

# A Radio by Women for Community: Radio Purbanchal in Nepal

by Kamala Kadel

*The media plays a pivotal role in fostering social change in society. It helps surface various issues such as inequality, injustice, and violence; social, political and economic discrimination; and environmental problems. More importantly, the media provides an important space where members of a community can raise their concerns and actively engage in strategising necessary responses to these issues*

Among the variety of media tools available in Nepal, community radio remains the most influential and effective in reaching out to grassroots communities. Women in particular have taken advantage of this medium, especially in working towards addressing issues related to their human rights. Radio Purbanchal was the first community radio station in South Asia to be both established and run by women. As such, it is cited as an influential platform because of its initiatives towards women's empowerment and development.

Radio Purbanchal has been instrumental in creating a conducive environment for women's empowerment and gender equality as it promotes awareness on the welfare of women and children. More specifically, its efforts are aimed at raising awareness and providing information about issues affecting women and children, including: health, education, community development, environmental conservation and bio-diversity, human rights, good governance and natural disaster mitigation. It also focuses on identifying, protecting and promoting the use of traditional

knowledge from indigenous communities and on the promotion and protection of local languages, literature and folk culture. The station's work is anchored on the main objective of surfacing issues of women, children and minority groups by prioritising these in the regular content of its programmes.

In eastern Nepal, Radio Purbanchal has served as an important platform where women are able to share their experiences and problems. It has also been a space where women can engage in dynamic discussions about solutions and responses to the problems they have identified. Moreover, the radio station helps to generate public opinion for the development and uplifting of oppressed and marginalised communities by providing opportunities for members of these communities to stand up for their rights through their participation in rights-based programs. This approach allows women to develop confidence and builds their capacities to stand up against perpetrators and injustice.

Radio Purbanchal also helps in creating awareness especially among women in rural communities, a majority of whom are illiterate and unaware of their rights. Radio Purbanchal raises awareness about the status and role of women in the Nepali society as well as provides updates and information about the situation of women in the community. Educating women

about their rights helps uplift the status of women, especially those coming from minority groups and rural areas.

There have been hundreds of success stories in using the media to advocate for women's rights in eastern Nepal. A strong example surrounds the dowry system, which is considered a social evil by many in Terai (southern belt of Nepal) and some neighboring parts of India. Thousands of poor, rural families cannot arrange the marriages of their daughters because of the dowry, in which money is given to the family of the son-in-law during marriage. As such, the editorial team at Radio Purbanchal decided to take a public stance against the dowry. It conducted a number of interactions in the community, gaining peoples perspectives and experiences about the dowry system. Hundreds of women and their male counterparts took part during the activities. Media persons and facilitators presented the legal provisions in relation to the dowry system as well as some of its disadvantages. Through this initiative, the local people realised the problems associated with the dowry and committed to stop it. Proceedings from the interactions have been produced as a series of radio programmes and have been broadcasted on Radio Purbanchal. Presently, the residents of Morag District are now more aware of the dowry system and the issues that have been raised in relation to it. As a result, cases of dowry have been reduced dramatically and less women are subject to this oppressive practice.

Moreover, Radio Purbanchal has also been working towards raising women's voices against inequality, violence, and social, political, and economic discrimination. Often, women who are victims of violence do not have the confidence, courage, or ability to speak out and take up these issues outside of their homes. Consequently, perpetrators do not fear committing such crimes and these dynamics result in increased rates of violence against women in Nepalese society.

Radio Purbanchal has been playing a major role in monitoring the new government

## Women in Nepal

In Nepal, women make up more than 51 percent of the country's total population of around 28 million. Among them, only 7 percent of women get the opportunity to participate in state affairs and engage with the social and economic sectors. They are alienated from social, economic, legal processes and are deprived of social, medical, and educational and other basic services. Women in the rural areas, where women are confined in the homes and are largely dependent on their husbands are especially vulnerable as they are uneducated and unaware of their rights.

## Success Story: The Voices of Women Victims of War in Majhare VDC, Morang

The conflict in Nepal has resulted in the loss of many lives, livelihoods and homes. Many who were caught in crossfires have become handicapped, have experience emotional trauma from the loss of family members and loved ones. Women and children have been mostly affected and the State has been unable to respond to the needs of the hundreds of victims of war, failing to provide social, economic, and psychological support to these victims.

Deeply alarmed by this issue, the Radio Purbanchal team, for its Hamro Chaso programme, visited Majhare VDC of Morang district. The visit was aimed at knowing the status of the women victims of conflict. The visit was coupled with open discussions about the issues of these women victims and how their rights can be ensured. The discussions initiated by Radio Purbanchal resulted in specific recommendations to the state. It was recommended that a programmes addressing the welfare of women should be prioritised, which meant the provision of better and qualitative education to victims, provision of proper health care and employment opportunities. Training and capacity building programmes should likewise be provided to enable women to become self reliant. Moreover, victims should be given proper identity cards to so that they are able to go to school, become members of institutions as well as to allow them to travel.

An association of 23 women from 8 VDCs was formed through the initiative of Radio Purbanchal. It was established to advocate for the rights and welfare of women victims. Frequent meetings and discussions are held, involving other people from the communities to talk about issues and ways of addressing and responding to them. This is a major achievement of the radio program.

as Nepal goes through a very critical political transition. After the settlement of a decade long armed conflict with the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist), the state is in a phase of transformation. The country is transitioning into a republic from two-and-half centuries of being under a monarchical system. As the new government drafts a new constitution, Radio Purbanchal helps concerned groups, especially marginalised sectors such as women, the dalits and indigenous peoples, to ensure that their rights are

enshrined, guaranteed and protected by this new constitution. It does this by providing important information and by training women to advocate for their constitutional rights and participate in the deliberations and processes of the drafting of the new constitution. Radio Purbanchal has done this by organising and broadcasting a rights-based advocacy programme, “Voice of Minority” in 3 districts of Nepal – Morang, Sunsari and Jhapa. The programme is about the importance of including the participation of minority groups in the drafting of the new constitution.

More specifically, it has taken strong initiatives towards addressing violence against women, creating a programme called “Hamro Chaso” (Our Concern on Women’s Empowerment) in 2009. The programme aimed at gathering relevant data on VAW and increasing the community’s awareness about issues related to VAW. Since its creation, the programme has provided avenues for women in the villages to reach out to other women, a system to report cases of VAW, as well as a safe space where they can openly share their experiences and discuss solutions to the issue with the help of a resource person.

This underscores the main strength of Radio Purbanchal, which is working with the community. The methodology for the station’s work is the use of media tools. In doing this, the Resource Person takes a number of issues, like provision and rights of women in the new constitution, education, health, reproductive health and childcare, training of barefoot media facilitators, community forestry and agriculture, domestic violence, child labor etc. These interactions at the community level gives the fact (ground reality) at one side, and at the same time the targeted people (or victim) gets the measures for remedies. The broadcasted programmes get more feedback and are used as a model in similar societies.

Radio Purbanchal is now broadcasted in five of the major languages in Nepal, reaching a wide audience. The result has been monumental, with women from villages, who were once afraid to speak up, beginning to open up and share their feelings and actively participate in discussions. Having women journalists in the radio helped tremendously as many rural women are illiterate and do not have the self confidence to speak up when discussions are led by male journalists. Today, women have become more engaged and active in working towards their human rights.

However, the journey has not been entirely smooth. There have been many challenges and difficulties since the establishment of Radio Purbanchal, and the radio station has been met with much criticism and skepticism. In particular, many people believed that it would be an unsuccessful and unsustainable media venture because they think that women are incapable of running and maintaining a radio station.

Radio Purbanchal also faces challenges in terms of economic stability since it only promotes national goods and commodities and does not give airtime for advertisements of Indian products and other commercial commodities

that are harmful peoples health such as processed food, soft drinks, tobacco and alcohol.

Also, Radio Purbanchal lacks well-trained human resources, particularly women journalists from the eastern part of Nepal in Biratnagar. This increases the difficulties in producing radio programmes. Moreover, political instability in the country has also been a major hurdle for the station. For, insecurity brought about by the unstable political conditions in the country have made it difficult for the station to organise and mobilise women and produce radio programmes.

Yet, even with all the difficulties encountered, Radio Purbanchal has overcome major stumbling blocks – running programmes that have helped women in various communities find their voices, express their concerns and most importantly, work together in providing solutions to the many issues they experience. Community radio gives women a platform to advocate for their rights, and their collective voices have a transformative presence on the airwaves. ♦

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