



WOMEN IN NEPAL: LEADING COMMUNITIES, CHANGING LIVES

Knowledge and Sharing Series

Introduction

In Nepal, women and girls are disproportionately affected by lack of access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). They often have to walk miles, carrying heavy loads, and queue for hours to get water for their families. Women and girls also pay a heavier price because of poor sanitation. Without latrines, many are compelled to relieve themselves in the fields or forests before dawn or after dark. They are exposed to many risks, including that of harassment and even assault. Having to wait for long hours to defecate and urinate is also uncomfortable and can cause serious illnesses.

Additionally, lack of safe, clean and separate toilets and washing facilities in schools is one of the main factors preventing girls from attending school, particularly while menstruating. Access to safe WASH plays an important role in meeting the specific needs of women and girls, and contributes to their social and economic development.


International Women's Day provides us with an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of women. To commemorate this special occasion, WaterAid Nepal has compiled stories of women across Nepal who have participated in our WASH programmes. With the help of our local partners, these women have overcome the obstacles facing them and taken important steps to address their water and sanitation needs.

WaterAid would like to thank Nepal Water for Health (NEWAH), Lumanti Support Group for Shelter, Environment and Public Health Organization (ENPHO), Urban Environment Management Society (UEMS), Karnali Integrated Rural Development and Research Center (KIRDARC), Backward Society Education (BASE), Centre for Integrated Urban Development (CIUD), Federation of Drinking Water and Sanitation Users Nepal (FEDWASUN), and Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO) for their contribution to this publication.

Furthermore, these case studies demonstrate that including women in leadership roles in our projects has positive impacts that reach far beyond access to WASH. The participating women describe how they, in transforming their communities, have transformed their own lives. They feel empowered to spread information and knowledge about health and hygiene in their villages, teach the skills they have learned to other women in their communities, and run their own small businesses with skills that will last them a lifetime. They feel pride in all they have done for their communities as well as what they have accomplished personally.

So let us come together to celebrate these women, whose bravery, strength and determination have transformed the communities they live in.

Happy International Women's Day 2015!



Woman from Toshramkhola
VDC, Sindhuli District,
carrying water.

WaterAid/Tom Van Cakenberghe

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Women leading communities



It feels good when people come to me and ask about the status of the project.

I feel like I am an important person and that I am involved in the community. My children, too, are happy and proud of my job.



WaterAid recognises the importance of reaching marginalised groups with WASH services. But key to the success of its projects is their active participation. Women, who are usually responsible for collecting water and overseeing household hygiene, are the primary stakeholders in improved WASH. WaterAid Nepal's local partners are invested in helping women not only participate in their projects, but also lead them. The following case studies demonstrate how such an approach has the potential to transform entire communities.

Juggling skills for the future

Laxmi Bhujel, 29, lives with her husband and two children in Sajbote Siruwani, Hardeni VDC, Udayapur District. She works as Vice President of the local users committee and as Caretaker of a WaterAid Nepal water supply scheme. Managing new water supplies is a major responsibility, and Laxmi feels that she has gained practical skills as well as respect in her community. "I am very proud of both my positions," she says. "Before, only a few people knew me in this village but now I am very popular!"

As Vice President, Laxmi assists the President of the committee, and has important tasks such as identifying sites to store construction materials and coordinating with the community to allocate work for the water supply scheme. The role of Caretaker, however, demands much more hands-on skills. "I learned how to cut pipes, make grooves, fit pipes and other useful techniques to join pipes to taps, sub-taps and junctions," she recalls. "The skills I have learnt will not only be useful in the project but will also help me secure a job in the future."

Juggling these two roles means that Laxmi is involved in all aspects of WASH programmes in her community, from direct implementation to leading her community. "I have personally crushed the stones, dug the ground for the pipeline and intake catchment, and carried sand, cement and other materials," she explains.

But Laxmi considers community involvement to be the major part of her job and believes that it has been crucial to the success of the project. "Since the community was heavily involved in this project, everyone loves the project very much," she says. It's clear the community appreciates Laxmi as well, and she relishes the recognition.

"It feels good when people come to me and ask about the status of the project," she declares. "I feel like I am an important person and that I am involved in the community. My children, too, are happy and proud of my job."

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WaterAid/Mani Karmacharya



Nothing tastes better than the water from these taps, and now we have fewer cases of water-borne diseases. We are now a happy community.



A happier, healthier village

Prithivi Tole, Ward 7 is a rapidly changing squatter settlement in Itahari, Sunsari District. Here, women have been managing the development of the community, including in waste management, water hygiene and menstrual health. The leadership of women has been decisive: Prithivi Tole achieved open defecation free (ODF) status in March 2014 and a penalty of Rs 501 accrues to anyone found defecating in the open, according to the rules set by the community.

It has taken a lot of hard work to achieve these positive changes. Nachanbati Sardar speaks about the awareness lessons she received from WaterAid's local partner on drinking water and its impact on the health of the community.

"Initially everyone hated the idea of drinking water taps because we had free water from the hand pump," she explains, adding, "We also used to drink water without boiling it and a lot of the kids would get sick from diarrhoea and dysentery. But after we attended the class on drinking water, we were convinced that it was worth investing in taps. We pay Rs 80 per month, but nothing tastes better than the water from these taps, and now we have fewer cases of water-borne diseases. We are now a happy community."

Kabita Sardar too, describes how her community has started taking simple actions with major health and hygiene impacts: "We had awareness lessons on waste management. Since then, everyone has dug a pit behind their houses to burn non-biodegradable waste. As for the biodegradable waste, we set it aside to use as compost. Nobody throws their rubbish outside the house anymore. We're also becoming a plastic-free zone. We've been taught how to get rid of toilet waste from the septic tank. We empty it in our own land and bury it."

WaterAid Nepal works with its local partners to address the unique health needs of women in the community. Dina Sardar, a participant in an awareness session on menstrual hygiene, describes the substantial changes in how they manage their periods. "We use sanitary pads now, they're much easier to use," she says. "We dispose of them in the non-biodegradable waste pit and burn them. Some of the women still use cloth pads, but now they use clean cloth and dry them out in the sun after washing them instead of indoors like in the past."

Finally, Suhawati Sardar touches on how the changes in the women's lives go beyond the direct goals of the programmes they participate in. "We feel empowered by the lessons we receive from the volunteers," she says. Referring to the successful women's savings account scheme implemented in her area, she notes, "It's enabled a lot of women to invest in livestock and small businesses and improve their living standards. With the Women's Saving Committee, we save Rs 100 per month. Any woman in financial need can apply to take out a loan from these savings, to be paid back with low interest."

Suhawati, like the other women of her ward, is happy about the positive changes in her community, especially when it comes to the important role they have played. "Now we are able to have a say in the community meetings," she beams, "We even lead a few."

New challenges, new horizons

Sapani Rai, 46, lives with her husband, two daughters and a son in Chuwade-Kewabesi, Sankhuwasabha District. She is the Caretaker for a water supply scheme run by a WaterAid local partner. She is also the Vice President of the Chuwade-Kewabesi Water Users Committee. Despite the many challenges of these two roles, Sapani takes pride in her accomplishments.

When the project first started in her area, however, she did not know what a users committee was. When she was chosen to be the Vice President, she was unsure what the role would entail. “I was very nervous,” she admits, “I did not think I would be able to handle such a big position.”

However, people from the community convinced her that she was right for the job and promised her their support. Despite this reassurance, Sapani soon found that coordinating labour was easier said than done.

“It was challenging,” she explains. “This area is geographically very difficult to work in, with steep walking paths. When I asked people to contribute their labour, they did not come and even when they did, they did so reluctantly and complained a lot. They found it hard to carry heavy construction materials up the hills. However, with time, people understood the importance of the project and started getting involved.”

In her role as Caretaker for the water supply scheme, Sapani faced a different kind of challenge. She had to learn a whole new trade.

“I had never seen such tools in my life,” she says, “Initially I thought I would never be able to learn anything but gradually I got the knack of it. I still don’t remember the names of all the tools, but I’m confident that I can do what needs to be done.”

Sapani describes her growing feeling of confidence in her abilities. In time, she even began to enjoy the experience, and became adept at balancing her new workload with her domestic responsibilities. She feels she has been personally transformed by working on the project. “I feel independent and more confident about myself,” she says, “I feel thankful for this opportunity.”

“I am glad I took on this challenge,” she concludes, adding, “The construction work is almost completed. I feel very good about how our hard work has shaped up. After the pipeline is connected and the water starts flowing from the tap, I’ll be the first person to rejoice!”

WaterAid/Mani Karmacharya



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Managing menstruation

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Menstruation is a time of emotional turmoil and personal discomfort for many girls and women in Nepal. Members of their families and communities stigmatise menstruating women as impure and unclean. This problem is even greater in far western Nepal, where practices of chhaupadi are rampant – women are forced to live outside their homes for the duration of their menstruation.

Reclaiming their bodies

Malati, an 18-year-old from Jumla, studies in Grade 10 in Kalika Secondary School. She speaks about the lack of awareness around menstrual hygiene in her community and the discrimination all girls and women face:

“I always dreaded having my periods. Every time I had it, I was forced to sleep in the cowshed alone. Even though I had severe stomach cramps, I would not be allowed in the house,” she recalls. The isolating practice of chhaupadi is not without its risks, either. Once, two boys tried to enter the hut she was staying in at night. “They started calling me names,” she remembers. “I was terrified and shouted out for help. After hearing my calls my sister came and drove them away.”

In addition, Malati was not allowed to go to school while menstruating due to the belief that menstruating girls should not touch books. The belief that this angers the goddess of knowledge, Saraswati, meant that Malati missed four days of school every month. In fact, she failed Grade 6 because the examinations took place when she was having her period.

The awareness programmes and training provided by WaterAid’s project have made a huge difference in the lives of girls like Malati. The project has been successful in clarifying misconceptions about menstruation-related issues such as personal hygiene, food taboos and social exclusion.

“I’ve learnt so much about menstrual hygiene,” Malati says, “I was unaware of sanitary pads. I always used a piece of cloth, which caused urinary infections and itching. Now I can make my own homemade sanitary pads.”

Malati not only feels that she has received useful information about menstrual hygiene, she is also part of a group – along with other girls – who are active in raising awareness in her community. “I no longer feel shy to talk about menstruation,” she says. “I feel clean and healthy.”

With Malati and her peers taking control of their bodies, the community has begun to listen to their concerns. They no longer have to sleep in the chhaupadi sheds or miss classes.

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Health and hygiene for all



My children do not fall sick as frequently. I've been able to save money that I would have spent on hospital fees and medication. They can go to school regularly and the money saved can be used for school fees and stationery.



Access to safe water and sanitation is a fundamental right, but unless health and hygiene practices are changed for the better, no amount of WASH investment will improve living conditions. In Nepal, women have the responsibility of managing health and hygiene at home, including the preparation of food as well as the general cleanliness of the household and children. Changing the hygiene practices of the women in the community, and then getting them to spread the message, is the most sustainable way to ensure that WaterAid Nepal's projects have a lasting impact.

Changing herself, changing hygiene practices

Manamaya Adhikari lives in Toshram Khola VDC, Sindhuli District. She has her hands full, as a housewife and a mother to three daughters, but she also plays an important role promoting health and hygiene in her community. She was selected along with three others to work as a Health and Sanitation Facilitator following an interview with sanitation experts for a WaterAid Nepal project.

Manamaya recalls: "After I was selected, I attended a 15-day facilitation training in Pokhara. This training, held in a big city, provided me with the opportunity to enhance my skills beyond household chores in the village. I learnt about different sanitation skills – hand washing, preparing Oral Rehydration Solution, as well as food and water hygiene."

As a facilitator, Manamaya visits houses in her community and monitors sanitation and hygiene practices. "Each house has a sanitation checklist that I check," she explains. "I inspect each household to see if they have covered their water pots properly, cut their nails, and kept their yards and toilets clean. If there are areas that need improvement, I teach them."

She adds, "I am very proud of the job I do; people in the village know me. When people see me they are alert, and they make sure to cut their nails and keep their houses clean."

People in Manamaya's village were often sick with water-borne diseases due to lack of access to safe drinking water and poor sanitation and hygiene. Since the project began, village life has changed for the better, Manamaya believes. With safe water and new toilets, common illnesses are on the wane. Manamaya asserts, "My children do not fall sick as frequently. I've been able to save money that I would have spent on hospital fees and medication. They can go to school regularly and the money saved can be used for school fees and stationery."

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WaterAid/Mani Karmacharya



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Manamaya also holds health chautaris (group discussions) for her community every couple of weeks. “In the beginning it was very difficult for me,” she remembers. “The first time I organised a chautari with the help of my sister, I was scared to speak in front of so many people. When somebody asked me a question, I stammered. I knew the answers but words wouldn’t come out of my mouth!”

With the support of her family and community, Manamaya was able to overcome her fears and grow in confidence. She has been instrumental in transforming her community, and in doing so has transformed herself.

Doing it for the community

WaterAid’s local partners have been very successful in harnessing the abilities of women to raise the level of health and hygiene within their communities. Rita Luitel, from Ward 12 in Kamalamai, Sindhuli District, is a community health volunteer. She describes the difficulties faced by her community in meeting basic health needs, and outlines the crucial role played by volunteers like herself.

“There aren’t any health posts in this ward,” she explains. “The nearest health post serves many wards. As a community health volunteer, I provide iron tablets, vitamins and contraceptives from my house. Between two and five people come to see me each day. I also give advice to pregnant women.”

In turn, Rita visits households in her ward to create awareness about water, sanitation and hygiene. She hopes her efforts will lead to improved awareness about health in her community. She laughs, “People realise they need to change their behaviour because we keep coming back to see them!” Rita is now confident enough not only to address her community, but also lobby political leaders.

Like Rita, Rajo Dhami of Tribhuvan Tole, Ward 6 in Inaruwa, Sunsari District, is an important source of information about health and hygiene in her community. She volunteers for a WaterAid programme for integrated drinking water, health and sanitation services for urban poor communities in Inaruwa.

Rajo is part of an all-women team spreading awareness on water, sanitation and hygiene in the ward. She has participated in a number of training sessions on issues such as latrine facilities, water and menstrual hygiene.

Rajo has also attended a training session on waste management, where she learnt how to separate out domestic waste. “I let the degradable waste turn into compost and use it in my field,” she explains.

Inspired by the training sessions, Rajo sought out other training opportunities and capacity-building activities. She went on to receive training to learn how to recycle plastic waste into beautiful household items such as baskets and flowerpots. Her ward has now been declared a plastic-free zone, and the community is poised to put a stop to the use of plastic altogether.

Rajo and Rita are both very happy with the results of the work they do for their communities. They have also personally benefited from the projects they have participated in, and would like to encourage other women in their communities to become more involved. Rita speaks for both when she says, “I am happy to contribute to my community. This project motivates us to do things.”

The right to go

Kapilvastu District scores extremely low in terms of sanitation coverage. Only around 51% of schools have toilet facilities. If one considers access to separate, girl-friendly toilets, the figure drops to just 39%. By law, there should be a toilet for every 50 students, but this is far from being met. Last year, WaterAid Nepal conducted a WASH-in-schools programme.

Mina Giri, Principal of Saraswati School in Kapilvastu, recounts how WaterAid’s initiative empowered the School Management Committee and the students to claim their WASH rights. Under Mina’s leadership, the School Management Committee and Child Club of Saraswati School have been able to build child, gender and disabled-friendly sanitation facilities in the school.

“Our school did not have latrines, so it was very difficult for us and our students,” Mina explains, “We had to go far away to relieve ourselves. We realised the importance of toilets but our school did not have enough funds to build a latrine. Our female students and staff suffered the most. During menstruation, they did not have anywhere safe to go and change their pads. This resulted in most students and teachers skipping school.”

Due to WaterAid’s advocacy programmes, Mina became aware of government provisions her school was entitled to. The School Management Committee and Child Club mobilised to demand their rights with local government. “We visited the District Education Office and demanded that they allocate a budget for the construction of child, gender and disabled-friendly toilets in our school,” Mira recalls. “Finally, after many rounds of persuasion, we were awarded Rs 250,000 to build sanitation facilities in our school.”

Saraswati School now has fully child, gender and disabled-friendly WASH facilities. “Our success has influenced others to lobby for sanitation financing in their schools.” Mina says, adding, “Our success story was covered by a team of journalists. We are proud that our school has earned a good reputation.”

FEDWASUN/Bishesh Aryal



Our success has influenced others to lobby for sanitation financing in their schools.



Free to do business



Now we have the self-confidence to speak in mass gatherings and express our feelings freely.



Providing WASH services to communities quite literally liberates women – they no longer have to spend as much time fetching water or going out of their way to relieve themselves. In other words, they are free to do business. WaterAid's local partners have explored avenues by which women can achieve financial security for themselves and their families. Agri-business and tourism are good examples, and in some cases savings and credit groups have been set up by women so they can mobilise funds to finance their own WASH programmes.

Saving for the future

In 2005, WaterAid Nepal initiated a WASH programme in Thecho, Lalitpur District. It used an innovative approach to sanitation financing by creating women's savings and credit groups. These groups loaned households money to construct toilets at a low interest rate. Maheshwori Maharjan and Nani Maya Maharjan recount the progress of the savings and credit groups, and express happiness at what has become possible as a result.

"We received Rs 400,000 as seed money from the WASH project," Maheshwori says. "And now our revolving fund has reached Rs 700,000. Because of the savings and credit group, we were able to declare our VDC open defecation free in December 2014. We are now providing support to four neighbouring VDCs for the promotion of WASH facilities."

Maheshwori describes how the project has transformed the lives of women in Thecho beyond WASH-related issues. "Before, women from our communities lacked confidence," she says, "They were shy to speak in front of other people. Involvement in the savings and credit group made us feel valued. Now we have the self-confidence to speak in mass gatherings and express our feelings freely. Women are leading the WASH movement in Thecho. There are more than 40 savings and credit groups with over 1,100 women as members."

Similarly, Nani Maya describes how her life has changed due to her involvement in the project. "Before, we were dependent on our husband's earnings for everything, from household expenses to our children's education. It was very difficult. We never had any money left to buy anything for ourselves. When there was a celebration or when someone was sick and we needed money, we had to take out a loan at high interest."

Now, with the savings and credit group, women can borrow money in times of need at low interest rates. The economic status of women has improved greatly. "I can buy things that I want now," Nani Maya says, "I also have some extra money to buy gifts for my children."

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Lumanti/Umesh Rupakhethi

A wholesome welcome

Bastola Gaun in Nagarkot, Bhaktapur District, is famous for its family homestay programmes. Households here are mainly involved in farming, and offer homestay as a seasonal means of livelihood. WaterAid Nepal began implementing its WASH projects in Nagarkot in 2012.

For 33-year-old Rashmita Bastola, who offers homestay to tourists, managing wastewater had always been difficult. It would simply pool outside her kitchen, making the area dirty. “The wastewater attracted a lot of flies,” she remembers. “We had small accidents, too, with family members slipping and falling in the accumulated water. I wanted to keep my house clean, but I did not know how to.”

Rashmita attended programmes conducted by WaterAid’s WASH project, and this helped her address the problem. “I gained a good understanding of safe water and waste management by attending training sessions,” she explains. “The project helped us to construct a juthelno (washing platform) to manage wastewater in a systematic way. Since the construction of juthelno all the houses in our neighbourhood have become very clean and hygienic.”

Rashmita is even able to use wastewater to water her kitchen garden. “I can grow organic seasonal vegetables such as cauliflower, cabbage and radish and serve them to my guests,” she says. “They like it very much.”

Cultivating seasonal flowers has also been beneficial to Rashmita’s homestay business. She explains, “We need a lot of flowers in our business, to greet our guests and then when we bid them farewell. We used to spend money on buying garlands but now we make them ourselves from flowers we grow. People used to feel that wastewater shouldn’t be used to water flowers, which are considered pure. But the training sessions encouraged us to put this belief aside. We now use wastewater to grow flowers and vegetables in the kitchen garden. These days, our whole community is covered in flowers. We even sell flowers in the city. This has been a great help to us. Now we can save for our children’s future.”

ENPHO/Rashmita Shrestha



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Growing out of dependence

In 2012, WaterAid Nepal initiated an integrated WASH project in Lele VDC of Lalitpur District. The project not only delivered water, sanitation and hygiene services to the people of Lele, it also linked WASH to sustainable livelihoods with training sessions on crops, agroforestry and drip irrigation. As part of the project, 24 plastic laminated ponds were constructed, and seeds as well as 50 sprinklers were distributed to the community.

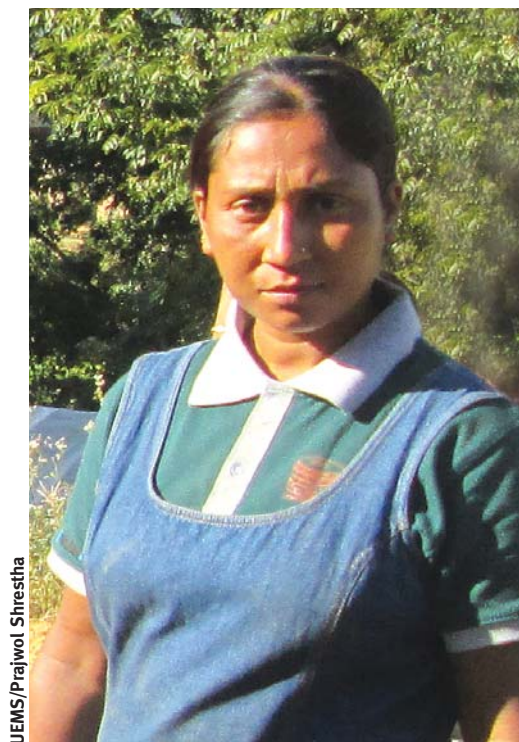
Usha Pradhan, 33, lives in Lele with her six-year-old son. Her husband works in Saudi Arabia as a security guard. Before the project started, the family was completely dependent on the remittance money sent back by Usha's husband. It was difficult for her to run the household – pay expenses, pay for her son's education, and cover medical costs when needed – with what little her husband could spare. With the support of the project, however, Usha has been able to set up a business to generate crucial income. Her inspiring story is proof that safe water and sanitation can bring wide-ranging and profound changes to the lives of women and girls.

When the WASH project was implemented in her area, Usha partnered with five others to set up an agricultural business. They started with commercial tomato farming and then added cauliflower, cabbage, coriander and green leafy vegetables. “Without the encouragement and support we got from the project, we would not have dared to start this business,” Usha admits.

The agri-business is set up on 10 ropanis of land and requires around 3,000 litres of water a week. Usha and her partners were supplied with plastic to construct a 30,000 litre laminated pond, and contributed labour for the construction. The pond is fed with rainwater and wastewater from two household taps, and the water is mainly used for micro-irrigation using sprinklers.

“We earn a good income from selling vegetables even during the dry season, using the water collected in the plastic pond for irrigation,” Usha explains. “We have prepared 10 plastic tunnels, which has helped us grow vegetables even during the off-season. We are planning to start mushroom farming next year, which will further increase our income.”

It's clear that the WASH project has brought important changes to the lives of women like Usha. By participating in this project, she has gained economic independence and improved her standing in her community. This has increased her self-esteem. As Usha herself puts it with a smile, “I don't have to depend on my husband anymore.”

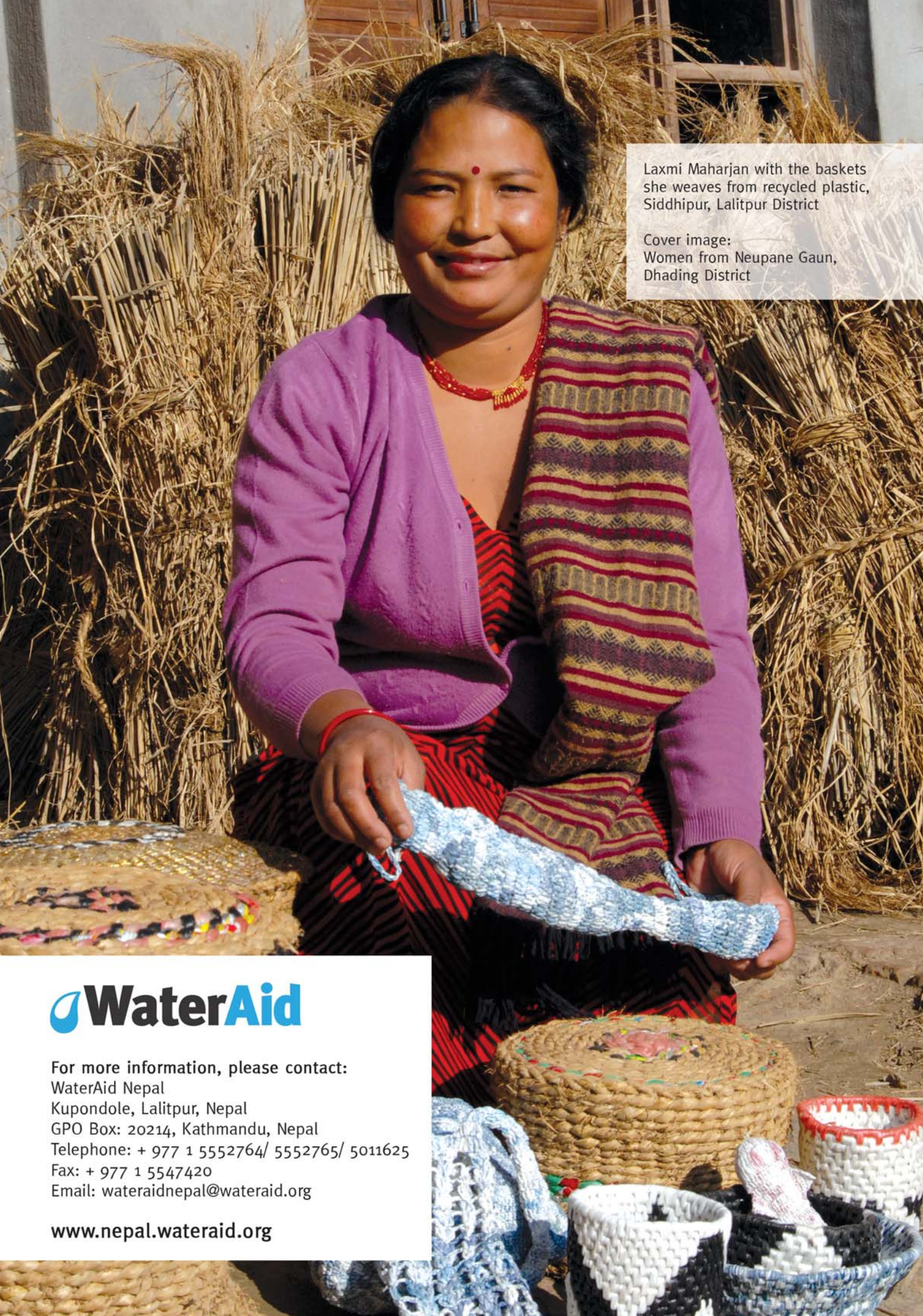


UEMS/Prajwol Shrestha



Without the encouragement and support we got from the project, we would not have dared to start this business.





Laxmi Maharjan with the baskets
she weaves from recycled plastic,
Siddhipur, Lalitpur District

Cover image:
Women from Neupane Gaun,
Dhading District



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