

"I WOULD LIKE TO BE INVOLVED, BUT I JUST DON'T HAVE TIME"

Nepal's new 2015 constitution guarantees full and equal rights for women, giving them formal equality with men. Yet in practice this status remains barely imaginable to most Nepalese women. This article considers the extent to which the provisions of the constitution are reflected in the government's trail bridge programme, which provides remote rural communities with vital access to schools, health centres and markets.

By Mona Sherpa, Ansu Tumbahangfe and Jane Carter*

The rugged mountainous terrain of Nepal has long impeded access to rural communities, and hence development opportunities. Although rural road construction has proceeded apace in recent years, many citizens still travel by foot, along winding trails rendered long and hazardous by gorges and ravines. Trail bridges are an important means of shortening distances and making travel safer. There are now over 7,500 in the country, with up to 500 more being constructed each year (see also article in Rural 21, No. 1/18).

The Swiss Agency for Cooperation and Development (SDC), with technical assistance from Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, has supported trail bridge building in Nepal for over 50 years – initially through direct implementation overseen by Swiss engineers, and subsequently by training Nepalese engineers and assisting with policy and guideline development, in part through a community-based approach. Nepal's trail bridge programme is

now fully government-run, with technical assistance being provided by Helvetas staff from the Trail Bridge Support Unit (TBSU), a body still financially supported by SDC.



Meetings can take place at short notice, and this lack of notice makes it difficult for the women members to attend.

Mina Kumal, Treasurer of the Bhorleghat Bridge user committee and Dalit woman, Arghakhachi District.

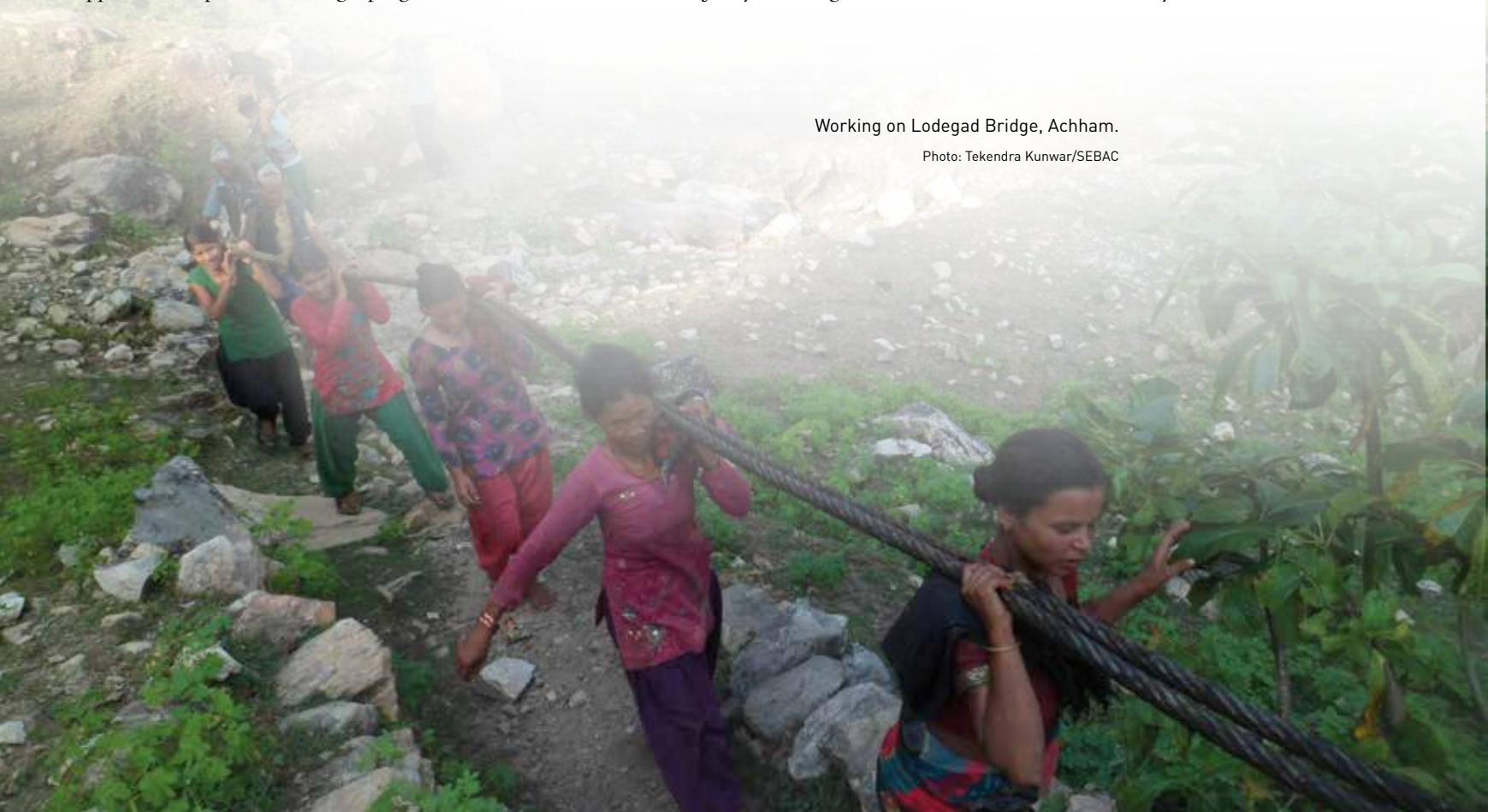
Some ten per cent of trail bridges are so-called long-span bridges; they are technically complicated and constructed by private contractors. The vast majority of bridges, so-called

short-span bridges with a length of less than 120 m, are constructed under a community-based scheme.

The Nepal government's Trail Bridge Strategy 2006, Trail Bridge Sector Wide Approach Frameworks and Directives II 2014 and the User's Committee Guidelines 2012 provide the legal foundations for the bridges. Bridge construction is preceded by a process facilitated by a local NGO, in which the primary future users of the bridge are identified and organised into a user group with a user committee. Meetings of the user group are called to take broad decisions regarding the planning, implementation and maintenance of the bridge, whilst the committee has responsibility for ensuring that construction proceeds in line with the agreed government budget allocation and time-frame. It is the committee members who order materials, ensure that workers are hired as required, and liaise with government officials as necessary.

Working on Lodegad Bridge, Achham.

Photo: Tekendra Kunwar/SEBAC



Although Nepal has undergone considerable social change in recent decades, society remains strongly patriarchal and hierarchical, especially in rural areas. Men dominate decision-making, whilst members of so-called “low castes” or Dalits and indigenous groups (Janajatis) have faced systematic discrimination in the past and still live with the effects – both material and psychological. The government recognises the need for affirmative action to address this situation; one example in this regard is the use of quotas for women’s and Dalit’s representation in last year’s local, state and national elections. The Box outlines the government provisions for promoting women’s and Dalit’s engagement in the trail bridge programme.



Women fitting a steel deck on Ghurswaghat Bridge, Kanchanpur.

Photo: Resham J Singh/TBSU

HOW GENDER PROVISIONS ARE EXPERIENCED IN PRACTICE

Over the period August 2016 to April 2017, a group of Helvetas staff, including the authors, conducted a small study funded by ReCAP (Research for Community Access Partnership) to investigate the extent to which the trail bridge programme contributes to transforming gender relations in Nepal. Being present or past members of TBSU, several members of the group have extensive knowledge of trail bridge construction.

The idea for the research was prompted by awareness that trail bridges are generally assumed to have an equally positive impact on men and women, although post-construction studies have indicated that this is an over-simplification. Men tend to use trail bridges for access to markets and services; women are more likely to use them in performing domestic tasks, such as accessing fodder and fuelwood. Nevertheless, figures showed a growing number of women in user’s committees. The overall target of 40 per cent women in user committees now tends to be met – but there was little or no data available on the extent to which women were able to influence committee decision-making, i.e. exert their agency.

As part of our study, we first considered the relevant legal frameworks and the rules, regulations and guidelines established for their implementation. We then examined practices in the field, focusing on nine bridges. Here, we collected information through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with local women. We also interviewed other key informants – especially government officials and local NGO and project staff – and verified

our findings through a consultative workshop with national-level stakeholders.

Quotas for women

"Now each and every policy is in favour of women or has provision for the involvement of women..."

Uttam B. Pal, husband of Basanti Pal (of the privileged Thakuri caste), Chholabagar bridge users’ committee member, Darchula.

We broadly expected user committees with a higher percentage of women to have a higher degree of women’s engagement and influence. However, almost the opposite was the case. Amongst the bridges visited, there were two examples of all-women user committees, but in neither of them were the women highly empowered. Rather, we found that women-only committees can be used as a means for others to exert control “behind the scenes”. Of course, this depends on the awareness and knowledge of the women concerned, but it was striking that one of the user committees with the lowest number of women members reported the most inclusive decision-making. The reason behind this was the active support of the men involved, who were both family members of the women concerned, and the male members of the user committee.

Women’s unpaid care work

"We (women) carry the stones at the construction site, mix the cement and earn some money, so the people have started

to realise that women can work on a par with men. However, the situation is still far from being equal. Before going to work, I cook, feed the children, get them to the school, and finish the rest of the household chores."

Pavitra Tamang, Phaklantapu bridge user and Janajati woman, Sunsari District.

It was clear from our investigation that the greatest factor inhibiting women from participating in trail bridge construction – either in decision-making positions or as labourers – is, simply, time. Women’s unpaid care work is in direct competition with time required for engagements outside the home. The absence of many men on labour migration often further adds to the domestic workload. Those women who participated most successfully in trail bridge activities were all helped by family members – men and/or women – through a redistribution of domestic tasks. In addition, user committee sensitivity to women’s time poverty, i.e. organising meetings at times convenient for women, also proved to be an important factor. Conversely, arranging meetings at short notice was perceived, and in some cases clearly used, as a way to exclude women.

Leadership training for women and men

"This was the first time I left my house for another place. I was scared initially, wondering what would happen, but when the training began I was at ease. I can now go anywhere I want with confidence, and put my views across without hesitation."

Sangita Ghimire, Adarsha bridge warden and woman of the privileged Brahmin caste, Morang District.

Traditional social norms discourage women from being outspoken, so training in public speaking can be very helpful. Community leadership training is offered to user committee members through the TBSU, and those who had attended such sessions expressed their strong appreciation. However, it was found that many eligible individuals were unable to participate because the timing clashed with other commitments or due to family restrictions on mobility, incompatible care responsibilities and similar reasons.

Social facilitation of trail bridge building

"We make sure that there is involvement of women in the committee, and also in one of the executive positions at the time of planning. During construction and maintenance, we also make sure that poor people and women get employment opportunities."

Purna Bahadur Mahar, President (and Dalit man), Social Welfare Society (NGO), Darchula.

Under the current guidelines, a local NGO provides both social and technical facilitation of bridge planning, building and maintenance. The performance of these NGOs is monitored under a system that covers both technical and social aspects, but focuses on the former. It is thus perhaps not surprising that the NGOs themselves place greater emphasis on technical matters, generally limiting their facilitation of social aspects to ensuring that the rules outlined in the Box are followed. The team concluded that whilst the letter of the regulations was being followed, the spirit was often lacking – that is, the true and active participation of women and disadvantaged groups was not systematically facilitated by the NGOs.

Improving women's wages

"Women labourers are unable to participate in skilled work because they are not trained. They only worked as load carriers and as unskilled labour."

Govindi Odha, general user of Chholebagar Bridge and Dalit woman, Darchula.

We found that the principle of equal pay for equal work was generally known and usual-

CHIEF CURRENT GENDER MAINSTREAMING AND SOCIAL INCLUSION ELEMENTS IN TRAIL BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION

Pre-construction phase

- All potential users – men and women – are invited to a public hearing.
- Users' committees are formed, comprising at least 40 per cent women.
- Women users' committee members are provided with demonstration model bridge training.

Construction phase

- Community leadership trainings are held for women users' committee members.
- Employment opportunities are targeted towards disadvantaged groups, including women.
- Equal pay for equal work is upheld, and all labourers are covered by a group accident insurance policy.
- Public reviews may be called to assess progress and explain any deviations from the plan.
- A public audit is conducted on completion, presenting the full expenditure.

Post-construction phase

- Women are prioritised as bridge wardens for routine maintenance.
- 40 per cent of bridge maintenance committee members are women.

ly respected. However, most women did not earn the same amount as men as they were only ever employed as unskilled labourers. No specific training programme exists to give women the competences that would class them as skilled.

TAKING THINGS FORWARD

The above points are among our main findings, and we are taking them forward by advocating the following:

- continued support for quotas of women in user committees, but set at 50 per cent rather than 40 per cent, in keeping with Nepal's constitution;
- awareness about women's time constraints and explicit provision to address this through, for example, child-care facilities at construction sites and mandatory minimum advance notice of meetings;

- a greater focus by NGOs on social issues in the facilitation of community-based bridge building;
- continued community leadership training, with repeat offers for those who missed out on earlier opportunities;
- skills training for women labourers to qualify them for tasks paid at skilled wages (as currently offered in some other Helvetas-supported projects).

Overall, what this translates to is a transformative change in societal attitudes towards women and their role. This means moving from women being confined to the home and expected to defer to male authority to becoming active, respected and equal participants in the wider community. In a radical upheaval of its political and administrative system, Nepal last year became a federalised state, transferring local decision-making authority to 753 rural and urban municipalities. It is these municipalities that are now responsible for trail bridges in their locality. It is to be hoped that they will champion the socially transformative processes recommended above.

Mona Sherpa was Deputy Country Director, Helvetas Nepal from August 2014 to April 2018. During this time, she directed the organisation's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) programme in Nepal, as well as managing the programmes of Good Governance and Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management. She conceived and led this ReCAP study.

Ansu Tumbahangfe is a member of the Trail Bridge Support Unit (TBSU) in which she is the Result Monitoring and Reporting Manager. She worked for TBSU over 2007–2009, and after pursuing other professional challenges, re-joined the team in October 2014.

Jane Carter is the International Programme Adviser at Helvetas Nepal and has worked for Helvetas (and its earlier part-parent organisation Intercooperation) since 1997. She has a long-standing interest in Nepal, dating back to her doctoral research in the late 1980s. Contact: Jane.Carter@helvetas.org

* With input from Niraj Acharya, Helvetas Nepal, Professor Dr Devendra Chhetri (retired) and Indu Tuladhar, Independent Policy Analyst.

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