



Nepal's Women, Young Moms, and Dalit Students Refuse to be Left Behind



Industrial Tailoring has quickly become one of Olgapuri Vocational School's most popular courses for women. Between May 2021 and June 2022, OVS trained 100 young women in this growing industry—four batches of 25 trainees, including the graduates pictured above. Almost all of them have opted to work in Kathmandu's growing garment industry, with a few choosing to open small tailoring businesses of their own.

The average monthly wage for our graduates is 30,000 rupees per month (\$260), with room to grow. Those with more experience are making as much as 45,000 rupees (\$390)—**over three times Nepal's minimum wage!**

Women are strongly encouraged to enroll in all of our OVS courses, including carpentry, electrical, plumbing, and welding. But most of our female trainees prefer to stick together in more traditional roles, like Industrial Tailoring and agricultural paths. **NYF has made a point to offer them lucrative options for building economic strength, no matter what field excites them the most.**

For 20 years, when NYF spoke of prioritizing **Freedom**, we spoke specifically about the young Tharu women we were freeing from the *kamlari* practice of kitchen slavery. Their remarkable journeys towards freedom—physical freedom, social freedom, economic freedom, emotional freedom, and more—are still foremost in our minds when we consider the importance of this value. But they're not the only ones benefiting from our programming!

This year's Freedom report will provide a deep dive into a handful of programs providing special freedom, flexibility, and empowerment to young people facing special obstacles in Nepal: **women, young mothers, and students from Nepal's Dalit castes** (those historically viewed as "untouchable" in the Hindu caste system).

Starting with the freedom to choose a career path, your support is unlocking remarkable opportunities for young people. And those young people are using what they learn to transform their own lives—and their communities. **Thank you for ensuring that your #LoveWorks, providing this Freedom to children and young people across Nepal!**

Young Women Flourish in OVS's Industrial Tailoring Course

Over the past year or so, those of us in NYF's US office have had a few conversations with uneasy donors about our new Industrial Tailoring vocational training course, which is held exclusively for women.

We're hearing two main concerns from our loving donors:

- 1) "Sewing is traditionally undervalued as 'women's work'. Shouldn't we be trying to encourage young women to break free of these sorts of industries, rather than continuing this pattern?"
- 2) "Isn't the garment / textile industry particularly dangerous and exploitative? I don't want my donations to go towards placing these bright young women into sweatshops!"



Maybe you've had similar concerns! In fact, people on the global team and on the board have discussed these same worries. At NYF, we deeply appreciate how thoughtful our donors are, and how engaged you are in looking out for the children and youth we serve.

We've decided to respond to these questions directly, by sharing stories from the women this program is serving.

The specialized Industrial Tailoring classroom at Olgapuri Vocational School was assembled with guidance from local garment manufacturers in Kathmandu. When designing new courses, NYF always involves employers who will be hiring our graduates. These employers give us advice on important skillsets (especially those that will set our graduates apart in the job market!) and provide insight on areas where industries need new skilled workers due to economic growth.

This classroom is outfitted with the same equipment used in the leading garment factories, and workstations are laid out in the same configurations and with the same dimensions. This allows the trainees to become familiar with the equipment in a well-lit, encouraging environment where they aren't pressed for time. This paves the way for a "seamless" transition into the workforce!

First and foremost, **our global team is committed to empowering women to follow their dreams**—*especially* when their options are limited because of entrenched gender roles and hierarchies. We believe every girl and every woman should be free and safe to choose her own destiny!

We're also appalled by the conditions within many of the world's factories—not just garment factories. **No one on the global team wants to see any one of our beneficiaries trapped in an oppressive, unsafe working environment.**



Jyoti*, 18, grew up in a village in Bhojpur District in eastern Nepal. In spring 2022, she passed the 12th grade—but her father told her the family could no longer afford to support her. If she wanted to pursue higher education, she would need to find her own way to pay for it, while supporting herself.

Prospects for building a career were slim in Jyoti's village, so she decided to move to Kathmandu, where she intended to find work and save enough to fund her studies later.

That's when she reached out to a Kathmandu-based relative, hoping to find a lead on a housekeeping or domestic help job. Fortunately, Jyoti's relative knew about NYF's **Vocational Education & Career Counseling** office.

At first, our staff suggested that Jyoti could apply for a college scholarship. But Jyoti said she couldn't wait for three or four years before she could work full-time—she needed work *now*. Besides, she wasn't confident in her ability in the competitive college courses that would net her a high salary.

(Most "general" college degrees in Nepal don't translate easily into well-paying careers, so unless a student is performing competitively in a field like medicine, teaching, or engineering, college may not be the pathway to financial stability for everyone.)

After hearing about the different vocational skills courses offered by NYF, she thought the Industrial Tailoring course would give her the best stability no matter what she chose to do in her education moving forward.

Jyoti has picked up the skills quickly! Here, she shows off a new OVS smock she made as an early assignment. Making items like this helps OVS to offset some costs—allowing more young people to receive training in all our courses.

Youth unemployment in Nepal hovers around 30-35%, with skilled labor opportunities often flowing to workers from overseas. Our vocational training courses have been tremendously successful in matching graduates with well-paying jobs in Nepal, with around 90% of graduates employed in their field within six months.

All OVS courses are openly advertised as available for all genders—especially the highest-paying construction trades: electrical, carpentry, welding, and plumbing. At the orientation presentations where young people are given application options, **women are always strongly encouraged to apply**. Some of the instructors for these courses are women, giving potential students clear evidence that women are welcome.

However, despite all this, **NYF has struggled to interest young women in signing up for these opportunities.** As a result, enrollment in these programs is overwhelmingly male (a staggering 90%).

Our team has been working for several years to understand this phenomenon and to provide good solutions. Young women know they are welcome to apply for these courses in male-dominated career fields, and they are encouraged by our commitment to them. **But many of these young women still don't feel safe in those industries.**



NYF can place female construction graduates in positions where we know they will be hired, paid equitably, and respected by their employers.

Unfortunately, **we can't guarantee that they will not experience sexual harassment and other sexist aggression in the workplace.**

In fact, we know they *will* likely experience these things—and they know it, too. **Our powerful female graduates in welding, plumbing, electrical, and carpentry thrive in their new careers—but they also report pushback from their social circles and sometimes even their husbands and parents. Their existence in these fields is helping to normalize the idea of women in the workplace,** and we are so proud of them.

But many young women don't want to walk that challenging path, even if it pays more. They just want to make a decent living, gaining personal economic freedom without entering a career where conditions simply won't feel safe for them as women.

We can't fault them for that.

Here, Jyoti receives some personal instruction from Lead Trainer Anju Thapa (seated). “At the beginning, I wasn't sure I would like the work,” Jyoti says. “But once I got the hang of it, I started really enjoying the training and the work. Plus, I've gotten the opportunity to participate in motivational sessions and life skills training. These sessions have built my self-confidence and help me to set my goals. After I complete the training, I plan to work in the clothing industry, earning enough to be independent and put myself through more studies as I go.”

When Jyoti arrived in Kathmandu, she was hoping for a housekeeping position in a family home—a job that pays quite poorly and isn't well-regulated. She likely wouldn't have found herself in a situation like the freed *kamlaris* faced, but her pay would have been quite low, and her hours would have been quite long, without much room for growth.

The Industrial Tailoring course has put Jyoti on an excellent path towards determining her own future—and has given her a network of empowered, inspirational women to lean on while living in the big city!

Olgapuri Vocational School’s Industrial Tailoring course was proposed by a group of former *kamlaris*. This initial group of young women met one another in a women’s empowerment group run by the Former Kamlaris Development Forum (FKDF), the community based nonprofit NYF helped found in the Tharu communities impacted by the traditional *kamlari* practice[†].

Most of these young women come from families still making their living through subsistence farming, often on rented land. Some of these women wish to remain close to home in adulthood—but others dream of starting careers in Nepal’s urban areas.

In a group discussion on attractive career paths, **several of these women shared that they wished NYF’s vocational school offered a course in Industrial Tailoring.** It seemed strange to them that this course wasn’t available. After all, they reasoned: clothing is one of Nepal’s biggest exports, and the job market in this area is growing. Careers in this field are stable, well-paying, and have room for growth and flexibility.

Even knowing that women were encouraged to apply for the construction training programs, some of these women almost felt left out by OVS *because OVS wasn’t offering trainings in the career fields most likely to attract female engagement*—traditionally female occupations. **The freedom to choose among a set of *only* male-dominated options just didn’t feel like real freedom.**



Meet our Industrial Tailoring trainers, **Anju Thapa** (*right*, Lead Trainer) and **Meena Kumari Chaudhary** (*left*, Asst. Trainer).

Anju has over 12 years of experience in industrial tailoring and training others in the skills of this trade. She loves a bright pop of color, and she’s inspired by different fabrics and clothing styles. Being part of this industry has brought her personal success and enjoyment over the years—and she loves sharing that infectious enthusiasm with her students.

Meena Kumari is a former *kamlari*—and she was also one of the earliest graduates of our Industrial Training program! She’s thrilled to be using the skills she learned here to empower more women to enter this growth industry.

Both women have become role models for the young women hoping to build a sustainable career in tailoring!

Fortunately, these empowered young women knew they could ask NYF directly about such an option—especially with a growing group of women who all agreed **they’d leap at the chance to earn their certifications in Industrial Tailoring.**

When this group approached NYF, our team let them know the common concerns about workplace dangers in the garment industry. The young women responded that

[†] *The Empowering Freed Kamlaris program is one of NYF’s greatest achievements. For more information on the former kamlaris and the FKDF, please visit <https://nyf.news/efk>*

construction trades are also dangerous. They all knew someone who had experienced an electrical accident or been injured by a power tool. And as far as exploitation was concerned, these young women had already survived *kamlari* bondage. They know better than most that bad actors exist in all industries.

Thanks to NYF and the FKDF, though, **they also possess the extraordinary inner tools that empower them to defend themselves from exploitation—and motivate them to defend their sisters as well.**

Their request was so powerful and so enthusiastic that our vocational education team knew we had to find a way to provide this opportunity.

NYF's team made connections with local high-quality garment factories known for their fair practices and safe working conditions, asking for their guidance in creating an ideal classroom and for help developing a specialized curriculum. These experts shared a list of skills all their employees needed to master, as well as a list of "dream skills" that made tailors especially competitive in the workforce.

Being highly skilled in a trade is a major safeguard against exploitation in any industry, as it allows workers the flexibility to seek out better workplaces without risking financial ruin.

Our team designed a six-month course which would prepare trainees to create **high-quality garments for local consumption as well as for international export.** Importantly, the training also includes the information needed for a student to **establish her own small clothing business, creating new items and completing alterations projects.**



Seventeen-year-old Bindu* has survived horrific ordeals over the past two years. During the COVID pandemic, she started dating an older man, against her parents' wishes. Soon, this man convinced her to run away with him to start a new life in India. Dreaming of a beautiful future, Bindu followed him across the border—and then life became a nightmare.

Bindu quickly learned that the man's intention all along had been to traffic her. Betrayed and heartbroken, Bindu relied on her inner strength to survive her situation—and she somehow managed to escape her captor and return to Nepal.

But the nightmare wasn't over. When Bindu finally reached her home village, her parents rejected and disowned her.

Fortunately, Bindu found an organization working with women who have survived sex trafficking, and they helped her file a case against the man who trafficked her. Thanks to Bindu's courage, he's now in prison, where he can't hurt any more girls and women.

Bindu found housing in a women's shelter in Kathmandu as she prepared for her next steps. One of the staff members there heard about NYF's new Industrial Tailoring program—and immediately thought of Bindu. NYF was honored to sign her up for the course.

The curriculum covers industrial machine operation and maintenance, different kinds of stitches and their uses, measurement skills, fabric types and their uses, clothing design

principles, and how to take items from printed designs to fabric cutting to assembly and through to the finishing touches. **Safety is always an important topic as well.**

Trainees are given specialized life skills and group therapy sessions (and, where needed, personal therapy as well) through NYF's Ankur Counseling Center. **They also participate in motivational sessions on women's empowerment!**

During the entire six-month course, trainees live in the Olgapuri Girls' Hostel, a space created especially so young women in vocational training courses (many of whom are not familiar with city life) can feel safe and secure during their training.

The first four months of the training consist of classroom instruction, followed by two months of paid On-the-Job training in one of the city's high-quality factories. **This apprenticeship period is paid, with pay nearly double Nepal's minimum wage.**

When we began training our first group of Industrial Tailoring students in May 2021, the owners of the local garment factories were



Bindu has taken to the Industrial Tailoring skillset extraordinarily well. For the first time since she ran away from home with a heart full of hope, Bindu feels like her dreams are truly within reach.

"This training has become a life-saver for me," Bindu says glowingly. "It's a very good source of income—I'm making good money." (She's right—Bindu is still in the On-the-Job Training phase of the Industrial Tailoring course, working with other OVS trainees at a local clothing manufacturer, pictured above. She's still living in the OVS Girl's Hostel, and she's already making 25,000 rupees per month, or \$216. **That's almost twice Nepal's minimum wage**, and she's saving all of it for her fresh start. She and the other women in this group will receive a pay bump once they become full-time employees there, after graduation.)

It's doing wonders for Bindu's self-worth. "I never thought I'd be able to acquire a skill that would pay me this much," she says, adding, "Economic independence is very important to me, as I have no family to support me. The work environment is also safe and pleasant. **The other girls and women that I work with have become like my family—and my greatest support system.** I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to meet them and work with them."

Being surrounded by a group of mostly former *kamlaris* has been a tremendous gift. Bindu's new friends are all outraged by what she's shared about her ordeal in India—and though they can't relate to all of it, they certainly know a thing or two about being deeply undervalued, exploited, and betrayed by the people who were supposed to love them the most.

Bindu is looking forward to continuing to enjoy safety and solidarity, surrounded by this sisterhood as she builds her new life.

hopeful that within six months, our students would be skilled enough to begin assembling some of their simpler products. **The expectation was that the students would spend the entire six months in the classroom.**

Some of these employers were brought to Olgapuri Vocational School after the first three months for a brief tour—and they were stunned by what they saw. **Our students' skills had already surpassed their expectations for the entire six-month course.** They excitedly proposed a slight change, adding the paid apprenticeship portion of the course. **When our graduates are hired on as full-time employees after graduation, they are already creating advanced articles of clothing—and being paid accordingly, based on their individual skill level.**

This high skill level gives these women significant leverage in the workplace.

What about workplace safety? Unfortunately, sweatshops do exist in Nepal—cramped factories with extremely poor and unsafe working conditions, where unscrupulous bosses demand inhumane working hours and withhold pay, and where laws and regulations are regularly ignored. **NYF would never partner with these organizations, let alone intentionally place a trainee in such a working environment.**

Kathmandu is also home to factories where workers are treated fairly, paid well, and conduct their work in well-lit, airy spaces that are kept tidy, with wide paths for evacuating in an emergency, ensuring safety for everyone. These are the workplaces our graduates enter, as a group of empowered women determined to build their futures—and continue working towards a more equitable world.

In the first year of its existence, the Industrial Tailoring course quickly became one of OVS's most sought-after options. **Our team has trained 149 women—and there's a long waiting list.** Most of these women are former *kamlaris* from western Nepal, but we've also received numerous referrals from Kathmandu women's shelters and other aid organizations. This training has already empowered single mothers, survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse, and women who have escaped trafficking.

We are so grateful for the support that allows us to offer these women this remarkable opportunity, **and we hope to be able to continue offering it as long as young women are interested.**



Instructors Anju (*standing, left*) and Meena Kumari (*standing, right*) observe Industrial Tailoring students at work and provide guidance on the current practice assignment.

Young Moms Thrive After the SAAET Project

Though many young Nepali women hope to enter more female-dominated industries, striking out on their own in some of Nepal's urban areas, **many others reported that they crave a career balance that keeps them close to their small communities and families.**

Women in Nepal's rural communities are still too often seen as dependent upon their fathers and then their husbands, without much social use beyond producing children.

Though these young women dream of achieving more, they are often also sincerely devoted to their parents, their extended families, their husbands, their children, and their close-knit communities. When they dream of building a life they can be proud of, one that includes financial freedom and resilience, **they imagine these achievements through the context of home.**



Lead SAAET trainer Karma Sherpa (*center, in blue*) demonstrates the proper lashing technique for constructing strong joints using bamboo and thick plastic cord. Each length of bamboo has been strategically notched to allow for a “Lincoln logs” style construction. Using practical physics, these linked notches are secured with strategically chosen knots, tightened with a small “stick-and-string” technique that can be adjusted as needed.

It's a perfect blend of well-researched technology and accessible, culturally appropriate building methods. The entire greenhouse can be constructed using only one main tool: a saw. And the materials are lightweight enough for a small team to manage.

These young women and their mothers expressed that an ideal opportunity would be training that allows them to increase agricultural yields or decrease the amount of labor required to grow crops. Increasing yields would allow families to feed themselves year-round from their own farms and to sell items at markets. Decreasing the amount of

physical labor required lowers the strength and stamina threshold for successful farming.

Greenhouse farming achieves both of these goals. **We launched the SAAET Project—Sustainable Agricultural and Entrepreneurship Training—for these women in March 2021**, beginning in Dang District in western Nepal.



Karma Sherpa is one of the lead trainers for the SAAET Project. He grew up in a rural region of Nepal among subsistence farmers, making his family incredibly proud when he pushed forward into college to study agriculture. In college, he was amazed to learn how much knowledge was available about farming effectively—and dismayed at knowing how much better life in his village could have been with access to some of this knowledge.

When he graduated, Karma headed back to his home village to share what he had learned. For the past 25 years, he has focused on organic farming, specializing in greenhouse technology, teaching whenever he can. His passion is translating the latest technological advances into versions people like his hometown neighbors can create and use.

Karma was delighted to help NYF develop the SAAET Project. He is greatly enjoying refining the project with each new session.

When first launching, we anticipated interest from mostly single women hoping to establish independent farming enterprises. **But we quickly learned that the course was particularly attractive to young, usually married mothers who wanted to support their growing families.**

Many of these women married hastily in their younger years (following the life patterns they had witnessed around them) and were already having children before considering their own financial freedom. **Our program, offering a high-yield agricultural option very close to home and shielded from the elements, is a near-perfect option for these women, who can work at their own pace while keeping an eye on young children.** It also provides greater parity with their husbands, which improves family dynamics significantly, lowers financial strain on the family unit, and introduces improved nutrition year-round into the household.

Marriage traditions in rural Nepal typically see a new wife leave her family of origin and enter her husband's greater household, usually living with multiple generations and branches of the husband's family. This means that **a single woman who took the SAAET training would typically leave her greenhouses behind** when she joined her marital household one day, since those greenhouses will have been established on her parents' land. Her parents or younger siblings may continue to operate these.

On the other hand, **a married woman taking the SAAET training can be more confident in the long-term stability of her physical location.** Even if a husband passes away, becomes incapacitated, or even chooses to leave his wife, she will usually not be dismissed from the greater marital household—especially not if she is

contributing significantly to that household. These greenhouses **provide greater stability to a married woman's status within her community, increasing her personal safety and that of her children** while achieving the primary goal of growing her financial independence.

The success of these women improves life enormously for her children, who enjoy **better nutrition, more stable educational opportunities, a safe living situation, an example of a mother's economic achievements, and the freedom to build upon a stronger foundation.** All this works to break down patterns of sexist oppression in future generations.



The finished greenhouses constructed by our graduates don't look like much—but these highly-effective structures are designed to last **at least five years** each (and the plastic pieces are expected to fail before the bamboo does). Bamboo is much stronger than it looks: it's more resistant to being pulled apart than steel and tolerates compression better than concrete! It is also lightweight and flexible, withstanding changes in temperature, weather changes, and even earthquakes.

The SAAET Project uses a species of bamboo that grows quite tall, with comparatively thick walls. "Timber bamboo" species can grow to 50 or more feet high, with some species reaching 100 feet! The stalks pictured above have already been shortened somewhat for transport and sale. Each of these, when growing, supported its own weight, not toppling, even in monsoon winds. These bamboo beams are more than capable of supporting the weight of the greenhouse structure.

Head trainer Karma visited the few greenhouses that existed in Dang District as we designed the program, asking about problems these farmers had encountered. These structures could only be sustained for a year or two. Karma took note of which portions of these greenhouses were failing earliest, and what those failures were. We have used what Karma learned to invest in materials with a five-year guarantee, tailoring the instructions to the region. **The finished products include protective netting against insects, drip irrigation systems, and ground coverage to limit evaporation, keeping production high even in areas experiencing water shortages.**

Most of these students have grown up with traditional subsistence farming. In this region, this kind of farming is done on small plots of land, often rented, growing a small

variety of crops (mainly wheat and rice). When these crops are out of season, family members take on daily labor jobs to get by, and the land goes unused except as grazing space for cattle.

Families are surprised to learn that commercial farming is possible using the land they currently live on.

If done correctly, a greenhouse can produce as much as four times what traditional farming can produce—and with a fraction of the labor, water, and fertilizer.

Karma is especially excited to introduce his students to composting. A huge amount of household and farm waste is being discarded in these communities due to a lack of knowledge! Stumps from harvested rice, livestock manure, ashes from fire pits—all can be used to make highly fertile organic compost.

Many of the earliest training graduates have told Karma that with the use of their high-quality compost, they haven't required any fertilizers from the market in the last year.

SAAET Project greenhouses create the conditions to produce **off-season vegetables of all types, fetching premium prices at market.** The greenhouses allow production to continue all year long—even during the intense monsoon season.

Trainees have reported success with potatoes, tomatoes, cauliflower, cabbage, beans, bitter gourds, okra, chilies, cucumbers, pumpkins, mustard greens, and bottle gourds. **Demand for their crops is significant.** Women from the original course (held in March



Maya*, 17, lives in a family of 8. They have a small farm on which they've been subsistence farming for Maya's whole childhood. Feeding such a large family is difficult, so **her parents were eager to find Maya a husband soon.** But that's not what Maya wanted.

She learned about the SAAET course from a local women's group and signed up. After the training session ended in early October, Maya was the first student to complete her own greenhouse and get her first seeds in the ground—with the help of some of her siblings!

Maya says she's excited to start farming using modern technology. The whole family is enthusiastic about what Maya has learned. They're waiting to see how this first greenhouse does, but they're already talking about gradually shifting their entire approach to greenhouse farming, following Maya's lead.

If Maya does eventually get married, she'll be leaving her current greenhouses behind on her parents' land—but **she'll carry the expertise with her.** She is now in much greater control of her path in life, wherever it leads her: her parents are less likely to try forcing a marriage, and if she chooses a partner in the future, his family is less likely to object. She would enter such a union carrying valuable expertise that would give her greater security, stability, and clout in the new family system, allowing her to nourish herself and her future children with confidence—as well as the ability to invest in their future.

2021) began selling their vegetables directly from their farms to local people by November of 2021, as well as to wholesale businesses, without needing to transport anything to a market location—and they reported that **the wholesalers would buy more if more existed.**

As we've refined the program over the past year, we've seen even faster success. So far, nearly all of the women trained through the SAAET Project are already bringing in monthly profits above Nepal's minimum wage. **All of them are in better situations, financially, than they were before the training began.**



Bamboo stalks are cut lengthwise into strips to frame the arched roof of the sample greenhouse. Most of our students have worked with bamboo in some capacity before. Though it needs to be imported to Dang District from other areas of Nepal, it's a common building material throughout the region—affordable and strong.

When eventually the bamboo parts begin to break down, it will be at the top and bottom first, particularly of the pieces acting as pillars. At this point (years from now), the rotting portions can be cut away and composted, and the parts that are still good can be repurposed in a replacement construction. When they're too broken-down for construction, they can become supporting materials for climbers and other plants or be cut into strips and used as roofing for a new greenhouse. Ultimately, they can be used as firewood or more compost.

Insight on planning for eventual reconstruction, replacements, and repairs are included in the material shared with our students. **Students are trained to set aside some of their profits with sustainability in mind.**

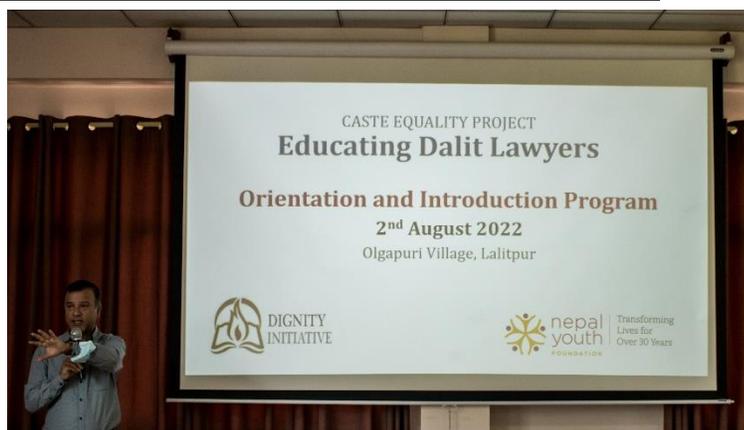
Some young women are enlisting their husbands or siblings, using early profits to build second and third greenhouses. Families are adding some of these vegetables into their own diets, **nourishing their small children and helping establish healthy habits early**—changes that will impact these young lives forever. Mothers are investing their earnings in **better school for their children**, long-awaited repairs to their homes, and medicine for ailing grandparents. The program is helping more “traditionally-minded” young women across the region develop their local economies—**while raising their families within the communities they love.**

Educating Dalit Lawyers – and Looking Forward to the Caste Equality Project

Though the **Educating Dalit Lawyers** scholarship program didn't launch until the summer of 2022, we are excited to share it with you as a peek into our work in the coming years!

In 2019, NYF began the process of designing a holistic set of programs for a community of Madhesi Dalits in Saptari District in southern Nepal. **Our vision was modeled off our extremely successful Indentured Daughters / Empowering Freed Kamlaris program**, which, over the course of 20 years, freed thousands of Tharu girls from kitchen slavery, ensured this childhood bonding practice was outlawed, and established broad household- and village-level changes ensuring the economic growth and community empowerment necessary to prevent the practice from resurfacing.

We anticipated that this new **Caste Equality Project** would run for at least 20 years—a generation or more—beginning with education and nutrition elements in mid-2020.



Above, NYF President Som Paneru kicks off the Educating Dalit Lawyers scholarship program with a presentation to the 22 Dalit students selected to receive testing prep support before their competitive law school entrance exam. **NYF received over 100 applications for this scholarship, with individuals representing all seven provinces and most major Dalit subcastes.**



Young Dalit girls in Saptari District participate in several days of meetings between village leaders and NYF representatives in December 2022. Members of these communities were told ahead of time about NYF's intention to visit, and that we wanted to hear their perspectives on the unique barriers they were facing. *(Photo by Lori Barra)*

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily suspended our plans, but now, as the pandemic ebbs, NYF is in the early stages of this ambitious project, incorporating lessons learned during the past tumultuous years.

Educating Dalit Lawyers is the first phase of the Caste Equality Project.

This program's goal is to produce highly dedicated, competent legal professionals from Dalit castes who can help the community claim their constitutional and legal rights. We aim to promote equity among Nepal's traditional castes by empowering members of the "lowest" castes—the Dalits—to actively participate in their country's legal system, to ensure Nepal's existing laws against casteism are upheld and enforced fairly, to challenge unjust laws, to broaden access to legal services for Dalit communities, and to expand representation within Nepal's legal field to include lawyers from underserved regions, communities, and subcastes.



Our selection committee (made up of half NYF staff members and half representatives from our partner, Dignity Initiative) identified the top 22 candidates for this first year (pictured above). These individuals have been brought to Kathmandu, moved into hostels, and enrolled in testing prep classes (all included in the scholarship) to prepare for the competitive law school entrance exam. **Fifteen of these students are female; there is at least one candidate from each of Nepal's seven provinces; and seven Dalit sub-castes are represented.** It is our hope that 15 of these students will pass the exam, gaining them entrance into law school.

Although only up to 15 of these 22 students will receive the full enriched scholarship, all those remaining will be enrolled in NYF's regular college scholarship program, either pursuing law school (if they pass the exam, but not scoring in the top 15) or in another major of their choice (if they do not pass the exam).

Today, **only 200 lawyers in Nepal are Dalit**—representing over 3 million Dalits in Nepal, 13% of the country's population. (There are about 12,000 lawyers practicing in Nepal—with only 1.6% of them from the Dalit community.) Empowering this group will require the enforcement of Nepal's existing laws, and we are hopeful that our young scholars can help to accomplish that.

Educating Dalit Lawyers has been designed and is being administered in partnership with the

Kathmandu-based, Dalit-led nonprofit **Dignity Initiative**. This organization was founded in 2015 by a group of Dalit academics, researchers, writers, and activists. They support the Dalit community through research, activism, policy advocacy, youth empowerment, and critical engagement with public debate. Their organization is committed to providing activists, NGOs, government committees, and others within the Dalit Rights movement with accurate data, evidence, and policy insights on key issues related to the Dalits.

You can learn more about this program (and watch for updates!) on the Educating Dalit Lawyers program page: <https://www.nepalyouthfoundation.org/program/educating-dalit-lawyers/>.

Meanwhile, we've got our sights set on launching new Caste Equality Project phases in summer 2023.

During the NYF team's visit to Saptari District in December 2022, women pose outside of their home, curious to hear what our representatives have to say. Built with what little is available (bamboo, thatch, and mud), these houses don't last long, and they're particularly vulnerable to fire during the cold season and collapse during the monsoons. People living in these communities have grown cynical about outside help—they're often exploited by politicians for their votes, and promises of support never pay off after election time. NYF was honored to discover that our reputation had preceded us. These communities were thrilled to hear we were coming to help them. **We're determined to make sure to honor this trust with transformative results.** (Photo by Lori Barra)





Kids play with old hoops on a dirt track behind a row of homes in Saptari District. Dalit villages—especially those here in the southern Terai, who belong to some of the lowest castes of all, even among Dalits—often experience a strange blend of access and ostracism.

In the photo above, electrical lines are clearly visible. **Most families here have electrical access, and many own smartphones that they use to access the internet.** But little, if any, technical support is offered to them from outside. Instead, these communities are left to fend for themselves.

Unfortunately, due to a lack of training and a lack of safe building materials, this electrical access can cause families great harm. Electricity can contact standing water during the monsoon season, causing electrocutions. Sparks can set homes ablaze. **Improving skills access in construction skills is just one of the ways NYF hopes to empower these communities.** (Photo by Lori Barra)

Our incredible teams are now forging partnerships with local leaders and contacts in Saptari District, and strategizing together about the pathway forward.

The Caste Equality Project will eventually involve specialized versions of every program NYF runs—and more. We're looking at solutions to the barriers keeping children out of school, to construction and safety issues within communities, to nutritional and vocational access, to deep-rooted psychological trauma and so much more.

Strengthening and empowering these communities will be the work of a generation. It's an ambitious project. Some might even call it intimidating.

But this is just the kind of work NYF was created for.

We can't wait to get started.

Dhanyabad – and Onward!

Our global team is so excited for the remarkable work we are doing in Nepal—and **we're so grateful for the part you play in making it all possible.**

Over the past three decades, **our work has expanded the Freedom of over 60,000 children in Nepal.**

In 2023 and beyond, we look forward to deepening this commitment to freeing Nepali children from obstacles keeping them from reaching their potential. Each child's freedom promises transformative growth and opportunities for future generations. Together, these youth are creating a better tomorrow.

Thank you for your thoughtful gifts in support of our shared mission. Your generosity truly makes a remarkable difference in the lives of the children we serve.

Dhanyabad!