

Interview with Dr Sumon Tuladhar

Dr Sumon Kamal Tuladhar works for UNICEF Nepal as an Education Specialist since December 2000 to present time (will be retiring from January 2016). Before she joined UNICEF Nepal, she was working as a Senior Research Officer since 1980. She also taught in Mahendra Ratna Campus, which is an undergraduate college under Tribhuvan University. With a blend of rich experience from research work and opportunity to work at the policy level from UNICEF, she has been able to contribute in educational policy with gender and equity lens.



In 1986, she won a Fulbright scholarship to study in University of Massachusetts, Amherst in USA, where she also completed her doctorate in Education in 1994. Upon her return from study abroad, she worked as a liaison officer to University of Massachusetts (where she has earned the Doctorate degree) and Research Center for Educational Innovation and Development (CERID) where eventually she established a Non- Formal Education Resource Centre in Nepal to support the NGOs who are working in the field of alternative basic education to the out of school children as well as to the illiterate adults.

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

I was born in Kishidhoka family in Asan Tole, Kathmandu, Nepal. I have two younger sisters – Dr. Rita Kamal Tuladhar and Madhuwanti Tuladhar and one younger brother, Prabin Man Tuladhar. My father, Angur Man Tuladhar, has 4 brothers and two sisters. All his brothers were well established businessmen. Being youngest among the brothers, my father got opportunity to study in India and became a civil engineer. My mother, Surya Laxmi is a housewife and have 4 sisters and 3 brothers. In my childhood, I was brought up in a joint family. My experience in a joint family was very positive and was a great support in my education as well as in my career development.

My grandfather, Mr. Manik Man Tuladhar was a pioneering entrepreneur as well as a social worker; he was one of the pioneers who introduced the entertainment business in the country. During that

time, there was no movies. He, not only trained the community people to stage a theater, but also introduced first silent movies in the country. His theatre group was extremely popular in the Rana families, who were the main rulers in Nepal at that time, consequently our family is very much influenced by their fun-loving and progressiveness.

My grandfather, being a progressive businessperson, sent his sons to India for their education and provided opportunities to his younger daughter and grandchildren for education. With his progressive vision and his contribution in the society, he has been able to earn a great deal of respect to our family which eventually became popular as Kishidhoka family. Some of the prominent features that distinguished my family from other families, is openness to modernism, liberal and less gender bias compared to other families.

In my childhood, my maternal family has also very prominent influence to shape my present life. The family was a very simple but rich in tradition and very religious, mostly guided by a very strong grandmother (the wife of my grandfather's elder brother). She was a widow and was living with my maternal grandfather and mother's family. She was very charismatic and powerful, and made all the rules in the house and she made sure that everybody followed rules, including my grandfather! She became a very powerful influence for me and she taught me the importance of all the cultural practices, including gender stereotypical roles. She makes sure that I learned my responsibility as a female member of the family, as she was well aware how I was raised in my progressive family. She thinks that we are too liberal to be an ideal female and wants to make sure that I can function well as a female. Despite her efforts, I was still not good in the kitchen and could not cook meals.

My Maternal family was also deeply entrenched with religious practices and spirituality, which became a reason for me to connect to a vihara, called Dharma Kirti Vihara (a nunnery). My spiritual teachers among who are Venerable Ashwogosh and Venerable Dhammawati played a great role to shape me to develop my confidence to speak out in the public and lead a team while we were youth.

What were your ambitions and who or what inspired and supported you when you were younger?

When I was in school it was very common to read the horoscopes and I really believed in them. My horoscope suggested I should be a teacher, ambassador, or doctor. As I was poor in mathematics I gave up my dream to be a doctor. I believed in these predictions though and as a result I developed a keen interest to become an ambassador more than a teacher. I loved the idea of an international job, but I didn't have a definite plan.

As mentioned above, I was lucky to have a very supportive family, especially for education. All members of our family expected us to study hard and do our best in the study. My aunt, who had dropped out of her studies due to her bad health, was a great source of help and inspiration in my studies. She would set the alarm and monitor our¹, studies especially during examination time. She was very keen on us studying, so she would spare us from the household chores. She was not married and was living with us so would give us a lot of time and support. To add more, I, especially, being eldest among 7 children in the joint family and my father as a role model, always felt I must study hard and get a decent job in a reputable office just like my father. Hence, my father is also my source of inspiration. In a middle of all these, my mother is a silent source of inspiration for me with her strong commitment to her children and family and being happy at our success. She offers puja to Sarwoti and other gods and goddesses wishing our success. She makes sure that we eat well.

Another big personality that shaped my academic life is my cousin brother, Mr. Nirmal Man Tuladhar who not only gave me daily tutoring, but also guided me in my academic and professional life, until I went out to the United States with the Fulbright Scholarship. He was a big source of inspiration and support for all my career success in my childhood, until I got married.

After my marriage, my husband Sidhartha Man Tuladhar became my solid support and source of inspiration. He, exactly, knows my competency and pushes me to my ambition even when I do not have own confidence. I would have never applied for the Fulbright Scholarship, if it was not for him and his firm pushing. I was reluctant to apply for it because, I know, it is a very prestigious scholarship and was a tough competition. I did not have much time to spend with my mother-in-law, but she was the moral support for me to continue my job after marriage. Society at that time, did not appreciate the daughter-in-law to go out and earn, as earning is looked only as a means of earning for family income rather than pursuing the ambition in life. Yet she stood behind me to let me continue my career. My energy and efforts became more resilient towards my career and profession with her support. I also learned that she was very happy to have an educated daughter-in-law. She didn't care about the stereo-typical ideas in our traditional society and provided me my own space and confidence to break away from gender stereo-types.

My mother-in-law got more excited than me when I got a chance to go on a short-term training course on Social Research Methodology in Pune in India; she was so proud and happy. She came to see me off in the airport, when I departed for the course. However, that became the most unfortunate time for me to leave, as my mother-in-law had a brain hemorrhages two months after I

¹ We were altogether 7 children in the family between my uncle and my family.

left for Pune and she left all of us for good. I couldn't take care of her in her last days, which always makes me feel very sad, but still she is living in my inspiration silently as a main moral support. Whenever I have a promotion or good things happen in my career, I just wish she is seeing it from somewhere. After the death of my mother-in-law, my father-in-law and my sister-in-laws supported me a lot.

Someone I can never thank enough is my mother who constantly keep up her support in every step and really encouraged to have a child and said that it does not really matter if it is a boy or a girl and convinced me that a child in conjugal life is a blessing. But my goal was to first get a Ph.D. before I had a child. Again my mother convinced me that she will take care of the baby so I can pursue my study. That's exactly what she did. By that time, my sibblings were also quite grown up and they were all part of bringing up my daughter. Thanks to all their support, I have achieved my goal to get the doctorate degree.

What is your present position and how did you get there?

I have been working in the capacity of Education Specialist in UNICEF Nepal since December 2000. My major responsibility is to support the Government of Nepal and improve the implementation of educational policies for children's educational rights.

My career started in Mahendra Ratna Campus, as an Assistant Lecturer in 1978. In 1979, I worked in CNAS (Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies) which is one of the four research centers under Tribhuvan University.

After working for some time in CNAS, in 1980, I joined CERID (Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development), which is also under the umbrella of Tribhuvan University and is the institution, I got a platform to advance my professional career. While working in CERID, I was involved in various research projects which enriched my academic background and made solid with the actual situation in the grassroots level. Knowledge accumulated from the Research work has enabled me to take technical leadership when I joined UNICEF and worked with the government in improving the educational policies to make it more equitable for women and children.

In answer to the question, how did I get there, there were many "*building blocks*" in my life. I have already mentioned about my childhood enforcements and my source of inspirations. Besides them, we need lot more. While academic qualification is one of the essentials, opportunities that you are able to make positive use of them becomes a stair-case for your success. When I was doing my undergraduate study in Padma Kanya College, I was able to take advantage of some extra-curricular activities, like Back to Village Campaign in which we were sent as volunteers to be a literacy

facilitators to the illiterate adults. I also enrolled in NCC, a para-military training, which provides some physical exercise as well as teaches some discipline needed for a good citizen to protect the country.

As a partial requirement of the Master's Degree, I also joined the National Development Services (NDS) and did various development works there, too. In fact this is a great opportunity for me to develop my life-skills and also to put my academic courses into practice, as the program takes you out of your home and stay in a rural area for a period of 9-month. Students were evaluated against some indicators of contributions in the field of community development.

What are your main achievements and what challenges have you faced?

I believe I have had many achievements in my life. I was the first member of my family to get a first division in SLC, and won Fulbright Scholarship. Some awards and medals that I earned are as follows:

1. Fulbright-Hays Program 1986/87
2. *Mahendra Vidhya Bhushan* 1995²
3. *Pancha Bir Singh Shirpa*³
4. *Dharma Kirti Dhammawati Shirpa* 2015⁴

During my work .with CERID, I have established a Non formal Resource Center for the first time in Nepal in 1994 under the University Linkage Program with University of Massachusetts at Amherst in USA. The main objective is to build the capacity of agencies working in literacy and education related activities through Dialogue Sessions, publication of Newsletters and Factsheets, and providing training and workshops. This was followed by ECD (Early Childhood Development) Resource Center in 1996. I was also able to lobby the Faculty of Education to introduce the course on ECD, which is still continuing. Course on Non-formal education was also offered but unfortunately it did not last long.

In 1998, with my professional leadership, CERID entered into a MOU with British Council on Higher Education Link program: research in the area of indigenous knowledge, health practices, gender and education and reproductive health in which there is an opportunity to share knowledge and

² It is an award given by the head of the state on completion of Doctorate Degree. In my case it was Late King Birendra Bir Vkrum Shaha Dev.

³ It is given to the best article published in Sandhya Times on Buddhism over the year.

⁴ It is an annual award given to the best contributor for Dharma Kirti Vihar

experience between two institutions – John Moor Liverpool University and Tribhuvan University. It continued until 2007 with extension of two terms.

In 2000 December I joined UNICEF, where I had opportunity to work with the government and made some contributions at the policy level. UNICEF works closely with the government to develop equitable policy, to improve the service delivery system and also to set a new social norms to benefit children and women in Nepal. Under the umbrella of UNGEI⁵, I had started first Gender Network group in Nepal in 2001 and in 2006 this network has been mainstreamed in the government policy under the name of Gender and Girls' Education Network (GEN). As a result, Nepal government has appointed a Gender Focal Point in all offices under the Ministry of Education (MOE), in all 5 Development Regions and in all 75 districts. I had provided technical support to the government in developing the first Girls' Education Strategy Paper in 2006. Besides this, I was instrumental in launching a campaign, namely Welcome to School (WTS), a highly successful campaign in 2004 enrolling 500,000 children in schools opposed to the government target to bring 150,000 children in primary level. In 2010, with UNICEF's support, especially with my technical leadership, Nepal government launched a National Framework on Child Friendly School to provide quality education to all primary children in Nepal. Recently my latest contribution in policy level initiative is to launch Consolidated Equity Strategy Paper for addressing equitable quality education in Nepal.

Besides my professional achievements, I am also a member of our community groups, including a religious society to provide capacity building programmes to Buddhist nuns.

Moreover, as a woman, I am proud to be blessed with a daughter, Urna Tara Tuladhar, who accompanied me to USA and cooperated me very well while I was doing my doctorate degree. Bringing her up is also a good learning event for me.

While initiating new tasks of bringing some changes, challenges are just natural and normal. But finding like-minded people and building a team with common understanding of the project or activities is a major strategy to deal with any challenges. It is said that "*Necessity is the mother of invention*" and challenges should be seen as "*windows of opportunities*".

⁵ UNGEI (United Nation's Girls' Education Initiative) is an initiative started in 2000 to promote gender equity in education sector and to improve girls' education in the world.

What are your future plans?

I am very satisfied with my present position, because being in Nepal and serving Nepali people is a very fulfilling task. I am working in collaboration with the government and other stakeholders to improve the educational opportunities for the children of Nepal, which makes me very satisfied.

After my retirement, I will continue to acquire knowledge and pursue my ambition to support women and children in their empowerment to be self-competent, to respect others' rights and also fulfilling their own duties towards the human kind and the country

What are your suggestions and advice for women?

Everybody must have a dream which needs to be worked into to set a goal in life and an ambition to the height which can be achieved. When Buddha was asked by King Koshala, if a girl child can be equally wise as a boy child, Buddha has answered that "you should treat boy and girl equal and give training and opportunities equally, a girl child will be as wise as a boy child". Similarly when women approached Buddha to ordain them as men, Ananda asked Buddha, if a woman can attain the enlightenment, he said a woman also can attain enlightenment as any man. Buddha has given entitlements of "perfection" to women in par with men.

Women must use their fullest inner strength without any reservation and remember that they are holding half of the sky and they are the first hand that rocks the cradle. They should remember that if *"a man is educated an individual is educated but if a woman is educated whole family is educated"*. These are the inspirations women should always keep in mind and move forward.

Women should remember that women as a mother provides love and compassion to their children and bless the whole family, while woman as a mother-in-law becomes strong support and pillar of inspiration to their daughter-in-laws. "Be the change that you want to see", as said by Mahatma Gandhi.

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 experiences can be explored, examining the gendered experiences of meanings of inspiration.