

GlobalWA Goalmaker: Nirmala Chaudhary, Nepal Country Director, buildOn

By Joel Meyers, Director of Communications



Nirmala Chaudhary, Nepal Country Director, buildOn. Photo: buildOn

On first glance of buildOn, you may think “oh, they build schools,” which they do, and they do so much more.

buildOn has a special model where they unite communities through service and education to create positive change – and building schools are one of the wonderful and empowering outcomes.

buildOn was founded in 1991 by Jim Ziolkowski who left his career in corporate finance to pursue his passion for service and education. Since then, buildOn has created the Constructive Leadership program in the U.S. where students are taught to lead by being in service, and the students volunteer their time and implement community improvement projects. Internationally, buildOn implements a similar model yet with the local communities, and U.S.-based alum can go and help.



Nepali women taking part in the buildOn Adult Literacy program. Photo: buildOn

In their [global program](#), buildOn works in eight countries: Burkina Faso, Guatemala, Haiti, Malawi, Mali, Nepal, Nicaragua, and Senegal. In these countries collectively, they have built 2,688 schools, 351,575 students attend buildOn schools, and 4.9 million volunteer work days have been contributed by the communities.

We were fortunate to be able to connect with one of their on-the-ground staff in Nepal, to first-hand get more familiar with the types of people that are implementing this wonderful work, their origins, their passions, and the change they are seeing.

We were able to have a conversation with Nirmala Chaudhary, Nepal Country Director, buildOn.

What is your role at buildOn – what are your primary activities in Nepal?

As a country director, my major role is to oversee the Nepal program, lead and manage the team, work closely with related staff on planning the budget and program, and coordination with government and related bodies. With the help of the community, we are constructing school buildings in very rural areas. We are also running income-generating and Adult Literacy Programs and enroll an accelerated learning class for children who have been previously out-of-school so they can catch up with their peers. The goal of all of our programs is to ensure equitable access to a quality education.



buildOn staff entering a village in Nepal. Photo: buildOn

Tell us a bit about your background – why did you choose this path of service; were there people or events that influenced you?

Good question. I'm from an indigenous marginalized community. Fortunately, we had a primary school in our community but they only sent their son to the school, not their daughter. I remember that there were only two girls from our village going to school. My elder brother took the initiative to send me to school. I was not ready to go to school because all my friends used to graze goats, and there was not a permanent building for our school. We had to sit under the mango tree and when it was raining, the teachers sent us home. I used to go to school without shoes up to grade 5. When I passed grade 5, I had to walk 5km to reach the high school. I didn't have a bicycle. It took 1 hour and 30 minutes to reach the school. I remembered the day we were taking history class and we were not focusing on the lesson; our history teacher was yelling at us. He was saying that girls are parasites like bed bugs, like lice. When they are with their parents, their parents take care of them and when they get married, their husband takes care of them. They always depend upon others and that's why they are parasites. It hurt me a lot and I promised that I will not be a parasite, I will be independent and will work on my education.

I chose this path because I know the importance of education, especially for girls. If we educate girls, they can also contribute to their nations. They are not like a doll put on the table to decorate the room.

How did you hear about buildOn, and how did you end up working for them?

After attempting the final exam of my bachelor's degree, I applied to be a teacher and they selected me to be a lower secondary teacher at the school. I was continuing my work at the school and at the same time I got a proposal to work with an NGO that was also working in the education sector. I was not able to make a decision at that time. Later I thought I could do better for girls through an NGO than from the school. I accepted that position and started working with an NGO called Backward Society Education (BASE). The project was related to education for conflict-affected children and parents. After phasing out of that project, I heard about the vacancy with Building with Books (BWB)—buildOn's previous

name—and applied to it as an education coordinator. I was finally selected to join buildOn on 15 April 2007.

As of 2021, I read that buildOn had built 293 schools in Nepal. A lot of work! How do you determine which communities need a school and how do they qualify for assistance from buildOn?

Some community members know about buildOn from their neighboring villages where buildOn has already built schools. We also go to the municipality for the coordination meeting and they provide us with a list of communities in need. After the application, our team visits the school, checks the data, and talks to the community members and municipality. After completing the field visit, we discuss with the team about the selection of schools in need and then we recommend the lists of the schools for the approval from our national board of directors and then submit the proposal to the social welfare council for approval. This is the process of program approval. But for the selection of the community, we check the building conditions, number of children, need of building, availability of local materials, volunteers etc. We give priority to poor, marginalized, lower caste, landless communities.

We have three levels of government i.e., 1st federal (central), 2nd province, and 3rd local government. The federal government allocates only 10 to 11 percent to education which is not sufficient for the education department, so rural communities are always left behind. We have so many communities that have no access to education. We find such communities and start working with them.



Teaching students in a buildOn built school. Photo buildOn

What is the role of the Nepal government (e.g. Ministry of Education) and the community in building each school? Are the community's roles the same for each project or do you customize based upon size, geography, community structure, or other needs?

High school is under the local government and it manages teachers, the school management committee, parent teacher association, infrastructures etc. Because of the limited budget, they are unable to construct more buildings, so we are supporting them. The community's main role is to provide volunteers and local materials like sand, aggregate, stone, land, local tools etc. That is worth almost 30% of the total cost of the building and the local government is supporting the community for it and it is almost the same everywhere we work.

Does buildOn also help with enrolling teachers for the schools you build?

No, buildOn doesn't help to enroll teachers. It is the government's responsibility to provide or manage teachers in the school.

How about building public awareness of the new school and enrolling students?

Before we start constructing a school in the community, we do at least three mass meetings. We try to understand the community and its challenges. In the mass meeting, we talk about our methodology, school construction program, and the importance of education. We also talk about the importance of education during the school construction. We always form a committee called the Project Leadership Committee and they take the initiative to mobilize the community members, manage local materials, check and receive materials from buildOn etc. So, they have a huge responsibility to complete the project and enroll the children at the school. They commit to sending boys and girls to school in equal numbers and helping teachers and buildOn with the enrollment campaign during and after the school construction. And normally we are getting more support from the community beyond the expectations because during the construction, they realize that one of the most important things in life is an education.



Public awareness for buildOn in a village region in Nepal. Photo: buildOn

Are you altering your building methods due to climate change?

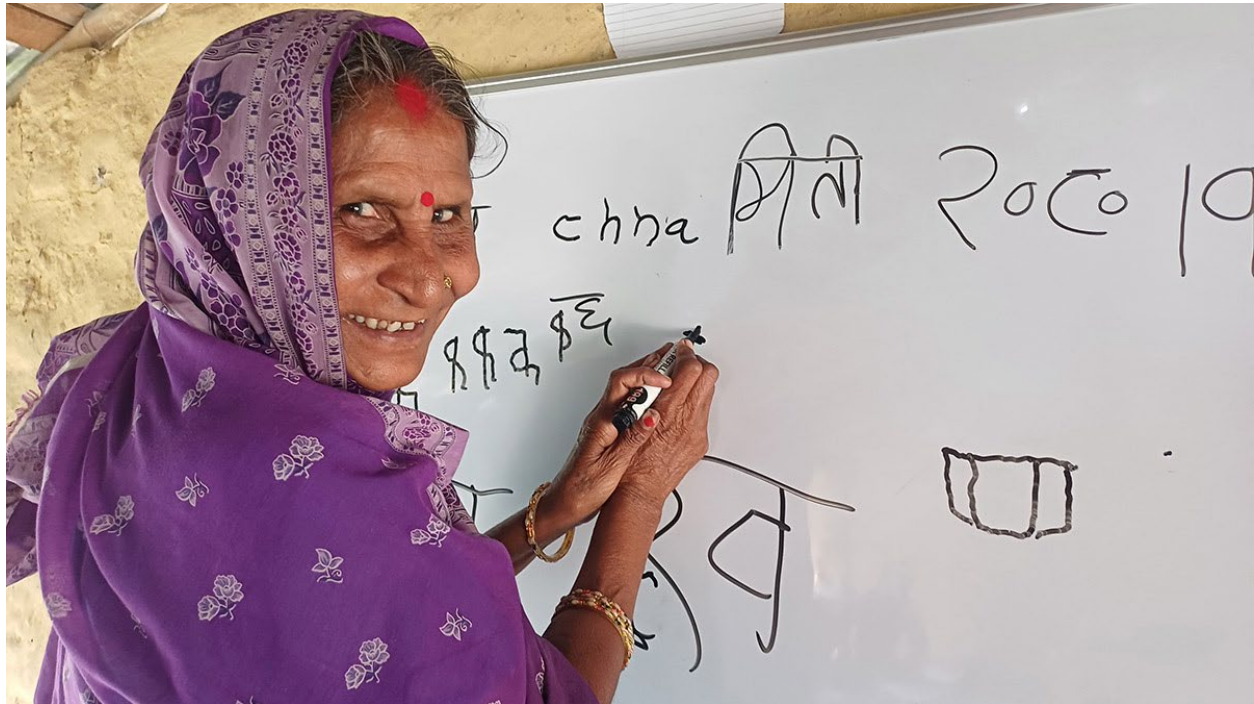
Yes. Normally we break ground on the schools between the end of September to the end of April because from June to August we have a lot of rain. The road is slippery, muddy, difficult to dig the foundation etc. If we dig 2 feet deep, water comes out. And during the winter season, it is too cold and the building takes more time to dry, so we always keep that in mind.

What have been some of the biggest challenges you have faced in your role as Country Director?

People management is one of the biggest challenges for me. Different people have different natures, character, and work ethics, so managing them can be a challenge for me. And at the same time, we have a national board and working in programs as well as for the organization, sometimes I feel it is difficult to manage the time. But these challenges are also making me stronger day by day.

You are a woman leader in a traditionally patriarchal society – have you found this challenging in your role? Do you have any advice for aspiring women leaders?

As a woman leader, my biggest challenges are to earn trust in my leadership skills. Very few people trust female leadership skills. I always need to prove myself to gain their trust. If a female does make a mistake, then people start talking about the female not the person. At the same time, it takes time for male staff to accept female leaders or bosses. You can see, male respect males more than females even if their position is lower. And, when daughters go outside the house alone, people start saying she is a spoiled girl. To move forward, every girl has to be a “spoiled girl.” I have a strong belief that there can be no greater leader than a woman. They successfully run the house so why not the organization, society, or nation? I just want to tell every woman leader to focus on their path and never give up! Success will be in your favor.



Woman taking part in the Adult Literacy program. Photo: buildOn

What is most exciting about your job, and what are you most hopeful about?

To be a female leader from a marginalized community is the most exciting thing for me. I'm hopeful that I can do something for my community as well as the girls and be a role model for every woman. All parents will be motivated to send their daughters to the school and believe in the power of women.