

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a yellow and pink shawl over a black and white striped cardigan, is seated and speaking. She has a thoughtful expression and is looking slightly to the right. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**Rural women in Nepal  
raise their voices  
on climate change  
and REDD+**

In Nepal, the Himalayan Grassroots Women's Natural Resource Management Association (HIMAWANTI) is known for their work to enhance rural women's participation in forest decision-making, although with little involvement in REDD+ and climate change programmes. Since partnering with RECOFTC, HIMAWANTI has become actively involved in these issues through their newly developed team of grassroots REDD+ trainers and becoming a key player in REDD+ national discussions. This story offers a glimpse of the evolution of just one of the team of HIMAWANTI trainers who is part of the institutional empowerment of HIMAWANTI as it evolved to become an influential organization working to ensure rural women's voices are heard in Nepal's REDD+ debate.

Fifteen year old Sharada Rai wrung her hands as she approached the gates of the District Forest Offices in Makwanpur district, Nepal. Two men with large guns stood at the entrance of the complex, looking at her as if to say "you don't belong here."

Taking a deep breath, Sharada stood up tall, walked into the building and approached the desk of the District Forest Officer.

"I would like to request approval to attend a training with the Himalayan Grassroots Women's Natural Resource Management Association," she said nervously.

After some delay, the officer eventually approved.

A few weeks earlier, Sharada went to a nearby village where she watched her neighbor, an older woman named Parbina, lead a community forestry training.

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Sharada sat quietly in the back of the training, mostly comprised of men, and marveled at the way Prabina commanded the room. The year was 1998 and it was unusual to see a woman hold an authoritative leadership position. Immediately, Sharada was interested in community forestry and jumped at opportunity when HIMAWANTI invited her to a training.

When Sharada returned from the training, she approached the District Forest Officer's desk with a newfound confidence - determined to bring HIMAWANTI, an organization that had just been officially formed a year earlier, into her community.

"Now, you must support me," she said.

Stunned by the confidence of this young woman, the forest officer obliged.

Over the next few years, Sharada worked building a HIMAWANTI presence in her community. She attended training after training, building her knowledge and

becoming more and more well-known in forestry community. Soon, she became HIMAWANTI district chairperson and central committee member, a position she has held for 15 years.

Today, Sharada is 33 years old. A single woman, with a no nonsense attitude and large kind eyes. Her success and leadership position is somewhat unique in Nepal- in the past only one or two women held positions in Community Forest User Groups (CFUG). "Most women just sit in the corner during meetings and don't speak up," Sharada explains. "When they do speak, the men often interrupt them and quiet them."

For Nepalese women who often work 18 hours a day and are heavily dependent on forest resources, participation in CFUGs is critical. Particularly, educating rural women on the impacts that climate change can have on the forest resources they depend on is of the utmost importance. Yet, few women are present in discussions on climate change science, adaptation and mitigation.

"Women are left behind socially, economically and politically. But, if we provide women with information on their rights, they will come forward and take leadership roles," she says. "We don't need to force them to take their rights, if we give them information, they will access their rights on their own."

So when RECOFTC and HIMAWANTI began discussing a partnership with the goal of educating women on REDD+, an initiative to create financial value for the carbon stored in forests by offering incentives, and climate change the decision to join forces seemed natural.

In 2011, RECOFTC and HIMAWANTI began holding trainings of trainers, like

Sharada, with the intention of creating a cascading effect through which information on REDD+ and the impacts of climate change would spread among local people - particularly women. Sharada immediately took a central role in the partnership, advocating for the involvement of women in the REDD+ discussions, representing HIMAWANTI in district REDD+ working groups.

Sharada also helps facilitate national level discussions to inform stakeholders, community level discussions and exhibition fairs in rural areas to help inform local communities about the difficulties and key issues related to women in climate change and REDD+ development.

"Because women don't get the same educational opportunities as men do," Sharada says, "they are often left in the shadows." Lack of education combined with varying local language dialects challenged effective verbal and written communication between trainers like Sharada and local women.

Knowing this, HIMAWANTI, with RECOFTC support, developed a range of tools suitable for this context, including a REDD+ training manual, posters and calendars, together with support on facilitation skills and methods. For example, the Nepali calendar illustrates the science of climate change and the impacts it can have on the environment. Using simplified language, visuals depicting the science behind concepts like the greenhouse gas effect and tapping into cultural motifs, like the sun, helps break down complex topics and make them accessible and understandable to everyone. "Many women don't get sent to school so providing them with a tool that can educate them without using words is very critical," notes Sharada.

A few weeks ago, Sharada got a call from a district official, requesting that she conduct a training on climate change in a nearby community. With little time to prepare, Sharada grabbed a stack of the calendars and headed to the training. After speaking for two hours to the training participants using the calendar as an aid, the official who invited her to the training approached her.

“Can you get me more of these training calendars? They are perfect for a training like this!” said the official.

Smiling, Sharada agreed, hopeful that the local people would be able to learn from them. “The trainings and appropriate tools gets our messages across in a way that our trainees understand,” Sharada says, “every REDD+ working group member now uses the training methods and calendar to help with raising awareness on climate change.”

Local level leaders, local resource persons and district level forestry officials are also being trained with the knowledge HIMAWANTI gained while collaborating with RECOFTC. “If we didn’t have this project with RECOFTC,” Sharada explains, “we might not have information on climate change and REDD+. But, now through our trainings this information has made its way into the community and women can advocate and discuss their perspectives on climate change with confidence” she says.

Reflecting on the confidence she had gained in the pursuit of carving out a bigger role for women in forestry, Sharada laughs, “now I just pick up the phone and call the District Officers without a thought!” And, when she walks past the guards holding guns at the entrance to the office, she just smiles and nods.

Under the partnership with HIMAWANTI there are now more than 12 local women resource persons like Sharada working in four districts to raise awareness on climate change and REDD+. Each resource person is actively disseminating information on climate change and REDD+ in their own community and neighbouring villages. The experiences of this cadre of trainers are combined with HIMAWANTI’s national presence, allowing the organization to amplify the voices of rural women in national REDD+ debates. HIMAWANTI is now committed to continuing to sensitize rural women on climate change and REDD+ issues and voicing their concerns in national discussions. With their strengthened organizational capacity in the field of climate change and REDD+, HIMAWANTI is continuing to develop new REDD+ programmes.

