

Demonstrating that Women Can Take the Lead in Bridge Building



Dila Chapai, secretary of the user committee, inspects the quality of the sand at the Chaur Khola bridge site.

Dila Chapai is taking a leading role in constructing the Chaur Khola bridge in Surkhet, Karnali Province in Nepal. She is also breaking gender stereotypes by challenging the common perception that bridge building is a man's job.

"I am the most active member of the user committee," Dila says proudly while surveying the work at the bridge site. "I have been providing support and advice to construct the bridge."

As the secretary of the Chaur Khola user committee, Dila participated in the Demonstration Model Bridge Training conducted by the Trail Bridge Support Unit (TBSU) of Helvetas Nepal. Dila says, "At the training, I learned about bridge building, how to manage the construction process, and to be aware of the quality of bridge materials. Now I supervise and provide advice to the laborers."

She has also participated in the Women's Leadership Training organized by TBSU/Helvetas. This training is solely for women user committee members and focuses on strengthening their confidence and motivating them to be active participants in bridge construction.

Dila says the five-day training allowed her to talk with women from different parts of the country and share

experiences. She credits the training with reinforcing her learnings about bridge building, boosting her confidence, and making her aware of her duties and rights. She says, "I was never shy, but I also wasn't vocal. During the training we were encouraged to express our points of views, and I have continued with it."

Following the trainings, Dila continued to learn about different types of complementary activities, such as opening a bank account, receiving funds and making payments to laborers – tasks she now performs to support her user committee chairperson. Her other duties include arranging the transportation of construction materials, keeping attendance records for laborers and working with the treasurer to maintain accounts.

These are time-consuming tasks that require her to be away from her household duties and three children, which has not been easy. Nevertheless, according to Dila, she has been able to balance the workload with the support from her husband and in-laws. She says that this has been crucial in enabling her to perform her duties, and she is very grateful that her family is understanding and encourages her to be active.

After witnessing her dedication and mobilization skills, Dila is now regarded as a role model in her community. Women look up to her and ask her advice. She has also been encouraging other user committee members (55% of whom are women) to be more active and express their opinions during the meetings – though it is not always easy. Dila notes that women, especially from marginalized groups, find it harder to be vocal due to prevalent social norms. But she is optimistic and says that she will continue to be a proactive and vocal committee member, and will encourage others to do the same.