Freedom to walk together with others
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A person carrying a load is not at the same level as someone who carries nothing. The Dalit has the load and should be free to walk together with others.

Cover Photo: Women from Kalidevi DWG
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Acronyms

CA  Constituent Assembly
CAC  Citizen’s Awareness Centre
CEDAW  Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
DDC  District Development Committee
DWG  Dalit Women’s Group
FEDO  Feminist Dalit Organisation
FLOW  Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women
FUG  Forest User Group
HDI  Human Development Index
HMC  Health Management Committee
IDEA  International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IPDWA  Intra Party Dalit Women Alliance
LDO  Local Development Officer
LPC  Local Peace Committee
MoFALD  Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development
NBA  Nepal Bar Association
NC  Nepali Congress
NHRC  National Human Rights Committee
NPDWA  National Party Dalit Women Alliance
NRs  Nepali Rupees
OHCHR  Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
SMC  School Management Committee
UCPN-M  Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)
UML  United Marxist Leninists (sometimes called the Communist party of Nepal CPN)
VDC  Village Development Committee
WASC  Water and Sanitation Committee
WCF  Ward Citizens’ Forum
1) Introduction

A short piece of research was carried out in Nepal in September 2015, as part of a larger research programme undertaken by Womankind Worldwide to look into different spaces that have been created for women to promote their political participation in four countries, with a focus on participation at the local level. The research was part of the Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women (FLOW) programme,1 funded by the Dutch Government in Afghanistan, Ghana, Kenya and Nepal, which aims to improve both grassroots women’s ability and opportunities to raise issues with women leaders and for women leaders at the local level to hold decision makers to account and to better influence local development plans. It also aims to strengthen accountability from national policy structures to local level structures and from local level political structures to communities. The projects had different priorities and different approaches in each country context, though there were many overlaps in implementation.

The research was undertaken in the fourth and final year of the FLOW programme with Womankind partners in four countries – Ghana, Nepal, Afghanistan and Zimbabwe.2 Through a process of review and reflection, Womankind and its partners agreed that the focus should be on gaining a deeper understanding of what happens when women are able to participate in local level decision-making spaces or spaces where women meet with decision makers to influence them. They were also keen to try and understand better the kinds of spaces created for women in different contexts to promote their participation and to learn what enables women – especially those with limited exposure or experience in decision-making and public life – to build their confidence, find their voice and engage in political activity at the local level. How do these spaces work and what are the barriers and enablers for change? There is a dearth of information exploring what enables women to change and grow and how they fare once they enter what are often complex and difficult decision-making arenas.

In each country selected, the research targets one or two particular kinds of spaces at the local level and involved visiting these spaces in two different locations to undertake qualitative research. The research understands spaces as either formal or informal groups or meetings in which women participate; they can be established by Womankind’s partners, other non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Government or set up by women themselves. In the FLOW programme, these are spaces where women meet with each other and with decision makers. This conceptualisation of spaces draws on Andrea Cornwall’s work in which she defines different types of spaces as follows:

2. Although not included in the FLOW programme, Womankind supports WIPSU through funding from Comic Relief to undertake a similar programme in Zimbabwe.
Closed spaces: hard to enter, decisions taken by a specific set of actors behind closed doors, non-participatory;

Invited: spaces created by external agencies in which people are invited to participate; the rules are framed by those who create them. They are often constructed opportunities to participate;

Claimed/organic spaces: created by people for/against power holders; united around a common cause; collective and popular space.3

The research examines what happens in the selected spaces, including what participants understand to be the purpose of these spaces, who is included or excluded in the space, what enables issues to get taken up by the group, and what enables women to make the shift from their personal issues to more community and political issues. How collective voice4 is understood and achieved and whether women are seen as more legitimate by decision makers and the wider community, if they are part of a group? It also explores to what extent participating in informal decision-making spaces is indeed providing a stepping-stone for some women to participate in more formal governance structures. For each location it is important to build an understanding of the local and country context and how this influences or shapes the decision-making spaces and women’s experiences.

The purpose of the research in Nepal was to explore how Dalit women engage in different spaces to bring about positive change in their lives and use the opportunities provided by these spaces to participate in decision-making and to raise issues with decision makers. It focuses on the Dalit Women’s Groups (DWGs) formed at community level by Dalit women with the support of Womankind’s partner, the Feminist Dalit Women’s Organisation (FEDO), a women’s rights organisation and social movement. The DWG is a space where Dalit women come together to create a savings and loans group and to unite to challenge discrimination and secure their rights. These groups are integral to the FEDO movement as once organised at the community level, the women benefit from links to other FEDO groups at the District and central levels. The research also explores some of the decision-making spaces in which Dalit women participate at the local level – Forest User Groups (FUG), Ward Citizens’ Forums and political parties – and the linkages between the Dalit Women’s Groups and these bodies.

The methodology in Nepal is explained in greater detail in Section 3. The research process was participatory and this report shares the key findings and some of the issues that arose during the process.

4. Womankind understands this to mean having shared principles, speaking for each other and supporting each other speaking.
2) Womankind’s work with FEDO and the FLOW project

FEDO was founded in 1994 to address issues of Dalit women who face multiple forms of discrimination. In 1854 the caste system was officially sanctioned in Nepal. In 1963 it was abolished but caste-discrimination and untouchability⁵ still exist in the country. Society still considers Dalits inhuman and untouchable. Dalit women face caste and gender discrimination and the entire state mechanism disadvantages Dalit women. Dalit women face high levels of poverty and food insecurity; they face exclusion within education and violence against Dalit women is endemic; they have no social and political protection and no access to justice. Rape and trafficking of Dalit women and girls is a big problem; men sell both their daughters and wives to traffickers.

Many Dalit women come from conflict-affected areas (the Maoist 10-year conflict 1996 – 2006 in Nepal, resulted in over 13,000 people killed and thousands displaced). Since the end of the conflict, FEDO has been fighting for Dalit women’s inclusion in peace committees and peace and reconstruction mechanisms. They have conducted training and worked with the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction to identify Dalit women affected by the conflict and link them with peace committees. They are still fighting for compensation for Dalit women affected by the conflict and those who were displaced and raped.

FEDO’s four key objectives are: 1) Improved Dalit women’s proportional representation and participation; 2) Improved access to services and economic opportunities; 3) Combat violence and improve peace and justice for Dalit women and 4) Fight for inclusion, identity, social transformation and dignified life. FEDO has 130 staff and works in 56 out of Nepal’s 75 Districts, of which 45 have formalised FEDO District Chapters or Boards, with around nine-ten Dalit women members. The District Boards mobilise and establish DWGs at community level. If FEDO receive project funding for a particular District they recruit Dalit women social mobilisers who work alongside the Boards to establish and support the DWGs. FEDO has established 2,154 Dalit women’s groups to date. Each group has between 30-70 members. From these groups one or two active women are selected to form Dalit women’s pressure groups, which engage in advocacy with Government, political parties and other key stakeholders. FEDO has more recently established Collective Action Groups (CAGs) of Dalit and non-Dalit women which work with the Village Development Committees (VDCs)⁶, a Government structure at local level responsible for managing local development. FEDO have learned that because of the exclusion and caste-discrimination Dalit women face, it is difficult for them to influence Government leaders acting as Dalits alone. Hence it is important to work both with Dalit men and non-Dalits to address both caste-discrimination and domestic violence. FEDO is the only organisation in Nepal working on both caste and gender discrimination.

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⁵ Untouchability means that if Dalits come into physical contact with people from other castes, or their objects, this is considered to be polluting, hence limiting Dalits’ opportunities to participate in society, affecting all areas of life including birth, education, employment, marriage and death.

⁶ Village Development Committees (VDCs) are the lowest form of governance in Nepal and have functioned in the absence of elected Local Government since 1997.
Womankind has been working in partnership with FEDO since 2010 on projects focused on violence against women and girls (VAWG) and including Dalit women in peace-building and democracy. In 2011, Womankind and FEDO developed the four-year FLOW project *Increasing Political Participation of Dalit Women for Sustainable Peace in Nepal (2012-2015)*. The project is located in the Terai (plains) area of Nepal in three Districts, Banke, Kailali and Kanchanpur. These Districts were chosen because of the large Dalit population, impact of the 10-year conflict and high levels of violence and discrimination towards Dalit women. This in turn has resulted in a lack of voice of Dalit women in household, community and public forums and institutions and low participation of Dalit women in political parties and other Government formed committees in these Districts. Dalit women’s needs were not being articulated or heard due to their lack of participation. The aim of the project was to enable Dalit women to access training, mentoring, information and support to assume leadership positions in a range of local decision-making structures which make decisions about local-level development, or about issues to raise with representatives from governance structures and to effectively contribute to policy and practice which eliminate poverty of women. The project was timely in Nepal as the political process and social inclusion agenda provided FEDO with an opportunity to hold the Government to account on the provisions provided for Dalit communities and to participate in and influence decisions that affect their lives.

The approach taken by the project is three pronged and implemented at all levels (local, District, national and regional) providing capacity building for Dalit women; lobbying and advocating for pro-Dalit women policies and increasing the accountability of Dalit leaders, policy makers, Government institutions, leaders of the political parties and sister organisations towards Dalit women and their issues.

The capacity building element involves training Dalit women leaders at local, District and national levels. 80 Dalit women leaders were selected by FEDO – 20 in each of the three project Districts and 20 based in Kathmandu. These women were drawn from the Dalit Women’s Groups (DWGs, these average 20-25 members) and District Boards and were selected because of their leadership roles in these groups or in political parties. They were trained in political structures and social integration, human rights, leadership skills, journalism, public speaking, VAWG and advocacy skills, financial management, report writing and monitoring and evaluation (M&E). These women then delivered the same training to other women in the DWGs in their Districts. Social mobilisers are Dalit women recruited in each of the three project Districts who, trained by FEDO, work with the FEDO District Boards to sensitise Dalit communities, mobilise Dalit women to form DWGs and support the training of the DWG members in the skills above, as well as helping them set up a savings and credit scheme. The savings and credit element forms the foundation of the DWGs and sustains their activities. It also enables more women to ‘come out of the house’ as their husbands and other family members are more likely to allow Dalit women to leave the household if they know there is some financial benefit.
This training along with FEDO’s regular radio programmes (220 radio programmes broadcast in the three project Districts from 2012, raising issues identified by Dalit women and pushing for policy reform) enables Dalit women to learn about their rights and articulate the issues affecting them. They also learn about local decision-making structures such as the Forest Users Group Committee, School Management Committee (SMC), Ward Citizens’ Forum, Health Management Committee (HMC), as well as services provided by the Government. They learn how to access different services and financial resources available for vocational skills training, education and income generating projects such as health education, and local civic projects such as road construction. The DWGs are supported by the social mobilisers to develop proposals for the WCF for the local development budget, 15% of which is allocated to marginalised groups including Dalits. FEDO’s coordination with organisations such as the Nepal Bar Association (NBA) has enabled DWG members to train as paralegals. This has resulted in the successful resolution of a number of cases of domestic violence, inter-caste marriage, caste-discrimination and polygamy. By the fourth year of the project, a total of 75 DWGs had been established (total membership estimated at 1,875 Dalit women) in 30 VDCs in the three project Districts.

The trained Dalit women leaders from Village Development Committee and District Levels monitor the implementation of Government development plans and commitments to ensure they are accountable and responsive to Dalit women. Through the project, FEDO has encouraged them to form a network that meets regularly in each of the three Districts. The network members hold quarterly meetings with political leaders and Government representatives where they raise Dalit women’s issues and stress the importance of including Dalit women’s participation in decision-making forums such as the WCFs, FUGs and SMCs as well as political party structures.

FEDO works with a range of stakeholders to sensitise them to support Dalit women’s issues and participation. These include political parties, political leaders, sister wings of political parties, Government institutions, local Institutions, civil society groups and local and national media. Their aim is to build good relationships with these stakeholders to strengthen coordination, reduce backlash and build a conducive environment for Dalit women’s participation.

Through the project, FEDO has also formed a National and three District Committees of Intra Party Dalit Women Alliances (IPDWA) to enable Dalit women from different political parties with different ideologies to form an alliance for a common voice on issues affecting Dalit women. They have also formed an alliance with a group/network of Dalit journalists to raise a collective voice on Dalit women’s issues. This has been a successful strategy in the Districts where Dalit issues are now regularly covered in local newspapers and on the radio.
3) Research methodology and limitations

We know that bringing women together in groups increases their confidence, their ability to raise issues of concern to them and increases the likelihood of them joining other groups, however we have limited understanding of:

- How women being involved in spaces where they are linked to decision makers leads to an increase of confidence, agency (an ability to act) and empowerment;
- What difference the space makes to different women and who benefits most from participating;
- What women's participation in the space enables women to do. The aim is to understand what participation means to women on a personal level and what it means for their communities and to explore whether being part of these spaces and accessing opportunities for influencing and meeting with decision makers enables women to go on to participate in other decision-making structures, beyond the community level.

The research was designed to explore the barriers for women around their participation, how they are able to participate and influence decision makers in selected groups, the kinds of concerns they are able to raise with decision makers, and the actions they have been able to take individually and collectively; identifying where possible what is enabling these changes.

Two weeks were spent in Nepal, working with FEDO staff in Kathmandu and travelling to two different research sites. The two external researchers (one Programme Manager from Womankind and a consultant) worked closely with FEDO staff for two days to confirm the research focus and questions and to select which participatory methods to use. The field work was undertaken over a period of seven days, (the Womankind Programme Manager was present for half of this field work) and there was a final meeting for feedback and discussion with FEDO. It was planned to undertake the research in two different geographical locations in Banke District in the Terai region of Nepal, one of the three Districts in which FEDO is implementing the FLOW project. The plan was to meet with a group of ten women from two different DWGs, established by FEDO, including one group in a Madhesi community. Linked to these groups, the researchers intended to meet with members of a Ward Citizens' Forum and a Forest Users Group or School Management Committee in which one or two women from the selected DWG participate. The idea was to meet with men and women, Dalit and non-Dalit members of the WCF and FUG/SMC in order to understand how the group functions according to these members, to observe the group dynamics, understand the priorities of the groups and what different members perceive to be the issues raised by Dalit members and the actions the groups take. The research was to explore the links between the DWGs and the decision-making structures in which Dalit women participate. The researchers were also due to meet with a number of Local Government officers at VDC and District Level.

7. The Madhesi people are those living in the Terai region, both the original inhabitants and those who migrated there. They include Hindus, Muslims and Dalits.
However, there were a number of challenges which arose just before the research took place. The timing of the research in early September 2015, coincided with civil unrest and political protests across the country relating to disagreements over draft provisions in Nepal’s Constitution promoted by the Government. Two of the Districts where the FLOW project is being implemented Kailali and Banke Districts were affected by the unrest and bhands\(^8\) (strikes) and curfews were imposed for several weeks. As a result, FEDO decided that it would be safer to conduct the research in a different location, so instead, the researchers travelled to two communities in Kavre District, about 1.5 and 3 hours from Kathmandu respectively.

Kavre is one of the 56 Districts in the country where FEDO has established a District Chapter or Board. FEDO is not currently implementing any project work in the area but nevertheless its approach to supporting the DWGs is the same throughout the country, so it was possible to explore the research questions around the purpose of the DWGs and the benefits women perceive as a result of their participation in the groups and the challenges they face. The difference in relation to FEDO’s work with the DWGs selected for the research and those involved in the FLOW project is that those in the FLOW project have had specific training for three days per topic on the specific topics related to political participation: leadership development, human rights, political empowerment. The groups in the FLOW project are also supported by social mobilisers as noted in section two above and the project is clearly focused on working with the media, Government and political parties raising Dalit women’s issues, promoting Dalit women’s engagement in decision-making structures and in organising and mobilising women to submit proposals for local-level planning.

In the areas where the research was carried out, the DWGs are supported by members of the FEDO Kavre District Board. There are currently nine members of the Board and they support 35 DWGs, across 10 VDCs in three municipalities. Board members highlighted that supporting so many groups is a lot of work but they are keen to reach remote communities. The Board members receive some small resources from FEDO Central office but are not paid for their work. They are committed activists, often contributing the resources required to travel to communities and organise meetings from their own pockets. The DWGs in these areas receive some training and advice from Board members but this is not as systematic as that which takes place within the FLOW project.

There were some other limitations due to the change of location and logistical challenges. It was not possible to meet with the two FEDO Kavre Board members who organised the research logistics in advance of the trip to discuss the research with them and some of the meetings ended up with more participants than intended and people coming and going etc. The researchers did not meet with members of two WCFs and FUGs in each location as intended, to explore how a specific WCF and FUG function, but instead met with groups of women from different WCFs and FUGs of which only one or two women were members of DWGs. Nor was it possible to meet with Local Government and District decision makers, except for one VDC Secretary.

\(^8\) Bhands are a form of political protest or strike where political parties encourage the general public to stay at home and not report to work. Most affected are shopkeepers who are expected to keep their shops closed, as well as public transport operators of buses and cabs who are expected to stay off the roads and not carry passengers.
The researchers met with the following groups:

**30 women members of two DWGs** – approximately 17 women from the Kalidevi DWG in Shikapur in Hokse Municipality; approximately 13 women from the Parijat DWG in Dulalthok in Panchkhal Municipality. (The researchers also had a short meeting with **five members of the Ekata DWG**).

**13 husbands of members of the DWGs** – nine husbands in Shikapur, four husbands in Dulalthok

**21 Dalit women from a range of different WCFs, FUGs and political parties:**
- Eight women from different WCFs in the District, (six were Dalits and two were non-Dalits). In addition, both the Chair and Treasurer of the Kalidevi DWG in Shikapur are also the Coordinator and Treasurer of the WCF in their Ward and they shared some insights on the WCFs during the consultation with the DWG. The co-founder member of the Parijat DWG in Dulalthok, who is also on the FEDO District Board, is a WCF member and talked about her experience in this group. Most of the WCF women had been WCF members for over two years. four of them were also Citizen Awareness Centre (CAC) members and two of these were coordinators of both the CAC and the WCF. One woman was a sub-coordinator of the WCF.
- Four Dalit women members of FUG committees as well as four women forest users who are members of the wider user group but not committee members. The longest serving Committee member had been on the committee in her community for 11 years and has been the Vice-Chair for nine years.
- Five young women and one older woman who are members of political parties at different levels ranging from community, to VDC, municipal and District Levels. The older woman is also an FUG Committee member and participated in the meeting with the FUG members.

**VDC Secretary for Banepa Municipality** (male Dalit)

**Five Dalit women leaders** (four of them were members of political parties) trained through the FLOW project, based in Kathmandu

**Six members of the FEDO District Board in Kavre**, the Secretary of the Board is also one of the women leaders trained by FEDO through the FLOW project

**14 members of staff from FEDO Central level**

The two communities which were visited had both been severely affected by the earthquakes in April and May 2015. Many people had lost their homes or their homes were so damaged that they had to move into temporary accommodation, which they constructed with local materials and corrugated zinc roofing sheets, provided as part of the general Government-led relief effort. Since receiving the modest relief package of 10kg of rice, NRs. 150,000 and a zinc sheet, there has been no further support to people and they are waiting for the reconstruction efforts to begin. They have received no word from the Government and it is not clear who they should talk to about the lack of action.
In spite of the challenges, there were many positive aspects to the research. The participants were eager to participate and share their thoughts and experiences and some women were proud to be involved, noting that in the past they would not have had the confidence to do so, but through participating in DWGs and other groups, they had gained confidence and the power to speak out. The Kavre District Board members who supported the research were interested and engaged throughout and reported that they were learning things that they had not considered before and that were useful for them in their work. It was clear that they were respected and appreciated by the women in the DWGs. There was a strong sense of solidarity amongst the women, women of different ages and educational backgrounds were comfortable to speak although some were more confident and spoke more frequently than others. A few women contributed considerable time to the research as they participated in meetings as members of the DWGs, as well as representatives of WCFs and FUGs and some travelled far to attend some of the meetings which were held outside of the communities. The FEDO staff also committed time to the planning and feedback workshops and logistics for the field work at short notice, in spite of the many competing demands they were facing.
4) Nepal country context

Nepal’s Human Development Index (HDI) ranking for 2013 is 145 out of 187 countries, placing it in the low human development category.\(^9\) Nepal’s ten years of conflict ended in 2006 with political changes promising an inclusive democracy and greater attention to disparities based on gender, caste, ethnicity, and religion. In 2008, there were Constituent Assembly (CA) elections and the country was declared a federal republic. However, the peace process has been complex and challenging and the CA has struggled to draft a new Constitution which addresses the deep-rooted and systemic discrimination and exclusion that are seen to be the main causes of the conflict.\(^10\) At the time that the research was conducted, in August and September 2015, as the main parties were debating the Constitution, due to be enacted on Sunday 27 September 2015, protests about the draft Constitution took place in different parts of the country. Many members of traditionally marginalised groups feared that the Constitution would still work against them, as it was rushed through by established parties which – including the Maoists – are dominated by high-caste, mostly male, leaders.

Women’s groups and women’s rights activists say the new constitution discriminates against Nepalese women in what is already a patriarchal society. Although there have been some advances, for example, the requirement to be born in Nepal to gain naturalised citizenship has been removed for children of Nepali men married to foreigners. So the children of Nepali men are assured citizenship through descent wherever they are born, but if a child is born to a Nepali woman and a foreign father, the child will not secure citizenship. This leaves many children without born to trafficked women and migrant women. Hence the citizenship provisions still discriminate against Nepali women and consider them, without citizenship, second-class citizens, continuing to treat women based on the dependent notion of nationality.

The leader of FEDO stated that whilst the new constitution has ensured secularism, an inclusive system, a society free from caste-based discrimination, it has not gone far enough as it has ignored demands for at least 3% Dalit representation at Central Government level, 5% at provincial level and 10% at local level.

Even though Nepal has made progress towards becoming a secular, federal, democratic republic, it has yet to make changes to ensure the meaningful participation of women in decision-making and at all levels of state structures. When women do participate, they usually occupy the less important roles and they face unequal access to their rights and opportunities from birth. Women’s representation in the Central Committees of major political parties varies from 6.12% (UCPN-M), 19.13% (CPN-UML) to 21.25% (Nepali Congress). Women rarely hold the posts of President, Vice-President, Secretary, Joint Secretary and Treasurer at central level and do not fare much better at District Level.

In 2008, 197 women were elected as CA members, representing 33% of total CA members; this was seen as a significant achievement for the women’s movement in Nepal, according to a research study on women members of the CA conducted in 2011. Of the women elected, 35.7% were Janajati/indigenous, 22.4% Brahmin, 15.8% Madhes, 10.7% Dalit, 10.7% Muslim and 2% others. The study notes that regardless of their background, qualifications, and experience, all of the women CA members have made notable contributions, although their political journey has not been easy. Many women in the CA said that they had faced court action (36%) and violence (70%) as a result of their participation in politics. Many also reported facing threats and coercion, the most extreme being death threats. Of the 137 women who reported having faced violence, more than half of them said that the perpetrators were security forces (68%). Other perpetrators of the violence were employers (27%), family members (13%), husbands (4.4%), and civil servants (3.6%). In spite of these obstacles and others, including lack of support from the majority of male CA members, the women successfully raised many important issues for women including proportional inclusive representation of women in all state mechanisms, equal citizenship rights for men and women

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and women's right to inheritance. Many of these issues have been included in the draft reports of the thematic committees. In the subsequent CA elections, in 2013, there was a drop in the percentage of women elected to 30%. At local level there has been one seat allocated for a woman in each Ward of the Village Development Committee but due to the lack of local elections, the participation of women has been disappointing.

Women are poorly represented in high level decision-making positions, in the public service, judiciary and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) as well as at the local level, particularly Dalit and indigenous women. This was noted by the CEDAW Committee in its Concluding Observations for Nepal (2011). The Committee recommended the adoption of temporary special measures and the establishment of concrete goals and timetables to increase representation. It also called for awareness raising activities on the importance of women in decision-making and programmes for capacity development of current and future women leaders.

The Committee recognised that Nepal has enacted a Domestic Violence Act in 2009 and launched a National Plan on Gender Based Violence, however it raised concerns about the continued prevalence of violence against women and girls, including domestic violence, in particular against disadvantaged groups of women such as Dalit women. It noted that most of the incidents are undocumented and unaddressed and there is a lack of statistical data on violence against women, including sexual violence and domestic violence; the existence of a statute of limitation for registration of cases of sexual violence; and the weak penalty for marital rape.

It also expressed deep concern in relation to the multiple forms of discrimination against disadvantaged groups of women such as Dalit and indigenous women, widows and women with disabilities.

The main issues of concern to Nepali women include the prevention of all kinds of violence and discrimination against women; including an end to domestic violence and women trafficking; equal access to education, health and property; and the right to obtain citizenship through matriarchal lineage. These are also issues which affect Dalit women and in fact Dalit women face even more restricted access to education and employment and increased exposure to sexual harassment and gender based violence. For example, 80% of Dalit women live below the poverty line, the literacy rate for Dalit women is 34.8% compared with the 54.5% national literacy rate for women and about 49.1% of Dalit women encounter violence yet only of 4.4% of the incidents are reported to the police.

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The main problems they face are landlessness, unemployment and working as bonded agricultural labourers. Legal provisions are inadequate in addressing this severe exclusion and the weak implementation of existing policies and laws result in Dalit women remaining excluded and underprivileged. Furthermore, Dalit women face other issues which they want to see addressed through state laws and policies – the abolition of caste-based untouchability, ghumto pratha, dowry, chaupadi and the curbing of violence and discrimination based on language, religion, culture, identity and religion. Dalit women face discrimination on three levels: caste, gender and social class.

The Government census states that 14% of the population are Dalits but FEDO believes that it is as much as 22%. Although the caste system was abolished in Nepal in 1963, caste continues to determine traditionally assigned roles and occupations that restrict access to education, health care and employment opportunities, which in turn perpetuates poverty and social exclusion.
Nepal adopted the Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability Act in May 2011, yet caste-based discrimination and untouchability continue to be widely practiced. The caste system therefore results in a system of denials, discrimination, deprivation, and domination.  

A report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Nepal, on Access to Justice for Dalits in Nepal, highlights the need for a holistic approach to ensuring access to justice for victims of caste-based discrimination and untouchability, so that while addressing institutional challenges in the criminal justice processes and improving the legislative frameworks it is also important to address the limited opportunities open to Dalits including in education and employment. It emphasises the need to enhance the awareness of caste-based discrimination and untouchability as a crime, not only for law enforcement officers and state officials but also for victims and the wider public.

Over the past 20 years, Dalit women in Nepal have organised themselves to stand against caste-based discrimination and violence. Dalit women’s rights organisations such as FEDO are calling for the abolition of caste-based discrimination; equal access to education, health and employment; and proportional inclusive participation and representation in all state structures. There have been some advances as noted by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA): Dalit women are now represented in the Parliament, they have participated in the constitution drafting process, and caste-based discrimination is being abolished in law. Their level of confidence has risen and they no longer suffer discrimination in silence. Nevertheless, society and customs are changing more slowly than the law, for example the Dalit CA members need to disguise their names when renting apartments in the capital to avoid discrimination. Development efforts are yet to ensure sustained benefits to Dalits who continue to be the poorest and the least developed community on the Human Development Index in Nepal.

Through the proportional representation system there is a 13% allocation to Dalits of which 50% of seats should go to Dalit women. However, Dalit women have had to fight both caste and gender discrimination to engage in politics. The Dalit women’s movement also highlights that the wider women’s movement has been silent on caste-based untouchability and on the equal participation and representation of Dalit women. The Dalit women’s movement claims that the issues raised by the Nepali women’s movement are not inclusive and that the women’s movement is driven by one class and caste group. Also as noted by FEDO, the Dalit women’s organisations have fewer links to key decision makers than higher caste women.
5) Context of the two research sites

5.1) Kavre District

Kavre District is located 50 km east of Kathmandu; it includes five municipalities and 78 Village Development Committees overseen by a District Development Committee (DDC) located in the capital city of Dhulikhel. There are 60,000 Dalits in Kavre District according to the records (electoral role) of the political parties.

Kavre was one of the Districts seriously affected both by the April and May 2015 earthquakes as well as by the 10 year conflict from 1996-2006. After the conflict came to an end, tensions in Kavre remained between the various political parties and the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and created difficulties in implementing reconstruction and development projects. A Local Peace Committee (LPC) was formed in the District with the aim of encouraging and facilitating joint inclusive peacebuilding processes. The LPC became a focal point which helped to bring together all parties for dialogue and established harmony within inter-party politics in Kavre working with local stakeholders, such as local NGOs, women’s groups, and local media to promote peace, harmony, justice and human rights at the local level. It continues to promote peace and harmony in the District.

The earthquakes had a devastating impact in many areas of the country and the Government is struggling to respond to the reconstruction needs of communities. An estimated 150,000 people – half the population of Kavre – were rendered homeless and more than 30,000 households were destroyed or damaged and are now too dangerous to live in. At the time of the research visit most people were still living in temporary or roughly constructed shelters alongside their damaged or destroyed houses. Dalit women and men in the areas visited were concerned with rebuilding their homes and livelihoods and were preoccupied with accessing support and resources for this endeavour. The impact of the earthquakes on existing local resources and intended Government expenditure for development initiatives at District Level was unclear for people.

It is important to outline some of the work of the FEDO Kavre District Board, in order to have a better understanding of the links between the Board and the DWGs. The Board was established in 2008 and as noted above, they support 35 DWGs, across ten VDCs in three of the municipalities; there are 511 women members of the FEDO Board General Assembly. The Board members go to communities and help form DWGs, motivate the women and tell them about their rights and discrimination/untouchability. They emphasise that to address these issues it is important to develop a feeling of helping each other and understanding each other, ‘Our objective is to campaign against discrimination.’
The Board had funding from the World Bank for one year in 2012 focused on promoting Government accountability. During that year they tried to form as many groups as possible. However, even after this project finished they continued to establish and support groups, raising funding from individuals and collecting funds from each other. They would stay with friends in villages to keep costs down. Once the DWGs are formed, the active members then form a ‘pressure group.’ FEDO have area ‘pressure groups’ (at VDC level) and a District ‘pressure group.’ They have used these groups to lobby and put pressure on the VDC to spend the Government budget allocation of 15% for marginalised groups. In the past, Dalit women were not aware of these funds and so the Government would use them for other activities such as road construction.

The Board also started a savings group in the District which has now become a cooperative. They began the group because when people take loans from banks or cooperatives the interest rates are very high, whereas in their group they set a lower interest rate. The savings group did so well they did not know what to do with the money so they formed a cooperative, bringing all the DWGs together and hired someone to run it. When they opened the cooperative two years ago, they had 25 members. They now have 11,000 members, men and women, both Dalit and non-Dalits.

The Board have built relationships with Government agencies and NGOs in the District which is an important strategy to ensure Dalit women and men are included in development initiatives and raises awareness of Dalit women’s rights amongst these bodies. The Board have been able to encourage women to speak up on their rights and bring a few people accused of committing crimes e.g. witchcraft and untouchability to court. Some decisions have been made in favour of Dalit women and some cases are on-going. The Board have accepted 18 lakh Rupees from the District Government and disbursed this money to different DWGs.

The Board identified two DWGs to visit for the research and some members of a third DWG attended a meeting in the District capital. The Kalidevi DWG is located in Shikapur (Ward 2, Hokse municipality) and the Parijat DWG in Dulalthok (Ward 4, Panchkhal municipality). In both these communities, FEDO is also supporting Dalit women’s pressure groups and some of the women in the DWG also participate in the pressure groups.

Shikapur is in a low-lying area around 1.5 hours from Kathmandu. There are 55 Dalit households in the community. The Dalit women and men in Shikapur are predominantly dependent on farming to make a living. They grow vegetables which they sell at the roadside (about half an hour’s walk from their community) to wholesalers. The money the women earn is used for common purposes. If they have in-laws, they may give the money to them, or to their husbands. Some said they keep a little bit for themselves and even if they give money to their in-laws, they can ask for it back. They also work as labourers on land belonging to others. They have access to water taps shared by a few households and are close to a medical centre and have a forest with an active forest users’ group.

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27. Program for Accountability in Nepal - FEDO was an implementing partner of the Centre for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI), the World Bank funded the project.
In contrast, the Dalit community in Dulalthok is situated on a hill and suffers from poor quality land, hence the vegetables they grow are barely enough for their own consumption and certainly not enough to sell. There are 715 households in the Ward and 35 Dalit households. Some of the men consulted go out of the community for work – some as agricultural labourers (five farmers/agricultural labourers) and others are drivers (three), blacksmith (one), sculptor (one), painter (one), the Founder member’s husband has a vehicle parts shop in Banepa and the Vice Chair’s husband has worked overseas in India and Malaysia. Some of the women work as agricultural labourers, however the women in this community said their biggest problem is not having their own income. This community also has access to water taps and is close to the municipal hospital and the research participants reported that their children, both boys and girls attend Local Government schools.

The women in Shikapur said that men and women together decide on children’s education and the preference is usually to send sons to private schools and girls to Government schools (eight of the women have children in Government schools, six have children in private schools). An NGO, Room to Read, provides scholarships for girls to attend private schools. In the past this organisation provided school materials as well as the fees but they no longer offer the materials. Many of the women consulted said that they would have liked to have an education but they did not have those opportunities, ‘Our parents think their girls belong to others so they don’t need to educate them.’ One said her father was worried his daughter would write love letters to boys if she was educated.

The earthquake has had a significant impact on Shikapur community. Most of the Dalit households were destroyed in the earthquake, whereas according to the research participants, not many of the non-Dalit houses were damaged. According to FEDO, Dalit houses were not as strongly built as non-Dalit houses and so the earthquake affected them disproportionately. Inhabitants received NRs. 15,000 from the Government as part of the relief effort (this was given to all affected households). From the Red Cross they received a package via the VDC office, which included 40kg of rice, two litres of cooking oil, five kg of lentils and two mosquito nets. They were also given eight zinc sheets for constructing their temporary shelters from an American man and some received tents from a religious organisation. Dulathok was also affected and many people are living in temporary shelters and are scared to move back into their houses even if they are still standing. In both locations, research participants reported that the temporary shelters they have built are small, snakes come in, and rats tear their clothes. They said they are not so worried about food but are concerned about shelter. They are also frustrated about the lack of action from Government in terms of reconstruction work. When the research team arrived in Shikapur around 80 members of the community turned up, both men and women. All were expecting earthquake reconstruction support. However, later the women said that non-Dalits had diverted relief to other communities encouraging the aid vehicles not to come to their area. When relief support did arrive, non-Dalit men would try to get access to it first.
5.2) Local level decision-making bodies

Nepal’s Local Government is divided into a middle tier of 75 Districts, each with a District Development Committee. The Chief District Officer heads the District Administration Office as a representative of the Central Government. Each District also has a local development officer (LDO) who is the District Level officer of the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development acting as the secretary to the elected DDC. The LDO is responsible for local development programmes supported by the Central Government as well as those funded and managed by the DDC.

The 75 Districts are sub-divided into 58 municipalities and 3,913 Village Development Committees. The Village Development Secretary is a civil servant appointed by Central Government who has responsibility for administration and management of the VDC. The VDC is made up of the Chair, the Vice Chair and nine ordinary VDC Members. The ordinary VDC Members should be the Chairs of the Ward Committees, however because there have not been local elections since 1997, in place of the Ward Committees, a temporary structure named the Ward Citizens’ Forum has been established instead; they are chaired by Ward Coordinators and these coordinators sit on the VDC. There are a maximum of nine Wards in the VDC, which represent the lowest level of service delivery in the system. WCFs have been established in a number of Wards but not yet all. It is important to understand that the DDCs, VDCs and the municipalities were dissolved in 2002 and since this time, they have been formally left in the hands of local civil servants. This means that effectively there is no active Local Government in the country. The diagram overleaf shows the different Government structures in Nepal, some of which currently exist and includes the Ward Committees, which should be in place, once the local elections take place.

The DDCs are responsible for administering the block grant allocated by the Central Government for the District and must allocate 10% of the total annual block grant for the benefit of women, 10% for children and another 15% for marginalised or disadvantaged groups. The block grants for VDCs also earmark a minimum of 10% for the benefit of women, 10% for children and 15% for marginalised groups including Dalits, Adivasi Janajatis, people with disabilities, Madhesi, Muslim, elderly and youth. These provisions are mentioned in the DDC/VDC block grant guidelines of the Government which makes it mandatory for DDCs and VDCs to follow the guidelines. It is important to bear in mind that in practice, the DDC and VDC block grants only reflect a small percentage of total public expenditure. The bulk of public expenditure that reaches the local level – for instance, the budgetary allocations that finance the provision of public education, public health services, agricultural extension services etc. are in fact allocated through central line ministries.28

A report by the Asia Foundation notes that the MoFALD has developed minimum conditions and performance measurement criteria to ensure fair distribution of resources among the local bodies. It also has a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Policy that guides all programmes and projects under the Ministry. All local bodies receive an initial grant equal to 35% of their total allocation under the development budget of the MoFALD, and the remainder is disbursed based on their performance and success in meeting minimum conditions.28

The best performing local bodies receive an additional 30% over their original allocation, while the worst performers forfeit 20%. In 2009/2010, 17 DDCs and 28 municipalities failed to meet these criteria, and forfeited portions of their allocations. The same report notes that in their discussions with DDCs and VDCs, participants said that decisions of local bodies were not transparent, there was a lack of focus in development programmes, which were essentially compromises, and that there was very little local ownership. The political appointment of decision makers had made them unaccountable locally, giving rise to corruption.

It was beyond the scope of the research to explore the decision-making mechanisms in the Local Government structures in the Kavre District and to understand who ultimately has the power to determine local development priorities. The researchers were only able to meet with one VDC Secretary and it was not possible to meet with any DDC members. However it was understood from the Dalit women consulted that the key local decision-making bodies from their perspective are both the WCFs and the VDCs. In addition, political parties are able to influence the spending decisions of the WCFs and VDCs as well as the DDC, so being a member of a political party was also considered as an important space in which to raise Dalit women's concerns.

**Village Development Committee (VDC)**

Members are elected every four years although since 2002 there have not been any Local Government elections so the members have been appointed and are run by a Government appointed secretary. A Ward Coordinator from each Ward is also represented on the VDC. There are up to nine Wards in a VDC area so the Committee numbers around 9-11 members. The Committee also has to include a woman representative and a representative of marginalised groups, including Dalits, Janajatis, elderly, disabled etc. The local development officer guides the VDC and the VDC Secretary authenticates the decisions of the meetings. The VDC has a number of roles including the budget allocation for the VDC, registration of births, marriages and citizenship, resolving issues such as property rights and lobbying the Government for services and resources. It is the use of the VDC budget that is the main concern to the Dalit women consulted and the channels they highlighted for influencing this are via becoming members of the WCF or through directly influencing the VDC Secretary.

The VDC is supposed to receive proposals from the WCFs to feed into the Village Development Plan which in turn is reviewed by the District Council. The District plan is then sent to the Ministry of Finance and to the National Planning commission. When the approved budget is allocated to the District, it may turn out to be less than was asked for. The budget is then disbursed to the VDCs and the VDC allocates it to the various WCFs. The planning regulations require the planning process to include all stakeholders, but in practice, the planning meetings at the DDCs and VDCs generally have low participation by representatives of marginalised groups. Since 2006, officials have made greater efforts to be inclusive, but local planning functions remain largely unrepresentative in the absence of elected officials to lead the process.

30. Ibid.
### Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development

#### District Development Committee (DDC)
Cluster of 13-14 Village District Committees make up a District. There are 75 Districts headed by Chief District Officers (CDOs), appointed by the Central Government. Each DDC also consists of:
- Members elected by the elected members of Village Council and Municipality Council in each area of the District at the rate of one member from each area,
- President and Vice president elected by the elected Members of each Village Council and Municipal Council in the District from amongst themselves,
- Members of the House of Representatives and the National Assembly within the District,
- Two Members including one woman nominated by the DDC from the Members of the District Council.

#### Municipality Committee*
Cluster of 9-35 Wards make up a municipality. Each Municipality consists of one elected Mayor and one Deputy Mayor Ward Chairs and two members including one woman nominated by the Municipality from the Members of the Municipal Council.

#### Municipality Council (MC)
Consists of:
- Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Municipality
- Ward Chair, Woman Ward Member and Ward Members of each Ward Committee
- 6-20 persons incl. one woman nominated by the Municipal Council from social workers, socially and economically marginalised or underrepresented communities.

#### Village Development Committee (VDC)*
Cluster of nine Wards make up a VDC. Each VDC consist of the Chair, Vice Chair, nine elected Ward chairs, & two members incl. one woman nominated by the VDC from the members of the Village Council.

#### Ward committee
A Ward is the smallest administrative unit and there are approximately 36,023 Wards in Nepal. A Ward Committee is made up of five elected members – one Chair and four Ward members (one of the members must be a woman).

#### Village Council (VC)
Consists of:
- Chair and Vice-chair of VDC
- Ward chair, Ward woman member & four Ward members of each Ward committee
- Six persons incl. one woman nominated by the VC from social workers or socially and economically marginalised or underrepresented communities.

#### District Council
Consists of:
- Chairman and Deputy chairman of each Village District Committee in the District,
- Mayor and Deputy Mayor of each Municipality in the District,
- Members of the District Development Committee,
- Members of the House of Representatives and the National Assembly within the District,
- MPs within the District, ex-officio member,
- Six persons including one woman nominated by the District Council from social workers, socially and economically marginalised or underrepresented communities.
There are 14 steps in this ‘bottom-up’ planning process and although politicians support this approach, it is widely recognised that the formal planning system is often manipulated and bypassed.

The Integrated Planning Committee is under the VDC and this is the body that decides which elements of the WCF plans to incorporate into the VDC development plan. According to the VDC Secretary for Ugratara, this body has two Dalit members, nine WCF Coordinators, two women, two Janajatis, some representatives from NGOs active in the VDC, one disabled person. The total membership is 21. There is also a Programme Implementation Committee which is chaired by the VDC Secretary and includes members of Government line agencies. The role of this committee is to ensure projects are implemented.

There are national directives which state how budgets should be allocated and what the ceiling should be for the budget. According to the VDC Secretary for Ugratara, 10% is allocated for children, 10% for women, 15% for marginalised groups including Dalits, Janajatis, elderly, disabled etc. The rest of the budget is for physical infrastructure type expenditure on health, education, roads etc. Salaries for teachers and other Government staff are separate. The VDC also has to mobilise local resources to contribute to the budget. For example, they charge a fee for registration of births, citizenship, land registration etc. as well as for billboards and business tax. In Ugratara, the budget for the previous year was 31 lakhs (NRs. 3,100,000) – 22 lakhs from Central Government and 9 lakhs generated through local resources.

**Ward Citizens’ Forum**

These forums have been established in the absence of an elected body and in the future these will be Ward Committees with elected members. There are supposed to be 25 members. According to FEDO, 33% of women should be represented in Government bodies, however in practice, the WCFs include only a minority of women. Around five members are representatives from political parties; amongst civil society members, there has to be one disabled person, one woman, one Dalit member. These are usually active members of the community or are nominated by the political party members. The role of this group is to identify Ward level issues and develop a Ward development plan through calling for proposals from the community. The WCF then has to mobilise resources from the VDC and oversee the implementation of the approved projects in the Ward.

FEDO reported that Dalit groups can submit proposals for the 15% allocated to marginalised groups. The Ward money for Dalit expenditure is spent on things like skills development, livelihood initiatives, WASH. The development budget for the Ward is spent on things like roads, schools, teacher’s quota, health. The money is usually delayed in getting to the Ward. There is an overall lack of transparency and accountability about how priorities are agreed for the Ward and the amount of money allocated to the Ward.

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32. The membership varies from VDC to VDC although there are guidelines about including representatives from amongst women and marginalised groups.
At VDC level there are Social Mobilisers who attend the meetings of some of the WCFs and where they exist, the weekly meetings of the Community Awareness Centres (CACs). These bodies are established in VDCs where there are minority/marginalised groups living in the communities. All Wards are represented on the CAC and the CAC meetings are to discuss the VDC budget available for minorities. The Social Mobiliser attends these meetings and notes down the key issues to feed back to the VDC. There are also quarterly meetings where the WCF Coordinators meet with the VDC Secretary. The VDC Secretary ensures that the issues reported by the Social Mobiliser correspond to those shared by the WCFs in the quarterly meetings. Also the VDC Secretary can call on the WCF to confirm the issues which the Social Mobiliser reports.

The Federation of Community Forest Users is an example of a federation that has effectively influenced policy and development processes. Forestry is an area which has received considerable donor funding and technical assistance and forest user groups have been established at community, District and the national level by the Government, with donor support. The Federation has established rules to include women in the decision-making arena and it supports local groups to include women and disadvantaged groups. By law, one-third of the executive committee members of community forest user groups must be women, but there are no stipulations for Dalits and Janajatis. The Asian Development Bank reports that despite its success in holding the Government accountable to its citizens, community forestry is not without its challenges – elite domination of executive committees marginalises the poor, Dalits, and Janajatis.
6) Spaces in which Dalit women participate at the local level

The research focuses on particular spaces where Dalit women meet and others where they are able to influence decisions.

It is clear that the women consulted have participated in and continue to participate in a number of different community groups with a range of purposes and involving different activities over the past few years. These include organic spaces such as savings and credit groups, as well as invited spaces created by Government or donor programmes where women are invited/nominated to participate or sometimes volunteer themselves as participants, as well as political parties who recruit members in communities. Women’s participation in many of these groups is fluid and some women are members of several groups at the same time and are more active in some than others.
For some women, being a member of a DWG is their first experience of participating in a group. FEDO staff highlighted that this is particularly important in the areas where FEDO is implementing the FLOW project where many women were unable to leave the house due to restrictive social norms in the project Districts, hence becoming a member of a DWG is a significant first step outside of the household. However in the communities where the research was undertaken, the researchers met with Dalit women, many of whom were active in a number of spaces and the DWG had not necessarily served as a platform to enable them to participate in other groups. In Shikapur, where the DWG has been established for over seven years, some women from the group had been involved in the project mentioned above funded by the World Bank, in 2012 and through this had accessed training on leadership and livelihoods. This gave them more exposure, confidence and knowledge on certain issues which contributed to some of these women becoming more active in different groups. Whereas in Dulalthok, where the DWG has only been active for two years, the group members had received less exposure and came across as less confident or less clear about the reasons why their participation in different groups is important.

A selection of the key spaces highlighted by Dalit women in the research are outlined below. The experiences of Dalit women in these various groups will be discussed further in sections 7, 8 and 9.

Claimed organic Spaces

The DWGs are claimed/organic spaces created by Dalit women in their communities with support from FEDO’s District chapter and FEDO central. They are not completely organic in that the groups are encouraged to establish a savings and credit scheme and to follow a structure for the group determined by FEDO but they are usually initiated by one or two Dalit women coming together with the desire to save and organise and then learning about FEDO and seeking their support.

Dalit women who are active in different decision-making structures are encouraged by FEDO to form a pressure group. One or two Dalit women mobilise others to come together to meet and discuss issues of discrimination and share information on rights and entitlements and to organise advocacy activities.

A number of the Dalit women also participate in other savings and credit groups and some have been part of community groups with both Dalits and non-Dalits in the past. Some of these savings groups are organic, formed initially by a few people coming together and gradually increasing their membership. Others are established by NGOs and Government agencies through different initiatives and are more formal, requiring women to be registered as citizens.
Invited Spaces

At Ward level the WCF, described in Section 5 above, is the key body for determining local development priorities and spending at the Ward level.

Other important spaces for the women in the communities consulted included the Forest User Group (FUG), School Management Committee (SMC), Watch Group (formerly known as a paralegal committee), Water and Sanitation Committee (WASC), the Safe Migration Network (focuses on different aspects of trafficking and migration – both internal and external) and the Mothers’ Group which is open to all mothers. There are also health management committees (HMCs) although women did not mention these committees in the research communities. One or two women in communities are selected to be Female Health Volunteers (FHVs). This affords them some level of status in the community, they are involved in maternal health and nutrition activities and in supporting the Mothers’ Groups. In all the Government structures such as the FUG, SMC, WASC, HMC, Dalits should be represented at the committee level. Most of the women members of the WCFs consulted also mentioned the Citizens’ Awareness Centre (CAC) and some participated in this structure alongside the WCF.

Amongst the Dalit women consulted in the research who were members of WCFs and FUGs, their routes to joining these particular groups included being active members of their community and being involved in other community groups and committees including the DWG and being encouraged by others to join or being invited by existing WCF or FUG members, often to fulfil the Dalit representation requirement. In some cases, women themselves were interested to join a particular group.

The WCFs are seen as important because Dalit women see their role as holding the WCF to account to ensure that the 15% budget which is supposed to be allocated to marginalised groups, is discussed and prioritises the needs of Dalit households. The Chair of the DWG in Shikapur is also the Coordinator of the WCF; she felt that the VDC is the most important structure because she influenced them to give her NRs. 50,000 towards a community building used by Dalit women for meetings and training activities (this building has since been destroyed by the earthquake).

In areas with forests, all households are entitled to have one member who is part of the wider forest user group, so everyone is at least aware of the FUG committee. Dalit women saw this as an important committee to be involved in, as they are forest users and the sustainability of the forest is thus very important to them. The FUG determines the rules for forest access and utilisation and also has to allocate 35% of income generated through forest resources to marginalised groups in the community.

Once elected to these groups, women appear to remain as committee members for a number of years. There are challenges where political parties have nominated a Dalit member of the committee and they have proposed someone who is illiterate and not able to fully participate in the committee meetings, so just because there is a Dalit member of the committee they may not necessarily be active. In addition, Dalits continue to face discrimination and marginalisation even if they are active committee members and especially if they are women, an issue which is discussed further in Section 9.
Dalit women are also invited to become members of political parties at the community level and some progress to VDC level and District Level over time. Often Dalit girls are recruited as students while still at school; some young women decide to join of their own accord. As a member of a party they are supposed to encourage support for the party during election time, but they also see it as a place to raise Dalit issues and to influence Local Government structures.

Some women participate in groups and structures established through NGO projects which tend to be transitory in nature, disappearing once the project finishes or shifting into a different form. For example in Shikapur, before they came together in the DWG a number of the women were part of a mixed group of Dalit and non-Dalit women, which was formed by the Women’s Development Office 20 years ago. This group had 600 members with 25 from Shikapur and survived for several years until it was dismantled in 2007. The women were disheartened by this as they were used to being in a group. Around this time they met the Secretary from the FEDO District Board who suggested collecting some women together for a one day meeting and she helped them establish the DWG.

Some women spoke about Watch Groups which were formerly paralegal committees. These were established across the country as part of a UNICEF programme. These committees were initially developed in response to the trafficking of women but since evolved into a community based mechanism for the prevention of and response to a much wider range of rights violations experienced by both women and children. This initiative involved the establishment of over a thousand GBV watch groups in 2013. Women in Shikapur talked about the Watch group having replaced the paralegal committee, ‘Before there was a paralegal women’s group in the community – this still exists but has changed its name to the Ward Watch Group.’ One of the women used to be in the paralegal group but left since it became a Watch group and was no longer clear what the group does. When the paralegal committees existed, she explained that women came to make complaints about gender-based violence and disputes with their in-laws.
7) The Dalit Women’s Groups

7.1) Who participates in the spaces and why

The researchers met with 30 women members from the Kalidevi and Parijat DWGs. The most vocal women in the research meetings were those who had more status in the groups – the Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, Treasurer or those who had been involved in establishing the group.

The Kalidevi DWG in Shikapur was established seven years ago. It used to have 70 members but has recently divided into two with 45 members in this part of the community and another group of 25. Before they came together in the DWG a number of the women were part of the mixed group of Dalit and non-Dalit women mentioned above, formed by the Women’s Development Office.

The group has an elected Chair, a Secretary and a Treasurer. The Chair of the group has been the Chair for the past seven years and she has considerable status amongst the Dalit households. Her husband participates in a number of decision-making groups as does she. She is also Chair of the WCF and is a member of the VDC, the FUG, WASH, CAC. She was president of the WCF. She said that she has too many responsibilities and she encourages other women to take up appointments but they don’t. Her husband was born to a Brahmin father and a Dalit mother which was seen by some of the FEDO staff as significant in terms of conferring a higher caste status on the Chair.
The Treasurer is seen as educated (she reached 12th Grade) and can speak out with confidence. She married into the community and her in-laws are proud to have an educated daughter in law. Her husband is a cobbler working in Kathmandu. Because she is educated and active she had the opportunity to participate in around four to five trainings for two-three days over a year as part of FEDO’s World Bank funded project in 2012. She had training on livestock, forestry, agriculture, women’s rights, health, cottage industries. None of the other women consulted in the DWG had had this training but many said they would like to. One said that the treasurer shares what she has learned. The treasurer explained that sometimes there is conflict in relation to training because some women hesitate and others are jealous of those who access the opportunities.

Women members of the DWG are from every Dalit household in the village and women of all ages are included, however, there is a core of active women who form the savings and credit group. The women members include younger women who have grown up in Shikapur and other women who have married into the community. Amongst the 17 women from the DWG who participated in the research, most are illiterate apart from a couple of the younger women who had taken on the roles of group treasurer and secretary. Some of the women (around seven of those consulted – mostly young and middle aged women) also participate in a ‘pressure group’ made up of the most active women in the DWG. The pressure group was set up two years previously to respond to cases of domestic violence, discrimination and untouchability. 10-15 women from the DWG are in the pressure group and around ten women from the other smaller DWG nearby, ‘Those with the loudest voices are in the pressure group. For example, if people tell us to stay away from the natural water spring, the pressure group threatens them with a fine. Since we formed the pressure group the number of cases of discrimination have reduced.’

Similarly to Shikapur, the DWG group in Dulalthok involves women from all 35 Dalit households in the community, both women who have grown up there and those who come to the community after marriage. The group was only established two years ago and includes 28 women members and four Dalit men members. The researcher met with 12 women from the group including the Chair, the Vice-Chair (VC), the Treasurer and the other members. The women said they wanted to include men in the group because ‘together we can make bigger savings.’ Another added, ‘we are all related and we felt there would be more support if they joined.’

The group was established by the Vice-Chair, together with a woman who had been involved in other FEDO groups, including a pressure group. They both attended training on gender-based violence organised by FEDO and met Dalit women from different groups and this motivated them to form the DWG. The Vice-Chair described her motivation to form the group:
“We didn’t know about organisations and women’s groups. I came to know of a Cooperative in 1999/2000. To pay NRs.50 per month was hard and to join the Cooperative you had to have citizenship to be registered. When I registered as a citizen, I came to know we are Dalit women and then got inspired with the idea of Dalit women sitting together and being able to move forward. I came to understand that no matter where you are, Dalits are always behind. I found out that Brahmins and Chetris are educated and Dalits are not and Dalits drink alcohol and are unproductive. I felt if we could come forward together, then the Brahmins and Chetris would not discriminate against us.”

(Vice-Chair, DWG, Dulalthok)

Also the Vice Chair had formed a savings group herself but was going house to house to collect the money which was very time-consuming, therefore the co-founder advised her she should form a group and convince people to bring their contributions to the group once a month.

The Chair of the Parijat group had come to live in the community in the past five years. She had been a member of the Maoist party and had moved to Dulalthok because her husband was a party organiser in the area. The FEDO Kavre Board Secretary who supports the DWG encouraged the members to nominate this woman as the Chair, as a way of giving her more opportunity and exposure. The Vice-Chair is well respected. She is a member of five Cooperatives and the Mothers Group and her daughters are active in the Child Club.

It was clear the savings and credit element of the group was a key motivation for the women to join the DWGs and to continue attending and even for the women’s husbands who were consulted and who saw some advantages in their wives having money. The benefits of having access to savings and loans are explored further in Section 8. Interestingly, for the FEDO Kavre Board members their motivation appeared to be more related to wanting to end caste-discrimination than the attraction of the savings, but for the village-level group, access to savings and loans was a critical motivating factor.

The Kavre Board members were very young when they formed the Board, they were still at school or in College and some of them have continued their education and some of them are now in paid employment, others are caring for their children. They are highly committed, undertaking their work voluntarily, on top of their jobs and studies and household work.

7.2) The purpose of the space

The women in both the DWGs see the central purpose of the group as being a savings group. The commitment to save once a month is what keeps the women coming to the meetings and clearly provides tangible benefits for the women. This is also important in terms of ensuring the support of the women’s husbands and wider family members. In discussions with the men, they said the women were better savers than them and brought money into the family through the groups, ‘Our wives spend less, women will think of changing NRs. 100 into 1000.’
The women also see the group as being an important space to come together with Dalit women to share with one another and seek solidarity. The women in the Kalidevi group which has been running for longer and has benefited from participation in the World Bank project, were clearer that in addition to the savings and loans element, that the group provides a platform for learning and sharing information and said they encourage people who are vocal and encourage them to be part of different committees:

“Through attending the meetings, we have learned many things and I have encouraged others to join. I didn’t know about the FUG or WASH meetings. Earlier if women even attended meetings of such groups, they were laughed at. We have had capacity building from FEDO and we were also encouraged to get training from the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA, an NGO). We have learned about book keeping and minute taking from the District Board Secretary. Previously we didn’t have confidence.”

(Chair of the Kalidevi DWG, Shikapur)

Through their participation in this group, some of the women have accessed training and exposure to the wider work of FEDO. They also see the group as a space for learning about their rights and sharing learning on their rights.

On the other hand, the Parijat group consider the main purpose to be about the savings, they do not talk about rights issues or discrimination much noting that this only happens when the FEDO Kavre Board Secretary comes to the meetings. The researchers also met with 6 members of the Ekata DWG outside of their community. These women said that the main purpose of their group is as a ‘platform to encourage people who are backward to resolve conflicts,’ it is also about savings and investing the savings. They added, ‘If one has a problem they will share it in the group.’

7.3) Main problems of Dalit women

The researchers were interested to hear from women about the main problems they face and to learn a little about how these problems are addressed and whether participation in particular spaces is important for addressing particular issues.

Women in the Parijat DWG in Dulalthok identified the most important problems for them as men dominating women, being illiterate, early child marriage, untouchability. Other problems they talked about included lack of skills training, men having access to more money – they said this is because the men have more skills, ‘we have potential but this is not exploited’. The women said they feel helpless; they have many needs but have had no training on income generating activities:

“We have less access to resources than men, we are illiterate and lack education.”

(Parijat DWG founding member)
For these women, to collect the NRs. 50 per month they contribute to the savings group, they have to ask their husbands and one or two women said their husbands sometimes deny them the money, adding that they feel humiliated and wish they had their own money. However the majority highlighted that that their husbands appreciated that the women are able to access loans as these are used for the benefit of the whole family and they readily gave the women the money to pay back instalments to the group each month. The women in Shikapur were less reliant on their husbands for money but were able to get support from them if needed.

In Shikapur, the DWG members shared similar problems of untouchability, violence and lack of education. The sale of human organs such as kidneys to traffickers on the black market was a problem highlighted by this DWG as it is known to take place in a nearby community. They said that a few Dalits are doing this. They gave an example of a man who sold his kidney and came back with lots of money, the wife bought clothes and make-up but then the man could not go back to work because he had health problems and soon the money was gone. They learned from this experience and have discussed this in the DWG meetings. Another Dalit man sold his kidney and died. In one family, seven members sold their kidneys.

Many of the women in both groups had been married from the age of 15 or 16. Even some of the younger women present who were in their mid to late 20s and early 30s had married as teenagers (i.e. around 10-15 years ago). Nevertheless the women in the Kalidevi DWG said early marriage does not occur at the same magnitude as before and women in both groups said women now have more choice in determining who they marry. The Chair of the Parijat group said she had an early child marriage which resulted in health problems. The Vice-Chair of this group was 15 when she got married and had her first child at 16. She knew nothing about family planning until she went to the hospital to deliver her babies. The women said it was important for their daughters to be educated and not to marry so young.

In Shikapur the women said there are women in the Dalit community who are subjected to violence but that this has reduced over time and they now know where to go to resolve this and that they should go to the police. Some women share their problems in the DWG. Before there was a paralegal women’s group in the community – this still exists but has changed its name to the Ward Watch Group. When the paralegal committees existed, women came to make complaints about violence and disputes with their in-laws. The Chair was also in this group and used to go to other villages to solve problems. She felt violence had decreased in Hokse because awareness has increased. The kinds of violence the women referred to included men beating their wives and restricting them from going outside. They said they don’t have child abuse or rape. Sometimes there are fights between sister-in-laws, ‘it could be about goats getting onto each other’s land, fighting between their children or be dowry related.’ Some violence is linked to men drinking alcohol. They said that now men consume less alcohol although after the earthquake when people were traumatised for 10-11 days men drank a lot of local liquor made from rice. In Dulalthok, the Vice Chair explained that the women have a big role in ‘taming men’:
“The men were very wild and we had to calm them down. The trend of drinking has gone down and if they do it now it is only in their own compound. My husband used to drink a lot. We were building a house and one day he beat me and I got a head injury and I went to hospital. Other women suggested I file a case against him, but I was worried about him being locked up as he was the only one earning an income. He realised he had a problem and he gave up drinking. At first I didn’t believe he would do it but he hasn’t drunk for 13 years.”

(Vice-Chair, DWG, Dulalthok)

In relation to caste-discrimination, the women generally felt this had declined but is still present in more subtle ways. This was also the feeling of the women’s husbands who participated in the research. One of the men in Dulalthok sums up how things have changed:

“Gradually untouchability is becoming less, earlier if you touched an upper caste person while they were eating they would scream – ‘why did you touch me?’ Now they just say it, instead of screaming it.”

(Man in Dulalthok)

Many women from the DWGs had experienced discrimination when working as agricultural labourers during their lunch breaks where they were obliged to wash the utensils and eat apart from non-Dalits. Others had experienced hostility in relation to access the fresh water sources in the community or their children had been told not to play near the water by non-Dalits. Some talked about being treated differently in the temple, being excluded from participating in social celebrations and not being able to enter the houses of non-Dalits. One woman who was the first in her community to pass the school leaving certificate (SLC) explained that she is a teacher and was appointed to a Government school. The school refused her because she was told ‘everyone will have to say Namaste to you and they won’t want to do that.’ She tried to talk to different people to change their minds but the 35 days lapsed within which to take up the contract and then she was not able to take up the post. The members of the Kavre District Board consulted had also various experiences of discrimination, including from teachers at school, from employers and caste-discrimination towards the blacksmith caste.

When women considered their problems compared to the challenges faced by Dalit men, some women felt that there was not that much difference in that men are also not educated and do not have good jobs. One or two women felt that men tended to be more educated and that gave them more opportunities and power than women. Women were aware of their subscribed roles, the huge workload they carry and the expectations placed on them that go back for generations. Some of the younger women felt able to challenge these expectations because they are the first generation to have an education and this has afforded them some status and respect from their husbands and mother-in-laws, however most of the women did not see their lack of equality as a problem, referring to this mainly in relation to lack of income generating skills and restricted mobility. For example when they travel and stay overnight they have to stay with friends or relatives, but this is not the case for men:
“Men can go anywhere. We have to be accompanied so cannot go and mix with people. Men have freedom. When we go somewhere they will send a small brother as a chaperone. We know he won’t protect us. When we go out we have to ask and inform the men but they don’t do the same. We also have to report back after our meetings.”
(Member of the Kalidevi DWG, Shikapur)

The Chair of the Parijat group highlighted that in order to participate in the research meeting they would have had to get up at 4 am to complete the household tasks and cook and feed the men, in order to be able to come. They explained that this is entirely different for men, who just go to meetings. The co-founder of this group said:

“Men never see our work. They go out to work and when they come back the food has to be ready and the clothes all prepared and they also like to be given a massage.”
(Co-founder, Parijat DWG)

One woman said her husband does the cooking but many said, ‘our husbands don’t enter the kitchen, women have to cook and clean.’

The Vice-Chair of the Parijat DWG said ‘I only wish they would get pregnant instead of us then they would know what we have to do.’ She added that most of the time they stay quiet but she feels that if she was educated her husband wouldn’t be able to dominate her.

In relation to being able to participate in the DWGs, some said that initially their husbands were reluctant to let them attend but this has changed. The FEDO Kavre Board Secretary had to work hard to convince some of the husbands in the early days of establishing the groups. Various women explained:

“We are allowed to go out but they are strict on timing e.g. if we take permission for an hour and the work might take 2 hours, we have to return on time.

“Even if invited to a meeting if we have the information 1 or 2 days before we have time to tell our husbands and mothers-in-law but at short notice it is difficult.”
(Various women in DWG, Kavre)

Another added that their husbands allow them to be in the group but they also ask the women, ‘What benefits come from the group and what is the use of just going for meetings?’ Another said, ‘we keep quiet and tell our husbands the benefits will happen one day.’ For those who are active in different groups, it means adding to their existing workloads but in spite of this, these women were pleased to involved in different groups.
8) Power of the DWGs for women

The research explored what the space meant for the women, who joined and what happened in that space that had value for them; what the space enabled them to do for themselves and for their community, especially in relation to political participation. It was very clear that women coming together in the DWG to form a savings and loans group had benefits for them beyond the economic benefits. Their access to information and understanding about the situation of Dalit women and men and knowledge about their entitlements to representation and Government budget allocations has encouraged some of them to become activists in different arenas. Clearly some of the benefits outlined below are experienced by Dalit women who participate in other groups and this is explored further in Section 9, however the findings below try to reflect as closely as possible what women attributed to their participation in the DWGs.

Access to savings and credit

As noted above, it was clear that savings and credit were an important motivation for the women joining the groups although certainly not the only factor. In the Parijat DWG, being able to access loans is important for the women who have no independent source of income.
“There are times when we are in desperate need of money. I used the money for farming and household expenses and sometimes borrow money from elsewhere and take money from the DWG to pay that loan. We have to buy staple food because we have a small amount of land and the yield is low.”

(Vice-Chair of Parijat DWG)

The Vice-Chair has also used a loan to help support her husband to go overseas for work. Another woman in this community had used her loan to help her husband establish a shop for vehicle parts in Banepa.

Some of the women are in several savings groups both to maximise what they can borrow but also to pay off one loan with another. With the loan from the DWG, even if the loan is small (a maximum of NRs. 50,000) they found they could raise some goats which has helped them. The Kalidevi DWG meet on the 14th of the month and each member contributes NRs.50 at each meeting. Group members can take a loan each month and the loans go to whoever is in need which is someone different every month. The group trusts the women to repay. For a loan of NRs. 1000, they have to pay back NRs. 15 per month. The loan has to be paid back at the end of six months. If they can’t repay, one month is given as a bonus. However no one has failed to pay back their loan so far. They have used the loans to buy seeds (they are farmers), to buy medicine, goats, pigs:

“We are careful with our money, we don’t spend it on ourselves.
“We are farming people, sometimes our husbands don’t have income so we can borrow money to buy seeds.”

(Woman from the DWG, Kalidevi)

The women in the Kalidevi DWG reported that just one month after the earthquake devastated their community the group reformed to start saving again and in doing so provided the women with a space to share their worries and stress after the earthquake.

Building their confidence

Many of the women in the DWGs gave examples of how they had become more confident through their involvement in the meetings, particularly in terms of having greater confidence to speak up in their homes. One woman in the Kalidevi DWG said that before they were shy and intimidated to speak in front of other women but now they are not even shy in front of their husbands.

“I used to feel awkward to speak in front of strangers. Now we are more encouraged and have no reservation.”

(Young woman from Parijat DWG)
“Now we can speak because of the training and meetings. We can go out of our house and we got the opportunity to meet you. We inform our husbands about the meeting, we don’t have to ask permission.”

(Young woman from Ekata DWG)

Others spoke of the importance of becoming informed of their rights, of learning about things that are happening in the community and that this gives them more confidence:

“From FEDO we learned about untouchability. Because we are now more confident, even if we are pushed back we have to be strong.”

(Chair of Kalidevi group)

In a role play by the Kalidevi DWG to portray how they conduct a monthly meeting, they showed how different women share information they have accessed through training or participation in meetings of other groups. For example, the Chair asked the treasurer who had attended a training session what she had learned. The treasurer shared that she had participated in a training session on people going overseas for employment and the need for authentic documentation. She explained that there are traffickers involved and people are duped and taken for jobs that are different than promised and then they suffer as they can’t return, even if they want to come back. She explained there is an organisation that you can contact which will rescue people. She said to one woman, ‘Your husband and brother-in-law are planning to go, so make sure they go through the legal channels.’

**Solidarity and collective voice**

Being in the group, offers solidarity to Dalit women. It is a space where they are not in minority but they are bound together by caste and shared experiences of discrimination. Kavre District Board members explained the importance of coming together in a group.

“Before joining FEDO I was living in my village. It has 200 households but only 35 households are Dalit and are scattered and didn’t come together. Even when we suffered violence we didn’t unite and raise our voices. When we went to work as agricultural labourers we Dalits couldn’t drink from same cups as the non-Dalits. We had to eat outside the restaurant while the Brahmins and Chetris ate inside. We were forced to wash our own utensils unlike the Brahmins and people wouldn’t drink the water served by us. We make the shoes and clothes others use, so why are we untouchable?

“Non-Dalits would have access to the VDC budget for roads, water taps and we were more backward without roads, taps etc. We knew there was an allocation for Dalits (from the radio) but because Dalit men and women are not active, the political parties would use the money elsewhere. I thought – how can we become united and bring all nine Wards together. The FEDO Board Secretary came to the village and
talked about the budget and told us we should be united and can handle violence cases and can form a group and can use this forum [DWG] to fight against cases of discrimination and untouchability. So we formed a DWG with women from all nine Wards.”
(Kavre District Board members)

Some of the women who were members of different groups see the DWG as being different than other groups because it is a space where they are united with other Dalit women. The Co-founder of the Parijat DWG highlighted the uniqueness of the DWG:

“In other groups I am a member but in the DWG we are together for a cause – caste-discrimination. Here we have the same voice, in other groups it is just savings.”
(Co-founder of the Parijat DWG)

The women also talked about the importance of coming together to challenge discrimination and to engage with decision makers:

“Being a Dalit we are discriminated and suffering a lot. We can make a complaint to the Chief District Officer if we are discriminated against so it is important that we are together.”
(Member of Parijat DWG)

For some of the younger women, they struggle to understand why they are discriminated against and being in the group is important both for understanding this and for realising they are not alone.

“The younger generation have questions about why people discriminate against Dalits – we are all humans. The higher caste groups say don’t touch me, we will become impure – we feel like crying – why are they saying this?”
(Young woman, Ekata DWG)

Another young woman member of the FEDO Kavre District Board shared her experiences of discrimination and how important it is for her to be part of a group with Dalit women and what this solidarity means for her:

“I was the only Dalit in my class in school. I was discriminated, scared to raise my voice. I got very hurt by this. I came to know that FEDO is doing a lot to campaign against discrimination through my sister who was a member of FEDO Kavre District Board. I realised it was not only me but that other Dalit women face the same problems. So I became determined from a very young age. I could feel the pain of other women. I learn a lot from being in this organisation and from central FEDO, I learned we have rights and can fight for our rights. I was happy when I learnt that we are equal to everybody and have rights like
everybody. I realised there are other women in pain and that I can help them so I have come together with other sisters and have started to form groups. At first nobody would listen to us, Government offices would say – ‘you are so young’ but I said ‘yes I can do it’ and everybody encouraged me. My sisters from my community are happy and that makes me happy. Happiness is not just about me. I have become fearless and determined to tackle any situation.”

(Young woman member of the FEDO Kavre District Board)

Learning about rights

The women in the Kalidevi DWG spoke about learning about their rights in this group, referring to rights to healthcare, inheritance and land rights, being equal to their husbands etc:

“We have rights from time of birth – going for a medical check-up when pregnant is a right. In the household we have rights.

“In the past, you could inherit the property of your husband after 16 years of marriage or when your son is 16 years old. Now as soon as you are married you are entitled to half the property. Therefore marriage registration is important and birth registration. If you register a birth within 35 days, it is free.

“Now there is a provision in law – if a woman has to register land and does it in her name (not her husband’s) then 25% of the fee is waived. However only 11% of women have land holdings, in spite of this law being passed 10 years ago.”

(Women in the Kalidevi DWG)

The women from the Ekata DWG said that it was through coming to the group that they realised that they are discriminated against because they are Dalits. They said they have learned they have to be strong so as not to give others the chance to discriminate against them. Some of the women in other groups also talked about this issue of not realising the reasons why they were discriminated against, particularly the younger women; discrimination has been practised for generations, hence it is often accepted without question.

The women in the Parijat group spoke less about learning about their rights but emphasised that they do learn from the FEDO Kavre District Board Secretary when she comes to the meetings and the Secretary noted that after being in the group the women have registered their citizenship according to their surname rather than their profession (caste) name which means they cannot automatically be identified as Dalits.
Changing women’s status in the family and community

The women were positive about their involvement in the DWG in terms of giving them more confidence and status in the household as noted above. Some talked about gaining knowledge and new ways of thinking which has changed them. The husbands of the women in the Parijat DWG said they have seen changes in their wives saying that they were illiterate and could not identify discrimination in the past. The Secretary of this group (man) highlighted, ‘Earlier women had restricted mobility and feared their in-laws and husbands and didn’t go out but now they are in many groups and husbands allow them to attend.’ Although this is certainly a positive change, it is still within a context of where women are ‘allowed’ to do such things by their husbands.

The husband of the Chair of the Kalidevi DWG had the following view of women’s participation in the DWG:

“It is good that they can save and borrow money. When my wife first joined the group, people said to me – ‘Your wife is going wild, she is very free and it will be more work for you.’ However, I was already in various committees so I understood.”

(Husband of the Chair of the Kalidevi DWG)

In the Parijat group they also talked about being supported by their mother-in-laws, saying that when they go for trainings or meetings they inform their mother-in-laws, ‘it is fine, they don’t restrict us. Some say you should go and learn, we didn’t have this opportunity, and you shouldn’t miss it.’

A platform for participation in other groups

For some women their experience in the DWG may have been their first experience of attending meetings, speaking out and learning about discrimination and how to tackle it. Also for some members of the group, it is the first time they have assumed a leadership role in a group. Their experiences in the DWG has inspired some of them to take up roles in decision-making bodies but others find this prospect challenging and some of the barriers they faced are explored in Sections 9.5 and 10.2 below. None of the women participate in the HMC in both communities, in Dulalthok they have never been invited to participate in the FUG committee. One of the women from the Kalidevi DWG is in the ‘Safe Migration Network’. She reported that they were able to catch a kidney trafficker who is now behind bars. This is an informal network formed by NGOs focused on people and kidney trafficking. The network looks at different aspects of trafficking and migration – both internal and external. It tries to create awareness in relation to the documents needed for going overseas and the risks of trafficking etc. She got involved because she was previously in the Paralegal committee and she was invited by the VDC to join:
“I am listened to in this group. I know most of the people, they respect me. Many of the people who plan to go for foreign labour decline to attend the network meetings as they don’t want to be put off travelling and the traffickers tell them to ignore the networks.”
(Woman from Kalidevi DWG)

Challenging discrimination and untouchability

Women talked about not knowing how to tackle discrimination and untouchability in the past but through being in the DWG and for some of them participating in pressure groups they are able to take action and know where to go. As mentioned above, one benefit of being in the group with other Dalit women is that together women have power to challenge discrimination. One of the Board members who formed a DWG in her community explained that earlier they didn’t know where to file cases and make complaints but now she receives calls from women even at 11pm at night from women seeking advice, as she is the key person in the group. She said there are also allegations of witchcraft – usually against single women, poor, Muslims, Dalits.

The FEDO Kavre District Board inform women in the DWGs about the law and untouchability. They accompany the women to the ‘woman and children’s service centre’ a special unit set up in the police station to support women and in some cases if a Dalit woman’s case goes directly to the police they will inform FEDO. At District Level, they have taken several cases of untouchability and gender based violence to court. This is an improvement on the past when cases of discrimination or untouchability used to be resolved through negotiation.

Dalit women access resources and influence Local Government budget expenditure

Through working collectively in their group, the women can raise issues with different decision-making bodies to secure much needed resources for Dalit households.

In the Parjiat DWG the women explained, ‘the VDC has a budget allocated for Dalits but we were not aware, however if we sit together we can use it for our group.’ For example over the last three years the women claimed to have brought in NRs. 75,000 which was used three years ago for an exposure visit to Pokhara – four-five women went and learned about health, hygiene and came back and shared their learning with others. In the following year they accessed NRs. 100,000 for a water drum with a tap for each Dalit household to store water and also soap. In the third year they received NRs. 75,000 which was used for baby goods for poor Dalit women who have no land. This money was allocated for the whole Ward not just the Dulalthok community. Dalit women certainly benefited from these inputs, but it was difficult to ascertain to what extent the DWG had influenced the decisions around this funding. One woman subsequently explained that there is another network of Dalit men and women (one person from each Ward is represented on the network with almost equal men and women), which covers the 17 Wards in the municipality. It was this network which accessed the money and the founder member of the DWG is a member of this network.
In Shikapur the DWG succeeded in getting the Dalit community house built, mentioned above. To write the proposal for this house the Chair of the group enlisted the support of a non-Dalit man who helped write the proposal. She became a member of the VDC through a previous role which involved weighing infants. She asked the VDC Secretary for the money for the Dalit community house. They gave NRs. 50,000. This wasn’t enough for the roof so ADRA came to the community and the DWG showed them the building and they provided zinc sheets. The following year they got NRs. 25,000 from the VDC and an additional NRs. 12,000 from ADRA for benches and cupboards. The Chair received an award from ADRA for her dedicated work which amounted to NRs. 5000. It is was apparent that the Chair took individual action to advocate for the Dalit community house. She is fully supported by the DWG members, but it she who goes to the VDC and links to different organisations to seek their support. Until it was destroyed in the earthquake, the Dalit community house was used for meetings – DWG meetings or meetings with polio volunteers; they also used it for training. Dalit men used the building to store tents and utensils for wedding parties. The men also helped to build it, all 55 Dalit households participated in the construction work.
9) Dalit women’s experience in selected decision-making spaces

9.1) Who participates in the spaces and who they represent

As described in the methodology section, the research involved consultation with women members of Ward Citizens’ Forums, Forest User Groups and members of political parties operating at different levels. A few women met the researchers more than once, one as Chair of the Parijat DWG and member of a political party, one who is a member of an FUG and a WCF and another who is a member of an FUG and a political party.

WCFs and FUGs

According to the women consulted, it is usually Dalit women who are active in other community or political spaces that are invited to join the WCF or FUG, others are encouraged to join by members of the Committees or other people in the community. Dalit women themselves are not necessarily aware that these structures should have Dalit representation but those women who are already participating in other groups such as the DWG, come to know this over time. All the women in WCFs were also in various other groups including DWGs, other savings groups, political parties, mothers’ groups, forest user groups etc.
“We are active and linked to other organisations hence we get into the WCF. I was invited by the community to participate in the group as a Dalit representative as there were no other Dalits.”

(Young woman member of WCF for one year, Ward 14, Panchkhal Municipality)

The women said that members of the WCF are mainly members of political parties and teachers and that only two-three members are women. Some WCFs also include representatives of child clubs. Although WCFs are supposed to contain around 25 members and meet every three months, it is usually around 9 – 12 members who regularly attend the meetings according to the women and some groups are more active than others. The proportion of women in the FUG Committees was reported to be greater than in the WCFs and in some cases, almost equal to the number of men.

A 16 year old girl from Ward 4 in Panchkhal has been a member of the WCF for one year. She comes from an active family, her mother is the Vice-Chair of the Parijat DWG and her sister also participates in the DWG. She was active in schools and was a member of the Child Club at the VDC level and subsequently at municipal level. Other people told her she should join the WCF, ‘several people including the Coordinator of the Village Child Protection Committee as well as the woman from the Municipality.’

The Sub-Coordinator of the WCF in Ward 1 in Panchkhal Municipality explained that she is also a member of a Cooperative and a member of the implementation committee of that Cooperative. She was approached by a member of staff from the municipality while attending meetings of the cooperative (a Ward secretary of Ward 4). The woman told her they needed representatives from her Ward on the WCF and that she recognised she was active because she was involved in a conflict related project and had to weigh infants and provide supplements. The woman told her that even though she is not educated, it was clear she wanted the best for her community so she invited her to attend the WCF. She has been a member for two years and has also been a member of the Forest User Group Committee for the past two years.

Some of the Dalit women who were not committee members saw their lack of education as a barrier to participating at this level and it was clear that the younger women consulted had a higher level of education than the older women, they had usually completed Grade 10 or 12 and felt more confident to take on committee roles. One of the forest users who is not on the Committee explained why the committee was formed in her community:

“Earlier we didn’t have a big forest in the community, only shrubs and it was almost destroyed. People were concerned and decided to form a committee. I am one of the 150 members, we pay NRs. 10 and are entitled to access the forest.”

(Woman forest user)

She explained why she is not a member of the Committee, ‘I am not educated so I don’t have confidence.’ Although people have suggested she should join she doesn’t feel able to and noted that there are only four Dalit households in her community, so they are in a minority.
Another young woman, who is in the wider forest users group in her community, said that the Committee is talking about inviting her onto the Committee. Her uncle is on the Committee representing Dalits and she talked to him and he talked to the others and they have said verbally that she can join. She said that there is an assumption that Dalits are not educated but she has completed Grade 12. She got married and came to the village five years ago. Gradually she got to know about the forest and now she wants to share information with others.

The different decision-making groups are supposed to include women and marginalised groups so this is a significant factor in that committee members know that they should include a Dalit member and therefore should encourage a Dalit to join.

“I joined the WCF just over a year ago. A lady told me they needed Dalit representation in the WCF. They took my phone number and called me on the day of the meeting and I attended.”

(Founder member of Parijat DWG, Ward 2, Panchkhal municipality, member of FEDO District Board)

“Forest is an important resource and has to be conserved. If we don’t take care destruction can happen and community people go in to collect fodder. The committee already existed when I got involved. The Chair wanted active people so he invited me – they were looking for women who suffer from forest destruction and they wanted someone active. There were three other women on the committee and ten men.”

(Member of committee for seven years, Ward 8, Jangal VDC)

“The Committee already existed in my community but there are some changes every year. Some of the users nominated me. The forest is not big. There are only 35 users and all are Dalits because the forest belongs to the Dalit community. When I entered the committee there were seven members – four men and three women.”

(Treasurer of FUG for almost five years, Ward 2, Tukucha VDC)

Some of the members of the FUG committee were themselves inspired to join because they were concerned about the state of the forest:

“There was a provision for Dalit representatives which became more pronounced. At one time the forest was destroyed so the Dalits and Janajatis came together and formed the committee to take care of the forest and make it more productive.”

(VC for nine years, committee member for 11 years, Ward 1 of Mahadevsta VDC. She has also been a member of political parties for over 10 years)
“Dalits weren’t on the committee and didn’t know when the forest was open so I decided to join. They couldn’t tell me not to be a member but they didn’t want me. I was forceful, they cannot say you can’t join. The non-Dalits on the Committee said ‘you are not educated and you would have to go to meetings regularly, are you sure you want to join?’ I insisted and came to every meeting.”
(Member of FUG Committee for two years, WCF Sub-Coordinator two years, Ward 1 of Panchkhal municipality)

Political parties

The political parties express sympathy towards Dalits and other marginalised groups and have made commitments in terms of Dalit representation but these do not go far enough according to Dalit organisations such as FEDO. However, it was understood by the women consulted that the parties want to demonstrate inclusion of Dalits and Dalit women.

Two women who were members of political parties were recruited to parties as students, four of the women decided that they wanted to get involved in a party because they were interested in politics and one was encouraged to join the party by her husband as he is a member.

Not all the women were particularly aligned to the politics of the party they belonged to, but they had entered a party which was active in their locality or which had invited them to join. When talking about which policies of their parties they think are important, one explained, ‘it is not necessary that I like all their policies but they encourage Dalit women to move forward. I don’t trust them but they need Dalit women.’

Another who had joined a party only four months before said that you should take responsibility to determine which party to join. She herself was motivated to join because of caste-discrimination. There were party workers in her community so she tagged along with them initially and then came to know that you have to be active and fight for rights. Later people from the party (Nepali Congress) came to her house to look for her. She highlighted that ‘all parties speak about Dalit rights, implementation may be weak but also it is up to us to explore.’ Another added, ‘Everyone in my family are United Marxist Leninist (UML) and I am the only Nepali Congress (NC) supporter but my family never asked why I chose that party. I chose the NC because it was the first party to include Dalits in the manifesto.’

Another NC member shared her motivation for joining:

“I was interested in politics from very early but only saw elderly men involved so I thought it would have to wait. Then when I was in school I was invited at Ward level and got involved. I became secretary of the Ward committee of the Nepali Congress and then became Secretary at the municipality level after six months when there was a general assembly. I was around 18 at the time. I didn’t know what it involved
but the members encouraged me. Then the leaders said ‘go to District Level and fight for it’ and I didn’t know what that meant.”

(Member of the NC in the Dalit wing for six years at District Level. She is also in a DW pressure group at municipal level; Ward 3 in Panauti municipality)

The women were also clear that there are benefits to joining a political party. These include access to knowledge, influence and in some cases, resources, as well as gaining status and respect. In addition, the party also benefits from having Dalit representatives:

“I started on a personal level, I wished to join politics. There were older men in the community who explained what happens and the benefits of being in a party. If you join there are lots of benefits and you can make sure the rights of Dalits are secured. I was 15-16 when I joined and was in Grade 9-10.”

(A member of the United Maoist (UM) party for two-three years at VDC level but it has recently split and a new party (Maoist Biplav) has been formed and she joined that four-five days previously at municipal level; Ward 12 in Panchkhal municipality)

One young woman is very active. She is a member of the UML at municipal level in Panauti municipality. She was active as a student and was in the students’ wing for seven years. Then she got to District Level and zonal level but now due to her studies she couldn’t continue at that level, so she has been in the woman’s wing of the UML for the past two years at municipal level and is the Secretary of the party. She has also been in a DWG for the past four years. She explained how and why she got into the UML:

“I got involved as a student. The student wings of political parties would explain to us why it is important to enter politics and how to balance this with our studies. They used to tell us that there are scholarships available from the Government for Dalit students who are deserving and discounts for student travel and that you can pressure the Government on these issues. Where I lived the majority of people were Nepali Congress supporters and my father was active but I don’t know in which party as he died 15 years ago. It was difficult for my mother with four children. We approached the school for a scholarship and I almost got admitted but the NC people intervened to block it so we submitted a letter to the Ward. I did get a full scholarship but it was the UML party who influenced the school to grant the scholarship, so I was influenced and motivated by the UML party members. Access to the party was not difficult as there were only a few Dalit households in my community, most were Brahmin and the party needed Dalit representation so I didn’t face competition.”

(Secretary, UML)
For some women, if benefits don’t come to fruition then they may change to another party:

“I started as a Female Health Volunteer and used to visit every household and meet with people. It happened that I became a member of the Maoist Committee in my community. I wasn’t so happy with the Maoists (was a member for eight-ten years), maybe because I was hurt we Dalits were not included in development activities in the village like electricity. So I decided to be independent and not be affiliated to any party. However after one-two months I joined the UML along with 100 other new entrants. Then gradually I was able to be part of the District committee (you have to work up from Ward, VDC to District). The UML convinced us by saying you will have a water supply, electricity/community building and it is gradually happening, I am not so disappointed. So I am ensuring that whatever opportunities come along are accessible for Dalits.”

(Member of the UML party. She is the general member of the District and has been there for one and a half years, she has also been VC in her FUG for nine years, Mahadevstan VDC)

Who the women represent

WCFs

Once the women are participating in the WCFs they very much see themselves as representing Dalit households in their communities and consider their role to be about ensuring that the 15% of the Ward budget is secured for the needs of Dalits in particular. They don’t refer to securing the allocation for other marginalised groups but talk about the importance of raising the issues of Dalits.

“There are 200-300 households in our Ward of which almost 60 are Dalit households – sometimes Dalits migrate. If Dalit women raise issues I will bring them to the WCF. Other groups raise issues e.g. teachers raise issues related to schools and women’s groups also raise issues.”

(Young woman member of WCF for one year, Ward 14, Panchkhal Municipality)

The same woman went on to explain that in her WCF, four people stood for the Coordinator position in the last year but elections stalled because of the earthquake, ‘A woman can be appointed as a woman, a Dalit, by a political party or by other caste. All those standing for election are politically strong.’ This is an important point to note as belonging to a political party can be important for opening doors to the women, enabling them to access positions in different groups as well as information. A number of the Dalit women members of political parties consulted in the research confirmed this finding, ‘sometimes money comes to the Ward or the municipality and they say that it will be spent on a road and Dalits don’t know that they should access some of the budget.’
In addition, belonging to a political party gives women more status and it is the members of political parties and other caste groups on the WCFs who have the strongest voice according to some of the women:

“The WCF has 11 members who attend and 6 of these are Dalit women but usually four-five of these attend. Even though I am the Chair, other caste groups have stronger voices in the meeting. Representatives of political parties are also vocal.”
(Member of WCF and coordinator of CAC, both four years, Upper Ward 6, Hokse Municipality)

**FUGs**

Being on the FUG Committee is particularly important to the women because it is they who are dependent on forest resources. The Dalit women in the FUGs see their role as both safeguarding the forest and representing Dalit households in their community and ensuring that the 35% of funds allocated (from the sale of forest products) for marginalised groups is not misappropriated. One FUG Committee member explained:

“My role is to communicate with Dalit households and everyone is happy to get to know about everything. In the past the non-Dalits told the forest guard to put up information on the opening hours of the forest. There are 150 households of Dalits and Janajatis so these people didn’t know what the notice said as they don’t read and their children were in school. This situation changed after I joined the committee.”
(Member of FUG Committee for two years, WCF Sub-Coordinator two years, Ward 1 of Panchkhal municipality)

**Women in political parties**

Most of the women said they are in political parties for Dalits and women in their community, ‘for all Dalits irrespective of their political party – if we are not united nothing can happen.’ One NC member said that they should reach Dalits from unreached communities. She said they shouldn’t blame the non-Dalits but added ‘within Dalit communities we are not supporting the people who are really behind. I am not into politics to earn money but want Dalits to get their entitlements. Many people are concerned with the development of the country as a whole but we should be responsible to ensure Dalits access their entitlements.’

Another woman shared:

“Whatsoever opportunities I come to know about I share with Dalits to help them access e.g. livelihood support, skills training. I ensure the budget allocated goes to Dalits.”
(Member of women’s wing of the UML for the past two years at municipal level and party Secretary)
These findings were similar to the women in the WCFs and the FUGs, who saw their role first and foremost as representing Dalits and accessing entitlements.

Interestingly in both communities it is mainly Dalit women rather than Dalit men who participate in other decision-making structures. In Dulalthok the Dalit men said they do not have time to participate in different groups and they think the women are able to do this. In Shikapur, the husband of the DWG Chair was a member of various groups but the other men also saw it as a good thing that women are representing Dalits in different groups. The Dalit men and women talked of being united in terms of wanting their entitlements and in raising issues which affect Dalit households.

9.2) The purpose of the space

When considering the purpose of the spaces to which they belong, the women mainly emphasised what for them is the purpose of belonging to these groups; though this may not necessarily be the core purpose of the group itself.

WCFs

The women consulted mainly see the WCF as a forum for discussing the needs of the community. The meetings are about determining which issues should be forwarded to the VDC and how the budget should be spent in the Ward:

“It is a platform where all citizens come together to discuss the needs of a Ward and what to do about them, whether road construction or water supply. There could be a need for a stretcher or an ambulance.”

(Coordinator of WCF and Citizens’ Awareness Centre. Four years in both, Ward 8, Ugathar Janagal VDC. Non-Dalit)

“There is lots of discussion and I speak on behalf of children as I represent them. Others talk about roads and water and we talk about the budget and what will be done during the year.”

(Chair of Child Club, two years in WCF, Ward 4 in Panchkhal)

“We discuss roads, water. The Coordinator is responsible to take the issues discussed to the municipality. We talk about the targeted groups – poor, Dalits etc.”

(FUG Committee two years, WCF Sub-Coordinator two years, Ward 1 of Panchkhal municipality)

The women also see the WCFs as an important way of keeping informed about resources coming in to the Ward:

“In the meeting I came to know about the budget allocated to marginalised groups and I was encouraged to mention issues so I raised the issue about the water supply as we had to walk a long distance to
bring water, so that was how we got the community tap for drinking water.”
(Founder member of Parijat DWG, Ward 2, Panchkhal municipality, member of FEDO District Board).

The women who were also members of the Citizen Awareness Centres (CACs), see their involvement in these bodies as significant for the same reason:

“Earlier we didn’t know much about VDCs. Water shortage was a big problem and one woman presented the problem at the VDC and there was a contribution from the DDC and VDC and we now have private water taps and a water reservoir.”
(Coordinator of WCF for two years, Chairperson of CAC, Ward 2, Thuksa VDC)

“Four years ago we formed a CAC and through this we have created awareness on issues like health and sanitation and built toilets. We also informed people about the budget available from VDCs. Before the CAC no one knew about this.”
(Member of WCF and Coordinator of CAC, both four years, Upper Ward 6, Hokse Municipality)

FUGs

The women explained that the FUG Committee sets the rules and regulations for forest access and the use of forest resources. They try to ensure these rules are followed and that punishments are defined. They discuss issues of forest conservation as well as water supply and sanitation. The FUGs are responsible for doing a lot of re-planting. They have rules about the size of area in which you cut trees and then have to replant the same amount. The FUG monitors this system. One woman explained that the forest in her community is always open for fodder and for firewood collected from the floor but if people cut trees they are fined (from NRs. 100 – 1000) depending on the scale of destruction. Others also spoke about the need to dissuade people from entering the forest illegally and taking out wood.

Once a year there is a general assembly meeting which is attended by all the community members and the FUG Committee should meet once a month:

“We conduct meetings every month and also have a general meeting and collect NRs. 100 to pay the Guard. We decide when to open the forest to cut the trees, which trees to cut, how to collect the money etc. It is difficult to be in the Committee as we tell people not to cut the trees and there is lots of conflict and people fight with us. It is also difficult as a woman. Those who understand the importance of the forest are easy to deal with but those who don’t are difficult. People think in the short term and want wood for the day, they don’t think about next month.”
(VC for nine years, committee member for 11 years, Ward 1 of Mahadevsta VDC)
One of the Committee members explained that ‘as a member of the Committee you have to lead by example and talk about the forest to people when we see people heading there.’ She added that the committee members are affiliated to different groups such as women’s groups so that they can better spread information:

“In the other groups we participate in, we include forestry issues on the agendas. It is women who collect firewood, fodder and water and the women who steal from the forest. I avoid having heated arguments but talk about the importance of the forest and ask people how often they need access to it and when the gates should be open and whether they think they need a professional forester to fell the trees.”

(Woman FUG Committee member)

Political parties

Although the purpose of the parties is to encourage other members to join and to canvass people to vote for the party, similarly to the WCFs, the women see the party as having an influence on the budget for the Ward, VDC or municipality, so for them that is a key purpose for the party committee:

“It is like a watch group, we keep an eye out to see when the budget comes. When the municipality gets the budget people don’t go and ask for the money so we make sure they do. There are certain Government benefits – NRs. 200 per month for children under five years to assist with their nutrition. Senior citizens get money – over age 65 for non-Dalits and over 60 for Dalits. We also question the municipality and enquire why communities are not getting the money, even during the earthquake we were protesting.”

(Member of NC for three-four months, also Chair of the DWG in Ward 7 of Dhulikhel municipality).

This woman went on to explain that during the election they realised women need to speak at community level and can’t achieve anything if they don’t speak, ‘The party supports Dalit representation so there are opportunities even if not many and we should be there to represent Dalit women. We ourselves need to look for opportunities.’

The women leaders who are members of political parties and were selected by FEDO for leadership training as part of the FLOW project talked about their main purpose within their parties as being about increasing Dalit membership of the parties and what they learned from the FEDO training:

“We learned we are behind because of gender, education, economic conditions and untouchability, this makes us different from other women. We learned we were in the parties for the sake of it and didn’t dissect the policies and were not so active so we realised we need to
have a more meaningful role. After the training FEDO called all the women leaders together to say there should be 20% participation of Dalits (13% to reflect the population and 7% for compensation for 3000+ years of discrimination). They said we should demand 10% representation of Dalit women in the party and this is what we have demanded in our respective parties.”

(Senior representative of the UML on its Central Committee. She is still a member of the women’s wing of the party which looks at Dalit issues. She is a graduate and is joining a masters)

9.3) What the groups are able to do

Most of the women were able to give examples of what the different groups have been able to do, with their involvement. One or two spoke of being in a group which wasn’t active or which had problems. The women certainly felt that they had a role in the achievements of their groups although many acknowledged challenges with being heard and being able to influence final decisions. These challenges are explored further in section 9.5.

WCFs

The women in the WCFs reported that there are many needs in their communities but they prioritise the issues. Most women gave examples of what the WCF has been able to do for the community rather than what they as individual women have been able to influence, although one or two women talked about actions they themselves had taken:

“The committee is big – some bring needs in written form and some verbally. When a problem comes to the WCF I convey it to the VDC. For example we had a problem with water supply and so I took it to the VDC and they have now helped us with water.”

(Coordinator of WCF and Citizens’ Awareness Centre. Four years in both, Ward 8, Ugathar Janagal VDC. Non-Dalit)

As described earlier, the Chair of the Shikapur DWG reported that she sat in the VDC office until they listened to her and agreed to contribute money for the Dalit community house.

Three of the WCF members raised the issue of the lack of water for Dalit households with their WCFs and as a result, having taps installed to share between households. Others highlighted different issues which they said the WCF had addressed:

“We successfully tackled the problem of kidney trafficking and the ringleaders were arrested. We also secured funds to improve the water supply in our Ward and started a CAC in a place with more marginalised people.”

(Member of WCF and Coordinator of CAC, both four years, Upper Ward 6, Hokse Municipality)
“Most people are engaged in agriculture but some people are capable of doing more. We provided training to the women (mixed caste) in sewing and knitting so they could become economically empowered.”
(Young woman member of WCF for one year, Ward 14, Panchkhal Municipality)

“In addition to getting the VDC to improve the water supply in our Ward we also got them to improve the roads. We also secured 1 Lakh (Nr 1,000,000) as a loan/credit for all the women in the Ward.”
(Mature woman, Ward 8. Coordinator of WCF and Citizens’ Awareness Centre (CAC). Four years in both; Ugathar Janagal VDC, Non-Dalit, together with a young woman from the same Ward, member of WCF for two years, member of CAC)

The Kalidevi DWG treasurer in Shikapur is a member of the WCF in her Ward (Ward 6 of Hokse Municipality), along with the Chair of the DWG and one other woman. Altogether there are six or seven Dalit women in the WCF in this Ward and two Dalit men. The women said that the WCF budget is usually directed to road construction but they have made sure a portion comes to Dalits. Through the WCF they have been provided with taps to share amongst households. However, they only access water for 30 minutes a day and only if there is electricity, so if there is load-shedding there is no water. The main reservoir therefore requires a generator in order to operate the machine which pumps the water from the ground reservoir to the water tanks. As a result of their demands, they received five lakhs from the VDC to buy a generator. In addition, the community contributed one lakh in total from each household (Dalit and non-Dalits), paying NRs. 1,500 from all 137 households. The project was targeting Dalits but benefits the whole community and the idea for the generator came from the water user group general assembly. The women explained that all 25 members of the WCF decide how to spend the money – through consensus.

The Chair of the DWG is the Coordinator of this WCF and she highlighted that they also accessed NRs. 30,000 for a pig rearing project for Dalit households. However, she explained that since the VDC was changed to a municipality in March 2015, it has become harder to influence decision makers and through this influence, to access resources. In Hokse, seven VDCs merged together to form the Municipality and Wards also combined, so her Ward combined with two others to become Ward 6. Now she is less clear about the structure for making decisions and thinks that maybe there haven’t been any meetings for Ward Coordinators since the earthquake in May.

**FUGs**

The production of forest products was an important activity highlighted by FUG members, especially given that 35% of the income from forest products is supposed to be allocated to marginalised groups:

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34. The term used for power cuts which are scheduled by the Government.
“In my community this 35% was used to contribute to a women’s community centre being built in the village. We also got NRs. 400,000 from the Federation of Forest users and added some forest income to pay for a water supply. This was important because until last July we had difficulty collecting water and had to travel a long way for water. We also had a case of untouchability when a Dalit went to the community tap near a Brahmin and Chetri community. Now each household has a private tap, however since the earthquake the water source has stopped.”
(Treasurer of FUG for almost five years, Ward 2, Tukucha VDC)

One woman was selected from her FUG to attend training on briquette making. They cut and burned dead trees and made 18-19 sacks of briquettes. Training participants were selected from all nine Wards in the VDC – 14 women and one man who is a forest warden. She had to come back and teach the technique to others in her users’ group. She was due to conduct the training but then the earthquake happened. The aim is to sell the briquettes to those in the users’ group at a subsidised cost and if any are left over, to sell these to others at commercial rates. She added that they learned that there are a number of uses for the briquettes, ‘they are useful for lactating mothers (for massage like hot stones) and also for rheumatism.’

In another community one of the women reported they are producing resin to make tyres and to use in thermometers. In the village of the District Board Secretary, who is also the Treasurer of the District Level federation of the FUG, they cultivated rhododendron flowers and had training on how to make juice and jam from the flowers to generate an income. They have also had training on types of trees and fruit to plant and they measure forest carbon levels.

It was explained that it is the responsibility of the Federation to monitor the groups but there are 412 user groups and only 18 members of the Federation committee so monitoring is challenging. Some FUGs have an advisory committee which have a role to ensure the money is spent according to the rules. The Federation treasurer highlighted that having inclusive committees helps to ensure the 35% is spent as it should be, for example, in her Ward there are nine Janajatis on the 18 member FUG committee.

**Political parties**

The women members of the parties saw their role to ensure that the money which comes to the Ward, VDC or municipality comes to Dalits, ‘Sometimes money comes to the Ward or the municipality and they say that it will be spent on a road and Dalits don’t know that they should access some of the budget.’ One woman highlighted that she is the only Dalit woman on the committee:
“It is not difficult when they ask for requests for the budget, they listen to me. I have been active in the community for a long time so they trust me and now the VDC Secretary even visits me and asks me to meet when I come to the VDC. We are now getting electricity and water. It is funded from the Government but the party is putting pressure on the Government at VDC level.”

(UML member District Level for one and a half years, VC in her FUG for nine years, Mahadevstan VD.)

The women felt that the parties should put more effort into securing rights for Dalits and that they should not just listen to issues of the Dalits but implement actions. One woman suggested that there should be a greater allocation to Dalits and that they should be more economically empowered and have more opportunities.

9.4) Personal changes for the women as a result of being part of the groups

Women members of both WCFs, FUGs and political parties talked about becoming more confident and empowered to speak in meetings and to fight for their rights. Some talked about becoming informed through exposure in the meetings:

“If we can conserve the forest, it is a big benefit. If I wasn’t in that group I would not get the kind of exposure like talking to you now. Also I have developed personally – I am able to speak up.”

(Member of FUG committee for seven years, Ward 8, Jangal VDC)

Some women said that now they are listened to in meetings:

“Some men say ‘it is not good when women crow like a cockerel.’ They say this about any women speaking, not only Dalit women. Men dominate the meeting, we have to struggle. Now it has changed a lot and now men listen a lot. Even if some make comments others say ‘we should listen to women.’ We have learned we have rights so we are more persistent.”

(Treasurer of DWG, member of WCF, Ward 6, Hokse Municipality)

She added that initially she didn’t know about the importance of being in committees but did some training on women’s rights and other topics as part of the FEDO World Bank project. In the first two to three meetings of the WCF she didn’t say anything and thought to herself afterwards that she should have spoken up as she had things she could say, but gradually she has raised her voice in the meetings and spoken up.

The Dalit men consulted in Shikapur saw women’s participation in these groups as important for the Dalit community:
“Being in committees gives prestige. Higher caste groups can’t look down on you. If Dalits are not represented, then Dalits’ voice is missing because no one else will raise our issues. Also if you are in a committee you get informed about what is happening e.g. if the FUG is distributing money etc.”
(Dalit man, Shikapur)

Some of the women talked about being more confident in their families as a result of their participation in different groups and one or two about becoming respected in the community:

“I used to be scared to speak in front of my family I can now speak up and find solutions to problems. My family are supportive – hence I am able to come here to this meeting.”
(Treasurer of FUG for almost five years, Ward 2, Tukucha VDC)

The women in political parties talked about having developed their capacity, noting they did not have confidence before, but now they can speak:

“Earlier we were ignorant of the rights of Dalits. We meet once a month and there are around 23 people and usually 17-18 come. One third of the members are women. The first four to five meetings I was not confident and others wouldn’t let you speak. We are behind in leadership because we are women plus Dalit and other members of the party say things and men still think women’s role is in the household but still we continued.”
(UML member for two-three years at VDC level and now in the Maoist Biplav party at municipal level; Ward 12 in Panchkhal)

“Gradually I became more confident. Earlier I was scared to speak but not now. Dalits are ahead in alcoholism but behind in access to knowledge and opportunities. Even if they know something they don’t know where to go and who to ask.”
(UML member at municipal level in Panauti, Secretary of the Party, also in a DWG for the past four years)

This young woman also noted she had become a role model in her community:

“Gradually I became an example as usually by 15-16 girls elope or are married off. People cited me as a role model in my community because I was focused on a mission. I earned respect from the community.”
(UML member at municipal level in Panauti, Secretary of the Party, also in a DWG for the past four years)
The Chair of the Parijat DWG in Dulalthok shared her experience of being a member of the United Maoists party which gave her confidence to unite Dalits for women’s rights:

“I was backward and never included in anything and had no knowledge. My husband was a UM member and he encouraged me saying we have to look for our rights and be part of a political party. Then I joined the United Maoists and faced many challenges. We didn’t know anything about the party, who the leaders were, where they were located, we were oblivious. The Government was looking for the Maoist cadres so the army would come and visit every household looking for Maoist supporters. I carried my baby and travelled a lot to unite people. The child was like a shield because people were less suspicious, so I would say I was going to visit relatives and I could enter communities. The Maoists were united at village and area level. I was really motivated after I carried my child around and was able to speak for women’s rights.”

(Chair of the Parijat DWG, Dulalthok)

One of the women consulted is employed by the municipality as a social mobiliser for the Panauti municipality and is supposed to be officially neutral, although she has been a member of the NC party in the Dalit wing for six years at District Level. She is also in a Dalit women’s pressure group at municipal level. She also works for the National Election Commission. As a social mobiliser she cannot ask for votes in her own Ward but can go to other Wards to do so. As a social mobiliser she visits the Ward and discusses people’s needs from the budget allocation. During election time they have to make voters ID cards and inform people about the elections. She has had opportunities to be part of training sessions – women’s empowerment training, ‘Through being in the party you get exposure so people know you so then you are invited to trainings elsewhere such as leadership.’ She also explained that she became respected by the VDC Secretary and can influence decisions, ‘Now the VDC Secretary waits for me to discuss things before distributing the budget.’

This woman also highlighted one of the problems other women spoke about, that once they became known for being active in a party, other parties try and lure them or threaten them, however she emphasised the importance of the party you are a member of providing you with protection, ‘Once you are established with one party, other parties try and lure you and offer you incentives, saying they will find you a job (they don’t get paid as party members). You also receive protection from your party. For example, I started a business in Kathmandu (an online sales company). My business was doing well and other similar businesses felt threatened and tried to stop my business, but once they got to know I was from the NC, the threatening calls stopped coming.’ This convinced her it is important to be involved in politics, ‘without political support we cannot do anything. People’s perception changes if they know you are supported by a party.’ Another woman added, ‘anywhere you go it helps to be affiliated to a party.’
One of the women leaders trained by FEDO highlighted how important the training on political participation was for her. She also found the training on how to speak and present issues very useful. She reported that this training has contributed to many women now running their own businesses and being self employed and taking up different positions in political committees at all levels, ‘FEDO has provided a platform for women to come together and also exposure visits to other countries to learn. This has helped women think about their role beyond the household.’ (UML Central Committee member). Another of the women leaders said that after the training she demanded more respect from the UML and now she is a member of the Youth wing, ‘There are different wings of the party but as a youth it is important to be in that wing. If you are not at District Level you can never be elected at central level.’

9.5) Challenges to join groups and those they face once they are in a group

Some women talked about their lack of confidence to join groups and their concerns about not being literate. For the women their lack of literacy was the most significant barrier they saw as holding them back from participation in decision-making spaces. The Vice-Chair of the Dulalthok DWG is a member of several groups and shared her experience:

“Even when these groups invite people they look for knowledgeable people so I tell them educated people already know but it’s more important for those of us who are not educated to be in those groups. We always say we want to be there but they say we have to be educated. We feel the biggest barrier is illiteracy (our husbands are more educated up to 4th or 5th grade).”
Others talked about challenges to influence the final decisions of the groups in which they participate:

“I am the only Dalit on the WCF and feel sometimes the others make decisions in their favour. I was there when the relief material came. If I had had a say, I would have suggested that the economically weakest Dalits should get support but they made the decision themselves so everyone just got one tent, 10kg of rice and NRs. 15,000 from the Government for everyone whose house was destroyed.”

(Member of WCF for one year, founder member of Parijat DWG, Ward 2, Panchkhal municipality, member of FEDO District Board)

She added that in relation to the money allocated to marginalised groups (15%), she said that the other members of the WCF agree to this because it is a directive from Central Government. However, the challenge is to influence people how to spend it. In the past, she said the WCF only gave a little bit of money towards marginalised groups but in the last two to three years it has been more systematic. Nevertheless she sometimes feels that her voice is not heard when it comes to the WCF making decisions.

Another woman felt that her WCF is not functioning very well and they need to get new members in. She reported that there is conflict between the members. One woman noted that there have been no achievements in her Ward and said this is partly because the Social Mobiliser is not active, ‘the WCF structure exists but it doesn’t meet and the VDC Secretary and social mobiliser are in conflict.’

There are also wider challenges in relation to the WCFs. Theoretically there should be nine WCFs for every VDC in the District, but currently only 42 out of the 78 VDCs in Kavre have active WCFs and the process to establish WCFs is on-going. The FEDO District Board Secretary explained that the Government social mobilisers play an important role and should be active but the majority of those in Kavre District for example, live in Kathmandu; they don’t visit the Wards and there have been cases of fake minutes of meetings. Sometimes they directly ask one or two members of the political parties to prepare proposals using Dalit names without the Dalits knowing, just to secure the funding, ‘this is also taking power away from the WCFs’. She added that the District Development Office is aware of this practice and they are trying to address it and monitor the Social Mobilisers. This is also why it is important that the VDC Secretary follows up with the WCF Coordinators and sometimes visits the WCFs.

What this often means is that marginalised groups are not aware of the budget allocations and provisions they are entitled to. There have been instances where Dalit women have raised issues such as the need for water provision in a community but nothing is done. This situation has started to improve since the 15% allocation for marginalised groups was introduced at VDC level and has become more systematic, but as noted before, ‘the problem is that the WCFs invite Dalit women who can’t even write their name and won’t raise their voice, just to meet the inclusion requirement.’
Some of the women had ideas about how to strengthen the WCFs. They felt it is important to have more educated Dalits and Janajatis represented. Others spoke about the importance of being determined and committed. One said, ‘all the members should be active and put pertinent issues on the table so it becomes easier to take issues forward.’ Another added that women should also be active and progressive, not just men, ‘If you’re a housewife you must wake up half an hour earlier and do the housework so you can participate in meetings! To get your rights is difficult but we manage. If there is a will there is a way. If you go to a meeting you give 100%, but if you send someone else they may only give 50%.’

**Members of the FUGs** talked about the difficulty of protecting forest resources and dealing with people who go in the forest to steal. One woman said that the committee members in her group are not very active and don’t care much. Hence there is a lot of smuggling of firewood and fodder for animals. She feels that if people on the committee were stronger there wouldn’t be any stealing, because they need all committee members to actively protect the forests. Another woman noted that there is another Dalit woman on the FUG committee with her who represents a more remote part of the VDC, but she doesn’t speak at all and is shy.

When asked if men are responsible members of the FUG committee one woman responded, ‘they hardly go to the forest so why would they feel responsible. They only talk in the meetings.’

**Most of the women members of political parties** experienced some problems when they joined the party in terms of community members not being supportive and making negative comments about their reputation. They also talked about the lack of belief in women taking leadership roles and the discrimination they face within the groups which ultimately means that others manipulate the decisions:

> “I faced a lot of challenges when I joined. There were no restrictions from my family but people would backbite. I didn’t care about such things. They said – ‘your daughter will be spoilt (means spoilt through getting involved with men)’. Members of other parties would say ‘your daughter is in the Maoists and she will carry a gun and go into battle.’ Also I am the first one from my village to join the party, so it was difficult. Now I have convinced 2-3 younger girls to join.”
> (UM member for two-three years at VDC level and now in the Maoist Biplav party at municipal level; Ward 12 in Panchkhal)

One NC member who began her involvement in politics at school, said she had gone with another Dalit women to the Education Department after completing school to ask about scholarships. First the officials were nice and then when the women said they were Dalits, the men started to touch them. This drove them to be more determined in politics, ‘we felt we have to be active in politics so men won’t look down on you and assault you.’

Another NC member explained, ‘As women we face lots of mental pressure. Everyone thinks men can be involved in politics but not women. Your families don’t tell you not to go but say you have to be a big shot to really succeed. There is gender discrimination and it was difficult to convince the community, only about 25 people understand the importance of being involved in politics.’
When the women were asked if it is challenging to spend time in all the activities, the same woman explained that it is more difficult for married women with children. Another added, ‘Even for students, parents ask – are they paying?’

One woman talked about the difficulty for Dalit women to assume leadership roles within the party structures:

“At national level we suffer because Dalit women are invited for representation but we are not included at leadership level. Men dominate in the party. We will agree on something in a meeting and in the end they manipulate and just want your signature. The kinds of decisions made relate to scholarships, livelihoods, income generation training etc. Some money is allocated to the parties and it goes to men first and finally to women.”

(UML member)

This woman is also feeling threatened because another political party tried to recruit her and its representatives went to see her mother and offered her support if her daughter joined it. She didn’t want to join their party as she never received support from them in the past when she needed it (when she was trying to access a scholarship). She is now worried about her safety on her journey home – the earliest she reaches home is 7.30pm and she has to walk a long way and is worried about being attacked.

This issue was also reflected in the discussions with the Dalit women leaders trained by FEDO as part of the FLOW project. One woman who is a senior representative of the UML on its Central Committee and member of the women’s wing shared, ‘it is very difficult for Dalit women to do politics. Dalit women hardly participate as they have not been trained enough by political parties to understand the parties. Therefore they have a lack of political awareness. Parties don’t accept our leadership. They don’t want Dalits to be ahead of them (them is the leaders – non-Dalit men and women). She added that even if Dalit women are given tickets by political parties to stand for election for the party, they don’t have the resources to run an election campaign at national level and that even if given tickets, it does not mean other party members will support you. She also talked about women feeling discouraged because they think they are wasting their time as they have no income from being in the party. She said it is important to be committed but it takes time so women are not enthused as they want to earn money.

Another shared her experience:

“We are prepared as women leaders but get threats because the community doesn’t accept it. My father was in politics and then me and the community didn’t accept this and people from other political parties came to attack me in my home. We don’t have protection and are weak economically.”

(Young woman member of the UML, in Grade 11 and treasurer of the Lalitpur District Board of FEDO)
10) Barriers and enablers of change

The women clearly perceived a number of benefits of participating in the various groups and changes which they were able to influence which impacted on Dalit households. It is important to reflect on the wider context affecting these findings and consider the enabling factors and barriers.

10.1) What enables Dalit women’s participation and ability to influence decision-making

There are a number of factors which enable the women to come together, learn, build confidence and participate in decision-making processes and take actions to influence decision-making bodies.

**Shared identity and experiences of discrimination, seeing other caste groups progress and wanting to come together to move forward,** this is highly significant, it is the fabric which binds the women together in their groups, the personal experiences which are shared by others are a driving force for change. Through seeing women come together through FEDO at all levels and that change is possible, women at the local level are inspired to participate in the movement.
Knowledge and learning about Dalit rights and entitlements, who makes the decisions and how to influence these bodies are important for giving women the confidence and agency to engage in different spaces and processes. Some of the women in different groups were clear that the more they learned about Dalit rights and entitlements, the more emboldened they felt to participate in different arenas and raise their voices. Armed with knowledge they become more powerful as they can share this knowledge with others in their groups, thereby empowering other women.

Learning from other women, sharing their experiences, issues and ideas together builds rapport between the women and strengthens the understanding of women. This is particularly important in the case of FEDO as their way of working brings women in different groups into contact with FEDO District Board members and members of FEDO central level. Support from FEDO at District and Central level ensures women are equipped with knowledge and understanding of how to raise issues, what their legal rights are and access opportunities for greater exposure and learning about how to be effective leaders.

Being part of the savings and credit group helps women address their poverty, pay for school materials, exam fees and medical needs. This is crucial for Dalit families, many of the women emphasising the need to belong to several savings groups in order for their families to survive.

Self-help, Dalit women and men contribute communal labour to initiatives and work together to resolve problems, demonstrated in communities where they had built temporary shelters following the earthquake and recognising that they cannot rely on the Government for support. Running the savings and credit groups gives the women skills and confidence to be able to implement other schemes like animal rearing and encourages them to join other savings groups and cooperatives.

Support from Dalit men and wider family members; this has increased over time as they see the benefits of women’s participation. Without the support of their husbands and family members, women would not be able to participate in group meetings and other activities and enjoy the solidarity and benefits of participating in the DWGs or in other decision-making spaces. For some women it was a case of asking for permission and working within the tight control which men have on their time but for others, often the younger women, it was about informing the men that they are participating in a meeting or event.

Gaining confidence to speak out in different arenas (both the DWGs and other spaces with both men and women) and being listened to and respected by others in their community, increases their confidence further and can lead to them participating in more groups. Women spoke of being inspired by being able to affect change and this serving to increase their determination and commitment to being active. The men in the two communities interviewed saw women’s participation in different decision-making spaces as important for both Dalit men and women, highlighting that women can represent the needs of Dalit households in these groups.
Dalit representation being required in different Government structures means that some women access opportunities and once there gain confidence and raise their voice to influence decisions. Whilst it was acknowledged that sometimes this means Dalit women are nominated to positions in groups and they are not confident to participate, it also allows for active women to nominate themselves or be nominated/invited by others. For those women in decision-making committees, initially they found it hard to raise their voices but they said that with time they became confident and assured in expressing themselves.

Dalit communities are close knit so representatives on different committees share information and learning with others and are able to understand needs and take issues raised by community members into different spaces. This is important as those women on committees felt that they are seen as representing Dalit households and this carries some weight even if they are a lone voice on the committee itself. Some women talked about a lack of harmony in communities where not all Dalits come together and where some do not want to be active and move forward, however for many of the women, being part of the DWGs is a way of bringing together women from all the Dalit households in a community.

Accessing some resources for Dalit households for water projects, livelihood training, etc. brings tangible benefits to the community; this in turn creates respect for those women participating in groups and encourages others to be active. Once a budget has been secured for one year, it is easier to go back to the VDC or WCF the next year and continue the dialogue on the budget allocation.
10.2) Barriers to Dalit women’s participation in different spaces

As noted above, in spite of laws against caste-discrimination, this still continues in many forms and contributes to women’s low self-esteem and lack of self-belief and confidence to speak out. Women also talked about facing opposition from their husbands and family members but that this was usually something they were able to overcome.

Low literacy level and access to livelihood opportunities is a significant barrier for Dalit women. Some women felt their husbands tend to have had more education than they have, so they see themselves as more backward than Dalit men. For some women, their lack of education was what was holding them back from participating in decision-making spaces, for others it was preventing them take on leadership roles in the groups in which they participate. The women in Dulalthok were particularly concerned by their lack of livelihood options and this was a major priority for them as they are totally reliant on their husbands, whereas the women in Shikapur had more financial independence through selling vegetables; some were able to pay back the loans themselves and others asked for contributions from their husbands if they needed their help.

Patriarchy and gender inequality is so much part of the lives of Dalit women that many do not necessarily see lack of equality as a problem. Even though Dalit women are supported by their husbands to participate in the DWG and other groups, their mobility is still considerably restricted and they shoulder a huge burden of household work and agricultural chores. They have to give advance notice and report back following the meetings they go to, they face back-biting and gossip in the community from other men if they are active. When they speak up in meetings men say they are ‘crowing like a cockerel’ etc.

Violence against women and girls in its many forms affects Dalit women. This is a big concern for Dalit women in the FLOW project areas where project activities involve resolving different cases of violence which include domestic violence, polygamy, trafficking, rape and inter-caste marriage. Women in the DWGs consulted in the research referred to domestic violence and knowing where to seek support but this was not discussed in detail aside from men’s problems with alcohol which they felt had decreased. FEDO District Board members talked about working to prevent gender based violence and being involved in broadcasting radio programmes on what to do if a Dalit women faces gender based violence or untouchability through their access to justice programme. Some Board members spoke of receiving calls from women victims of violence and advising them on where to seek support. FEDO central staff raised the issue of Dalit women being so used to living with violence that they are not always aware that it is something that should be challenged but is accepted as part of life. It is widely documented that women who experience violence are less likely to have confidence to participate in wider public spaces and suffer from low self-esteem. Dalit women victims of violence are less likely to be allowed out of the house.
Early marriage is common even though women say that the age of marriage is increasing and that women have more choice over who they marry nowadays. Most of the married women consulted had been married as teenagers, however the younger women students were clear that they would not marry so young. Nevertheless, daughters are still considered the property of their families and once they marry go to live with their in-laws where they have low status in the household, although young women who had some level of education said that being educated makes a difference and that they are able to challenge the views of family members and some of these women had convinced their in-laws to let them participate in different groups, while their family members look after their young children. Raising a family and having time to be an activist is difficult as members of the FEDO Kavre District Board noted. Those who the researchers met who were most active in political parties and other groups were predominantly young unmarried women or older married women who no longer have young children.

Lack of elected Local Government. This impacts on all levels of decision-making – District, village and Ward level. It means that the VDCs are run by civil servants and their effectiveness depends on the capacity and commitment of the VDC Secretary and the resources s/he commands. As the WCFs are not elected bodies, there is less transparency and accountability their membership than if members were elected. Generally there is a lack of transparency and clarity about the different structures, who gets to serve on the committees and how membership is determined. In some areas the groups may not meet or not be functioning, so there is little opportunity to influence planning or decision-making.
Lack of accountability mechanisms. Whilst the role of the Government social mobilisers is intended to ensure a level of accountability to marginalised groups at VDC level, there was a lack of clarity and consensus about how this works in practice. Women talked about raising issues at WCF meetings but then receiving less money than expected for the Ward or for different initiatives and it was not clear if there is some way of raising complaints and getting concerns looked into. Some of the women in Shikapur talked about relief packages for victims of the earthquake being diverted by non-Dalit community members away from the Dalit households. These women were unsure how to raise their concerns about the lack of support they had received following the earthquake, especially with the changes in governance structures where their VDC had merged with others to become a municipality so their links with decision makers at VDC level were no longer useful to them. Women in the groups consulted were not aware of budget amounts which are available in the District, VDC or at Ward level, they only knew that marginalised groups should receive a certain percentage.

Dalit women participating in decision-making structures are often side-lined by the more powerful non-Dalit majority. Women gave many examples of how their demands are side-lined by non-Dalit members of committees and also how they alone in the various groups they belong to, are pushing for the entitlements that are allocated for Dalits. FEDO staff also talked about how challenging it is to ensure non-Dalits understand and are concerned about issues which affect Dalits. The fact that the decision-making spaces are structured to include one or two Dalit members to represent Dalits maintains this segregation, as other members do not see Dalit issues as their responsibility. Hence although Dalit representation is assured, Dalits are still a minority in committees where the majority members are non-Dalits and higher caste groups. This also has implications for how Dalit women see themselves in these spaces. First and foremost they said they see themselves as representing Dalits because there is usually a non-Dalit woman to represent women. This is a challenge for FEDO because Dalit women of course share many of the women’s rights concerns which affect all women, but in these groups the Dalit women are not necessarily joining forces with other women to raise the concerns of women in their communities more broadly. Whilst a strength of FEDO is all the work it does linking with different organisations, this is not without its challenges. For example, at central level FEDO collaborates with other women’s right organisations to raise issues nationally but at this level they also suffer from being marginalised and have fewer channels of influence and contacts with powerful decision makers than higher caste women within the women’s movement.
11) Reflections arising from the women’s feedback

The women only spaces are critical. For some of the Dalit women consulted, being part of a Dalit women’s group is their first experience in participating in an organised group with other Dalit women or their first experience of participating in any kind of organised group. Their mobility beyond the household has been severely constrained so they see being part of the group as an opportunity for exposure, for independence and becoming more informed, as well as providing a route to savings and accessing loans. As a women’s only group this represents a safe space where women can share with others and find solidarity and support from women who have faced the same barriers and hardships. For others, who have already been a member of a mothers’ group or a school management committee, or for those who are active in political parties or Local Government structures, they nevertheless value the Dalit women’s group both for the savings element but also because it is only in this group where they come together with other Dalit women and can learn about rights and feel united. Here they are able to share the experiences and challenges they face in other mixed groups. When women take action together such as going to meetings or travelling to events, this is more likely to be accepted by male relatives than if they are moving around alone, so being part of a women’s group provides some legitimacy for the women.
Many of the women consulted had personal experiences of discrimination from an early age and this is a driving factor for their activism. Both older and younger women shared examples of discrimination they had experienced. Younger women said they found it hard to understand why they were treated differently to others by their teachers or not allowed into friends’ houses as school children and that people could not explain why this still occurs. The older women felt that discrimination has become more subtle since they were young, but is still widespread. This very personal experience and sense of injustice shared by the women motivates many of them to overcome their fear and lack of confidence and find ways to be active. As seen above, some of the women are active in a number of groups. One or two of those consulted said it was difficult to be in so many groups but most merely said the meetings are on different days and that they are very motivated to participate in all of these. A comment from one of the founder members of the Parijat DWG and member of FEDO’s Kavre District Board sums up what some of the women felt, ‘I have suffered lots of discrimination so I make a point of being in many committees to wipe it out.’

Women have become more confident in their households as a result of participation in the DWGs and other groups. Being in groups gets women out of the house and contributes to building their confidence and independence and enables them to take on a wider role in the community. Becoming more active and independent increases their status in the household as well as their control over financial resources. However, some women said at first it was hard to convince their families to let them join the DWGs or political party groups and some shared examples of disparaging comments made by other men in the community to their families about their participation in different groups. Nevertheless, once they have joined the DWGs and political parties, they said their families are supportive and they feel more self-assured and able to voice their views. Some women said they were now able to look their husbands in the eye as a result of being in the DWG. Some of the women who want to take a more activist role go on to participate in pressure groups which again are women only groups and women find strength through raising their voices together.

The savings and credit element of the Dalit women’s groups is a key factor in sustaining the groups and bringing the women’s husbands and wider families on board. Not only does this provide women with some financial security, it also provides them with justification to meet together which is approved of by their husbands and families. Women are motivated to continue meeting so that they can maintain their savings and access loans when needed. Women have used the loans to help the household with family businesses, school fees, medical costs etc. and this is appreciated by other members of their households. The women’s husbands are involved in paying back the loans and were clear about the value of the groups.

Being part of a wider social movement is of fundamental importance for Dalit women. For the women who already participate in others spaces both informal and formal, the DWG is unique because the women are linked by their very identity, ‘they share the same pain,’ as some of the women said. Women from community level, leadership level, at District and the central level of FEDO, talked about women being united through their Dalit identity and how this enables Dalit women to have some power and to speak with one voice.
Even though some women talked about discord amongst Dalits in communities and even sometimes within the DWGs, the links in FEDO from central level to District to community level are valued by members of the DWGs, as the members come into contact with Dalit women from different backgrounds, active at local, District and national levels, many of whom have become leaders in different arenas and who act as a source of advice and inspiration. The Kavre District Board explained that they motivate the women and tell them about their rights and discrimination and untouchability. They emphasise that to address these issues it is important to develop a feeling of helping each other and understanding each other. This informal process of encouraging unity, information sharing and exposure for women contributes to their empowerment and agency. Being organised and working together is an essential element of the successes of the FEDO movement, otherwise Dalit women will not be able to influence decision makers. This is illustrated by the experience of the FEDO Kavre District Board Treasurer who explained that in her village they had heard about the 15% allocation for marginalised groups through the news, but because the Dalits were not active politically, nothing was done to access it even though they faced daily discrimination and did not have roads or taps for drinking water.

**FEDO’s emphasis on linking Dalit women to Government and NGO structures at all levels and its creation of networks aimed at bringing Dalit women together with non-Dalit women serves to bring Dalit women’s issues into every possible discussion and decision-making space.** FEDO’s approach is all about ensuring that the different levels of the movement support each other and that at each level there is stakeholder engagement, endeavouring to overcome the challenge of non-Dalits not taking ownership of Dalit rights. FEDO creates networks and alliances such as the Intra-Party Dalit Women’s Alliance to bring Dalit women together into different arenas and to join with non-Dalit women to lobby for women’s rights. It also builds links with Government agencies and NGOs. For example at FEDO Board level in Kavre, the Board has formed links to the Ministries of Agriculture and Animal Science and have informed them about the issues of Dalit women and this has enabled them at times to get seeds and pesticides at a good rate or for free; their links with different VDCs and groups such as the Forest Users’ Federation have helped increased opportunities for Dalit women to enter different institutions. FEDO’s building of relationships and lobbying has benefited Dalit men as well as women. For example, by lobbying the Chief District Officer in Kavre and sensitising him on Dalit women’s issues it is now possible for Dalits to register for citizenship using their non-Dalit names.

**Exposure to training and opportunities through FEDO equips some women to participate in more spaces and become more active.** Some of the women who have had the opportunity to participate in donor funded FEDO projects fed back that the training on women’s leadership and political participation had been helpful for them and wider group members said they benefited from women feeding back to them following their training. Not only have they acquired information about specific issues such as women’s rights issues but their understanding of different decision-making bodies has increased and their awareness of the rights of Dalits to participate in these groups. Those who have had more training and exposure were more likely to become invited or taken an interest in participating in different decision-making spaces. The women who were very active had clearly benefited from different types of exposure but this alone is not enough, these women have huge passion and commitment to bring about changes for Dalits, hence they participate in as many groups as they can and go out to motivate others in their communities.
The Dalit women’s groups are active and continue for years without being part of a project intervention. Whilst the savings and loans element of the groups plays a part in sustaining the groups, some women see the DWG as a learning ground and a stepping stone to being involved in decision-making spaces. The groups consulted in the research were not established through a project intervention but had been formed through the work of the Kavre District Board, which aims to cover more areas of the District and form more groups, whilst continuing to support the existing groups. The women members are committed to the groups, valuing both the savings and loans element and the solidarity and information sharing aspects. Even after the earthquake, the Kalidevi group met the following month to continue saving. The groups are the spaces where Dalit women from all Dalit households in the community come together and over time, older women bring in younger women from their households so more than one generation of women in a household may be present in the DWG and the DWG is sustained through new active members coming in. This is a fora to raise their concerns and for those women who do participate in WCFs, FUGs and other decision-making spaces, to hear these concerns and take them to these different bodies.

The Government allocation of local budgets to marginalised groups provides a platform for Dalit women’s engagement in different Local Government structures such as the WCFs, FUGs, VDCs etc. This is also important for those women who are participating in political parties as they know that these parties have a role to ensure that policies are followed and they can influence decision-making structures at Ward, VDC, municipal and District Levels.
The women consulted in WCFs and FUGs mobilised around this issue and had some leverage in influencing decisions around budget allocations.

**The Government commitment to Dalit representation and women’s representation is significant, however holding Government to account remains a challenge.** Directives exist from Central Government for inclusion of marginalised groups on decision-making bodies as well as for budget allocation to marginalised groups. Whilst Dalit representation is a long way below the proportion that FEDO are calling for through their advocacy and campaigning work, the existence of these provisions means that there are some efforts to invite Dalit representatives onto different structures, although there are certainly instances of Dalit women being nominated without knowing much about the role or having their voice heard. Even for those women who are literate and more confident and clear about their role and who are able to speak up and make demands, when it comes to final decisions and budgets being disbursed their demands may be bypassed and there are no clear channels for holding the Government to account to its promises. The Government has tried to set up some level of accountability through the role of its Social Mobilisers working closely with the Wards and Citizen’s Awareness Centres to ensure that the concerns of marginalised community members are heard and brought to the ears of the VDC Secretary in parallel to the WCF meetings and submission of proposals to the VDC. Whilst there were a number of concerns from some about this system and it is clearly open to corruption, it signifies an attempt by Government to take the issues of marginalised groups more seriously. The challenges remains that once the funds are disbursed, there is no form of redress. Nevertheless, the opportunity for Dalit women to participate and claim entitlements for Dalits exists, and as the younger generation of Dalit women emerges which is literate and better educated than the previous generation and are united by their passion to achieve equality, Dalit women are becoming a stronger force to be reckoned with.
## Annex 1: Research timeline

### Day 1: Friday, 4th September, 2015, Meeting at FEDO Centre/Kathmandu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:00-11:10</td>
<td>Meeting at FEDO Centre/Kathmandu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00-9:10</td>
<td>Welcome remarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:10-9:35</td>
<td>Presentation about FEDO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:35-10:00</td>
<td>Presentation on progress and achievement of the project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-1:00</td>
<td>Discussion (roundtable with discussion of the achievements, challenges and learning from the project)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00-2:00</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00-4:30</td>
<td>Mapping of stakeholders involved in the FLOW project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Mapping of different decision-making spaces accessed by DW in communities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.30-5:30</td>
<td>Discussion of research itinerary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wrap up of the day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Day 2: Saturday, 5th September, 2015, FEDO Center, Kathmandu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10:00–1:00</td>
<td>Review of research methodology – discussion of research questions, areas of interest to FEDO, gaps etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00-2:00</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.00-3.15</td>
<td>Continue discussion of research and review of itinerary – background on the two research areas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Day 3: Sunday 6th September, 2015, Rest Day
Day 4: Monday 7th September, 2015, Travel to Kavre – by hired vehicle

7:30-8:30 Breakfast in hotel
8:30-9:30 Heading towards FEDO office Kavre
9:30-11:30 Meeting with FEDO District Board -Kavre
11:30-12:30 Lunch
12:30-1:30 Travel to visit Dalit women’s group (Kalidevi Dalit Woman Group), Hokse, Kavre
1:30-4:30 Meeting with 10 DWG Group members
4:30-5:30 Interview with Chairperson of Dalit Woman Group
5:30-7:00 Returned Back to Kathmandu
Wrap up of the day

Day 5: Tuesday 8th September, 2015, Travel to Kavre

7:00-8:00 Breakfast at hotel
8:00-10:00 Travel to visit Kavre for conducting meeting with VDC secretary
11:00-12:00 Meeting with VDC secretary
12:00-1:00 Lunch
1:00-3:30 Group work with male family members of Dalit Woman Group
3:30-5:00 Individual interview with DWG’s members identified previous day
4:30-7:00 Return to Kathmandu

Day 6: Wednesday 9th September, 2015, Travel to visit WCF in Kavre

7:30-8:00 Breakfast in hotel
8:00-10:00 Travel to conduct meeting with WCF
10:00-1:00 Meeting with Members of WCF
1:00-2:00 Lunch
2:00-4:30 Meeting with Members of FUG
4:30-6:30 Return to Kathmandu
Day 7: Thursday 10th September, 2015: Meeting with DWG in Panchkhal

7:00-8:00  Breakfast in hotel
8:00-10:00  Travel to visit Dalit Women’s Group (Parijat Dalit Woman Group),
10:00-1:00  Meeting with group of 10 DWG members
1.00-2.00  Lunch
2.00-3:30  Individual interview with DWG members and individual interview with Chair of DWG
3:30-5:30  Group work with male family members of DWG

Day 8: Friday 11th September, 2015: Meeting with WCF and CFUG in Panchkhal

7:00-8:00  Breakfast in hotel
8:00-10:00  Travel to conduct meeting with WCF
10:00-1:00  Meeting with members of WCF
1:00-2:00  Lunch
2:00-5:00  Meeting with members of CFUG
5:00-7:00  Return to Kathmandu
Wrap up of the day

Day 9: Saturday 12th September (Holiday/rest day)

Day 10: Sunday 13th September, 2015, Panchkhal, Kavre

8:00-10:00  Travel to conduct meeting with community leaders of the political parties in Kavre
10:00-12:00  Interview with political leaders of the community (round table and individual interview)
12:00-1:00  Lunch
1:00-3:00  Returned to Kathmandu
3:00-5:30  Meeting with selected 10 Dalit woman leaders
Day 11: Monday 14th September, Debriefing meeting at FEDO

2:00-5:00  Debriefing with FEDO
- Sharing findings
- Recommendations
- Challenges
- Learning and way forward
- Closing of the Meeting
Annex 2: Case studies

Chanmati – one of the founder members of Parijat DWG

I was born in a different Ward in Kavre District. I have two older brothers, two younger brothers, one older sister and one younger sister. My parents are farmers. The boys and my youngest sister went to school. My sister completed Grade 5. I was busy looking after my siblings and helping my parents on the farm which was why I didn’t go to school. When I was 16 I attended some adult literacy classes in my village and can do some simple reading and writing. The school teacher who taught in the afternoon sessions in the school organised the classes in the mornings for 22 women who included mothers and aunties. I did this for six months. Before I didn’t know anything, now I can sign my name and when my children were small I would guide them in writing their letters.

I was 17 when I got married. It was arranged; at that time you couldn’t decide who to marry on your own. It was almost forced. If your parents like the boy you have to agree. He was from this village. He used to work in a shop selling vehicle parts.

We have had our own shop for the last year. I borrowed money from the DWG and my husband borrowed money from other groups and we were able to start the shop. The business was going well but after the earthquake it is not doing so well. It is in the District capital of Banepa. My son who is 19 also helps his father, whereas I grow food on our land. My son completed Grade 12 and my daughter who is 15 is in Grade 10. Before the quake, my husband and son stayed in Banepa but now they are here. My daughter helps in the house.

FEDO formed a pressure group on the other side of the village and two women from this side were part of it so I got to know about it. I heard about a three day training course from the Kavre District Board Secretary on leadership (part of the Word Bank funded project in 2012). The Board Secretary asked one of the women from the Pressure Group in this village to bring someone so I was one of three women from here (including who went for the training). I also participated in FEDO’s national conference where they talked about inter-caste marriage, discrimination and untouchability. We understood why we are behind and learned of the budget allocation from the municipality. After this, I was inspired to form the group and the District Board Secretary suggested I do this together with another woman from the community.

So we started the group and the District Board Secretary accompanied us for around six-seven months for every monthly meeting. She now comes every two-three months. I don’t know how much money we have built up. Initially I took a loan of NRs. 50,000 for the shop and paid this back in instalments. Recently I took another loan. An individual is only allowed to take a maximum of NRs. 50,000 from the group but I needed double this amount so I joined with another woman from the DWG to take this amount but I pay all the interest. My husband is the one who pays back the loan money, as I have no money. He gives me money for school fees. I manage all the expenses at home but he gives me the money.
I joined the WCF just over a year ago. A lady told me they needed Dalit representation in the WCF. They took my phone number and called me on the day of the meeting and I attended. In the meeting, I came to know about the budget allocated to marginalised groups and I was encouraged to mention issues so I raised the issue about the water supply as we had to walk a long distance to bring water, so that was how we got the community tap for drinking water. In our houses some also have boreholes. I am the only Dalit on the WCF and I feel sometimes that the others make decisions in their favour. I was there when the relief material came. If I had had a say I would have suggested that the economically weakest Dalits should get support but they made the decision themselves so everyone just got one tent, 10kg of rice and NRs. 15,000 from the Government for everyone whose house was destroyed. Some houses even if they look fine on the outside are damaged on the inside. Almost everyone is staying in a temporary shed like this – we still feel unsafe in those houses.

In relation to the money allocated to marginalised groups (15%), the other members agree to this because it is a directive from Central Government. However, the challenge is to influence people how to spend it. Before they only gave a little bit of money but in the last two-three years it has been more systematic.

There is a water users group and I am also in that but not on the committee. I am happy with the Water Users Committee. There is one Dalit woman on the committee and no Dalit men. The bore water is for 150 households so it includes non-Dalit households. I think it would be good if there was a Dalit man on the committee.

I am also in another cooperative which has been running for 17 years and is run by women. I have been saving there for eight years.

In other groups I am a member but in the DWG we are together for a cause – caste-discrimination. Here we have the same voice, in other groups it is just savings.

Our one concern is that many problems can be overcome if we could be involved in some kind of income generating activity where women can work at home. We have small landholdings and usually we work as labourers elsewhere so it would be better to have our own businesses (the goat rearing mentioned earlier is too small an enterprise). Different trainings are offered e.g. embroidery and weaving but the training is not enough as we can’t buy the materials ourselves or the weaving machines. If we had some kind of income generating activity, we could supplement our families with income.
Maiya – Secretary of FEDO Kavre District Board

I am the eldest daughter and my father left us when I was four and went to the west of Nepal to live with another woman. When my father left we didn’t know where he was until after a long time and he didn’t support us. I have three younger brothers and two are close in age so I took them to school so my mother was pleased. I had a lot of responsibilities and wherever I would go I would witness a lot of discrimination so I had to struggle ever since I was young. We all had to work even when we were studying.

We didn’t have land, we lived in a slum. This was a Newar community and they had big feasts there for which they use disposable plates made from teak leaves. My mother was very good at making these plates and earned an income from this. When I was in Grade 1, I came second in the class and after that I always came first and received an award that was enough to pay for my brothers’ school fees. In Grade 5, I was first out of 40 schools and received a lot of stationery materials. At Grade 5 and Grade 8 you have to take District Level exams and that is when I got the awards. I was into all the extra curricular activities like quiz, volley ball and mainly came first so I got lots of awards. When I was in Grade 1, there were 10-12 dalits, by the time I was in Grade 5 there were only a few and after that I was the only one. My friends didn’t want to study and would play. I would study all night and in the day help my mother. Most Dalit families are into alcohol (both men and women), however this has declined since my childhood. This affected the younger generation, as non-Dalit friends wouldn’t come to Dalit houses as they think we are dirty and alcoholics so younger dalits have convinced their parents not to drink.

From a young age I saw disparities in education for Dalits. I also witnessed violence - my father left my mother. My mother was very beautiful and she was kidnapped by my father when she was young but he left her after a few years. I thought that if my mother was educated she could have been in a better situation. She gave me lots of encouragement with my education.

The quality of education was good in my school as lots of children tried to join the school. Every year they gave certificates and awards and invited teachers from nearby schools A principal from a private school came to these events and kept seeing me winning awards, so he asked the school if he could take me to his school but the teachers didn’t want to lose me. He then went to visit me and my mother at home and I chose to go to that school. I didn’t tell my teachers as I knew they would try and stop me so I attended the private school for Grade 9 and 10.

We faced discrimination as Dalits. I started to question why are we different? Even though I was a bright student coming top of my class, still I was treated differently. When we played together with other non-Dalit children, their parents would tell them not to eat with us. I would face abuse and discrimination during daytime and then in the evening listen to the radio and that is where I learned about FEDO. I wanted to find out more. In my community there were few Dalits but when I joined college and after hearing about FEDO I brought together other Dalit students from different communities and we started discussing the issues of Dalit women, discrimination and untouchability. I visited Ms. Durga Sob at the FEDO national office and Ms. Sob advised me to collect 5-6 people and then FEDO came to Kavre and helped us establish the Board in 2008. Durga inaugurated and encouraged us even though we were still very young. From this time we created a nine member board.
All my family is illiterate, I am the first to pass the school leaving certificate in my family. It took a lot of time to get to where I am now because we were told as girls we should not go out of the house or talk and we have roles imposed on us. My grandfather was very strict and would scold me and get angry but I would calmly explain. He thought if Dalit girls get educated they would become bad. It was big news when I passed the school leaving certificate, everyone started congratulating my grandfather. Afterwards he said he won’t stop me but wouldn’t give me money and said I have to manage on my own.

Our economic condition was very weak. I worked doing agricultural labour to pay for school fees. When I was 15, I volunteered in a DANIDA education project. Then when I was 17, I applied for a job with the Nepali Youth Foundation to work on their school scholarships programme. Even though I was 17 and hadn’t yet completed Grade 12, a human rights activist friend (man) persuaded them to consider my application and to let me do the exam and interview for experience. I was then offered the job but when I was called to the office to collect the appointment letter the other unsuccessful candidates were there protesting that they should not have given the job to such a young girl and they locked the gates of the Foundation and I had to wait for ten days to receive the letter. I worked there for five years.

Now I am waiting for my graduate level results (bachelors, doing a double degree – one is on accountancy under management and another on sociology). I want to do a masters in management but am not sure where. I am also working managing a shelter for children displaced during the earthquake.

Now my family is convinced I am doing good work and they don’t stop me. I am a pioneer. I took legal training through FEDO and I was able to resolve cases. I encouraged the Dalit girls at my school and more than 20 girls passed 12th grade. Our VDC has become a model VDC according to the District Development Office because it has helped different groups – women, children, youth. We have built a community centre and terraced our road with budget from the VDC. The VDC contributed 20% budget and we contributed 80% labour. The labour contribution is usually only 35% from communities so this was impressive that the community was able to contribute so much labour.

Through being involved in FEDO I have had the opportunity to work with women like myself. They supported me to form all those groups and to be in the Board. I have seen many women who must have suffered as I have. The Board still has work to do – We haven’t covered the whole District yet, we need to introduce FEDO to the whole District. We also want to introduce Kavre to other Districts.

I am also the Treasurer on the Forest Users Group (FUG) at District Level. I am the only Dalit woman and represent women at this level. At first it was difficult as a Dalit woman. I faced particular discrimination for example, the Dalits were asked to pay entry fees to the forest but not the non-Dalits. When I became a leader I challenged this in the group and now all members have to pay.
Freedom to Walk Together With Others

This country report from Nepal is part of a larger research programme undertaken by Womankind Worldwide funded by the FLOW (Funding Leadership Opportunities for Women) programme, funded by the Dutch Government. The research aims to try and understand better the kinds of spaces created for women in different contexts to promote their participation and to learn what enables women - especially those with limited exposure or experience in decision-making and public life - to build their confidence, find their voice and engage in political activity at the local level. It aims to address the question: how do these spaces work and what are the barriers and enablers for change? There is a dearth of information exploring what enables women to change and grow and how they fare in complex and difficult decision-making arenas and this research aims to address this gap by focusing on the experiences of women.