

## Case Story #2: Barsa Rai: Young Girl Turned to Young Leader

This is the story of **Barsa Rai**, a 20-year-old recent high school graduate from Yangwarak Rural Municipality in Panchthar district and belonging to a disadvantaged caste group.

Early 2024, while forming a Water Users Association (WUA) in a mass meeting of 31 families for start of *Ladam Khola Irrigation Project* in her village, she was unanimously proposed and eventually selected as the chairperson. She was nervous and excited to get selected as the Chairperson. It was a huge responsibility to lead the WUA to successfully plan and implement the project by mobilizing the villages and by collaborating with the local government- Yangwarak Rural Municipality.

The project was one of the projects under Small Irrigation Programme (SIP) which is a joint collaboration of the Swiss government and Nepal government with a budget of NPR 6,601,081 (Approximately CHF 41,000) in the year 2024. The Project aimed to construct one diversion intake and 2.3 km long irrigation canal including bio-engineering works to irrigate 22 hectares of land for round-the-year targeting disadvantaged group of people with land holding of less than 0.5 hectare per family.

On the other hand, she had to represent the community for signing an agreement with the local government for the project and receive fund in various instalments upon submitting running bills and invoices.

She also had to lead for procurement of construction materials, safely storing and properly utilizing them in the construction. There were other 6 members in the WUA and she had to coordinate and lead them for the day-to-day management of the project activities, maintaining transparency and quality construction works. She also had to closely coordinate with the engineers of the SIP and Local Government for assuring quality construction and measurement of actual works.

At the beginning of the project, she participated in construction quality and institutional development training imparted by SIP. This was a great help for exercising her roles in the project. While her education helped her grasp technical and administrative processes, she initially faced scepticism from some community members who doubted her ability due to her youth and gender. However, her dedication and leadership quickly earned the community's trust.

The project construction works were completed in July 2025. Local employment was created for nearly 500 number person-days, of which 40% went to women and 84 % to the discriminated castes in the community. Today, the irrigation is available for round the year, enabling farmers to



*Photo 1: Ms. Barsa, monitoring construction work of canal*

cultivate two cereal crops and multiple cash crops annually. It is expected that farmers could sell surplus food and vegetable in the nearby markets.

She has been coordinating with the local government for seeking agricultural services for farmers to increase productivity and cropping intensity. Even after the increase of agriculture produce, she had to coordinate with the market actors for selling the produces so that farmers could earn some money for their livelihood.

During conversation Barsha shared, “I realized change in my life after experience in this project, my management skill and social network has increased. Now I have confidence to work in management position of any type of social project, I feel that I can handle any challenge and difficulties.”

A remarkably young age girl stepping towards leadership position is itself very strong motivation and courage for other women to engage in community development activities and enhance their confidence. At the same time, it is one example that, social attitude towards women also drastically changes.

This story indicates that, SIP is not only supporting to increase the agricultural productivity through water but also sowing the seeds for women empowerment. This is solid example of meaningful participation and leadership of women as part of Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI) mainstreaming.

This project has cracked the opportunity for Barsa to change her identity from young girl to young leader in her community.



*Photo 2: Ms. Barsa Rai, Chairperson of Ladam Khola Irrigation Project, proudly stands by the newly completed irrigation canal this FY, marking a significant milestone in enhancing the year-round Irrigation access and agricultural productivity.*