

Late. Ajita Paswan

Founder: Aakriti Praakritik Prasichhyan Kendra



Interviewer:

To begin with, what inspired you to establish this organization, drawing from your childhood experiences? Where were you born, and what kind of family background did you come from? What was your family's perspective regarding education for daughters, and how did you manage to pursue your own studies? Furthermore, please share the lived experiences and hardships you encountered after completing your education, how the idea to start this organization was conceived in your mind, and the challenges the organization has faced from its inception up to the present day. You are welcome to share all of these aspects.

Interviewee:

I was born in Sirha, which is where my maternal family home is located. However, due to my father's employment, we had to relocate frequently. Wherever his job took him, whether it was Pokhara, Butwal, Bhimad, Janakpur, or Sarlahi, our family moved along with him. Although my ancestral roots are in Sirha, my actual birthplace is Butwal. I was born there, and that is where our foundations as a family were built.

Interviewer:

Understood.

Interviewee:

After that, during the first four or five years of my childhood, I followed my father for his postings and studied in places like Baruwa in Sarlahi. Later, when my father was transferred to Pokhara, it was quite challenging to manage because communication was difficult back then; we didn't have mobile phones like young people do today. Consequently, instead of moving to Pokhara, we relocated directly from Sarlahi back to our roots in Janakpur. My father joined us there, and that was where my formal education truly began.

I studied in Janakpur for about seven to eight years. During my schooling, I developed a deep interest in education. At the same time, I noticed that within our community, women generally did not engage in any impactful work or look toward advancement. I began to comprehend these social realities much better while attending college and engaging in community work. As I

experienced these struggles firsthand, I accepted them as they were. However, realizing the depth of the problems women faced motivated me to find solutions. This awareness grew progressively from that period onward.

When I was in grades 8 and 10, my school principal noticed my dedication. He told me that I was a highly active and capable young woman with a strong, distinct interest in social work. Recognizing this, he placed me in an early childhood development initiative. He assured me that even if I was still learning, it would be a valuable experience. He offered to manage my basic needs, such as snacks and refreshments, and encouraged me to work with them. I accepted and worked dynamically, balancing my studies while engaging with the children. Shortly after reaching the tenth grade, negotiations for my marriage began. Are you familiar with the Madhesi context?

Interviewer:

Yes, I understand.

Interviewee:

In our society, families usually look for a groom with a good job and a stable household. My prospective husband belonged to a decent family and was pursuing his education, while his elder sister was already employed. Since he was well-educated and focused on his studies, the marriage proposal was accepted, and we were wed. Following the marriage, our extended families agreed on our living arrangements, and I stayed at home for about two to three years. During this period, I became pregnant. My paternal uncle's family was also supportive, but the domestic routine meant my education and career aspirations were temporarily sidelined.

Interviewer:

How old were you when you got married?

Interviewee:

I had just appeared for my SLC (*School Leaving Certificate*) examination...

Interviewer:

In which year or at what age did this happen?

Interviewee:

I took my SLC examinations when I was about fifteen or fifteen and a half years old, and I got married at sixteen or sixteen and a half. As of today, I have been married for fourteen years.

After my marriage, when I was pregnant, my family did not expect me to engage in demanding physical labor. They took good care of me at home and assured me that I didn't need to go outside, work in the fields, or handle strenuous chores; my responsibilities were confined to light kitchen work. However, my mind could not remain idle. Having studied in Janakpur, I felt a strong urge to utilize my potential rather than just sitting at home.

Even when I assisted my parents-in-law with household chores, such as carrying water, participating in various community programs, or traveling to places like Dharan, I sought opportunities to learn. When I wasn't performing manual tasks like cutting grass for the cattle, I would spend time explaining things to the local youth and raising awareness. I continued doing this work consistently. Throughout my pregnancy, I maintained this active momentum.

When opportunities for training programs arose, three or four of us women expressed interest. I managed to convince the project coordinator, and they accommodated us in the program. Through these gradual steps, I became deeply involved in institutional work and executed numerous community projects.

Eventually, through my involvement as a leading driver of change, I gained a comprehensive understanding of institutional dynamics. I collaborated with several established organizations, such as the Social Development Forum and Ujyalo Nepal. Through working with them for about six to nine months, I observed their operations closely and felt inspired to launch a dedicated initiative myself.

However, as time went on, I felt disheartened by certain practices. I realized that despite the intensive labor we contributed, our efforts were being treated like mere contractual work. Programs were frequently launched using the name of the Dalit community to secure funding, but the actual benefits did not reach them in a meaningful or fair manner.

This systemic gap deeply unsettled me. I thought to myself, *"If we are dedicating our hard work to this cause, why shouldn't we do something independently and correctly?"* I initiated discussions with my peers to deliberate on how we could move forward, pondering whether we should launch our initiative immediately or plan for the long term.

My colleagues encouraged me, saying they were ready to work alongside me. They promised their full support based on whatever resources were required. Motivated by this, we drafted the organizational constitution. We consulted several young men and women, gathered their input, and kept our doors open for collective collaboration. With the mutual support of my dedicated colleagues, we completed the official registration of our organization in Janakpur.

Following the registration, we faced skeptical remarks from people insinuating that our organization would not survive or that it would diminish. In our society, when people see Dalit women stepping forward, they often look down on them or try to marginalize them. They assumed that if they supported us, we would break free from dependency and stop following them for assistance. Despite these attempts to demoralize us, I understood their mentality completely, and it only made our objectives clearer. This is how we established our presence here.

Eventually, as I began executing independent projects with my core team, I gradually distanced myself from those external networks that did not align with our vision. It was a painful decision internally, but it was necessary. After parting ways with them, our organization became fully independent.

Since our organization is only a year old, it is still in its infancy. We started with virtually no financial resources or external funding. Consequently, our operational output in the first year was modest. I visited various municipal offices to seek support. However, as you know, local administration is deeply entangled with political dynamics. Because our team was not politically aligned or connected with influential political brokers who could facilitate institutional backing, we faced severe setbacks and rejections.

Nevertheless, my colleagues and I held meetings to strategize how to manage our expenses and move forward. I personally took the lead in approaching the municipalities to pitch our programs, and we successfully executed a few initiatives. Yet, we faced deliberate institutional hurdles; for instance, the Janakpur Sub-Metropolitan City allocated a program to us, but it felt like a calculated move to test us. There is a prevailing fear among local leaders and social elites that if women from our community become empowered and self-reliant, they will no longer remain subordinate or follow them blindly. Whether at the ward level or the municipal level, political leaders and social influencers constantly look for ways to keep us under their control or suppress our progress. Because of this, I have faced significant opposition and distressing encounters recently. Everything has become heavily politicized.

Despite these challenges, I refused to feel discouraged or harassed, and I remained steadfast in my commitment. As a result of our persistence, both of our proposed programs were formally approved by the Janakpur Sub-Metropolitan City. However, an obstacle remains: they have withheld our official work order. Our operations and project payments have been stalled for the past three months.

Faced with this gridlock, I sought counsel from various advisors. They advised me not to despair and assured me that if the authorities do not summon us soon, we will raise the issue formally, advocate for our cause, and resume our programs. The budget has not been released yet, but if we receive continuous support from partners like you, it reinforces our confidence that we are not fighting this battle alone. If we look at these immense challenges in isolation, achieving our goals seems impossible. However, with the solidarity of allies like you, we feel empowered. Even if you do not vocalize it constantly, knowing you stand with us matters immensely. By sharing information and collaborating, you help integrate grassroots organizations like ours into larger platforms.

Operating an organization introduces multifaceted challenges and harsh realities, especially regarding the specific vulnerabilities women encounter while working on the ground. If one is not vigilant and legally aware, it is easy to be entrapped or manipulated. Over time, one encounters various forms of inducement, ethical compromises, or religious pressures designed to sway our mission. An unaware individual might easily succumb, thinking it is a beneficial opportunity. However, once you educate yourself about organizational governance, understand external dynamics, and perceive how the wider world operates, you become naturally vigilant. You learn

to reject deceptive allurements and maintain your integrity. I've shared my journey and request the others to do so as well.

Interviewer:

Thank you so much.

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