

FEMINIST VOLUNTEERISM : STORIES FROM NEPAL

UN Women Nepal
Volunteer as Programme Support Officer
(Women's Economic Empowerment)
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In a nutshell

From cluttering prayer flags against the Himalayan backdrop to concealing wild tigers in the plain Terai, Nepal presents itself as a mystic charm to behold.

In its recent history, it has persist through the savage civil war, catastrophic earthquake and the making of a modern federalist nation with a constitution that puts forth an vision of an equal society. Though the new governance has pave the way for 14,000 women to be elected in all three tiers of government, the work on ensuring gender equality and women's empowerment is far from complete. Such that the issue of *chhaupadi* (women being banished into a mensuration shaft for reason of impurity), despite being outlawed, is still prevalent.

UN Women works towards a gender equality mandate, and in Nepal, it mainly works on inclusive governance through increasing women's political leadership and inclusion of gender-responsive provisions, and women's economic empowerment through skills-based projects and engendering macroeconomic policies. Based in the valley of Kathmandu, UN Women Nepal also work on violence against women/girls, transitional justice, leading coordination on gender work.

In the proudest way possible, my assignment with them has further emboldened my identity as a feminist and has grounded me to empathise in the local realities - *think intersectionality*.

LEADERSHIP IN VOLUNTEERING : THE ROLE

In the capacity of a programme support officer with the Women's Economic Empowerment unit, my main responsibility revolved around leading a programme design component and supporting programme management. For project design, I was tasked with introducing and piloting digital innovation in a uplifting women in value chains programme. Innovation being the buzzword in current development discourse has both its utility and distraction.

With UN Women, the work on innovation started with understanding the current challenges faced by women at the local level in gaining higher value in the product chains. Main hindrance in their empowerment in value chain was the limited access of information, network and market, with the over-arching issues of discriminatory social norms and restrictive business practices.



UN Women Nepal Team during 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence 2018



Interviewing one of the beneficiaries for the digital innovation project component

As a result, a desk review on gender gaps in agricultural value chain was conducted and through meeting different women/labour/agricultural organisation and stakeholders, I was able to understand the issue and the problem scope in-depth. Furthermore, I was given the opportunity to go a field mission in a project site to interview current beneficiaries to recognise the level of digital literacy and access to mobile technologies at the grassroots level. After synthesising findings, a mobile application design solution was drafted which aimed to improve information dissemination and provided business tools in-app. My seniors at UN Women saw the potential and drove me to take leadership in advancing the project, of which, gratitude is all I have.

The value of leadership (regardless of what do you and who you are) was evident, together with other youth colleagues, we were encouraged to established a team to lead forward initiatives in engaging with youth with a gender lens. We initially started with small probing survey called to understand the gender perspective. After an enthusiastic feedback from the office, we planned a research on youth perceptions on gender equality in order to inform our programmatic interventions and to engage youth better. Furthermore, I was the co-chair of an internal change management task-force - "*The Care, Leadership and Human Dimension*", we took several initiatives in trying to ensure work-life balance, promoting an healthier office culture and open the discussion for leadership amongst the office.

In supporting the communication effort of the Nepal office, I undertook responsibility in leading social media, visual communication design, content curation and supporting campaign management for the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence. Through this experience, some of my accomplishment came in forms of a draft presentation of the 2019 Annual Work Plan and a gender-based violence orientation package for provincial parliamentarians that was done with them during the 16 Days campaign.

16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence Campaign in Nepal, 2018



"Males must understand that showing concern on women rights and fighting against violence on women and girls is guaranteeing on the safety of their own daughters and sisters, wife and mother."

- Maya Gurung Manangi, Women Human Rights Defender, Kaski.

16,016



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The Mandatory Struggles

Ridden with acronyms, development jargons and imposter syndrome, the first few months with the respective can tough - you also might want to add cultural differences to the mix.

Understanding the development and the UN world is a tough task to start with, it has its own processes and language. Patience is great a tool to navigate in the beginning, also remember to put yourself out there to ask questions, get clarification and be proactive in your learning. The burden of tasks will build of course, ones has to utilise support from team members. Remember, attitude is a vital value when it comes to growth.

The cultural spar will come to play as well, but switching perceptive is important here. Do not think of it as a hurdle but rather a platform to tackle ignorance and challenge your world view through dialogue and engaging with cultural experiences.

Look inwards as well, through the chaos, one gets lost - I know I did, still do. A key thing I learnt from my mentor here in Nepal (Country Rep of UN Women) is that have the value of *self-directedness*. It encompasses self-awareness, self-monitoring and self- correcting. Constant reflection and questioning is a handy buddy in your growth, befriend it.

Value of Volunteering

In the current political and social discourse, more often we bear witness to failing institutions and the biggest catalyst has been the societal numbness and passiveness in the world around us. It is of utmost importance that we collectively take ownership of the current state and the future to come. Yes, it is important to read, to organise, to become an activist. Volunteering, though underrated, is an experience that embodies ownership to society and a commitment for a better self and also a better world.

Remember to converse with people of opposite spectrum, engage in community work and READ, READ, READ!





Take Ownership, Understand the World Better, And Volunteer.

Some of the photos taken as a UN
Women Photographer

