

TRAVEL REPORT May-June 2023

Constance, June 16, 2023

Hello Everyone,

I recently returned from a 3-week trip to Nepal, which included one week in the Far Western District of Bajhang. In summary, it was an adventurous and a productive trip.

I first spent a week in Kathmandu with Madhav Joshi, preparing for the endline survey to be conducted in Bajhang to determine the effectiveness of the first year of our Girls' and women's project. The survey was designed and conducted by Prof. Narbada Thapa, who was in charge of the baseline survey back in 2021, with which the current survey will be compared. We also discussed how to continue our Girls' and Women's project and how to conduct our tentative project with the women of the village of Khori – described below.

As we prepared to visit Bajhang we heard that the airplane that usually flies from Dhanghadi in the south to Chainpur, the capital of Bajhang had broken down and there was no replacement. This meant that we had to travel for 10 hours by Jeep along very bumpy and fairly dangerous roads, and back the same way a week later.

But the adventurous part came during the week we were in Bajhang. All 4 elements, Fire, Earth, Water and Air showed themselves in force. First, we had a forest fire that came within 100 meters of our hotel:



A forest fire behind our hotel

Two days later, at 4 in the morning, I woke up because the whole room was shaking. Yes, it was an earthquake at 4.5 on the Richter Scale and the epicenter was only 40 km away. It was a bit of a shock, but it turned out to be short and sweet and nobody was hurt. A day later there was a big

windstorm that took out the electricity in Chainpur for 24 hours. And when we drove back to Dhanghadi we experienced severe rain and hail, water being the last of the four elements that affected us.

The Survey

In Bajhang, Prof. Thapa spent two days training six nurses and other personnel to conduct the endline survey in the field. They then travelled to six schools, interviewing the schoolgirls and -boys, the teachers, the mothers and fathers of the schoolchildren, the School Management Committees and other municipal authorities. The results are currently being analyzed and the final report should be available in a few weeks.



Prof. Narbada Thapa

The Girls' and Women's Project

Our Girls' and Women's Project is now in its second year, and we hope to finish all 120 schools/villages in Bajhang by the end of the year or perhaps a month or two later.



Our staff in Bajhang: from left to right, above: District Coordinator Pooja Shahi, nurses Puja Rawal, Radhika Ratala and Shusila Jethara; below: health worker Rajesh Bahadur Bohara, organisers Nabin Pandit and Chandra Joshi.

We expect the endline survey to show that the project has been a success and this has been confirmed by those conducting the survey in the field. We have therefore begun to consider how this project, which from the start was intended as a pilot project, can continue.

The government has decided that all government schools in Nepal should hire a school nurse. The implementation of this decision is taking its time, but in two of the seven provinces, province 1 and 3 (also called Bagmati Province) most schools by now have hired a school nurse. 530 of the schools in Bagmati Province, where Kathmandu is located, now have school nurses.

Our idea is that HEAR Nepal could train the school nurses to teach the contents of our two brochures *Kishoree* and *Kishor* to the schoolgirls and -boys using modern participatory teaching methods.

We want to start implementing this idea in Bagmati Province. Since we need the approval and authorization of the provincial government, we had planned to drive for 3 hours from Kathmandu to Hetauda, the capital of Bagmati Province, to speak with representatives of the provincial government. However, the day before we were to leave for Hetauda, we heard that those responsible, among them the Secretary of the Social Development Department and the person in charge of training school nurses, were in Kathmandu, about to leave the next day for Hetauda. We therefore had a two hour meeting with them at 7 am before they took off.



From left to right: I, Maheswor Shresta, Head of the Social Development Ministry, his deputy Satis Bista, Rita Mahato (responsible for the training of nurses), Ragishree Shresta (Training Director), Krishna Chand (retired Senior Joint Secretary, Health and Education in Bagmati Province and our long-term ally and friend) and Madhav Joshi (HEAR Nepal)

They gave us their full support for our project and during a subsequent meeting with those in charge of training the school nurses, we discussed all the details. We thus expect to start this project in January 2024 and teach all school nurses in Bagmati Province by the end of the year. The only problem remaining to be solved concerns who should pay for the printing of the brochures, which we want to be distributed to each student before or around the onset of puberty. HEAR Nepal cannot take this on, since we are dealing with too many brochures and since it would not be sustainable for us to keep paying for brochures every year. We will be holding discussions with each

municipality separately about this, since due to the recently federalization, it is they who disburse the money for the schools.

Should this scaling up of our Girls' and Women's Project in Bajhang be successful, we intend to continue teaching school nurses in the other 6 provinces. The goal is thus for every schoolgirl and - boy in Nepal entering puberty to receive one of the brochures and be taught by a school nurse about their contents for 4 hours. I believe Nepal would thereby become one of the first South Asian country to prepare all adolescents for their entry into puberty and to teach them about the topics of menstruation and menstrual hygiene, gender equality and harassment.

Here, I would like to thank my wife Karin, who from the beginning was essential in designing and defining the Girls' and Women's project. Unfortunately, she could not accompany me on my trip to Bajhang this time.

The Khori Project

Background

Especially in the remote rural areas of Nepal women are often the ones who must work in the fields and then give what money they earn to their husbands who play cards or other games during the day and use the money to drink alcohol every evening. It is then common for them to beat their women and children when they come home drunk. This problem is endemic in large parts of Nepal. Women tend to have little say in the important matters of the villages or topics surrounding money. The result has been misery for women, continued poverty, emigration to other countries to earn money and a lack of good nutrition.

Back in 2021 I read an article about the village of Khori in Bajhang, where the women had had enough of this degradation. Seven years ago, they got together and decided to take action. They went to the local alcohol manufacturer and forced him to stop making alcohol. They then decided that anyone found drunk in the street would be fined 5,000 Rupees, a sizable amount of money.



*One of the leaders of the women's group in Khori
who fined her husband 4 times.*

They spent the money they made on the fines to improve the infrastructure in the village, for example, by laying water pipes into the houses so they would not have to collect water every day at the well. They also installed toilets in all houses. Their actions were very well received by the local municipality who provided financial help for them to build greenhouses so they could grow

vegetables that could not normally grow at that altitude. They also abolished the tradition of Chhaupadi and started to make washable menstrual pads for themselves and to sell to others. By now, after some 7 years, Khori is a prosperous village. The men, who initially were a bit critical, now appreciate the leadership of the women in all walks of life.

More about the women in Khori can be found in this Kathmandu Post article:

<https://kathmandupost.com/sudurpaschim-province/2021/11/29/how-women-leadership-changed-the-face-of-this-rural-village-in-bajhang> .

The Project

Power cannot be given; it can only be taken. Power that is given can be taken away. We were therefore elated when we heard of the self-empowerment of the women in Khori and we wanted to support this kind of self-empowerment in other villages. Storytelling is the most effective way of getting an idea across, so we had the idea that 2-3 women from Khori could visit 10 similar villages in Bajhang and tell their story, so as to motivate the women in the other villages to also take their power and change the circumstances in their lives.

When we were in Bajhang, we drove for 3 hours on extremely bad roads to visit Khori, located at an altitude of 2,650 meters and met with the women of the village. They told us more in detail what they had done and agreed to visit other villages and tell their story.



The women of Khori with some HEAR Nepal staff and me in the background

As soon as we manage to provide funding for this project, our staff is ready to accompany the women to other villages. The project is intended as a small pilot project, which will be accompanied by surveys before and after the women visit the villages to determine the effectiveness of the project. Should this kind of self-empowerment be contagious, we will send the women to other similar villages to speak about their experiences.

The women of Khori also had a wish of their own: They want help in building a hall where they can all meet instead of having to meet outdoors. They will provide the land, but they need the equivalent of € 7,000 (US \$ 7,550) to build the structure.

I thank you for your interest and for the support that you have provided for our work.

Sten Linnander