CORPORATE

Rural Nepal leads by example

FIGHTING POVERTY THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

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Manju, a young woman in a pink *kurta-salwar*, stands in front of a group of her peers holding a paper sign that says "How we act". Rather than an acting class, she is practising her new facilitation skills as a social mobiliser on a project that addresses gender roles, empowerment, and violence in two VDCs of Baglung district that have high labour migration rates. While Manju is one of the eight social mobilisers in the 'One Community, One Family' (OCOF) project who will lead 28 weeks of community empowerment and violence reduction trainings for hundreds of Baglung residents, she herself is becoming empowered through her role.

Manju, a 24-year old from Bhimpokhara VDC, got married at age 21 to a young Nepali man who works outside Nepal. Before marriage, she completed Class XII in school, but couldn't continue her studies after marriage and started doing daily household chores in her husband's house. In October 2015, she saw a vacancy advertisement from VSO Nepal and their partner, Bhimpokhara Youth Club (BYC), in a local newspaper. Manju was intrigued by the project's goal to reduce violence against women in her own community. She convinced her in-laws to let her apply for the job.

"Before this job, I was a rookie. I felt hesitant to speak and didn't know how to make others understand," says Manju. "After working in the OCOF project, participating in capacity development workshops led by VSO and BYC, I have had the opportunity to learn many things," she says.

Today Manju feels confident enough to present herself in front of groups and facilitate a series of community empowerment sessions beginning in March 2017.

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The 'One Community, One Family' project is a three-year study and intervention to understand what works to reduce violence against women and girls. In the context of Nepal, this project focuses on urgent social issues: male labour migration and violence against women. In Nepali communities with a steady outflow of male labour migrants, women are often left behind and become vulnerable to violence in their own households and communities. Further, returned labour migrants may feel that their household role has changed while they were away, creating tensions within families that could erupt in violence. The OCOF project studies these trends while social mobilisers lead 28 weeks of trainings in two VDCs on the topics of gender roles and economic empowerment of families, with young married women at the centre of the intervention, along with men and teenagers.

The OCOF is an exciting pilot project being implemented by VSO Nepal and Bhimpokhara Youth Club, organisations that have a history of fighting poverty through their partnership. The BYC was established 30 years ago in Baglung Bazaar and has been working closely with communities on various rural development issues since then. It aims to empower women, minorities, and disadvantaged ethnic groups to address development issues and create accountability from within the communities. In this way, BYC's values align with the principles of VSO Nepal to put people first, using participatory approaches based on the needs of the communities. Beginning in 2013, VSO and BYC become partners on the ICS youth volunteer programme in Baglung. To date, over 6,000 community members have benefitted from the ICS programme in Balgung district. Mani Sharma, Vice President of BYC, says, "The BYC and VSO partnership has provided a great opportunity for BYC to reach more than 6,000 primary actors at the community level. VSO has strengthened the staff of BYC by providing us with many capacity development programmes." By building the capacity of local partners, VSO Nepal ultimately empowers those partners' communities.



Photo: Courtesy VSO Nepal

The VSO Nepal and BYC partnership has been reinforced during the OCOF project as each team applies their expertise to different parts of the project.BYC has recruited and prepared eight local social mobilisers, while VSO Nepal has led training and developed three manuals that the social mobilisers will teach in Resha and Bhimpokhara VDCs. Weekly empowerment sessions will be led by these young, thoughtful, and motivated social mobilisers, who will guide communities through topics such as communicating for healthy relationships, building a family-based income-generating business, and establishing a household budget, with awareness of gender roles as an underlying theme.

The OCOF project has changed the lives of Manju and the seven other social mobilisers. A young male social mobiliser, Deepak, says, "I was not so responsible before — I used to stay out late with my friends and I did not do household chores. After becoming engaged in the OCOF project, I feel that I have responsibilities towards my family and community, and I also realise that I can be the role model for my community because I am doing work in my own place."



Peskin is a VSO international volunteer serving as a gender advisor at Nepal's National Women's Commission. Her work on gender equality policies, research, and implementation is part of VSO's Gender and Inclusive Governance programme. Adhikari works for VSO Nepal as a Project and Finance Officer for One Community One Family (OCOF) Project. OCOF is a research based project which aims to reduce the risk of violence against women and girls among migrant communities in Baglung



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