

## The journey from the Water Supply Scheme to Socio-political role



"Danuwarni has won the election, what will she even do? Do we really have to respect Danuwarni now? I'd much rather not."

Lakshmi Danuwar heard and digested many cold remarks as such after being elected as the Deputy Mayor of Panchkhal Municipality. Lakshmi Danuwar, who was born in April 1988 AD (Chaitra 2044 BS) to an ordinary family in the then Methinkot VDC currently Ward No. 9 of Paanchkhaal, had to struggle with drinking water since her childhood. At that time, water had to be carried from a distant well in the jungle at night, which was just as risky as it sounds. Lakshmi, being the eldest daughter of the family started helping her mother in fetching water from a very young age, despite the danger. Many children like her had the same problem and missed their studies countless times while fetching water. But in a situation as such, it was normal to miss school as they were at least about three kilometers away from home.

Lakshmi would often think about why they have to struggle so much to fetch water, although it is such a basic essential for life. This question always kept lingering in her mind and eventually motivated her to

put in the effort to bring safe water facilities into her community. Many Danuwar families like her had to tolerate humiliating treatment and discrimination from so-called higher caste people along the way. Accepting this rude behavior was obviously a challenge. Regardless, Lakshmi's parents, despite not being able to read on their own, endured many hardships and provided higher education to not only Lakshmi but also their two sons, and a younger daughter who is differently-abled.

### **Important turning points in her journey of life**

Lakshmi, who has completed her bachelor's degree and is currently pursuing her master's degree, got the opportunity to work as a member of the Water Supply Users Committee while studying in class 12. It was under the Seti Devi Charuwaa Water Supply and Sanitation Scheme of Batch V, operated with the financial support of the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Fund Development Board (RWSSFDB) and the social and technical facilitation of the Shanti Jana Adarsh Seva Kendra (SJAYC). This turned out to be an important and positive turning point in her life. While working on the water supply and sanitation scheme, she got the opportunity to participate in various orientation and training programs provided by the Shanti Jana Adarsha



Sewa Kendra allied with the strategy and program of the Fund Development Board. She also got an opportunity to run programs in raising awareness about health and sanitation among the villagers. It also played an important role in boosting her ability and confidence. Having struggled for water since childhood, and suffering due to caste and untouchability issues, she was very happy to be directly involved in the project run by the Fund Development Board and to work for an easy supply of water and sanitation. She felt responsible and said to herself, "I am an aware resident of the region, I am also involved on the Water Supply Committee and I also have a responsibility and accountability to every work done by the committee"

During the interview, she added, "It was a very happy moment for me to see the children going to school on time without having to struggle for water," While working, she gradually came to believe that social service is the one and only true religion and decided to indulge herself in social development work. It was not easy for a woman to pursue the goal of social service. Previously it was difficult to raise awareness among the villagers due to a lack of knowledge. They'd likely to show her that she was acting over-smart and they'd tried to discourage her. Gradually she proved them wrong with her patience and diligence and now the same people keep praising her.

Subsequently, Lakshmi also got involved in a non-governmental organization called Child Development Society. She had seen that the residents were beginning to participate in other social programs since the easy advent of water. So, she emphasized, "Any development programs extended to the villages will not make any impact if there is no sufficient water facility. As per her, water supply projects are one of the most useful and important development projects out of all other development projects.

Lakshmi faced water scarcity in her Maiti (Paternal home). After marriage, she had faced water problems even worse. There, she played again a leading role in bringing drinking water. In 2072 BS by taking initiative with the help of Dhulikhel Hospital, community services, and other organizations she brought water facility and also successfully fulfilled the responsibility of being the president in the water user's committee. The name of the drinking water project was Kol Danda Kham Pur Drinking Water Project. During working on that project, her son was too small however she had successfully raised him well and also fulfilled the community responsibility.

Nepal's constitution gives women the opportunity to participate in various government services. Realizing this, she an inborn social worker, wanted to be a candidate in the local government elections held in 2074 BS (2017 AD). She found herself a deserving candidate for election because of her education, experience working with NGOs, experiences working for the benefit of society, and also being from a minority ethnic group. This was another important turning point of her life in which her family, relatives, and society also supported and helped her. The political party also deemed it appropriate and provided a ticket for the election. She was the only one to represent Danuwar in the election. Even though her opponents were Brahmins and other castes, she won with a good amount of votes.

### **An example of mutual coordination and cooperation**

Lakshmi is lucky to receive very coordinated support from Mayor Mahesh Kharel who encourages her to carry out various responsibilities at the local level. Thus with mutual coordination and cooperation, they have been able to do a lot of work for the development of the entire municipality and have brought a lot of training and vocational activities especially for women with the direct and indirect support of the municipality. In particular, such programs are focused on women's education, health, nutrition, focus, as well as their capacity-building training, income generation activities.

Last year, the Bagmati state government, in its second annual festival program, honored the Panchkhal municipality out of 45 metropolises, sub-metropolises, and municipalities of the state by declaring it the best municipality. The municipality was honored with a letter of appreciation for the services provided to the city dwellers from the city with very low internal revenue as well as the development work.

The municipality is currently operating the Sunkoshi-Panchkhal Mega Drinking Water Project with the aim of supplying drinking water to 6,000 households of Panchkhal. The project is planned to be completed at the investment of 2.21 billion Rupees from the Government of Nepal, Town Development Fund, Asian Development Bank (ADB), and consumers.

Lakshmi has been an active member of the Water Consumer's Committee of this mega drinking water project since before she was elected as the Deputy Mayor. "The project, which is currently in the implementation phase, is not only the largest drinking water project in Nepal but also the largest in South Asia," said the deputy mayor.

Women's participation in the country's development work is vital. It is not possible to achieve the goal of sustainable development without women's active participation. In our country, Nepal, the participation of women has been gradually increasing in recent times. This type of participation can be found to be gradually increasing due to the prevailing trend of proportional representation and inclusion. The above-mentioned life journey of Lakshmi Danuwar from a member of WSUC of Fund Board's water supply and sanitation project to her current position as Deputy Mayor of Panchkhal Municipality as a woman representing, the most marginalized ethnic group listed by the Government of Nepal, also helps to shed light on this. In addition, it provides a hope for better future for women. This is a positive signal, but more needs to be done to uplift the status of women and make them economically and socially strong and empowered from every sector besides from state level.

Shankh Buddha Lama, President of Shanti Jana Adarsh Seva Kendra, who has seen her progress from the beginning of Lakshmi's career and has worked together in 2059 BS, says, "from the very beginning, I found that she is hardworking, combative, and full of energy to do something for the society and I think a lot of remarkable progress in development work can be expected from her in future."

Undoubtedly, Lakshmi Danuwar, the Deputy Mayor of Kavre, Panchkhal Municipality, who has achieved success at an early age, is truly a source of inspiration for all as well as praiseworthy.

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