



## Nepal: Road maintenance as a vehicle for social inclusion and decent work for women

### 1. PROJECT SUMMARY

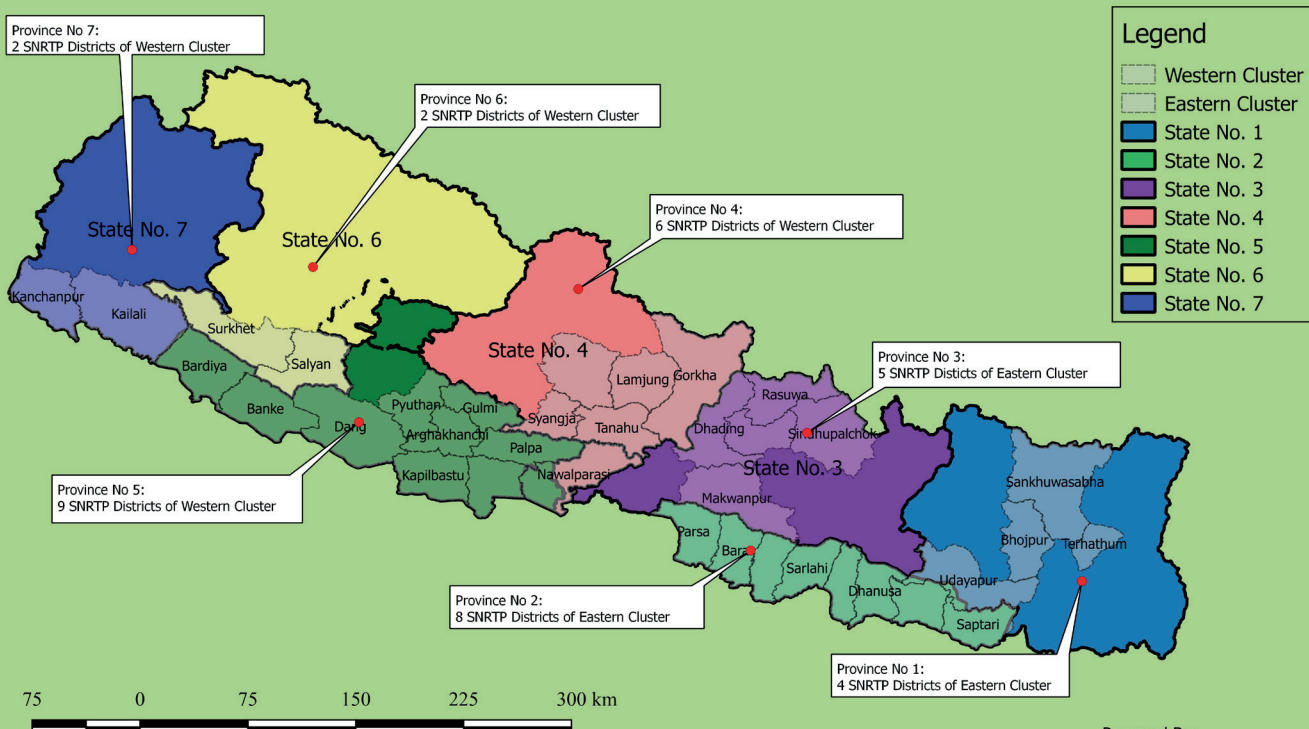
The Government of Nepal is running a large infrastructure programme, the “Strengthening the National Rural Transport Programme” (SNRTP), with financial assistance from the World Bank and the Government of Nepal and with technical support by the ILO.

The main objective of the programme is to maintain and upgrade rural roads and crossing structures. The ILO’s support focuses primarily on decent job creation through the promotion of labour-intensive methods for this road maintenance. Various measures have been introduced in order

to ensure a pro-poor, inclusive and gender-responsive approach, including guidelines on Road Maintenance Groups (RMG) with provisions for affirmative action, support and guidelines on occupational safety and health (OSH) issues, linkages to financial institutions, and a range of worksite-related practical measures.

To date, the project has generated a total of 5.4 million person days of employment and is involved in the maintenance of 354 roads in 36 districts across the country, covering all seven provinces and a total length of 5,880 km.

### SNRTP District Distribution Along the Provincial States of Nepal



## 2. GENDER COUNTRY CONTEXT

With a labour force participation rate of 83% in 2018<sup>1</sup>, as compared to women in other South Asian countries, women are more active in the labour market in Nepal.

However, this is to a large extent explained by needs for income-generation among women, given the high proportions of female-headed households and out-migration of men following the various political challenges and natural disasters that have affected Nepal in recent decades.

Furthermore, significant gender differences do persist in relation to employment trends: as Table 1 below shows, only the proportions of women working in agriculture – a typically low-paid sector – and as contributing family workers are larger than those of men, who are more likely to be employed in industry, services, and as wage and salaried workers.

Due to the lack of employment opportunities for women, they face difficulties in choosing not to accept migration and employment abroad in exploitative and unsafe conditions. Women also do not have equal access to livelihood-related resources: for example, women tend to have very limited access to financial services, and most of the women beneficiaries of the project did not even have a bank account prior to the project.

The project operates in a context where women's ability to work is limited in several project locations due to various factors, including cultural reasons in Terai (which covers 16 of 36 SNRTP districts) where women are not expected to work outside of the domestic sphere, and reasons linked to safety and security in the post-conflict hilly regions served by the project. The project also has to manage the challenge of a limited availability of female engineers in Nepal.

**Table 1: Female and male employment trends, 2018 (based on ILO modelling)**

PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE/MALE EMPLOYMENT	FEMALE	MALE
EMPLOYMENT IN AGRICULTURE	82.5	59.2
EMPLOYMENT IN INDUSTRY	6.6	10.0
EMPLOYMENT IN SERVICES	10.9	30.9
UNEMPLOYMENT*	2.2	3.2
WAGE AND SALARIED WORKERS	10.1	30.6
CONTRIBUTING FAMILY WORKERS	60.9	21.4

<sup>1</sup> ILO modelled estimate from ILOSTAT ([www.ilo.org/ilostat](http://www.ilo.org/ilostat), accessed January 2019).

## 3. ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY

The Government of Nepal has adopted a series of policies, legal amendments and practical measures to promote gender equality, including a quota for women in the Constitution promulgated in 2015. The SNRTP supports these government efforts at a practical level in the road maintenance sector through various means.

Activities undertaken by the project to promote gender equality and women's empowerment include:

- The development of an RMG guideline which includes 1) a target and quota for women's participation (ideally 100% of the selected maintenance workers should be women, but they should in no case make up less than 33% of the total workers) and 2) a performance/output-based payment system, meaning women and men with family responsibilities are able to adjust their work schedules according to their needs.
- Prioritising the enlisting of female engineers in the programme, and encouraging young female engineers by providing internship opportunities to enable them to gain field exposure for six months.
- Prioritizing the involvement of female administrative and finance associates in the programme, in order to avoid a situation of women only being recruited for manual labour.
- Ensuring that the principle of equal pay for work of equal value is adhered to through the performance-based payment system.
- Providing specific training on maintenance skills, bio-engineering and plantation work in order to empower female RMG members.
- Supporting the access of women to financial services through assistance for the opening of individual bank accounts in the national level commercial bank for their monthly wage transfers and linking them to cooperatives and local banks for further savings and credit services.
- The provision of official identity cards for RMG members to enable them to access various support services and for example to enable them to complete the administrative formalities related to opening bank accounts.

\* As a percentage of the female/male labour force (while for other categories, the percentages relate to female/male employment)

- The development of gender-friendly OSH guidelines, including elements such as a zero-tolerance against harassment, the provision of separate sleeping and sanitary arrangements for women in labour camps, the provision of appropriate tools for high productivity work, ensuring compulsory use of OSH safety gear by all workers, the development and implementation of a first aid training and provision of a medical kit to all RMG members, linking RMG members to local health centers for monthly check-ups, and the provision of accident insurance up to NPR 500,000 (USD 4,371).
- Negotiating an arrangement of free transport to and from the worksite with the district transport association in order to provide safe, easy, time- and money-saving transport for the RMG members.
- Providing alternative income generation activities to husbands and family members of RMG members and a work-replacement arrangement between wives and husbands in the case of pregnancy or illness.

#### 4. RESULTS AND IMPACT OF GENDER INITIATIVES

The project has thus far reached the following results and impacts in the field of gender equality and women's empowerment:

- In terms of promoting women in technical and administrative roles (as opposed to only in low-skilled manual labour), the programme has managed to ensure 20% of the programme's engineers and 100% of its administrative and finance staff are women. The percentage of female engineers is still low, but, considering the limited number of women engineers in Nepal, this is a commendable achievement.
- For road maintenance workers, the programme helped to develop the technical road maintenance and masonry skills of women and promoted them to become RMG members. This includes women from different socio-economic categories (for example, 184 or 4% of RMG members are single women). 41 roads with a total length of 817 km are being maintained exclusively by women RMG members, and 70% of the total 2,879 RMG members employed by the project are women.
- The programme has achieved full pay equity and provides equal payments to women and men at a rate of NPR 14,092 (USD 123) per month, which exceeds the national average wage rate of NPR 13,450 (USD 118) per month.



- For the first time, the 2,879 RMG members opened bank accounts, and many have been able to access services such as small credits up to NPR 50,000 (USD 437) as well as ATM cards, cheques, SMS alerts and mobile banking. 49% of RMG members are now saving up to NPR 50,000 and 13% are saving more than NPR 50,000. 68% of RMG members have been linked with cooperatives for additional financial services and livelihoods support.
- The project has had several concrete impacts on the quality of the lives of RMG members: 13% of RMG members renovated their earthquake-affected houses, 34% constructed toilets, 70% became involved in animal husbandry and poultry farming, and 45% are sending their children to a better school thanks to the incomes earned from the road maintenance work.
- The project has also helped to develop women's negotiation skills, and has empowered many to take on new roles: thanks to the confidence building and skill enhancement in different areas (for example, road maintenance and masonry, first aid, and savings and credit), a few of the RMG members were elected in local level elections for becoming members of village development committees and wards, despite their initially disadvantaged situation.



## 5. LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Bringing poor and disadvantaged women out of their homes even for the purpose of providing them decent paid employment and incomes was initially a challenge for the project in the 20 conservative Terai districts and 16 hilly post-conflict districts. Furthermore, due to the multiple roles of women in Nepal and disproportionate care burden, it has been difficult for women to maintain a work-life balance. In addition, given the high poverty and low education levels among the RMG members, a further challenge has been to be able to effectively transfer maintenance skills and convince them of the importance of personal protective equipment at the workplace.

The project found that the RMG guidelines played a significant role in promoting gender equality and social inclusion and helped to overcome some of these barriers through a transparent selection process. The involvement of the

local government (District Technical Office) as an implementing partner also helped to gain the trust of the RMG members as they felt this provided them a sense of safety and empowerment. The incorporation of decent work elements into the RMG work made the maintenance job more attractive for potential female RMG members and helped to motivate them despite their initial hesitation.

The project team's recommendations for other projects operating in similar circumstances include the setting up of a child care centre, the establishment of a mobile toilet, providing grants for pregnant and lactating women, providing a child care grant, topping up the savings made by RMG members in order to encourage them to save more, and supporting additional livelihood packages to complement the road maintenance work based on the positive experiences gained through the SNRTP Project.



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[www.ilo.org/global/topics/employment-intensive-investment/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/employment-intensive-investment/lang--en/index.htm)