

# Women farmers in Nepal: a new outlook catalysed by Covid?



**Jane Carter** was Director, Programme Development for the Helvetas Nepal country programme May 2017 – September 2020 and is now Senior Adviser, Natural Resource Governance, Helvetas Switzerland. She is now Senior Adviser, Natural Resource Governance, Helvetas Switzerland.



**Sudha Khadka** is National Manager, Nutrition in Mountain Agro-ecosystems, Helvetas Nepal and former Team Leader, Nepal Agricultural Services Development Programme.

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Nepal has been in the news of late for one reason: the terrible toll that the second wave of Covid-19 is having on the lives of its people. The highly contagious Indian and UK variants of the virus are now widespread - straining health services to breaking point. In this short article we examine the impact on agriculture in the hills of Nepal, and particularly on women farmers. In doing so, we draw particularly on the experiences of two SDC projects: the Nepal Agricultural Services Development Programme ([NASDP](#)), a bilateral project of the governments of Switzerland and Nepal to which Helvetas provided technical assistance, and the Nutrition in Mountain Agro-ecosystems ([NMA](#)) project implemented through a consortium of IFOAM, Helvetas and FiBL.

## Migrant labour to India

Nepal's economy is heavily dependent on migrant labour; the usually quoted figure is that every second household has at least one member sending remittances from abroad. Much of this is from migrants working in Gulf countries and Malaysia, although wealthier families can afford to send their members elsewhere. Meanwhile, the very poorest try their chances in India. Already in the first wave of Covid in spring 2020, many of these migrant labourers were forced to return home at the onset of the Indian lockdown. Some were infected by Covid, but deaths were relatively few. Having experienced a tight lockdown in Nepal for four months during which work as manual labour was almost non-existent, such labourers had little alternative but to return to their former work-places when the Indian and Nepali lockdowns eased. Now again they are back in Nepal, again often bringing Covid – but this time in more deadly form. Country-wide, there is much alarm and renewed movement restrictions.

## The Role of Municipalities in Supporting Agricultural Interventions

Municipalities are new political and administrative structures under federalised Nepal; they only became operational in 2017, following local elections. Amongst other functions, they have exclusive responsibility for the promotion of agriculture within their territory. The NASDP worked closely with 60 municipalities, supporting them in developing this aspect of their work.

During the first wave of Covid, many municipalities (not just those supported by NASDP) recognised the need to help farmers get their produce to market; they duly organised “agricultural ambulances” to this effect. As illustrated by the case of Parbakata KC, returnee migrants and women were targeted for subsidies and technical assistance as well as support in taking out agricultural insurance. In addition, many municipalities organised phone-in lines for agricultural advice and/or played jingles or longer programmes on local FM radio stations. All these interventions have served to reinforce the message that farming is a positive means of livelihood, and a promising alternative to migration.

### The feminisation of agriculture

Although some labour migrants are women, the majority are men. They leave behind their wives or other female relatives to take care of the household and whatever land the family possesses. The resulting **feminisation of agriculture is a widely recognised trend, generally perceived as having negative consequences**. This is in terms of both the additional burden on women, and a reduction in overall productivity. **Yet some women have thrived in being able to make their own decisions and run a farm as they see fit** – especially when assisted by development interventions. Here we highlight two examples.

**Ambika Rai** cultivates kiwi fruits in the settlement of Khiruale, Dprung Chuichumma rural municipality in province 1 (Eastern Nepal).

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*Over the past few years, kiwi farming has become popular amongst the farming community here. I was the first person in this village to start kiwi farming. Now the village men who returned from the cities and abroad are also practicing kiwi farming. During the current lockdown, many people have been asking me about the kiwi farm in person and on social media. Kiwi is also considered good for immunity during Covid times and local consumption has increased. – Ambika Rai*

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**Parbata KC** lives and farms in the settlement of Chhera, Musikot municipality in province 6 (Karnali, Western Nepal). She herself experienced labour migration to India, working with her husband in a restaurant in Goa. However, when the couple returned home after the first wave of Covid, she started investigating other income-generating opportunities. With her husband, she began by supporting her father-in-law in vegetable cultivation, initially maintaining a small plot of about 0.025 ha (0.5 *ropani* in local measurements). As a woman and a returnee migrant, she was prioritised by her municipality for support in the form of technical advice and subsidised inputs. This allowed her to gain confidence and expand to vegetable cultivation to some 0.2 ha (4 *ropani*), investing some NRs 1 lakh (CHF 765 at current exchange rates). During the first lockdown, marketing was not problematic as the municipality provided a service of

collection and transport to the large vegetable market in Surkhet (capital of Karnali province). She and other returnee migrants were also supported to take out crop insurance with the NLG insurance company. Subsequently, when her production of chilies and cucumbers was significantly reduced by disease (respectively wilt and anthracnose fungal infection, and powdery mildew and mosaic virus), she managed to claim NRs 15,000 (some CHF 115, current exchange rates). Unfortunately, the gravity of the second wave of Covid has negatively impacted Parbata's business. Many municipal staff and neighbours are infected, and market facilitation activities have paused. Nevertheless, she still manages to sell her products locally, at somewhat lower prices. She commented (by telephonic interview):

*I'm confident that I'll get renewed support as soon as the situation improves. And I have already earned enough this year to be able to accept a little risk. NRs 70'000 [approx.. CHF 535] per season is much more than I earned in India, and here I am earning with dignity. I'm going to continue farming.*  
– Parbakata KC



Parbakata KC and her vegetable production.

Photo credit: Nabin Kumar Sharma

### Local Service Providers

One intervention long supported by Swiss agricultural projects is the training of local or rural resource persons (LSPs or RSPs) – women and men belonging to the local community who have a special interest in farming, and motivation to share their knowledge with others. This strategy goes beyond the two SDC projects mentioned. For example, under riverbed farming and coffee promotion, both funded by donations to Helvetas, LRP's were also trained and their capacities built in a systematic manner. The importance of trusted local expertise has been highlighted through the movement restrictions imposed by Covid. Although not an LRP, the comment of Ramnidhi Acharya, quoted here, is illustrative.

*Returnees from Nepal's cities and abroad have been asking about different plants and crops available for farming both for their personal use and for income generation. When these people come in to purchase plants, we share our technical knowledge on farming with them. They find it quite useful.*  
– Ramnidhi Acharya, Dibrung Chuichumma rural municipality

### Reducing the burden of agricultural labour

The installation of local mills is a “woman-targeted” intervention practiced under various projects that has become particularly significant in Covid times. In the past, women generally had to grind all the grain consumed by their household by hand, using a rotating stone mill (*jato*). This gruelling, time consuming task would often be fitted in before dawn or late into the evening. Water-driven, electrical, or diesel-powered mills offer a much less physically

demanding alternative but may be located some distance from the home. The local provision of mills, so travel can be avoided, is therefore highly appreciated. One example is from Diphung, where a motorised mill was provided through NASDP Covid-related support.

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*We used to travel a long way [to the nearest mill], or otherwise had to use the tedious jato to grind maize, millet and wheat. Now, with the motor mill, grinding has become easy. We are not tired, and time saved is used in farming. Besides, we have additional hands now for farming [from returnee migrants] and we want to expand maize and paddy production. Thirty-five households of the village are using this mill and we have a rule to collect Rs 1 per kg so that a fund is available for maintenance if needed later.*

– Hiramaya Tamand, Dadagaun, Diphung Chuichumma rural municipality.

## Increasing awareness of home-grown food for health

Many municipalities are reporting that their citizens have become more aware of the benefits of nutritious, home grown food during the Covid pandemic. Chetana Shahi is a long-term nutrition activist and RSP under the NMA project. She comes from Mugu, Karnali province, where poor nutrition is often particularly acute, and comments as follows:

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*For a long time, we've been organising campaigns and awareness in Mugu about nutritious food and nutrition-sensitive agriculture through radio programmes, door to door campaigns, and school nutrition gardens. Changes in behaviour are visible but slow. Recently, we have been linking messages about Covid to the consumptions of indigenous and local crops. We have varieties of crops that are rich in vitamin C and iron such as millet, chino [a local millet], walnut, and beans that help boost good health and immunity. People now listen and take such matters seriously; some have even expanded their home production and consumption.*

– Chetana Shahi, Mugu, Karnali Province

It is undoubtedly true that the Covid pandemic has forced many poorer individuals to return to their village roots and try to make a living there. With support through their municipalities and other development interventions, some are finding that life from farming can be dignified, profitable – and healthy.

Perhaps, there could be a small silver lining to the very dark cloud of Covid – at least for some households.

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