



TROSA LEARNING BRIEF

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WOMEN AND WATER

CREATING POSITIVE RIPPLES IN TRANSBOUNDARY WATER GOVERNANCE IN SOUTH ASIA

INTRODUCTION

Women's role in water resource management is recognized, yet, the implementation of methods and strategies to get beyond gender-based obstacles to women's equal participation in water resource management related projects remain vague.¹ Women in South Asia, particularly in Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) basins, play a critical role in providing, managing, and safeguarding water resources and yet their participation in water governance is not visible.

Despite the inextricable relationship between women and water in South Asia, gender

considerations are still seen as irrelevant in major decisions on large-scale water management issues like construction of dams and hydropower projects, river protection embankments, or water trade. Policy decisions are mostly devoid of women's participation, and as a result, they are affected more than their male counterparts.

But all this is changing, as more women across South Asia's rural and riverine landscape become better informed about their rights, access to water and come forward to participate in decision making processes meaningfully.

HOW TROSA USES WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN POLICY AND PRACTICE

TROSA's approach

TROSA sees gender as a relevant component within policy and practice across multiple levels and within institutional frameworks related to water governance at the transboundary levels.

As women from river communities are disproportionately affected by the way water resources are managed, Transboundary Rivers of South Asia ([TROSA](#)) programme is working to amplify their perspectives to ensure these can influence decision-making processes.

TROSA country teams and partners are initiating various measures to engage with the grassroots women and build their capacity so that they can engage themselves in various advocacy and campaign initiatives to demand their rights and contribute to water resource management. Some of these interventions were able to enable women to take leadership roles and bring positive results at the grassroots level.

¹ Women, Water Resource Management, and Sustainable Development: The Turkey-North Cyprus Water Pipeline Project

Mahakali Basin: How Women are leading the way in the Mahakali

At the heart of TROSA's work in the Mahakali basin are the Women Empowerment Centers (WECs). Started in 2017 with the help of local partners, TROSA helped establish community discussion groups, formally called Women

TROSA's women empowerment work in the Mahakali basin in Nepal is hinged on bringing about a transformative change in the perceived role of women in the governance of water and natural resources and ensuring long-term sustainability. This goal is being achieved through a three-tiered approach (figure:01).

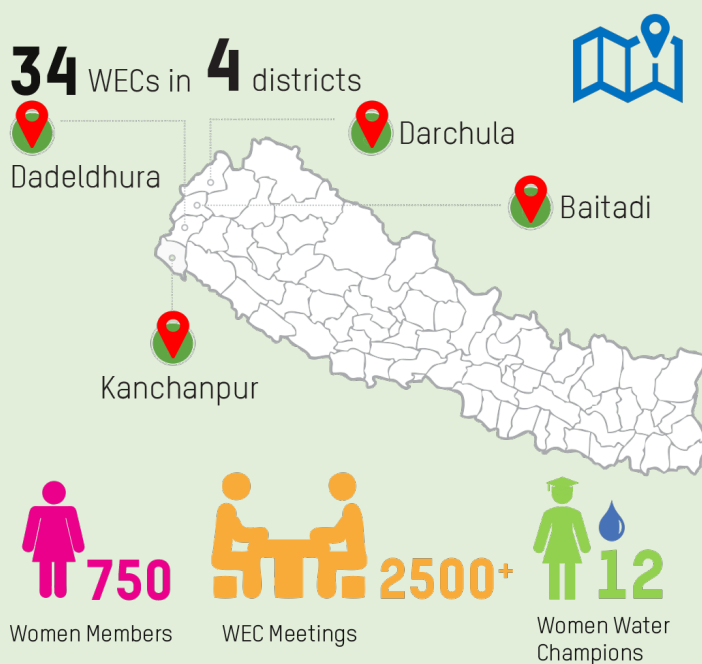
leading to increased participation, contribution and influence of women in water governance policy processes.

Empowerment Centers, to enable community members especially women, to discuss water-related issues and to enhance their knowledge about their water rights.

Figure: 01



Figure: 02



Today, there are 34 WECs in 4 districts (Baitadi, Darchula, Dadeldhura and Kanchanpur) led and operated by more than 750 local women members regularly conducting active discussions with local authorities to identify problems and issues related to the governance of the Mahakali river. At the same time they are also demanding and offering solutions for irrigation, flood protection, sand mining and water pollution.

Over 2500 such meetings have been successfully conducted over a period of three years. A significant outcome of the initiative is the emergence of 12 women water champions at the local level who are confident to meaningfully lead and engage with local authorities as well as counterparts across the river in India.

“As we share the same water, we want our relationship to grow stronger.” Secretary of the Pragatisheel WEC in Darchula, Chandra Samantha on the participation of women from across the river in India in WEC meetings in Nepal.



New Bhagawoti & Sagarmatha WEC Ka
Photo: TROSA/Oxfam

Brahmaputra basin: Learnings from Lakhimpur, Assam

TROSA began work in Assam in 2017 with a major focus on ensuring the water rights of vulnerable river basin communities, especially women and indigenous communities. Though Assam has a history of women leaders in the past, their participation in the decision making processes is still very low. Women are not properly represented in the political system, and the institutional gaps are

reflected in the way water resources are governed. This can be attributed to lack of opportunity, low women population, low literacy, low level of information, economic inequality, burdens of domestic work, female insecurity, lack of confidence, lack of ability to communicate with the public, lack of empowerment among women, and lack of proper training².



New Bhagawoti & Sagarmatha WEC Ka
Photo: TROSA/Oxfam

TROSA's intervention

TROSA and its partner- the People's Action for Development (PAD) initiated its engagement with the communities of Lakhimpur district with a series of activities targeting women's roles in water governance. It was revealed that women's roles in promoting water rights were poorly understood or valued by their male counterparts. Participation of women in community-led initiatives including river management was very low and there was no platform for them to raise voice and demand water rights. Male members of the communities in some villages upon being suggested about women's participation in village meetings responded that women had no place or roles in the meetings.

² <https://www.sentinelassam.com/news/women-in-assam-politics/>.

The intervention focused on a series of trainings targeting women members in building awareness and capacity to engage with government authorities with some women being selected as committee members of Village Development Management

Committees (VDMCs) and Women's Uses Groups (WUGs). This not only had an enabling effect on communities but also created better understanding among government representatives about how water governance related decisions impacted women.

*Pragatishil & Mahakali WEC Dattu
Photo: TROSA/Oxfam*



As a result, out of 24 VDMCs and WUGs, 10 female members in Lakhimpur started leading the engagement process with various government offices about water-related issues.

This situation has gradually changed with communities finally realizing the importance of women's voice and participation in shaping local policies. Attitudinal changes were observed in both men and women.

Salween-basin

In Myanmar, women's participation and involvement in river-campaigning are against the cultural norms. As the Salween river runs through the states where there are ongoing conflicts, women's involvement is also challenged. Women remain behind in terms of river management knowledge and information even though they are the first to use the water from the river for household purposes. Gender is a sensitive topic in those areas as the locals consider that there needs no collaboration of women in river management and campaigning.

Through TROSA, KESAN, implementing partner of Oxfam in Myanmar, started to integrate the needs, voices and participation of women in their project planning and implementation. They emphasized on bringing the women of project area to collaborate and work together to discuss their issues during committee meetings. Attendance quota for the women of Salween became compulsory to make sure there is gender balance in participants.

TROSA partner International Rivers campaigns in Myanmar, women were asked to participate and speak in press conferences and other events such as Myanmar CSO Energy Forum. This highlights women's perspective on alternative energy, water governance and river management. As TROSA advanced, women in the Daw Lar Lake area started to

become members of the water resources governance committee. Women came together especially in gatherings such as Daw Lar Lake community food exchange event where they cooked together the fishes from the lake and discussed the history, significance and value of the lake for their livelihood.

During Quarter 4 of Year 1, the estimated total number of direct and indirect beneficiaries was 2976 among which, 1398 were women.

And in comparison, as per the estimated number of the combination of direct and indirect beneficiaries in 2019 was 199916 among which, 94564 were women.



Photo: Sankalpa, Darchula

TROSA's approach to women's empowerment goes beyond the grassroots activities to support network building among relevant stakeholders and actors working to build concerted efforts.

“ Even though my working period in the committee is 3 years, after I leave the committee, I have decided that I will make sure that this lake does not get passed into someone else's hands. This is because this lake is a part of our natural habitat, our village. And we cannot watch nature getting destroyed. I want to protect nature - this is why I became an elected member of the committee. ” – Ms. Nang Tin San, member of Daw Lar Lake Committee.

LEARNINGS:

- TROSA's experience through its activities in river basins in South Asia shows that activities that are designed to help boost women's confidence and leadership skills can be helpful in their fair representation at local and municipal levels, and play catalyzing roles in addressing the social, political, economic disparities coupled with religious norms.
- If opportunities are created, women can stand up for their communities, take part in the decision making processes, lead the grassroots mobilization initiatives and become the voice of any social movement. For example, in its three years' time, TROSA has helped produce many female leaders and influencers not only in Daw Lar Lake but community-level, CSO-level, network-level and also basin-level.
- Women's groups at the local level can be instrumental in building support networks and build consensus regarding issues related to river governance and related gender issues.
- There is a need to highlight women's contribution and further strengthen their active engagement at the local, national and regional levels.
- While empowering women leaders, it has to be ensured that the process is systematic and women are properly trained and well informed so that they are able to create a positive impression while dealing with the authorities.
- Favourable political conditions and political will play an important role in promoting women's rights and empowerment.

About TROSA

TROSA is a five year (2017-2021) regional water governance programme being implemented in the transboundary river basins of Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) in Nepal, India and Bangladesh and the Salween in Myanmar. Adopting a human-rights based approach, TROSA facilitates river dependent communities' participation in water governance and help them uphold their rights to water. As part of this, it also supports and promotes multi-stakeholder partnerships and collective action for inclusive water governance policies and practices at various levels. TROSA is funded by the Government of Sweden and managed by Oxfam.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed in this brief are those of the author and don't represent the views of the Oxfam or Government of Sweden.



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