

## Interview with Ram Kali

Women's Skills Development Organization in Pokhara is a Fair Trade Organization which has been working as a non-profit organization and income generating program for economically disadvantaged, disabled, abused, widowed, divorced, single, and outcaste women in rural Nepal since 1975. WSDO provides them with free vocational skills training, and after training is complete, a job facility is available to help the women to become self-supportive.

After arriving at WSDO the women are provided with training on material cutting, sewing, weaving, dying, business management, and various other skills-training programs related to handicrafts. A successful local NGO that has been running for the last 35 years without the help of local or International donations, WSDO is considered the best handicraft organization in Pokhara.

<http://womensskillsdevelopment.org/>



Ramkali was the first woman to pass her SLC from her village Tumkot in Far West Nepal. She was offered a training course in Kathmandu that was based around Women's Skill Development. She began to train women and improve their basic skills. After marriage, Ramkali decided to take an entrance examination to work within government services. After passing this she was given the job of government employee in the women's training centre in Pokhara. Due to this she then established her own organization which is Women's Skill Development to help economically empower women. She is also a founder member of World Fair Trade Nepal.

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

I was born in November 1955 in a remote village called Tumkot of Muchu VDC of Humla District in Karnali Zone (Far West Nepal). We are all together three brothers and sisters in the family. My father has been serving as a priest in a Buddhist Monastery and was educated in China so he sent me to School for the formal education. He had obtained some homeopathic education from China therefore he was known as a local Doctor in the village. Being a priest (Lama) and homeopathic

practitioner, everyone respected him. My mother was an illiterate housewife but she was aware of educating girls that was rare in the village. She was positive about formal education but also wanted us to have sufficient knowledge on Buddhist alphabets to carry on the Buddhist culture. We had to walk about 1.5 km from our home to School. I began my formal education in the local Government (Kharsarpani ) School up to 4<sup>th</sup> grade and moved to Simikot, District head quarter in search of a good school where I did my test pass. I was the only one girl who got a chance to take part in an eighteen months training course in Women training center Jaulakhel Kathmandu which was designed for the women to develop some skills. After completing my training I got a temporary job in District Administrative Office of Humla District to train women in the villages.

I met my husband during a field visit. He was a police officer from Kathmandu and we had an inter caste marriage in 2031 B.S. After I could not continue my higher education as there were no colleges at our nearest and also my early marriage and work meant I was unable to enrol in the college. My husband had to move to a different district for his job so I had to stay at home and look after my children. Actually, I had to handle three jobs at a time: looking after children, doing my government job, and also my social work. Being a working class family, we were not that strong economically so I had faced many difficulties to bring up my children. But now I am happy that I could handle everything smoothly so that I am here talking with you, although I am not highly educated. We have three children, our eldest son studied in Australia but he is now at home; middle one is assisting in my business and social work and younger son is in USA.

After I got married I had to quit my temporary job and moved to Bhairahawa with my husband. I was trying to get a permanent job in the government service and finally I passed the entrance examination and I was sent to Pokhara in the Women Training Centre as a government employee. When I worked as a government employee I was able to visit almost all villages of Kaski District where I could see women having different problems in their household. In general, the problems were created due to poverty. I saw lots of problems between husbands and wives and tensions between mother in laws and daughter in laws. I thought it was mainly because the women were uneducated and didn't have any source of income so they were dependent on their husbands. It was this that led me to establish "Women's Skill Development Organization" in 2032 B.S (1975 A.D) to help economically empower women. I started a training program for the poor and deprived women with a hope to upgrade their confidence with some skilful training. I started employment with ten thousand Nepali Rupees. At that time continued only 3 ladies. This organization was registered in D.A.O Kaski 2051 B.s (1994 A.D) and Social welfare council.

## Can you tell us what you do and who inspired you?

Currently I am an Executive Director/Founder and member secretary of Women's Skill Development Organization. Besides, I am a founder member of Fair Trade Nepal, member of World Fair Trade Organization in Nepal, Founder Chairperson of Women's Skill Development cooperative, member of Pokhara Chamber of Commerce, Advisor of Far Western Society Pokhara, Advisor of Women's Police Family Pokhara, and also a member of Nepal Red Cross Society.

I established Women's Skills Development Organization to provide different kind of training to women including sewing, weaving, knitting, crafting and dying. We conducted adult literacy classes to the women in cooperation with the district education office in Pokhara. We also helped many women to get support for their pregnancy test in the health centre. When we began it was very difficult to attract women for the training; we could only find a few girls who were waiting for the SLC result. They used to take only 4-5 months training. Then we tried hard to make women aware about the skilful training and its outcome. Now they know about the impact of the training we receive about 2500 women applying for the training so it is difficult now to select trainees.

The main objective of the organization is to provide training for disadvantaged women so we prioritize women who are disabled, economically poor, excluded from their family and women who suffer from leprosy. There is still a taboo in society about leprosy but we give them training in a group of about sixty – seventy to convey the message that it is not a transferable disease. We now have six to seven women working here and they bring their products to us from their homes. As well as paying a fair wage we also sponsor some of the children going to school. We are now making around 600-700 cotton items and altogether more than 500 women are employed by us. We take women to different places once in a year on an observation tour to promote fair trade as well as refreshment for them. We employ eighteen trainers and also organize a cooperative so that women are saving money and getting loans whenever they need.

I had lots of support from my family in every step of my life. Besides that, I can never forget a person called Anna Magril, A British Volunteer who had encouraged me to do all these things through Women's Skill Development Organization. Though I had invested my time and money, the organization is now in this condition due to her advice and continued support. Definitely, I had some skills but I had no knowledge about business, marketing, and quality control. She helped me through all the steps so she is my inspiration.

## What are your main achievements and challenges?

I am satisfied that I could help many girls and women to get some skills. I feel very happy to receive phone calls from women who are working abroad and making good money with the help of the training that they took from our centre. At the beginning, I was not sure whether I could sell the products or not. I remember the day when I took a bag full of products to an exhibition at the British Embassy organized for the British Volunteers. That day was my turning point as I sold all the products and made Rs.4000. It encouraged me to do more in this field and I started making coordination with other organizations. I cannot forget the help and encouragement from my family and volunteers.

The main challenge was the market when we started our project and also we were struggling to pay salary for the women at the time. It was very difficult to control the quality and get raw materials. The main challenge now is that I see other organizations are collecting money in the name of orphanages and copying our work. They have money and use this to gain media attention and for publicity which we are not able to do. We don't get any donations at all from the outside agencies so it is frustrating when these organizations copy us which aren't based on the same principles that our organization is based on.

The market for our products is good but we are lobbying the Government for more women friendly policies. For example, we cannot compete with India as they have cheap materials and labour costs and they are sending their products abroad at low prices but we cannot do that as we need raw materials from India for which we have to pay tax. Therefore, the government should have some policy to reduce taxes and encourage women who are working for the betterment of women. Also there should be a copy right policy in this field. We need an area where we can have more discussions and policies between all the different classes of women in Nepal as there is a big gap between the high class families and the third class women who are illiterate and deprived of everything.

It would have been very effective if we could send some women to take training abroad so that they could get knowledge about the market out of Nepal and also would attract more women in this field. The INGOs are only concerned to those who can write good letters and speak good English but they are not reaching to those who are working in a grass root level. I request them to have a look on the women who are in the villages.

## What are your plans for the future?

I have a plan to extend this project to other districts so that the women who are hated by their husbands and in-laws could get a kind of relief. If I have money, I have a dream plan to extend our project nationwide like BRAC are doing in Bangladesh.

## Do you have any suggestions or advice for women?

I request the high class women to spend some money to help the lower class women for skill development rather than spend their money in beauty parlours and parties. Also I request those women to come out from home who are skilful to impart their skills to those who don't have any.

Finally, I request those women who are mentally and physically tortured by their family at home to come out from home and speak out loudly.

### **Qualitative Analysis in Action**

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