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# Here Are The Women (2017): Manjula Devi Ram (/index.php/en/actions/here-are-the-women/512-here-are-the-women-2017-manjula-devi-ram)



By Alisia Evans



'We are the leaders' is the motto of 56 year old Manjula Devi Ram – the 'we' Ram refers to are the women who live with her in the community of Vunimoli where she is a farm manager, a shop keeper and the Treasurer of the Vunimoli Arya Mahila Mandal in Labasa.

Established in 1995, Ram is one of the founding members of the Mahila Mandal and has seen her club grow over the years – from a small group of 10 women to now an active and vibrant membership of 17.

Ram speaks with careful measure - but when she starts talking about the role of women in her community, she is quick to affirm their leadership.

"We are home managers," said Ram in August 2016, during an interview with our femLINK team in the Northern Division. "We should be recognised (as leaders)."

Ram's fierce belief in women's leadership skills comes from personal experience.

Her life is most definitely not one of idyllic rural pleasure. Instead, her daily life, like many rural women, is a constant balancing act. On any given day Ram must manage the ins and outs of her family home alongside their family-run store – and as if that wasn't enough, there is always the 41 acres of sugar cane farm to keep track of.

So it's with little wonder why Ram during our 3rd National Women's Human Security First consultation in October last year called for greater support of rural women leaders.

"(So) Rural women should be empowered and have a say in decision making...at all levels," she stressed. "They should (also) know their rights."

"They should know their risks that they're faced with and then they can address the issues in community level and in district level and national level if they're given the leadership chances."

Yet, the chances that Ram wants to see given to women are more often than not few and far between.

Women like Ram don't have enough time in the day to leave their homes, farms or businesses and participate in community or district level meetings. So, the chance to have a woman recognised by the community for her leadership is even further diminished. It is one of the reasons why women leaders may not have the visibility as men who are then selected as district advisory councillors.

"The barriers I think (are that) women have unpaid workload," she explained. "They're very busy and they find it difficult to come out and do the community work."

However, one meeting Ram always makes time to attend is her Mahila Mandal meetings - particularly because, as a mother to five daughters, Ram knows that the mandali is a place where mothers can connect with their daughters to pass on their experience and knowledge as women.

A place where women's leadership skills can be nurtured from an early age. It should be noted that the Arya Pratindhi Sabha trains women as 'punditas' - so this is a very sacred and special women's space.

"We have our hawan (prayer meeting) on Sundays so that we can encourage our young girls to learn our culture too with the mothers," she shared with me last week. "That's why we decided to have it on Sundays so that children can take part in our hawans."

It is this culture and knowledge that has served the women from her family well in the past – especially during times of hardship, such as following natural disasters – particularly for the flood prone Vunimoli.

"Before, our mothers used to preserve food especially dhal," Ram recalled in October last year. "They used to blend the dhal and dry it in the sunshine."

"When there is a scarcity of food then she used to cook the food (using dhal)."

She wants to see such expertise and skills not just preserved, but acknowledged and celebrated.

"Women are best in what they do," summarised Ram. "Women are the first responders and also we are the backbone of the family."