"Dalit Women In Local Level: Opportunities, Challenges and Plans Ahead"

Coinciding the occasion of the 25th anniversary of its establishment, Feminist Dalit Organisation (FEDO) organized an interaction program on ‘Dalit Women in Local Level: Opportunities, Challenges and Plans Ahead’ at Alpha House, Baneshwor.

The event aimed at enabling locally elected Dalit women to have their say on the relevant issues and effectively influence the decision-making process. The event also aimed at providing a platform for stakeholders to offer their views and suggestions in relation to ensuring the meaningful participation of locally elected Dalit women in budgeting, formulating plans and policies among others.

The interaction program was conducted with Chair of the State Affairs and Good Governance Committee of the House of Representatives Shashi Shrestha as the Chief Guest and Chair of the Parliamentary Education and Health Committee, Jay Puri Gharti, Parliamentarian duo: Parvati Kumari Bisunkhe and Anjana Bisunkhe as a Special Guests. The event witnessed the participation of Dalit women elected in local level of Kathmandu Metropolitan, several individuals, activists, stakeholders, representatives of NGOs, media personalities among others. The event was chaired by the President of FEDO, Kala Swarnakar and facilitated by General Secretary of FEDO, Renu Sijapti.

Speaking on the occasion, the guests laid special stress on the need of knowledge advancement and capacity building of the locally elected Dalit women. They also vowed for the discrimination free working environment for locally elected Dalit women.
The interaction focused on the study conducted by FEDO on "Dalit Women in Local Level: Opportunities, Challenges and Plans Ahead." The study was presented by the journalist Laxmi Basnet prior to beginning of interaction.

The study identifies the presence of record number of Dalit women in local level as an opportunity to elevate their status and help break the practice of untouchability and caste-based discrimination and bring about a revolutionary change in the society. The study also claims that the elected Dalit women have got an opportunity to deliver better, inclusive, and more transparent public services and infrastructure development for the benefit of entire women, marginalized groups, and the general population.

The study found that the locally elected Dalit women have been facing varies degree of discrimination from their colleagues who happens to be from so-called upper caste. The study revealed that the roles of locally elected Dalit women are barely acknowledged. Moreover, ward chair is always reluctant to assign any responsibility to them, questioning on their capabilities. Likewise, they are not even informed about the meeting being called and in case, they happened to attend the meeting then their idea, opinions or proposals are not given any consideration. They have to struggle a lot for approving budget allocated for the Dalit community.

The name of the elected Dalit women is always written is the last row of the minute, despite she holds same position in hierarchy as of the other ward member." Likewise, the elected representatives who are non-Dalits make several excuses not to have food together with the elected Dalits. The study also reveals that the elected Dalit women often faces social discrimination as they are not invited to the occasions like marriages, pujas etc. In many occasion, separate arrangement is made for their snacks and water as their colleagues from the so-called upper caste are reluctant to have their food together.
"Locally Elected Dalit women have also been facing various threats including death threats when they raise any question against leadership"

The study suggest that the locally elected Dalit women should be given capacity building trainings by the local government and their respective parties. The study also suggest that whoever practice discrimination should be punished as per law. Locally elected Dalit women should prepare themselves to fight for the higher position such as ward chair, mayor and even parliamentarian the next election.

The study further recommends that the women from the Dalit community should be encouraged to have their participation in politics. Those who are already in politics should encourage to continues their political career by providing them with various economic opportunities so that they will have face economic burden while pursuing their career in politics.

**Case of Januka Gahatraj and Bhawani Mahara**

The study mentioned the case of Januka Gahatraj, ward member of Melung Rural Municipality in Dolakha who faced several obstacles while making effort to ensure the access to safe drinking water in her ward. After long struggle and effort, Januka was able to construct water tank in the Dalit community. However, to made her effort to go in vain, someone put a dead snake inside a newly built water tank. Instead of finding the true troublemaker, Januka was blamed for the incident. She was criticized by her non-Dalits counterparts.

Likewise, the study also mentioned the case of Bhavani Mahara, ward member of ward no 4, Mirchaya Municipality and also member of Municipality Judicial Committee. She received a couple of threats for her participation as a Judicial Committee member in the decision-making process. Following dissatisfaction over Judicial Committee decision, a group of around 10-12 people came to her house at around 10 pm and threatened her of unfortunate consequences for making a decision against them. The incident brought her enthusiasm to work and self-esteem to the lowest level.
We have been fighting since long to break the chain of discrimination against Dalit. Now we are in a decision making position but struggle against discrimination has not over yet. As the charity begins at home, we should end the discrimination prevailing in our office, in our party first, then only we will able to make a discrimination free society.

Because of our gender and caste, we face unequal treatment. In fact, we are treated as dummies. We are barely given any responsibilities. Moreover, we are not made informed on the various activities carried out by the office. Sometimes, we are not even invited.

It has been 2 years since we are in office. However, the fact can not be denied that we are still in a learning phase. Majority of us lack political and or social background. Owing to which there is always confusion on Political terms and processes, such as budgets and proposals. Thus, we required series of training which focuses on enhancing knowledge and capacity building.

We are facing discrimination even within our party. We were given candidacy by our party because they had no other choice being bounded by the Local Level Election Act 2017. We served the party for a long and in fact, we are still serving. However, unfortunately, we are not getting any support from them. We expect our party to conduct various program targeting capacity building so that we will be able to perform our task in a required manner.
Discouragement from Chair and Other Members

"Being a Dalit, we share common agenda like end of discrimination, and untouchability. We always make effort to bring various programs targeting Dalit and other marginalised community so as to uplift their socioeconomic status. However, we don't get support from our co-workers so are non-Dalits. In fact, we are discouraged. The issues of Dalits are not given priority while policy and budget formulation. We always have to fight hard to allocate the budget for Dalits."

Meaningful Participation?

"The numbers of Dalit women have undoubtedly increased in the local government, however, their meaningful participation in the decision making is barely seen, due to discriminatory behavior from the so-called high caste people who hold the top most position in the hierarchy of decision making; lack of self-awareness and self-consciousness among other. Moreover, in many occasion, it has been found that the locally elected Dalit women have no or very limited knowledge about their own roles and responsibilities in their respective local units, especially in the case of budgeting and development of the various policies. To ensure the meaningful participation of locally elected Dalit women in decision making it is must to enhance their knowledge and build up their capacity."