smile.

“Men in my ward usually say that women should be patient and nice to everyone, and that they shouldn’t argue over small issues,” she says. “I disagree with them.”

When the political leaders were considering nominating her for the election, she was not their first choice. The leaders wanted to name their wives. But Shanta argued her case, telling the party leaders that she deserved the candidacy since she was not only a Dalit woman, but also had lots of experience in politics. In the end she was nominated. She knew who her voters were and by her calculations, there weren’t enough for her to win. She was certain that she would lose in the election. But she was in luck: people believed in her abilities and cast their votes for her and she won. It was the happiest moment of her life. Shanta has been confident ever since she was a child. She always questioned her parents and teachers when they say confusing things. “I’ve been fearless since birth,” she says. “I never hesitate to argue with people if I need to.”

It was not hard for her to interact with people and listen to their problems, one of the most important roles of elected woman representatives. What bothers her is that she can’t make decisions independently. She often argues with the ward chairperson. “I can’t buy even a meter of wire without the approval of the chairperson,” she explains. “You can imagine how difficult it is for me to make decision about other things.” Shanta sighs.

Shanta knows what Dalit women are facing these days in her society. Endless caste discrimination is a major issue in her ward. Women are vulnerable. They must ask their husbands for money. Shanta wants women to make money by themselves.

She helped to allocate a budget for a livelihoods program in her ward that would help achieve that. “But that alone is not enough,” she says. “We need big changes.”

Shanta has been advocating for women rights for years. Whenever she participates in local programs, she has lot to say to the men. Rather than teaching the men to support women in our society,” she says, “we should be teaching everyone how men can support women to be empowered,”

When Center for Dalit Women Nepal ran a series of training sessions in her area, she was one of the first to be trained. ‘Budget Planning and Implementation’ was the most useful, she recalls, since she didn’t know much about budgets before. “It shouldn’t only be the NGOs that provide trainings on such important topics,” she says. “Our government must also orient us regularly to enhance our capacity.” Shanta has some suggestions for the government. “Allowing Dalit women to participate in elections shouldn’t only be about creating a more inclusive society,” she says. “Help us to become empowered and skilled so that we can play our part in running the nation! Furthermore, too many women representatives don’t know anything about creating a gender-responsive budget. They should be oriented on that too,” she adds.

Shanta believes that to reform local governments, women representatives must be capacitated on budget planning and implementation. Each municipality should be required to set up a system to orient women representatives on financial management systems. Shanta suggests creating an independent body that looks at existing gender gaps and forces the local government to make gender-responsive budgets that create a gender friendly environment



# Srijana BK



Srijana has been working as an activist against women violence and caste discrimination for years. And although she has been affiliated with a single party for twelve years, she never felt the party respected her feelings or supported her as a female politician. So, she decided to leave the party and join another. She was heavily criticized for her decision. Some senior leaders said, “Removing a few buckets of water won’t empty the ocean. The loss of one Srijana doesn’t make much difference for the party.” As she remembers their reaction, her 12 years of contributions and loyalty forgotten in a few minutes, Srijana cried a lot and was depressed for months.

The new party, thankfully, welcomed her with open arms and even suggested she run for local office. She was introduced to many politicians, young and old, and many of them asked her to become the elected Dalit women representative. Eventually, Srijana decided to run and asked her friends and people in her community to vote for her. A short while later she won the election and was appointed the elected Dalit woman representative in her ward.

On her first day at the ward office everyone was very pleasant and welcoming, greeting her with a smile. Srijana immediately loved the environment. She got to talk to the all staff at the ward and the chairperson briefed her on the responsibilities and rights she holds as elected representative.

But she didn't know much about budgeting and finances, so she attended trainings held by Center for Dalit Women Nepal where she learned how to plan and budget programs for Dalit, women and marginalized communities.

Srijana has been successful at allocating funds for women, Dalits and marginalized communities. Srijana explains that women are not as free as men in Nepali society. For example, as an elected representative it is very difficult for her to enjoy a social life like men. When she goes out and meets with male representatives, people imply that she is a loose woman. Good women don't go and hang out with men who aren't family members.

Srijana feels that being an elected woman representative is only symbolical representation. It makes the local government appear more inclusive, but in reality, women are still struggling to wield decision-making power equal to the men. This is especially true when she has to justify herself to the chairperson and other representatives why they need to make plans and allocate funds for Dalit women. Why only road construction is considered development? Isn't women's empowerment and awareness social development?

Srijana tries giving justifications for all these issues and she never tires of raising women's issues during meetings in the ward and municipality. Srijana doesn't think women should stop fighting for their rights until they get all the rights they deserve.

Some ward members don't appreciate her presence at meetings, but Srijana says, "In fact, I go to the ward office almost every day. It's my

duty to attend all the meetings and provide meaningful participation, even if my presence bothers them, right?"

When Srijana brings innovative ideas, most of the ward members laugh at her, but not because her ideas are stupid. Rather, the reason is that Dalit women are stereotyped as uneducated and ignorant, with no real role to play at ward meetings. "They ignore me and treat me like I am only there to sign documents without reading them," Srijana says. But, she thinks, that's just life as an elected woman representative. She is sick and tired of hearing that she should focus on roads and water systems instead of women's and Dalit issues. Nonetheless, Srijana believes that focusing on women and Dalits is a more meaningful contribution of elected Dalit women representatives than the more conventional focus on infrastructure.

Srijana also got the opportunity to participate in a series of writing workshops provided by Center for Dalit Women Nepal. When she can't talk to people directly, she expresses her anger through writing. She is very grateful that she got the chance to sharpen her writing skills through CDWN's PEER project. She has started writing her stories down.

Srijana is also an executive member and works as a coordinator of six subjective committees. As an executive member she holds more power than even the chairperson. She also lobbies for budgets that funds activities for women and marginalized communities.

Srijana wants to become the mayor of her municipality in the next election so she can make decisions in the future.

# Sushila Kumari Harijan



“There was a big fight between the men of our ward office about whose wife should run in the local election,” says, Sushila Kumari Harijan a 33 year old, the elected Dalit women representative from Suddodhan 1, Rupandehi. “Our own husbands who were fighting and arguing about us without asking what we thought, without informing us!”

The fight was not about the men involved, it was about women, their wives. The husbands were having conversation about their wives. The wives who were completely ignorant about the whole affair. When Sushila's husband told her that she had been selected to run for election, she was both shocked and scared. Shocked because she did know what was going on and scared

because she now had to take part in the election. What else she could do except agree to the candidacy?

Sushila's father-in-law was a respected politician so people from her neighborhood at first suggested that his wife run for election. Sushila's father in law, on the other hand, wanted Sushila to become the elected Dalit women representative instead. He said, “My wife has gotten old, and so have I. Our country needs young people, like my daughter-in-law.” The ‘New Nepal,’ in his opinion, requires not only political change, but also new leadership through young women.

But at the time, Sushila did not know anything about the new federal structure of government nor about the importance of women’s leadership. But she liked the idea of political change through young women.

That particular phrase – ‘young women’s leadership’ – ignited her imagination, and she accepted when her husband and father-in-law asked her to run.

Sushila remembers the days of campaigning, when she had to go out and greet everyone, asking them to cast their vote for her. She was a very shy woman; she never spoke to any men apart from her husband. And she didn't have the confidence to tell people why she needed people's votes; it wasn't just because she was shy, she just honestly didn't know what she could do for people if she won. She was under a lot of stress and just wanted to quit and give up trying to become a politician. But fate had something else in store for her.



She won the election and became a representative of her ward. She did not know much about her responsibilities and spent the first year of her job learning. She started taking part in local discussions. Other ward members invited her to attend meetings and so she attended the meetings. She started going out more, meeting people and listening to their problems.

“I accepted the fact that I could not make big changes in my community,” she recalls. “But a little change in my own life are also a meaningful change for society. I am no longer a shy woman. I talk to people and listen to their problems and concerns. So I can't remain shy like before. Being confident is not a choice, it's a need now.”

Sushila had never been outside of Rupandehi before, but after her election she regularly travels. This has exposed her to new places, new communities and new people that she never met before.

Sushila strongly believes that knowing the culture and people made her smarter at thinking about society and knowing society means knowing politics. Along with other recently elected women representatives, Sushila attended five training sessions provided by Center For Dalit Women Nepal. Those trainings have improved her knowledge about her job and responsibilities and boosted her confidence to perform her work.

“I have learned so many skills through CDWN's trainings and know how to apply them in my working life,” says Sushila. Before she was elected, people

in her community hesitated to talk to her. But now they ask questions about road development and local construction projects. She feels responsible for local development.

Sushila's life has changed dramatically from a simple woman to a respected elected ward member in her village. She has allocated 12 lakhs for various programs for women, Dalits, marginalized communities and minorities. At one point, Sushila talked about having to ask her husband for money to run the household. These days she doesn't ask anyone for money. Instead, if she needs to get something done, she allocates a budget for the welfare of the community. She didn't realize the power of elected women representatives until she used it. She now believes that once women hold power they will know how to utilize it without abusing it.

Winning the election and representing her community on the ward committee is Sushila's proudest achievement. But her journey has not ended here; she intends to gain more power and change her community even more than she already has. Sushila thinks more women need to take leadership positions in local government. She urges all women to run for the chairperson position in the next local election. The more power women have, she reasons, the more social development will occur in Nepal.

“I may succeed as an individual,” she says, “but collectively we are powerful.”