



## Interview with Harinder Thapalia

Harinder Thapalia is the Chairperson of the Central Department for Home Science and Women's Studies. Originally from India, she moved to Nepal in 1968 after she was married. She is the first person to reach such a high position within the Padma Kanya Campus. She is able to make all the decisions for the campus and is able to give funds of her own accord. She also works with UNICEF on behalf on child rights.

Padma Kanya campus is situated in Bagbazar. It is a female only college allowing women and girls from all backgrounds to gain access to an education. It offers different courses in conjunction with Tribhuvan University, the courses available at Padma Kanya are: BBS, Post Graduate Diploma in Women Studies, MA Rural Development, MA English, MBS TU, MA Sociology and Anthropology and MA Population Studies as well as MA Nepali.

<http://tribhuvan-university.edu.np/>

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

I was born in India before the partition during 1946. I was the third child of my parents. It was a very critical period when I was born because of the partition between India and Pakistan that was going to take place so it was not a very good time for my parents to take care of a child. So when we came from Pakistan to India due to partition, my parents told me they had a lot of difficulties at the border to reach New Delhi where they were going to settle. We were eight children, six daughters and two sons. I belong to a Sikh family, called Panjabi, so we were very much trained in regular religious prayers and household work. Even though our family was going through economic problems at that time, all the children had to do some work. The daughters especially had to look after the kitchen, cooking and washing the clothing but it didn't mean that we didn't go to school. My parents were very particular to send us to schools. All three of us sisters went to the same government school. My father told me later on that I was a very good child, very obedient, and very good in my studies. He always used to tell me that I would do well in my education.

After grade five we moved to Andaman Islands in India where I studied for seven years. I completed my high school education there and I passed my higher secondary in highest position in the school and that was the first achievement in my life. I got a scholarship to continue my studies in New Delhi. I did my BSC in Home Science from New Delhi and I did my M.Sc. in Home Science from Barodha University where I met my husband. He was also doing his masters in Rajasthan Udaypur. My parents were not happy about it. They didn't want me to marry him because my father was not sure whether a Nepali man was going to look after his daughter. Eventually we married in 1968 with the consent of my parents. I had finished my MSc (Master's Degree) by that time. It was difficult when I first came to Nepal because the social and cultural environment was totally different, and also economically. My husband was a District Administration Development Officer in the agricultural office in Ilam. So the financial situation was okay but with him working and me studying the household situations was difficult. There was no electricity, there was no water and I used to feel I had a very hard life there. I could not cook using the fire wood system and I became ill. I went back to Delhi and my father said I won't send my daughter back to Nepal because she is having a hard time, but my husband arranged a transfer to Kathmandu so we moved here.

I was inspired to study by many of my family members. My father's sister used to live with us and she was highly educated. Even though girls were not encouraged to study Mathematics she was doing her master's in Mathematics and then became a teacher. Also my elder sister did a nursing course from New Delhi so the family environment was very encouraging regarding education and nobody used to put any restriction on our educational achievements.

### Can you tell us a little more about your educational background?

We were not very rich; we were just a middle class family. My father used to say "you wear just a very simple clothes you should not wear very modern clothes but you should go for higher education". And he used to buy the same colours of clothes for all sisters. My father was a follower of Gandhi and he used to talk about Gandhi all the time. He was quite strict but was always very particular about education. My sister was studying Science and because I was good in painting and drawing my father said why don't you go for different subjects, one daughter should go for Science and you can go for Arts. I was not very happy at the time as I also wanted to be a Doctor but my father said no, one daughter should go for Arts and one for Science. So that's how I joined Home Science according to his choosing. Later on I realized that I should also have studied Medicine and become a doctor but my father said you can still become a doctor you can do a Ph.D. so that is what I did! I was the first person to do a Ph.D. in Home Science from this Department. It was not easy

because I had my very small daughter at that time and I had very difficult times leaving her alone with my husband, sometimes taking her to my natal home and my mother used to look after her. Everybody used to criticize me, saying that I was too ambitious, and criticize me for leaving my daughter home all the time and going to study.

## Can you tell us about your present position and any support you have had?

I am Chairperson of the Central Department for Home Science and Women's Studies which means I am also Head of all the Home Science colleges in the Kathmandu Valley not just the one here at Padma Kanya Campus. We have fourteen home science colleges, so I am the chairperson of all the home science colleges in Nepal you can say. This is why I am not called the head but rather the chairperson. My position is really quite high as it is an autonomous body and I am not under the Campus Chief. I have my own programme; I can give funds to anybody and make decisions about spending on my own as I manage the budget.

After doing my Ph.D., I didn't find any satisfaction in the department because I was not given the chance to progress. Because of this I started working for PLAN International (INGO), I worked there for three years. They were asking for people who specialized in child development. My BA/BSc degree was in Home Science in Child Development. So I worked there as an Early Childhood Development Specialist. During that time I had to visit many areas in Nepal, areas such as Banke and Sunsari. I took leave from the college so I could work for PLAN. I have also worked for UNICEF as a consultant. I think these experiences have given me confidence and helped me as a teacher.

I am also involved in many other organizations and now I am also member of the Business Professional Women Federation. I have also worked for many Early Childhood Development programs in the Kathmandu Valley and outside. I have always been working for child rights actually. That is my interest so in relation to that I am a member of the children's world forum. I work with agencies such as UNICEF and Seto Gurans in their work to support child rights. I am also a Ph.D. research committee member. I am often consulted on Gender issues and involved in examinations of Ph.Ds. and research so this helps me continue to contribute to the field of Gender within Nepal.

## What or who has inspired you in your life?

Well, that is a very good question; actually it was my father more than my mother. My father was always insisting that we should be educated. He would always listen to the BBC and so we all developed the habit of listening to the radio. He was a very inspiring person. He would always

encourage us saying that if we worked hard work and had a strong character then we could achieve anything. There was some preference for our brother though such as in feeding him and we were aware that he was preferred. I used to think that it is not good to have a daughter, it is better to have a son and I was happy when my first born child was a son. When my daughter was born though I thought why should she face this discrimination. I work hard to support my daughter and now she is doing well, maybe I am favouring her more than my son!

### So what do you feel your main achievements have been?

The main thing I have achieved has been working in the Education sector and reaching the highest position in the Central Department as Chairperson. Also doing my Ph.D. was also a big achievement for me because at that time it was not a very common thing to do a Ph.D. and it was a really hard work. Also we have managed to start a Master's in Gender Studies, which is a very big achievement for the country actually. This Masters programme was the first Masters in Gender Studies in Nepal.

I also feel that I was a good teacher and this is an achievement, people tell me that I am though I do not know why. Many students like me very much I don't know why but some of them say because I speak a lot of English and can give them a lot of information and recommend books some of which are not available here. I use the internet to get the latest information and try to make the class more interesting. I think my background and experience in India also helps me to make my classes interesting. Also because of my consultancy I can give examples from other institutions and also from my time in India. I feel happy when I hear that people like my teaching, it makes me feel proud and satisfied.

### Can you tell us about the challenges have you faced?

I have faced many challenges; the first one is that of just being a woman! I was not given a lot of encouragement in the beginning when I needed it so this delayed me progressing in my career. I also had to spend time looking after my son when he was small as there was no one there to help me. I didn't join the Campus until he was four years old and I missed some opportunities like going to work for UNICEF. Working from 8am till 8 pm was too difficult as I was working for PLAN International at the same time and this meant I did not have enough time for my children. I felt pressure to leave my job to take care of my children. It is hard to divide the time between all these things. I depended on my husband and my husband's family at that time. Now I find I have reached the stage of being independent and I don't have to worry about anything. As long I am in a good health you know. Money wise I am okay, I am qualified, and I have knowledge. There are certain

stages of life when we have to be under our husband and family but then gradually if you are really strong in your mind and heart, you can achieve things easily rather than difficulty. So this is what I have learnt from my life.

And in the last two years I have not been well, I got cancer, actually uterus cancer, two years ago. I found out when I had a check-up and thankfully I have had an operation but then found it had spread to my stomach. I went to Delhi Rajiv Gandhi Cancer Hospital and was admitted there for two months. There I had another operation and then I had chemo therapy for six months, I was not able to do anything. I was just on leave and I was not even sure I would come back to this stage. Because I was very weak, I lost all my hair and everything. Luckily God helped me you know I survived so now I am alright after this chemo and I have had to take some therapy, yoga therapy, and I am still doing that so I am recovering now. So I am a survivor of cancer.

### What are your plans for the future?

Well we are starting a Masters course in Gender Studies and that is really good and I plan to retire from Padma Kanya and take up a new post. Let's see what I will do. (Harinder has since taken on position at The University Grant Commission in Nepal where she is continuing her involvement with research interests linked to Gender and Development).

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

Well have self-confidence is one of the big tips for me. Self-confidence and work hard and of course you have to be tolerant and you shouldn't be angry or moody you should be patient, calm, and peaceful. Yes peaceful is the best word I should say. Often things happen and it is not easy to solve them but you have to aim to be peaceful.

Economic independence is also necessary especially for women but you should work hard. I would suggest that every woman has to work. Women have to come out of the house. Really if they have to achieve something, they have to come out of the house and do some economic work as well. The society like ours is very traditional so we have to fight with all these practices which are preventing women getting ahead. Women need to be strong to fight those things. It's not necessary to say that I am a Brahmin or Chetri or whatever. We must forget about the caste system and class system and come together as human beings.

I always like to see other women reaching their potential especially in their career but whatever the educational level of women we can achieve things. If we have good commitment and are sincere in our work and if we can gain the support of our family then we can realise our dreams.

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