

Interview with Chhing Lamu Sherpa

Chhing Lamu Sherpa is a founding member of Mountain Spirit, Nepal Participatory Action Network (NEPAN), Imagine Nepal (Appreciative Inquiry Network), TEWA (women's philanthropy organization), SAGUN (search for harmony) and other few none profit organization. She has worked in a number of jobs from teaching to working in women's training centre of government, Action Aid Nepal, the Makalu Barun National Park and Conservation Project and Plan International. She is an advocate of participatory approaches and Appreciative Inquiry to the inclusive and gender sensitive development and was one the 1000 women nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.



Can you tell us about your family background and your childhood memories?

I am from Finjoling Tatne, Nametar, Udyapur District of Nepal. I was born in a remote hill area of Nepal which was a small community of only about a hundred houses of Sherpas. My father (Rickjan Norbu Lama) used to read traditional lama scripts but didn't have a formal education and my mother was totally illiterate, but she was a genuine person and very aware about society. I was born on 17th August 1960 and started my formal education late because there weren't educational institutions in my village. The primary school in my village was established after the 1960s by the continuous effort of local people under the leadership of my parents. I didn't receive regular education. One of the main problems in Nepal is the tradition of not prioritizing formal education for daughters. I feel that historically there was discrimination between sons and daughters in my society due to a lack of awareness and a general lack of exposure to education. Facilities such as electricity, communication, and transportation were not available when I was younger. The focus of the family was on cattle herding, farming and supporting the family so there was no emphasis placed on education.

My childhood was not so different from other children in my community. During my childhood it was difficult to convince my parents to provide educational material and create a good environment for my education. My primary school teacher was also my cousin, T.N. Sherpa who helped me convince my parents to send me to school. I also got motivation from my Mitini (legal friends) called China Giri. In our society at that time, as I have mentioned, there was no culture of facilitating

daughters for formal education and this was a major cause of difficulty. My initial formal education was poor. At the end of grade five, I informally follow my younger brother Jhyang Nurbu Sherpa. I struggled in school and nearly didn't pass the end of year test to join the high school in Deury to grade six. My school was one day's hard walk on foot in southern part of my home village. I managed to reach the required standard through strong self-determination in my studies and the help of my teachers. By the start of grade six I was in a better position and after that I was continuously second top of the class until I reached grade ten. I am very happy to tell you that I was the first female from my village to acquire my School Leaving Certificate. It was not easy as at that time there was no electricity and it used to take five days to get to the market and come back with kerosene along with necessary goods from Lahan Bazar. So in my childhood education, kerosene was always scarce, which was needed to be able to read at night. I used to read till late at night, I only realised after the crow of cocks that morning had arrived. After a short sleep, I had to go with my sisters to take the livestock (sheep) for grazing. So my childhood and initial education was difficult and challenging with many scarcities.

I remember as a child asking my father many times: why do daughters have no rights on the property of their parents? Why aren't daughters allowed to go abroad and join the British army? So from an early age I was interested to know about the differences between boys and girls.

Can you tell us a little bit more about your educational journey?

After I had completed my schooling, I got an opportunity to go to Kathmandu for higher study. When I left my home to study in Kathmandu my mother, Nejang Lhamu Lamani gave me a knife and told me take it and use it for my self-defence. I kept that knife for a long time until I completed my intermediate level studies, but fortunately there was never a need for me to use it. When I look back, I feel that, that knife was only given to me to increase my confidence. My mother also advised me: "always remember to pay for your tea yourself and do not accept other people's offers unless you can return the favour later or share the cost equally". She taught me about the importance of fairness and self-reliance.

I had completed my intermediate level from Padma Kanya College with Culture, Economics and Nepali Literature as major subjects in 1983. I chose Nepali Literature as a major because I was a Sherpa girl and I was weak in Nepali Literature and I wanted to be challenged. After my intermediate I completed my graduate studies in 1988 from the same college in Arts Stream with Economics, Culture and Literature. At that time I was already thirty years old. My family tried to force me to get married but I convinced them otherwise and I started my further studies in the UK with the valuable support from Pam Mitchell, Roger Heyhurt, Geoff, Cath (Dansdal family) and moral

support from Rob Fearly and my supervisors Jances Smith and Dave Richard. In 1991, I completed my Post Graduate Diploma in Rural Extension and Women from Reading University. I had the opportunity to settle in the UK at that time but I came back here to Nepal because I wanted to use my skills and contribute to my own country. At that time I had published a paper where I wrote that I am ready to eat dry bread as long as I can contribute to my mother country, such is my love of Nepal. I had selected Rural Extension and Women as my major subject in Post Graduate Diploma because I wanted to investigate the condition of rural women of different countries. This course was of great help to me because I learnt about case studies of women in South Africa, and other 'third world'¹ countries. I saw that all the women in the world were discriminated against and this inspired me to work for women in my own country.

As a woman who has worked on community based projects and has promoted a more equitable society, can you tell us what your inspiration was and who supported you on your journey?

As I mentioned before, I was initially inspired by my teacher T.N. Sherpa for primary education, I will never forget her encouragement and support. I was also inspired by educated women I saw from cities who were working in jobs and travelling abroad. When I saw females working in some of the big institutions, I used to dream of being like them. I was always inspired by soldiers (Ghurkhas) and used to dream of going abroad which my friends Boojum, Alex Frisons, and with Charles Mangles who had inspired me and opened the door to go abroad first time in UK. Nowadays, I am serving my mother nation with absolute happiness. Even as a youngster I wanted to be a social worker, although at that time I couldn't even pronounce the term "social work" because my English was so poor!

My mother was always there to inspire me by giving me self-confidence and strong will-power. I migrated to the Terai (lowland west Nepal) with my parents, where I met my close friend China Giri, who could read and write. She had also inspired me to study hard. We planned to study together after SLC but unfortunately she couldn't continue with her studies as her father did not support her.

My mother wanted me to be a teacher in our village, but later she had helped me pursue my career and travel and work in different parts of Nepal. Being single means I am free from family duties and

¹ The use of the term 'Third World' is contested, but we have left it here as it is the word used by many of the participants. For a further discussion in terms of framing discourses around development in Nepal see Nanda Shrestha (1995) Becoming a development category.

enables me to concentrate on my work. However, despite not being married, I feel that I have more extended family and social responsibilities, so family is always with you.

Can you tell us about the work that you have done and your current position?

I started my professional career as a teacher. I worked as the Head Teacher in Finjoling Tatne Government Primary School, Udaypur District from 1978-1979. Similarly from 1982 – 1987 I worked as a junior instructor in the Women’s Training Centre at the Ministry of Local Development where my responsibilities were to work as a trainer, mobilize local people to manage resources and raise awareness amongst women of health and sanitation issues in rural areas. I then worked as a Senior Community Organizer, Gender and Development Coordinator and Area Manager of Action-Aid Nepal from 1987 to 1993. I was guided by from Dr.Ganesh Youngaen Lama (present Ambassador for Japan) and was supported by Bimal Phuyal (present Country Director of Action-Aid) during my work at Action-Aid. In the early 1990s I also worked as Women Development Project Officer at Makalu Barun Conservation and National Park Project, under the joint collaboration of the Forest and Wild Life Department and the Mountain Institute. After this I worked for a short time as a part time Manager for Eco-Himal which is an environmentally sensitive agricultural income generation and community development project in the Makalu-Barun National Park and Conservation Area. This gave me experience of working with local communities on conservation and development projects.

From 1995 until 2004, I devoted my time to Mountain Spirit and I was the Founder Chairperson and Director of Mountain Spirit, where I was responsible for the design and implementation of programs through participatory means to develop mountain communities and environments. Mountain Spirit aims to support mountain people and mountain environments and promotes sustainable and participatory development. I am also a founder member of TEWA², a philanthropic women’s organization. Similarly I am also one of founder member of SAGUN³, Nepal Participator Action Network (NEPAN), and Appreciative Inquiry Nepal (AIN) and presently I am also associated with as a board member of the Chandra Gurung Conservation Foundation.

Recently I have been working as Program Unit Manager for Plan Nepal, Sunsari in the Eastern Region. In this office as Program Unit Manager I am responsible for a number of areas including the overall management and development of programs for Sunsari District and for administering the

² Tewa means “support” in Nepali. Tewa is a non-profit organization committed to philanthropy for equitable justice and peace. Founded in 1996 it offers an alternative model for development within the Nepali context and promotes both sustainable development and women’s empowerment.

³ Strengthened Actions for Governance in Utilization of Natural Resources (SAGUN)

regional grant programs to address universal birth registration, social inclusion and gender as well as addressing the worst form of child labour where children work as a domestic help, in factories and in dance bars. I also worked towards preventing trafficking through raising awareness on health education and microfinance. As part of my job I have to manage the USAID funded 'Local Innovation for Better Outcome for Neonates' project along with Norwegian and Japanese projects for single women in need of support. I supervised and managed thirty eight staff, grant program and overseas staff, delivering capacity building projects with special initiatives for women staff and those from disadvantaged groups.

I have been involved in a programs aimed at institutional strengthening and capacity building of eighteen women federations, one hundred and seven child clubs and twelve youth networks, two hundred and twenty six pregnant women groups and work in direct partnership and coordinate with fifteen NGOs, sixty CBOs and twelve government agencies. I also worked with individuals with disabilities and Dalit concern associations. My work focuses on working in partnerships with organizations and institutions to contribute to the planning, implementation and joint monitoring of community development programs for ownership and sustainability. I also assist in the development, adoption and follow up of the organization's strategic direction, program principles, and Country Strategic Plan and Rights-based Child Centered Community Development approaches.

Recently I have been giving more time to Nepal Participatory Action Network as a chairperson along with other social organizations. Apart from that I am giving my time to my home villages and advising institutions and program in the Nation as a development professional and resource person.

What do you consider to be your main achievements and what challenges have you faced?

I have always worked for my Nepalese dignity and for my pride. I have had many opportunities to handle and head different developmental social organizations and I think I did it in a smoothly and effectively way. Being a female of Nepali culture and tradition, I am satisfied with what I have done. I believe all my work at least has helped in some way for our society to grow in a sustainable manner as much as possible which I think is a great achievement. During the course of my service I have been mentioned in many papers, courses and international conferences that credit my work, which makes me very proud. Moreover, I have also published my own work as well.

I have been given awards by a few organizations for my good work, and this gives me a great sense of achievement. In 2005 I was proud to be recognized as a nominee of the Nobel Peace Prize along with 1000 women across the world for Peace across the Globe.

I was awarded the Nepal Sherpa Association Award in recognition of my contribution to the social sector in 2002, and honoured in the mass Sherpa gathering.

I was also awarded a grant by USAID in 1996 for an International Study Tour to study Environment Education and Management in the USA. I was also nominated by the US Ambassador to Nepal in recognition of special contribution to conservation in Makalu-Barun National Park.

Similarly, I was awarded as a pride of Indigenous people by Indigenous Film Archive and National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities in 2009 and by youth concern of Eastern Region in 2009 along with few other organizations.

When I reflect on all these achievements, I remember the many difficulties that I have faced. Initially I faced various challenges simply due to the fact that I am female. I think challenges in the life can be minimized by developing our life skills for example how we talk, look, behave and act to others. Our society traditionally underestimates women. As we all know our society has a different angle of vision for single women and is prejudiced towards them. This is one of the major problems for females like me. Similarly, I have faced economic and emotional challenges in my life.

I am a very easy-going person, which too creates some challenges for me. Due to this nature of mine some people underestimate me, even my own family members! Imported culture from different parts of the world is also creating some sort of challenges for females in our society. My long term experience in this field has made me realize that often superficial people are becoming successful not due to their hard work but just by chance and fashion which does not set a good role model. I think this poses a challenge for those people who are hardworking and genuine.

What are your future plans?

Recently I have constructed a house. So, firstly I have to be free from the bank-loans. I plan to write about what I have experienced in my life, which has been quite hidden. You might say I plan to write my hidden life story.

My next plan is to be settled in the countryside and contribute in increasing awareness amongst the rural population of the need to be sustainable which I have started. I think there is a great need to utilize local resources for local development. I am planning to do this with the help of some organizations at the local village level in Nepal.

I also plan to continue to work with the disadvantaged 'have-nots' in our society and work to promote self- dignity in their own environment. At the same time there is a great need to improve communication, increase awareness and build the capacity of youth and children towards realizing

the potential within them to make their future dreams come true and avoid unintentionally going in the wrong direction.

What suggestions do you have for women in Nepal?

I would like to give all my Nepali sisters, mothers, daughters this advice: Always live with honour and dignity and respect your local environment. Do not be dependent on others. Do not rob your children's capability to develop their social capacity and live a dignified life. Please provide them with support so that they can flourish in the diverse world that we live in. Give equal opportunities to your sons and daughters for education, food, and other opportunities. Please pass on your skills to younger generations. The main instructors in the family are mothers, so she should make the house like a practical university. Guardians are a role-model for every child so please give them a good grounding in their traditions and culture when they are young. Respect to all culture, all sects and old people, reflecting the fact that we all are human being and we all become old and die. Practice Philanthropy for your own satisfaction.

Qualitative Analysis in Action

Qualitative Analysis in Action provides open access to interviews undertaken with inspirational women of Nepal. In doing so it creates an environment where these women's experiences can be explored, examining the gendered experiences of meanings of inspiration.