

The power of engagement: gender, volunteerism and governance in the post-2015 development agenda

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Speech by Catherine Nixon

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VSO is an International NGO that works through volunteers to achieve development results.

Catherine, a nurse by profession, is now on a VSO volunteer placement as Community Health Worker and Mobilizer with Women Empowerment Action Forum (WEAF) in Nepal. Catherine has been supporting WEAF to roll out a women's leadership programme, encouraging women to be good leaders and increase their confidence in the community. Catherine is currently undertaking research into increasing women's meaningful participation in decision-making roles.

I have been volunteering as a public health nurse with a women's rights organisation in rural Nepal for the past two year. My work in Nepal has varied from working alongside nurses at the hospital, to helping ensure women's reproductive health rights in the community are met. I have also been working alongside women's networks in rural communities to increase their ability to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

On a personal level, volunteering has had many different values for me. It has drawn my attention to the status of women not just in Nepal but globally. It has made me reflect on home and how things are in my own culture, some of the cultural norms in the UK that are also subtle and maybe easier to identify once removed from that culture. For example, how women tend to underestimated their own ability whereas men overestimate their ability. How in a room with 80% men and 20% women; there is the assumption by men in the room that it is 50:50. I think my society has become complacent in accepting the gender gap or not even noticing that it is there.

Through working with women in rural Nepal I feel their perception of how they see women in the UK has changed. My friend Dilkumari commented on how she felt love relationships were fickle and women in my country may have rights but at the expense of values. As time has gone on she has said that meeting someone in person from a different culture has given her a different impression from this and that I am not that different from her. She says 'tapai bideshi mahilia hoina, tapai Nepali mahila jesti ho' which I took as recognition that I am not that different from her. This has helped to breakdown stereotypes, we unite as 'women' and this gives us solidarity.

Living in Dailekh, I have found that the women have commented on how my presence has provoked them to think about the alternative roles women can have other than being housewives, and mothers. Some women have commented on the choices I have... My life choices, such as the choice whether to have children or not, has often been used in women's groups by other women to discuss what rights women should have. They make links that as these rights are universal they should also have them. 'Mero adikar, mero awaj' - My rights, my voice.

I have found that volunteering with communities breaks down the power relationship that I have seen existing in other development work. I believe in using people rather than resources as you meet people on a level playing field and this helps with shared learning. I have found that women-to-women volunteering can be very powerful. Women can act as allies for each other and help foster personal growth and empowerment. For example, Durga, from our women's network, despite having overcome many challenges in getting an education herself due to early marriage and violence in the home, has become a teacher and is now a strong advocate for every girl's right to an education. Durga has been key in mobilising women at a village level. Her strength to continue the fight for rights despite the challenges she has faced in life is a big inspiration to me.

Through volunteering in Dailekh, I now know that I want to continue to work on women's rights. This inspiration and empowerment has come from the women I have met in Nepal.

For me, volunteering goes beyond just doing a role. I have connected with people, they have been my sisters and my friends. Because of this strong people-centred approach that volunteering brings, I believe it has a key role to play in the post-2015 agenda.