

CARE Nepal – Contributed by Joy Shiferaw

This narrative offers a few highlights of the struggles and the solutions experienced by staff in addressing gender equity, and some important concluding lessons about the implications of these experiences on addressing caste equity, and CARE Nepal's overall changing role in development.

Background

In May 2001, a CARE USA team visited CARE Nepal to gather staff perceptions and points of view on the gender equity and diversity work undertaken by the organization. Upon interviewing several staff it was clearly evident that most were very appreciate and knowledgeable about gender equity and diversity issues. As staff described CARE Nepal's story they began by stating that an influential beginning to broadening staff engagement with these issues was the critical role the Country Director in 1993 played in raising gender equity as an organizational priority, and the subsequent target in the LRSP to advance gender equity in staffing by 30%. These heated LRSP discussions pointed to the reality that as CARE Nepal's programming evolved from a single sector - infrastructure development in remote areas of the country - to an integrated program implementation approach, issues faced by disadvantaged groups needed to be a focus for development strategies to be successful. Expansion into the health sector brought more women into the work force, and remote sites which were once never conceived as suitable for women, were now being staffed by women.

Today, the goal of 30% women in their staff has been reached. But, the story does not end here, because clearly this effort implied more than just increasing numbers of women in staffing. As the interviews continue, we learn from the Assistant Country Director, that as CARE Nepal begins to be more explicit about its emphasis on social change and transformation not only gender but caste inequity must be a priority. Dalits make up 20% of the population and are considered to be the lowest caste in the hierarchical caste system, and have been historically, socially, culturally and economically discriminated against and marginalized. Changes in government policy emphasized the need to address Dalit issues and brought these concerns into the forefront of discussions. Clearly,

addressing caste issues implied an even greater challenge than gender.

Undoubtedly, staff were resistant to an explicit focus on gender and even more so on Dalits, but conceptual orientations on gender undertaken organization-wide, extensive discussions, studies, surveys, analysis, and LRSP exercises over the past 10 years created a forum for open debate, learning and internalization of these concepts. It was clear from all the interviews that there is now organization-wide agreement that these issues cannot be ignored, however, there remains uncertainty and anxiety about how progress can be achieved within deeply held cultural barriers and within on-going political instability. This narrative offers a few highlights of the struggles and the solutions experienced by staff in addressing gender equity, and some important concluding lessons about the implications of these experiences on addressing caste equity, and CARE Nepal's overall changing role in development.

Managers as Negotiators

From the interviews, it was clear that managers played a key role in promoting gender equity. Many pointed out that for gender and caste to be brought to the mainstream, it required staff who are already convinced about these areas.

"Personal commitment must already be there, don't focus on gender or caste as a concept alone, pay attention to your role, your function, contribution and linkage with others, and then gender and caste equity will make sense" noted one senior manager.

The interviews demonstrate that individual initiative was key in creating a supportive work environment for women, since there was little institutional guidance. When women were assigned to remote projects, it was predominantly up to the project manager to provide the necessary support. One project manager narrated his story:

"Two years ago, one female staff joined our team in a remote location. She would be the first woman to ever work in this community, and the village chairperson in the community rushed to us upon hearing this news, and insisted that we should not send this woman to the community. He simply could not understand how a woman could be productive and effective. I had to spend a lot of time with this village chairperson to explain to him the capabilities this woman offered and why she was valuable to the project. It took significant negotiation with the chairperson to build trust in a female staff worker. Over time, as the community observed the performance of the female staff worker they accepted her."

The managers then emphasized that what they needed was not additional training on gender concepts, but rather strong negotiation skills that would help them negotiate with local communities who resist change. They also needed better skills in coaching and in building their team effectiveness. Not only was it a challenge to support women in their new roles at the community level, but issues of loneliness, and separation from family were impacting on their ability to retain female staff. Another manager shared his story:

"One of my staff members was about to resign one day because her husband told her that he would leave her if she did not return home, she was deeply distressed. I asked her what the concerns of her husband were, and she later explained to me that child care was a problem at her home. I then proceeded to visit the husband personally, and explained to him the vital role his staff member played in development projects, and encouraged the couple to find alternative child care."

The steps he took to negotiate between the staff member and her husband were critical, she decided to stay with the team, and was more encouraged and motivated. Clearly, the manager in this story was able to address resistance by offering options and by building the confidence of his staff. He took his own personal time and commitment to coach and mentor his staff.

Impact of Women in Non-Traditional Roles

Another significant observation from the interviews was the level of confidence and

stamina amongst women who work for CARE who would otherwise never have had the opportunity to work in this field. A common challenge in Nepal is the lack of interest amongst educated women to go to remote areas, and the few number of women in agriculture or other technical fields. To tap into the interest of those who want to build and gain experience in development, CARE Nepal instituted an internship program to provide short-term experiences for women graduates, and long term on-the-job management training for women in fields such as agriculture and forestry. A beneficiary of this program made the following comment upon reflecting on her experience:

"I felt so new, fully of energy, I wanted to learn more about Nepal's rural poor, but my self confidence went down when everyone around me was so experienced, I was new, a young woman, I was from the city. My project manager made me work, allowed me to do proposals, teach the community, get hands-on experience - I slowly gained confidence. He would listen to my frustrations and concerns. Other women in the project also encouraged me. I now feel confident that I can contribute to addressing poverty, I feel more connected to a Nepal I never knew."

The impact women in non-traditional roles have had at the community level can also be noted. One staff member pointed out that CARE's female staff have been key role models in the community and have impacted change. Female staff who have gained the trust of the community are now looked upon for help, where once women in the community had no one to go to for advice, they now look to CARE's female staff for input, and to function as mediators on their behalf. There is also more openness to have women in the community play different roles and participate in areas that they would not have been allowed to in the past. One can attribute these changes to the presence and work performance of female staff, and the support and guidance of their male co-workers.

Some Concluding Lessons

Reflective Space

We observed that gender equity and to a lesser degree diversity, was a function of individual initiative, institutional support was uneven. As was clearly evident, middle managers have good ideas about how to advance gender and caste equity, but lack the time and facilitating mechanisms to have on-going reflection on what they learned and to share this knowledge with other managers. The expertise clearly rested in the organization, but was not utilized to its full potential. As a consequence one could observe more progress in some areas than in others. There is a critical need at the operational level to establish structures that allow staff to dialogue more around strategies that advance gender equity and diversity. To strengthen this change process, space and mechanisms for dialogue to share learning, to engage with one another about day to day challenges, and to seek solutions from each other, needs to be created. Strong facilitation skills are vital to engage staff in conversation and real and honest dialogue.

Risk Management

Furthermore, inherent in cutting edge work around gender and diversity are high stress levels on staff as they find themselves in new roles, or find themselves supporting others in new roles. Thought must be given to managing the risks inherent in this type of work. Current risk management processes are most developed around risk to physical safety, which is understandable given the instability of the political environment. However, risk management is needed around understanding and controlling the level of stress experienced by staff. For example, issues of loneliness, long periods of separation from family, family pressure, community resistance, need to be monitored and human resource policies need to be in place to help staff cope with these difficulties. It should be noted that both men and women struggled with these issues, and there has been little effort to monitor the impact of these challenges. Efforts have been made to revise leave policies to be more supportive of working

mothers, but staff in remote locations did not seem able to fully reap the benefits of these revisions. More could be done to continue revisiting and developing better human resource risk management strategies.

Managers As Gatekeepers

We cannot underestimate the role managers and those in leadership positions play as key gatekeepers for success in advancing gender equity and diversity. The support of those in key management positions in ensuring these issues are priorities to the organization cannot be overemphasized. In the Kathmandu CARE Nepal headquarters, staff repeatedly pointed out that the leadership commitment to gender equity, and the personal investments made towards these issues gave a clear message to staff of the relevance and priority of advancing gender and caste equity.

Furthermore, given the isolated nature of many project sites, program managers are often required to act in a multiplicity of roles for which they have little to no training or guidance. In addition to current gender and diversity training and workshops implemented, these managers need support in building new skill sets in regards to relationship building, coaching, mentoring, negotiation, problem solving, and conflict resolution.

Integration of Priorities

Finally, although there is good understanding of gender equity and diversity concepts, staff were not clear how the many initiatives that CARE has embraced such as rights based programming, advocacy, and addressing gender and caste equity were integrated. Each was seen as separate rather than inter-related efforts. Clearly, lessons derived from advancing gender can be applied to advancing caste equity, and clearly more room is needed to understand the common principles that underlie both these issues. As CARE Nepal embraces rights based programming, which seeks to transform the power relations that drive discrimination and poverty, more work needs to be done around having staff understand and explore this shift

and the implications on the work they do and the role of CARE Nepal in ending poverty.