

## **Laidlaw Scholarship** **Leadership In Action (LIA) - Women, International Development, and the Valley**



### The Kathmandu Valley

I arrived in Kathmandu on an early July morning after a long layover in Dubai. Though jet-lagged, I couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement as our car weaved through the lively streets of the city. Already buzzing with activity, Kathmandu welcomed me with its usual hustle and bustle. Nestled in the Himalayan foothills, the Kathmandu Valley is home to three ancient cities — Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur. According to popular legend, this valley was once a sacred lake inhabited by celestial beings, transformed into a place for human life by Bodhisattva Manjushri.

Over the next few weeks, I became familiar with the long morning commute from Kathmandu to Lalitpur during rush hours, where I volunteered with **SABAH Nepal** — the SAARC Business Association of Home-Based Workers. A community-based social enterprise, SABAH empowers marginalized women across Nepal by providing vocational training, leadership development, and entrepreneurial support. Since 2008, it has reached more than 10,000 home-based workers in 23 districts, helping them integrate into value chains and develop sustainable livelihoods through its Trade Facilitation Centre (TFC), Common Facilitation Centres (CFCs), and local clusters.

### Volunteering at SABAH Nepal



At the TFC in Lalitpur, I joined the Programme Coordination Team. My work during July and August focused on project development and proposal writing, aimed at connecting SABAH with new donors and partners. Drawing on my background in journalism and documentary filmmaking, I also contributed to feature writing and field documentation, while revitalising communication and outreach efforts —

particularly important after the pandemic had slowed engagement with potential customers. Here are some highlights from my LIA.

#### *Advocating for the Home-Based Workers Act*

One of the most impactful experiences I participated in was a documentary project, spotlighting personal stories of three members at SABAH. The film shared the success stories of three women home-based workers, highlighting not only their achievements but also the persistent challenges they face — low wages, unsafe working conditions, and limited access to markets. Our documentary advocates for the implementation of the Home-Based Workers Act, aligned with the Kathmandu Declaration (2000), seeking to grant legal recognition and protection to over 92,000 home-based workers in Nepal.

We filmed at the Bhaktapur Common Facilitation Centre (CFC), which is renowned for its expertise in Dhaka weaving — a traditional Nepali textile known for its intricate geometric patterns and precise handcrafting. There, I had the privilege of meeting **Dil Maya Limbu**, a master trainer whose skill and dedication to Dhaka weaving have earned her multiple awards. We also filmed at the Trade Facilitation Centre (TFC), spotlighting the success story of **Apsara Maharajan**, who is the current President of SABAH Nepal and formerly a home-based worker. She believes, “By improving their economic status of the women workers, SABAH is improving the lives of entire families. Children can attend school, healthcare becomes more accessible, and families are better equipped to handle finances.”



#### *Innovative Marketing Strategies*

Another project I truly enjoyed was developing a concept note for **Norec (Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation)**. After speaking with staff across departments and observing daily operations, I crafted a proposal titled “Innovation in Market Strategies for Exporting Textiles and Crafts of Home-Based Workers.” The goal was to develop and test creative approaches, especially through social media and digital marketing, to increase international sales and visibility.

The proposal directly supports several UN Sustainable Development Goals, including:

- Goal 5: Gender Equality
- Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- Goal 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure
- Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

SABAH already excels in product development and quality standardisation. What it needs now is stronger global exposure, especially in a post-COVID world where international customer links have weakened. I hope future funding can help bridge this gap.

### *Empowering through Non-violence*

I also participated in a non-violence training session delivered by **HomeNet South Asia (HNSA)** — a regional network dedicated to the rights and livelihoods of home-based workers. The training focused on equipping women with tools to resist physical, emotional, and financial violence. Delivered by Indian trainers and translated into Nepali, the sessions included field visit to the local police. While the intensity and pacing of the sessions proved challenging for many participants, the content was deeply important. Personally, I found certain topics like the gender pay gap between men, women, and transgender individuals, requiring careful unpacking before diving into research or advocacy. It alerted the complexity of women’s issues, which are intersectional.

### *Personal Stories of Women*

One of the most memorable parts of my time at SABAH was hearing the personal stories of women whose lives have been transformed through economic empowerment. Take **Rita Karmacharya**, for example, who is now an owner of a shoemaking enterprise and a local Newari restaurant. When she first began training in shoemaking in 2015, she faced strong resistance from her family. Not only she was challenged by gender norms, but also shoemaking has been stigmatised as low-caste labour. She worked secretly at night, hiding her efforts. Only when her business became profitable, and she began contributing to the household did her family’s perception so as others in her community changed. Today, Rita employs 15 people in her local area, and she believes “The community may oppress women, but we must remain resilient.”

At the office, I grew close with **Binita Maharjan**, board member and Head of the Knitting Department. She was the first colleague I become acquainted to, when we coincidentally met outside office during my first week. Very naturally we started chatting about her outfit, her commute to office, and her family. I really enjoyed our conversations, yet it was only my last day I learnt about her personal journey: she began knitting in Grade 8, working six hours a day to pay for her and her sister’s college education. Her story reminded me of my grandmother, who once supported my mother’s university dreams through her own sewing work. To me, stories like these deeply reaffirm the importance of economic empowerment for women.



### *Teej and the Power of Sisterhood*

Near the end of my stay, I joined SABAH members in celebrating Teej, a vibrant festival traditionally celebrated by women for their husbands or future partners. Today, it also stands as a joyful expression of womanhood and sisterhood. Surrounded by music, laughter, and women dancing in red sarees, I felt incredibly connected to the women I had worked with. SABAH Nepal isn't just about economic empowerment – it's about building solidarity and shared goal for fostering a more accommodating world for women.

### Inside UN Women Nepal



Another highlight of my LIA was visiting **UN Women Nepal**, where I had the chance to meet Country Representative **Patricia Fernandez-Pacheco** and her team. We discussed key initiatives to promote women's economic empowerment in Nepal, including both grassroots development schemes and high-level policy advocacy focusing on providing income opportunities and entrepreneurial paths.

One topic that stood out was the Asian Pacific Care Economy Forum, an upcoming event focused on reducing unpaid care burdens on women through policy and innovation. Patricia explained how simple technologies, like washing machines, can drastically improve quality of life in low-income settings by freeing up time for education, work, or rest.

UN Women also works in close partnership with other UN agencies to address women-focused issues. For example:

- WHO Nepal prioritises maternal and women's healthcare.
- UNDP Nepal promotes gender equality through its flagship Gender Equality Seal programme.

Despite growing global scepticism about the UN, especially after the U.S. withdrawal from several agencies, Patricia described it powerfully: “The UN is normative, idealistic, and bureaucratic.” And yet, it remains a crucial bridge, connecting governments, social organisations, and global knowledge. My time in Nepal, a country heavily funded and transformed by international organisations and foundations, made me believe, more than ever, we need these bridges.

### Leadership Lessons from Nepal



I arrived in Kathmandu with many ideas about how I could contribute. Yet as I began monitoring programme delivery, I quickly realised that these women already knew what they wanted. They are the leaders of their own change; my role was to support them on their terms. I came to understand that leadership is not only about offering solutions, but doing so through listening, caring, and responding with humility to others' lived realities. I learnt development work isn't fast. Progress is slow, sometimes frustrating, and often delayed by logistics and bureaucracy. But the harsh truth is impactful changes never comes so easily.

One of the most powerful lessons I took away was from the meeting at UN Women. When sharing his journey in advocating for women, the Head of Economic Empowerment told me it was really realising his privilege as a man he was first inspired to join SABAH Nepal and later UN Women. Privilege can either be indulged or transformed, he said. That idea has stayed with me.

For me, leadership means using your voice and your position to open doors for others. Like one of the UN slogans says: "It's not just what we do. It's who we are." As I move forward, I am committed to continuing my engagement with women-focused issues, and to keep using my privilege to amplify and transform.