



## SUCCESS STORY

### Raising Dalit Awareness of the Constituent Assembly



Girls sing a folk song about the Constituent Assembly.



Tharu women (a higher Hindu caste) share their experiences with a Dalit woman.

USAID/NEPAL

*In August 2006, the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) began a 2-year, \$15,000,000 program in Nepal to bolster the current peace process, strengthen governance mechanisms, and support positive, nonviolent community engagement in the country's political, social, and economic future.*

*The objectives of the program are to:*

1. *Increase access to information and diversify public debate on issues critical to the political transition, and*
2. *Increase effectiveness of key political transition institutions.*

May 2007 – Dalits are traditionally the most marginalized people in Nepal, with Hindu custom placing them at the bottom of the caste ladder. Although they comprise an estimated 15 percent of the population, Dalits have minimal representation in governmental bodies. Furthermore, the literacy rate in the Dalit community is a dismal 10 percent. Residing predominantly in the Far Western Development Region, the Dalits have been one of Nepal's most conflict-affected groups during the 11-year Maoist insurgency. However, the seating of the Constituent Assembly (CA), which the government is committed to form as a condition of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), will present the Dalit community with a critical opportunity to voice its grievances of discrimination and social exclusion.

With USAID/OTI assistance, beginning in early March 2007, the Nepal National Dalit Social Welfare Organization (NNDSWO) organized a CA awareness campaign by mobilizing 25 peace facilitators. The resulting activities included 221 orientations on the CA for 6,630 people in 5 districts in the Far Western Region and 48 Village Development Committee-level dialogues. In addition, 33 performances of songs and dances on the CA were staged, as folk songs are an effective way to disseminate information in populations where literacy rates are low. More than 12,500 Dalits participated in the activities, and more than 3,000 CPA booklets and posters have been distributed.

The strong engagement and participation of women in this activity has been a major highlight of the campaign, and NNDSWO has mandated that its other activities devote at least an hour to CA-related issues.

The tangible effect of the dialogues and orientations can be seen in the feedback received from the participants who feel that they have moved from ignorance about the CA and the peace agreement to where they understand the issues with much more clarity. "After this program, I have realized that the King, the Maoists, the government, and the army are all under the constitution," said Mandira Sarki, who participated in the orientation. This activity has increased the visibility of Dalit inclusion issues, as people of other castes now approach the knowledgeable Dalits for information and materials on the CA.