

# Sarina Gurung

## Finding My Voice: What SIWA Taught Me About Speaking, Leadership and Myself

### Taking the First Step

I am 22 years old and studying social work and psychology. As I entered the final years of my university degree, I began to feel that something was missing. I had spent years learning through books and classrooms, but I had very little practical experience. I knew that I wanted to work in the social sector and eventually pursue my master's degree, possibly through a scholarship. I wanted to work with nonprofit organisations, but I also knew that studying social work and psychology would not be enough. I needed to step outside the classroom and understand what the work actually looked like.

That was what pushed me to look for opportunities. When I first heard about SIWA, I did not really understand what the programme was. When I heard the word "training," I imagined something quite different, based on the kinds of trainings I had seen my mother attend. I thought it might be about learning a particular skill or making a product. I did not expect discussions around feminist leadership, advocacy, women's rights, organisational development and finance. I also did not expect the programme to challenge something as personal as my confidence in speaking Nepali.

### The Fear of Being Judged

My spoken and written Nepali have never been very strong, and I have always been conscious of that. Before joining the programme, I worried about what people would think of me. I wondered whether they would look at me and think, "She is Nepali, but she cannot even speak Nepali properly." I was also unsure about the people I would meet. I imagined myself surrounded mostly by older women and wondered who I would talk to, whether I would fit in and whether I would actually belong there.

But I had reached a point where I knew that avoiding uncomfortable situations would not help me build the future I wanted. I remember thinking that if I did not take this first step, I might never take it. So, despite all my fears, I decided to go.

### Finding My Voice Through SIWA

The experience was completely different from what I had imagined. I met people from different parts of the province, different generations and different communities. Everyone brought different experiences, languages and perspectives into the room. Instead of feeling out of place, I found myself curious about the people around me and interested in their stories.

One of the first things that caught my attention was meeting a psychosocial counsellor. Since I study psychology and social work, I immediately became interested in her background and career. I approached her during the break and asked her about her education and the path she had taken. That conversation made me realise that SIWA was giving me something I had been looking for: practical exposure.

Through SIWA, ideas that I had previously understood mostly through theory became much more real. I listened to women from different communities talk about their experiences and began to understand how differently people can experience discrimination, opportunity and exclusion. I realised that just because I do not experience something directly does not mean it does not exist for someone else.

## Choosing to Speak Nepali

One of the biggest changes for me came through something very simple: I chose to speak Nepali. We were given the option to communicate in the language we were most comfortable with. I could have spoken English, and that would have been easier for me, but I decided to challenge myself.

It was difficult. The first time I had to read a report in Nepali, I was trembling and sweating. I had spent years avoiding situations where I might make mistakes, so speaking in front of everyone felt frightening. But I continued. What surprised me was that nobody judged me. My grammar was not perfect and sometimes the way I spoke sounded funny, but people listened to what I was saying rather than focusing on how I said it.

That experience changed something inside me. Before SIWA, whenever I felt uncomfortable speaking Nepali, I would avoid the conversation, switch to English or simply withdraw. I realised that I did not have to speak perfectly before I was allowed to participate. I still have a lot to learn, but I no longer feel the same shame or fear. For me, that is a significant change.

## Understanding Feminism Beyond a Word

Before SIWA, I had heard the word “feminist” many times and had even used it casually with my friends. I knew feminism was connected to women’s rights, women’s value and women’s empowerment, but I now realise that my understanding was mostly superficial. Listening to women from different communities talk about their experiences helped me understand feminism through people’s actual lives rather than simply through a definition.

I also began thinking about an experience from my own life. There was a man I knew casually who once called me a “massive feminist” while I was having a conversation with my friends. It was not simply the word that upset me. It was the way he said it and the assumptions behind it. At the time, I did not know how to respond, so I eventually stopped visiting that place and cut contact with him.

Looking back now, I understand that experience differently. I have a better understanding of the language around feminism and the ways women can be labelled or dismissed. More importantly, I feel that I can respond now. If someone wants to challenge my understanding of feminism, I can have that conversation. I can ask questions, explain myself and debate. I did not have that confidence before.

## Learning That Plans Can Change

SIWA also taught me through practical activities. During one activity, we were given a small amount of money, asked to purchase products and then sell them. I enjoyed the exercise because I have some previous marketing experience and immediately started thinking about presentation, pitching and the market.

Most of the activity went well, but we were eventually left with a couple of products that had not sold. That experience taught me something important. I had planned carefully, but I had not planned for every possible situation. I had analysed the market but had not anticipated every risk. It reminded me that preparation is important, but adaptability is just as important. Unexpected challenges will always come, and we have to be ready to respond.

## Rethinking Leadership

The experience also changed how I think about leadership. I am interested in politics, particularly after the recent Gen Z movement made me more aware of my own political voice and responsibility as a young voter. But I do not necessarily imagine myself becoming a politician or standing at the centre of a political movement.

I still have a lot to learn about laws and the Constitution, and formal Nepali is still something I struggle with. But I know that I enjoy speaking, connecting with people and bringing people together around ideas. Maybe my contribution will come through social work, advocacy or the nonprofit sector rather than through formal politics. I have realised that I do not have to be the main person in the room to contribute. A supporting role can also be meaningful.

## Building a Base Before Building a Movement

One lesson that stayed with me was the importance of building a base before trying to lead. A campaign cannot succeed through one person alone. It needs people, relationships and trust. That idea made me think differently about what I want to do in the future.

Before I try to lead, I need to listen, build relationships and understand the people around me. After the programme, I found myself asking participants about their organisations and the work they were doing. I told them that if there were awareness programmes or activities happening in my area, I wanted to know about them. I do not want to simply support these issues from a distance. I want to be present and involved.

## Moving Forward, Together

The experience also made me realise that my own growth cannot be the end goal. There are many young women who have not received the opportunities that I have received. There are girls younger than us who are still waiting for someone to show up and create a space for them.

I do not want us to become so focused on moving forward ourselves that we forget to look around and ask who is coming with us. If we gain knowledge, that knowledge should reach someone else. If we gain confidence, it should help create space for another person to find theirs. If we receive an opportunity, we should think about how that opportunity can eventually open another door for someone else.

## What I Am Taking With Me

When I look back at where I was before joining SIWA, I can see a clear difference. I came into the programme worried about my lack of practical experience, afraid of being judged for my Nepali and unsure whether I belonged in the room. I am leaving with a stronger understanding of feminism and leadership, greater confidence in expressing myself and a much stronger desire to become involved in my community.

I still have a lot to learn, and I am not pretending that one experience has given me all the answers. But I am no longer as afraid of beginning.

For me, finding my voice does not mean knowing everything or speaking perfectly. It means being willing to ask questions, to learn, to participate and to speak even when I am uncomfortable. It means accepting that I still have room to grow without being ashamed of where I am today. And perhaps most importantly, it means understanding that finding my own voice is only the beginning. I want to use it to make sure that other young women around me also get the opportunity to find theirs.