

FIGHTING FOR WHAT'S **RIGHT**

Sharmila Karki

President of Jagaran Nepal, Sharmila Karki is a dedicated social activist who has been working in the field of human rights for the last 15 years. She has travelled over 45 districts of Nepal conducting research, seminars, workshops and capacity building sessions to empower women in conflict areas. She has spent months with women at the grassroots level training them on Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) principles and making them aware of their basic human rights. She is armed with a masters degree in Anthropology, a post graduate degree in Women's Studies and a special course in Women's Management from Sweden. Besides being a dedicated social worker, Sharmila is a loving sister, doting wife and an affectionate mother. Outspoken and confident, she believes that the inspiration and will to go on in life comes from within – the deeper you look inside yourself the more stronger you become as an individual.

We plan our lives according to a dream that came to us in our childhood

Though I was born in the far eastern region of Kotang, I consider myself fortunate as I was born to a well-to-do family. The eldest of seven siblings, I was always up to mischief; I would hide my sister's dresses and pretend as if I knew nothing about it, I would try different ways to keep my tutor away so that we had more time to play. We had many attendants at home, some of whom were considered 'untouchables'. My parents never allowed them to enter the house and it was clearly stated to us that we were not supposed to touch them. This always surprised me. I often questioned my mother but she always brushed it aside saying that I was too young to understand. I saw such discrimination in other families too and deep inside, I always knew that it was wrong. When I look back, I feel that the seeds to work against discrimination were sown in my early childhood - probably it was a silent dream then.

Education was top priority and my father tried in every way to give us the best. He never differentiated between us siblings and often mentioned to friends and relatives that daughters were no less than sons. He was liberal and believed that with education women could become the leaders of tomorrow.

I was only 12 when I moved to Jhapa for my higher studies. Later, my involvement with the student union was natural as the environment at college was politically inclined. In a year's time I was an active member of the union and participated in various fund raising and community level programmes. Interacting with people at various levels, I realised that the world outside was full of opportunities. After completing my bachelor's degree, I decided to move to Kathmandu and this proved to be the turning point in my life. I had to visit the villages of Chobar as a part of my curriculum. After spending almost a week there, I came face-to-face with the realities of life and the actual discrimination that existed in society. Women were treated like slaves, working at home from dusk to dawn, and men would do nothing but play cards, make merry and abuse their women folk. The life stories of these women touched my heart and it was then that I decided to dedicate my entire life for the empowerment and social upliftment of women.

The journey to the realisation of my dreams

I worked as a volunteer at the Centre for Women and Development (CWD) for a few years after which I, along with a relative, established an NGO called Children Women and Social Welfare. The concept of an NGO looked attractive from the outside but it was only after I personally got involved with the operations that I realised what a difficult responsibility it was. Our biggest challenge was to build trust among the donors and the common people. I tried hard to save the organisation but soon realised that things would not work out. I felt the need to train myself with the necessary skills to run an organisation and began looking for suitable opportunities.

I had the privilege of being one of the founder members of TEWA which proved to be the best platform for me to train in the field of social welfare. I participated in various fund raising programmes, workshops, and international training sessions and also had the opportunity to go to Sweden for a course in Women in Management. I left no stone unturned in developing myself both personally and professionally. I simultaneously began giving gender trainings for projects under UNDP which helped widen my horizon, and understand the intricate details of discrimination against women especially in the rural areas.

After five years of extensive trainings, I felt confident to start something on my own. In 2001, I started Jagaran Nepal, a non-political, non-profitable and non-governmental organisation that aims to nurture marginalised groups and help women realise their rights through advocacy. Initially, we started programmes that concentrated on building awareness among women about their social, economic, cultural and political rights. We then moved on to girl child education, programmes for women in conflict, women in leadership programmes for good governance. I have always wanted to work with women in politics by creating a platform that provides them with capacity building and international policy awareness programmes and am glad to have finally got the chance. I believe that policies can become gender friendly only if women participating in the policy making process are aware of their rights, and the international political scenario. The programme has just begun and we hope that our endeavours will bring a path breaking change.

-Vaishali Pradhan