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Inside a small room, around ten to twelve women sit encircling three low tables and are busy writing on their notebooks in silence. A woman at the corner takes a chart of Nepali alphabets and sticks it on a white board. She then picks a long ruler from the table and points at another woman across the room and says in a strong voice, "Tara, your turn."

Tara Tamang, a 42-year-old businesswoman, shifts towards the whiteboard before she starts chanting the alphabets, "Aa bata Anara." The other women in the room follow her in loud voice. Sheela Basnet, the teacher, encourages the women to increase the volume of their pitch. "Let me know that you had your lunch," she says. The room echoes with the chanting of Nepali alphabets as if these grown women are practicing nursery rhymes.

They are indeed practicing nursery rhymes. The informal class at Nari Ghar, a small non-governmental organization located at Kuleshwor, includes women from age 16 to 60 years who gather everyday at 5pm to learn to read and write.

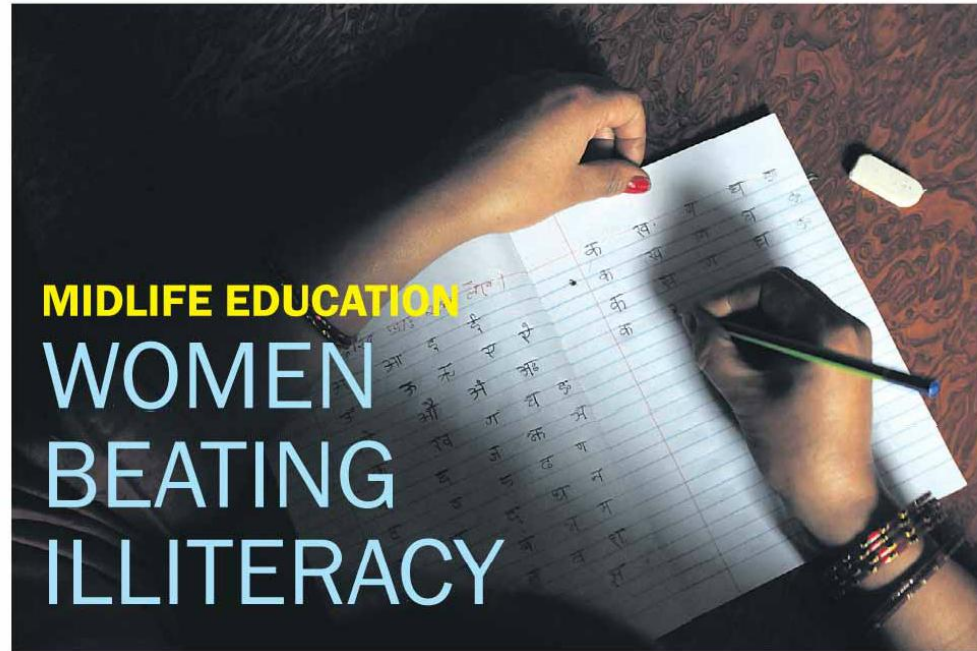
"We never had the chance to be educated when we were young," says Tara who grew up in her village at Dapcha, Kavre. The third child among eight siblings, Tara claims that her parents could have afforded her schooling if they had intended to. "They could've sent us to school. But back then, people thought that only boys needed education. We girls were obliged to do household chores instead," she says.

Tara's cousins Gyani Maya and Chini Maya also have the same story to share. "I looked after my siblings since I was old enough to carry them. Chini Maya did the same," says Gyani Maya. Daughters of a former Indian Army soldier, they say their father was never concerned about their education.

"There was a teacher who took me to the nearby school but my mother brought us back home immediately," recalls Gyani Maya.

But more than her education, Gyani Maya regrets that none of her male siblings showed interest in education. "Though the boys had the opportunity, they weren't able to achieve much. At the most, one brother works as a driver," she says.

These women, however, are adamant that they will learn



to read and write. "I'm tired of depending on others even for petty things. I've failed many times in life solely because I was uneducated," says bitter Tara.

The women say that people in the society tend to look at illiterates in demeaning ways. "Even your family members will start to make fun of you and take you as a burden if you don't know how to accomplish your tasks in this time and age," says Gyani Maya.

From dialing numbers and organizing their contacts in their mobile phones, looking for various OPD rooms at hospitals and dealing with creditors, these women have learnt the importance of education the hard way.

"I owned a small grocery store but I couldn't run it well as I couldn't keep track of my financial records. People took things from me on credit but without proper documentation, I couldn't remember the amount of money they owed me," says Tara.

While women like Tara and Gyani Maya are attending these informal education classes to beat their illiteracy and make their lives easier, the eldest in

the class, Hem Kumari Baniya, says that she has been attending these classes only to fulfill her wish to be literate.

The story of this sixty-year-old is not very different from that of the Tamang sisters. She says that she spent her lifetime in the kitchen.

"I was always curious to learn to read and write but I couldn't find such opportunity anytime in my life. It wasn't my family's priority to educate me and subsequently never became mine, either," she says.

But now, she has put her feet down and is resolute about her decision to learn regardless of her age.

"Apart from the learning to read and write, being able to meet other women of similar interests is also a motivation for them," says Laxmi Dhungel who coordinates the classes and looks after the organization. "This class was started solely through word-to-mouth communication. After the first batch of ladies completed the course, other women demanded for more classes and we started off with the second batch," she adds.

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"You'll never learn if you don't ask questions," says Tara for whom this is not the first informal class that she has attended. Three years back, she had attended a similar class which was supervised by government curriculum and funding. But she did not complete the course as she was not satisfied with how the instructors carried on with the classes. "The government education was very primitive and unsatisfactory," she says.

The Government of Nepal launched its National Literacy Campaign in 2011 which aims to make literate men and women of 15 to 60 years of age who had been deprived of education. According to the government module, there are two types of courses: literacy and post-literacy. Each of three months, the literacy course caters to those people who are unable to read and write at all. The post-literacy course is for those who know the basic alphabets and numbers.

Buddhi Bhatta, Technical Assistant at the Informal Education Division of the District Education Office in Kathmandu, says that they have been aware

of the problems.

"First, the instructors in the informal education classes are underpaid (Rs 300 for three months). So we can't demand performance from them according to our expectations," he says.

The other problem with the government classes is the unrevised curriculum. "The curriculum does not address the necessity of changing times. These informal education classes should have at least made people's access to different gadgets easier but that hasn't happened," he says, adding that they have recommended a revised course and most probably they will finalize it for the next session.

Dhungel of Nari Ghar also says that they are soon commencing English and mathematics classes for the first batch of women. "In their age, they need education to carry out basic trending functions like mobile phones. So they want to learn numbers and English alphabets as well," she says.

At Nari Ghar, like its name suggests, it only caters to enthusiastic women for the informal classes. But unlike the non-gov-

ernmental organization, the government-run informal classes are open to both males and females. However, most participants in these classes are also female.

According to Bhatta, about 90-95% females while only 5-10% males have been attending the informal education classes. He points out many factors behind it.

"Due to the social misunderstanding that education for girls is not important, many females may have missed school than their male counterparts. And even for illiterate men, they find it difficult to find time for the classes as they are supposed to be the key breadwinners in the families."

But as the old saying goes, "where there is a will, there is a way," these women at Nari Ghar have found their way out of illiteracy. As they leave the classroom, they discuss as to how they can set up small businesses at home. It seems that inside their small plastic bags in which they carry their books, notebooks, pencils and other stationeries, these women also carry bigger dreams and aspirations.



PHOTOS: KESHAB THOKER