

## Libraries Connecting Communities

This is the second of two *Stories from the Field* articles exploring how libraries connect with people and with literacy—both in Canada and abroad.

### ***Social inclusion leading to social change: The role of community libraries in rural Nepal***

Two libraries in Nepal have transformed the traditional social exclusion of women in rural communities into social inclusion, creating spaces and opportunities for women to participate in learning. A study by ethnographic researchers in Nepal found that the creation of community libraries in two rural communities was the first step in helping women and girls gain access to literacy education, technology, and opportunities to learn financial skills.<sup>1</sup>

Men and women have culturally separate and specific roles in Nepalese communities.

In our community a girl cannot spend time in a public place, she cannot attend a social gathering, take part in or watch a sporting activity or engage in any activities outside the home. These social rules have placed real pressures and limitations on females in our community which in turn has had a negative impact on female mobility, especially in terms of their access to education. These social behaviours directly affect a girl's development notably in terms of her personality and she continues to lose her independence as she gets older.  
(field notes from September 2007, Adhikari 2008, 241).

How did these two community libraries manage to change the rules governing women's participation in their societies?

### **The Jhuwani Community Library**

The Jhuwani Community Library (JCL) was established in 2001 by people in the community with support from an international nongovernmental organization called READ (Rural Education and Development) Nepal (Martin and Adhikari 2008). From the moment the library first opened, there was a plan to provide community activities and encourage the involvement of local indigenous groups and lower-caste people, both men and women. Initially, more men participated than women.

In 2002, in an effort to encourage and increase women's involvement in the library, staff created a women's section and began to run women-specific programs. The programs were successful, attracting over fifty participants per program from mostly upper-caste groups and women who were literate. However, socially disadvantaged and lower-caste women felt intimidated and did not join the programs (Martin and Adhikari 2008).

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In an effort to reach out to them, the JCL created a “mobile library” with the hope of increasing access to the library’s materials to help the women develop their literacy skills. The mobile library was a success and also provided local women with information about family planning and contraception.

The JCL currently has eight computers, Internet access, a DVD player, a telephone connection, a fax, a laminator, and a scanner. In 2002, it ran the first community computer-training program. Of 102 participants, 36 were women (Martin and Adhikari 2008). Having communication facilities (Internet, phone, and fax) in the library means that women can access new media resources in ways that weren’t possible before.

The researchers believe that “the social acceptability of the community library and its programs is in part derived from the fact that the library is a community space open to men and women” (Martin and Adhikari 2008, 248).

### **The Agyauli Community Library**

The community library in Agyauli (ACL), also established with the support of READ Nepal and various partners, has achieved similar success. Most of the people in this area are lower caste or *Dalit* and there are many poor and landless families (Martin and Adhikari 2008). Like JCL, ACL runs innovative programming designed to encourage women’s participation. This includes literacy classes, savings and credit groups, and income-generating courses.

Since 2002, the ACL has run forty-one literacy classes within the district. Over 800 women have benefitted from participating in the literacy program, 70 percent of them from lower-caste groups. Both libraries have incorporated new technologies into their services and provide skills training in digital story telling. Since December 2006, participants at JCL and ACL have made seventeen digital stories on issues such as children’s welfare, gender and participation, social roles, property rights, domestic violence, women’s health, and caste discrimination (Martin and Adhikari 2008).

It’s clear that the two libraries facilitate “an unprecedented sense of social interaction and engagement amongst the local women” (Martin and Adhikari 2008). They have become community-approved spaces where women and men take part in lifelong learning.

### *Reference*

Martin, Kirsty and Sita Adhikari. 2008. “More than Books: A Study of Women’s Participation in Community Libraries in Rural Nepal.” *Journal of International Women's Studies* 9 (3): 241-255. Retrieved from <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol9/iss3/13>.