

Mid-Term Report

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Namaste!

I came into this fellowship knowing almost nothing about Nepal or BASE. In these four short weeks I have been in Nepal, I have learnt a lot as a peace fellow and I know that I will carry these lessons throughout my personal and professional life. I have met the most amazing people and I would like to share their stories.

Daughters Of The Tharu – Besahi Village



In a time when there is an active global movement for securing girls' rights, the daughters of the *Tharu* seem to be unfortunately forgotten. The *Tharu*, a small community in western Nepal that accounts for approximately 13% of the Nepali population, are the indigenous people of the *Tarai*. Despite being the original inhabitants of Nepal's lowlands, they have been the victims of exploitation at the hands of settlers who migrated to their homeland from the hills. In the first half of the 20th century, the *Tarai* was covered in dense forest and ridden in malaria meaning that other people could not live there. Only the *Tharu*, who possessed natural immunity to malaria enabling them to survive in such a harsh environment. Following the eradication of malaria in the 1950's and 1960's, the fertile land of the *Tarai* could no longer be hidden to the eyes of the people living in the hills and mountains. Gradually, they began to migrate to the *Tarai* to cultivate the fertile lands.

Being naive and illiterate, the *Tharu* were easily tricked into signing contracts which gave away their ancestral lands for minimal compensation. With no land left to support them, the *Tharu* found themselves in debt to their new landlords requiring them to work for their landlords until their debt was fully paid off. But the debt could never be paid off and the *Tharu* became slaves known as *Kamaiya* bonded laborers. As a marginalized community, most of their daughters were sent to work as domestic servants in the homes of the landowners. But why does child labor continue to be a persistent issue in Nepal despite national statistics showing a continuous decline?



Before I dive into the numbers, let's define what child labor is. Child labor, as defined by the International Labor Organization (ILO), refers to any work that deprives children of their childhood and their right to education, health, safety and moral development based on the [ILO standards on child labour are defined by the ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 \(No. 138\) and the Worst Form of Child Labour Convention, 1999, \(No. 182\)](#). Though child labor is declining at the rate of 100,000 every year, Nepal still accounts for 1.6 million children between (5-17 years) in child labor. Of these 621,000 are estimated to be engaged in hazardous work. Estimates suggest that 60 per cent of children in hazardous workplace are girls (373,000).

Of the different forms of child labor in Nepal, the employment of *Tharu* girls as domestic servants (*Kamlaharis / Kamlaris*) has received the most publicity. The *Kamlaris* have been subjected to serious human rights violations by their so-called masters or landlords. Many of these young girls were compelled to work for their landlords instead of attending school and some of them were subjected to sexual harassment and abuse. These conditions of slavery have continued through several generations because the *Kamaiya* families were never able to earn enough to pay off their original debt. The necessity to borrow more money from their landlords for clothes, medicine and other essentials only added to their spiraling debt leaving them with no end in sight to their lives of misery and oppression.



Backward Society Education (BASE) begun a non-violent people's movement across Nepal for the total liberation of *Kamaiyas*. Peaceful protests were organized and legal petitions to the central government were sent. Over 200,000 ordinary Nepalese people participated in one of Nepal's greatest periods of non-violent political struggle. As a result of this movement, the government declared the complete abolition of the *Kamaiya* system in July 2000. This was the apex of the *Kamaiya* movement. However, the joy and happiness experienced did not last long. The now freed *Kamaiyas* who had been living for generations on their landlords' properties were suddenly thrown out on the streets. They had no place to live or food to eat. Over approximately 200,000 *Kamaiyas* who were freed that day, many of the families have still not received the land that was promised to them by the government. Thousands of their children have been forced to return to conditions of bonded labor to pay off newly incurred debts. Their lives are still rung by poverty and suffering. Many of them rely on daily wage labor to enable them to live a hand to mouth existence and are still waiting for the government to fulfill its promise before rehabilitation.



The needs today of the freed *Kamaiyas* are education, employment, healthcare and full political participation in a democratic Nepal. BASE continues to strive through peaceful means to advocate for these needs as well as providing its own grassroots services to the *Tharu*. Continuous support and commitment is still needed by the government to finally resolve the trials of the *Kamaiya* bonded laborers. BASE will never give up its peaceful struggle for justice neither will the daughters of *Tharu* give up their quest of being autonomous.

A Woman With Honor – Ghorahi Town

Meet Sunita Chaudhary...25



Sunita is the current central president of the Freed Kamlari Development Forum (FKDF), a community-based organization in Ghorahi, Dang district in Nepal that hopes to “build a civilized, prosperous and developed *Kamlari* free society.” Since its establishment in June 2010, FKDF has assisted many freed *Kamlaris* to better themselves economically and socially through advocacy, empowerment and entrepreneurial programs implemented by FKDF. Her commitment, and that of the organization in which she serves, is to “work for the welfare, economic and social empowerment of the freed *Kamlaris*.”



Living in poverty, Sunita was forced to go to work for a landlord in Ghorahi under the false pretense that she would be provided with an education, a necessity that her parents could not accord her. When her grandmother passed away, her parents borrowed money from a landlord and sent her to work for him as a way to repay the loan. She was immediately forced into a system that she knew nothing about. At the tender age of 8, she was held as a bonded laborer doing domestic chores for a household of 28 members. Her childhood stolen from her.

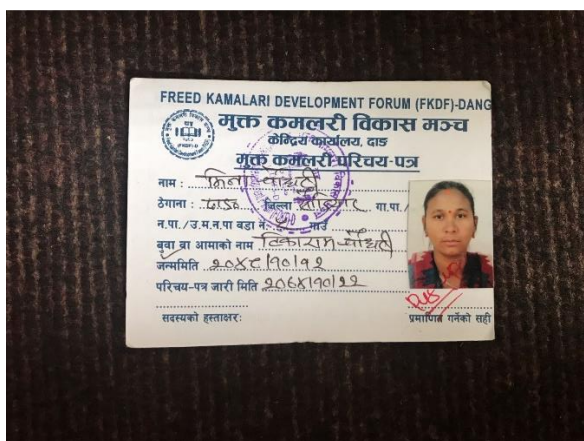
Back then, it seemed that Sunita was destined to follow in her family's footsteps into a bonded laborer. But that changed when she was rescued by the Friends of Needy Children after 2 years working as a *Kamlari*. This organization later became the Freed Kamlari Development Forum (FKDF). As a young girl, Sunita knew that helping free her fellow sisters was her destiny. She said that those 2 years she worked as a *Kamlari* confronted her with the truth about the crimes against young *Tharu* girls and challenged her to face up to her responsibility as a *Tharu* community member to protect young girls from the human and child rights violations. Sunita has risen through the ranks within FKDF, serving first as a social mobilizer and later on as a district president and now serves as the central president of the entire organization. As a way of formalizing her training, she is pursuing her bachelor's degree in Education at Mahendra Multiple Campus. She hopes to use this opportunity to further advance the agendas set out by FKDF.

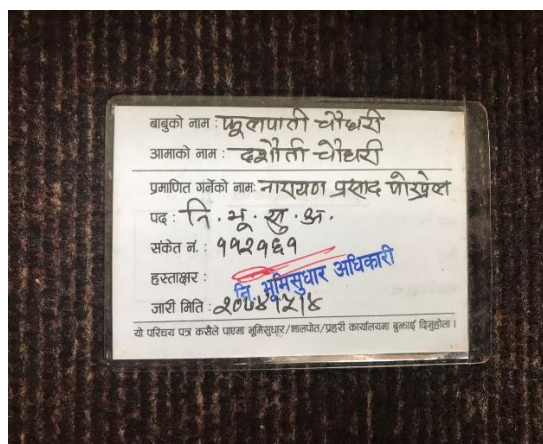


With a total number of approximately 13,000 members, FKDF has not only grown in size but also in capacity and has championed for the betterment of the lives of former *Kamlaris*. FKDF has offered short term vocational programs to a number of these young women who have gone to become small business owners in several sectors. These vocational training programs enable these young women to earn an income and build crucial life skills. These young women lack access to financial capital and have limited opportunities to gain education, knowledge, and skills that can lead to economic advancement. The inadequate policy frameworks and inequitable gender norms also often create barriers to their economic advancement.



Of the different services offered by FKDF, the issuing of identity card to freed *Kamlaris* is of the most importance as it has become a necessity for people to reach various services offered by *governmental* and a few *non-governmental* institutions. With these identity cards, former *Kamlaris* can apply for national identity cards from the government which gives them proof of citizenship, access to scholarship opportunities from the government (the government has set aside 12 million Nepali Rupees as an education fund for former *Kamlaris*), access to subsidized vocational training programs offered by the government, employment in government agencies and access to subsidized land from the government. The process of receiving these national identity cards is a tall order. In Dang district alone, there are 5,546 former *Kamlaris* but so far only 500 of them have received the identity cards. Issues of citizenship, statelessness and marginalization have featured the *Tharu* community in Nepal. This is a group of people with historical or ethnic ties to Nepal but have been rendered stateless for generations. International treaties proclaim citizenship as a basic right. The fact that they are not recognized by the government as citizens exposes them to many challenges, ranging from denial of basic rights to access to employment, housing, education, and healthcare.





What I took out of my meeting with Sunita was that delivering the freedom to all *Kamlaris* and achieving the poverty eradication goal in accordance to the Sustainable Development Goals demands renewed policy approaches and more comprehensive and sophisticated knowledge. Beyond the traditional practices of domestic slavery and servitude, an old problem continues to exist and permeate. She said that poverty among the *Kamlaris* can only be solved by tackling inequalities. So long as injustice and exploitation continue to be part of our economic, social and cultural systems, poverty will continue to devastate the lives of thousands of *Kamlaris*.

Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken – Lalmatiya Chowk

Nepalese women in general who dream of managing their own businesses face many challenges. A disabled young girl born into a family that has been in bonded labor for generations but shares the same ambition, faces even larger challenges. This is because any person living with any disability is less likely to participate actively in making decisions that concern him or her and is less likely to have his or her protection needs met. Asha Kumal, 18, was born deaf and dumb. She has been dependent on her family and friends to communicate with the rest of the people. She started life at a disadvantage, having to always do something extra just to be on the same level.



From a young age, Asha viewed going to school as a huge privilege and she was always very eager to learn, her father, Bhagu Bahadur Kumal, explains. While in school, Asha experienced learning difficulties as much as she looked 'normal'. She became disenfranchised because her educational needs were not being met. She developed low self-esteem and eventually dropped out of school at class 3. Her father informs us that there is an inadequate number of special need schools in Nepal. The few that are available are widely scarce and are only found in major towns. He also says that the number of teachers trained to teach special needs students is low despite the large number of children living with disabilities. Many of these children are deprived of access to basic literacy and numerical skills, he says. But he is very proud that Asha can at least read and write.



Globally, disabled people are faced with discrimination and barriers to full participation in employment programs and skills training. Because of ignorance and discrimination, disabled people are often debarred in work. Society's argument is centered on their inability to compete on the basis of relevant skills or qualifications. Many communities, mostly in developing countries, still associate disability with curses and bad omens. This is the case in Nepal too. Unfortunately, this has impeded the country's development of services for children with disabilities, prevented parents from accepting their children's disabilities, and makes social inclusion for these children almost impossible. BASE, however, provided a 3-month specialized training course at a nearby community training center as a way to empower young women who had been freed for the *Kamaiya* system and to also shift the mentality surrounding disabilities to bring part of the population out of the shadows. Asha attended this training in 2015 and learnt how to sew.

Shanta asks Asha what she thought of the vocational training program and whether she would like to enroll in another one (in Nepali):



She responds:

“I liked training and it was good for me. I need more training on the latest fashion trends. Right now, I can only make a petticoat which I sell for 100 Nepali Rupees and a *kurta* (a local Nepali clothing) which I sell for 250 Nepali Rupees.”



The word ‘opportunity’ means a set of circumstances in which a course of successful action is possible. Opportunity is scarce for disabled people. But what is even more rare is the willingness to take advantage of an opportunity that may present itself. To the extent a country is free, a person with no money, no education, no connections can rise as far as his ability and ambition will take him. But developing ability and ambition is a challenging, uncomfortable, even scary process. Relatively few people in any era choose to do it, and as a result, few capitalize on life’s unlimited opportunities. The importance of these vocational training programs cannot be over emphasized. By equipping former *Kamlaris* and / or their children with basic skills in technical fields will enable them to pursue employment opportunities which will ultimately contribute towards their socio-economic inclusion.

In Andrew Carnegie’s words, a “man may be born in poverty, but he does not have to go through life in poverty. He may be illiterate, but he does not have to remain so. But . . . no amount of opportunity will benefit the man who neglects or refuses to take possession of his own mind power and use it for his own personal advancement.”



The Gift

It is not uncommon globally for minority communities to live in fear of eviction from their ancestral lands. Nepal is no exception. In Nepal, the ownership of land determines the economic prosperity, social status and the political hold a family or an individual has over the rest of the community. Land is probably the most important asset in any rural agrarian society. Rural community lands cover about two-thirds of Nepal's land area. Like most developing countries, agriculture is the primary source of livelihoods for the majority of Nepal's population. However, there is a large percentage of the population (approximately 25%) that do not have land to farm on. The situation is further worsened by the uneven distribution of agricultural land in the country.



The exclusion of the *Kamaiyas* from access to productive assets such as land is one of the main reasons why poverty among the *Tharu* continues to permeate. Landlessness negatively impacts an individual's right to food, housing, water, health and work because most of the community relies on subsistence farming for their livelihood. Inequality in land distribution among the *Tharu* community in particular was brought about by customary system of land tenure where the original inhabitants of the region settled there and cultivated the land but did not have any land certificates or any records to show ownership. While the *Tharu* had no records of the land they were cultivating, the settlers registered the land in their name, forcing the *Tharu* to work as agricultural laborers. Over time, this practice was replaced by the ill practice of bonded labor which is known as the *Kamaiya* bonded labor system.

After the historic moment in July 2000 when the Nepalese government declared the *Kamaiya* system of bonded labor as illegal, many *Tharu* community members were left landless and homeless. The government of Nepal promised them small pieces of land and building materials where they could settle and start a fresh. As recent as August 2017, the Minister for Land Reform & Management assured that all the remaining *Kamaiyas* would be rehabilitated within

that fiscal year. But many of these *Kamaiyas* wait desperately for the realization of this promise. These *Kamaiyas* remain destitute but quietly demand for the resettlement money and timber that was promised to them by the government.



In the early 1990's, being landless in Nepal also meant that you were considered stateless. Backward Society Education (BASE) saw the need of these people and offered to assist them to purchase land. The first exercise involved the saving of 100 Nepali Rupees monthly by each *Kamaiya* family household. They would then collectively purchase a small plot of land (1 *kattha*) that they would resettle on. BASE introduced a saving scheme for the *Kamaiyas*. Every day, they would take a handful of rice or as much as they could do without and store it in a pot. BASE would then sell the rice on their behalf and deposit the money in a bank account in the name of the *Kamaiyas*. 500 Nepali Rupees was the minimum amount to open a bank account. As an incentive, BASE matched the first year's saving by 300%, second year's by 200% and third year's by 100%. The minimum amount required to be matched by BASE was 1,200 Nepali Rupees. The cost of 1 *kattha* of land at the time ranged between 3,000 – 5,000 Nepali Rupees (1 *kattha* = 0.08 acres). 221 *Kamaiya* families benefited from this program. However, the project was too expensive to scale up to assist the 100,000 families who had been affected by the bonded labor system at the time.



BASE's decision to help these families is more of a response to an existing need than a responsibility. As much as BASE understand that addressing housing, land and property issues is a key component of national responsibility, it recognizes its strong role at the grassroots level. They understand their implied duty to assist their fellow community members to obtain appropriate compensation. Securing their housing, land and property rights is, of course, one of the main components of finding durable solutions to landlessness. While the government has made efforts to provide mechanisms for *Kamaiya* compensation, those mechanisms have rarely been adequate to deal – at least in a timely manner – with the scale and complexity of the *Kamaiya* problem.



I would like to continue to bring awareness to the challenges that face the Tharu community in Nepal and continue to support BASE in their campaign against the practice of domestic child labor. I am extremely grateful to JJCF for granting me this opportunity!