

DSROI 2021 Module 1 - Niluka Gunawardena

interviews Pratima Gurung

Hi everyone, welcome to the DSROI 2021 Radical Action Component for Module 1. The Radical Action Components during the course of this institute would look at how activists and leaders in the disability community are carrying the different concepts, notions, and theories that you are learning in this course into their work at the ground level, at the community level, in order to create transformative change and to promote disability justice and rights across the world. For Module 1, we are specifically looking at the intersection of disability and gender. And today we have a good friend and colleague of mine, Pratima Gurung, as our featured speaker for Radical Action.

Pratima Gurung is a highly recognized, renowned, and active disability rights activist in the South Asian region. She works specifically in the area of the rights of women and girls who are indigenous and also happen to be persons with disabilities. Pratima, thank you so much for joining with us today.

We are deeply honored to have you as a featured speaker for the Module 1 Radical Action Component. So just a very brief background, Pratima Gurung is the General Secretary for the Indigenous Persons with Disabilities Global Network. She is the chair of the National Indigenous Disabled Women's Association Nepal and a faculty member at Padma Kanya College in Kathmandu.

She is known for both her activism and her scholarship, and we are very lucky to have her with us today. So Pratima, I know from the work that you do that you often emphasize the importance of intersectionality when it comes to both your scholarship and your research. Can you explain to us why intersectionality is so important, especially when it comes to the work that you do with women and girls with disabilities, specifically from indigenous communities? Thank you, Niluka, for providing me this opportunity.

And I need to apologize with all of you because I'm having some kind of throat problem. However, I will try my best to address some of the questions and queries that you have so far done with me. So regarding the lens of intersectionality and why it is important for me and my work and my community, I would like to say that Global South, basically South Asia, including Nepal, has such a diverse in terms of humanity, in terms of the geography, religion, cultures, and we have so many different languages and people in our country.

When it comes to Nepal, we have diversity in many terms relating from the geography and also trying to relate with different castes and ethnic groups. So we have 123 languages and 123 ethnic communities, and we have diversity in terms of religion and also the geography. You have mountain, hilly regions, and plains.

So in this context, we see that our society is not an homogeneous group. It comprises of heterogeneous groups, and within the heterogeneous groups also we have many diversities. So to introduce, to know, to realize about these diversities, it is very much essential and crucial to have an intersectional lens, which we realized after the, what do you say, after the different theorists who defined this theory in terms of theory and philosophy in the work of academia.

But when we reflected those things at the grassroots level and on the ground, we realized that these theories are so common to our heart because it reflects the reality of our society that we live. And in that regard, I would say that the issue of intersectionality and understanding and realizing and respecting the diversity of the society is very much crucial, and that is why the lens of intersectionality is very much important for people like us who are historically, structurally, systematically, and indirectly discriminated in different forms. So I would say that this kind of discriminations are hardly been reflected in our laws, policies, and in the constitution of Nepal.

So it's crucial in that sense. This is what I would like to add on. That's fantastic.

Thank you, Pratima, for highlighting the diversity and heterogeneity of persons with disabilities in our sub-region and the importance of intersectionality when it comes to work and advocacy. Next, I'd like you to pick your brain in terms of disability rights and disability justice. To what extent do these two concepts play a role in your activism and your scholarship, disability rights and disability justice? So I would say because the narratives the philosophy and the understanding of disability rights and disability justice is very different.

I would say in a very traditional and in a very simple layman language, I would say even the understanding of the CRPD has not been framed in a comprehensive modality. So when we talk about disability rights, we look at the entire legal provision that the UNCRPD has provided to persons with disabilities, and it is so crucial for persons with disabilities to be a human being. And when it comes to disability justice, disability justice goes more beyond than the disability rights.

It doesn't mean that those things are isolated. They are interconnected, but the disability justice provides a holistic and comprehensive modality of understanding people with disabilities, their lively experiences, and also the challenges that they face in their daily lives. So I would say the issue of inclusion, the issue of accessibility, respecting the collective and individual rights of all people, including indigenous and other marginalized, comes in a broader aspect of disability justice.

And when it comes to disability rights movement, I still say, even in my country, I would say that the disability movement in Nepal is so much limited and so much, what do you say, not in a very holistic, not in a very comprehensive, but with definitions related with people with disabilities and related with their impairment. So it's more confined by the definition of the physical impairment or different kinds of impairment that people with disabilities have. For example, all the policies and provisions in the context of Nepal has been defined by 10 types of impairment.

And that is why the lens of gender, the lens of caste, class, ethnicity, including other lens, are not being framed in a human rights-based approach. So we know that the CRPD has been framed from the philosophy of non-discrimination and respecting the human diversity, but it has not been able to internalize in the Global South perspectives that what does human diversity mean? Is it only the human diversity within people with disabilities or beyond it? So for me, I would say that there is still a kind of wider comprehensive understanding that is required when it comes to disability rights perspective. And in that regard, I would say that the disability justice is a broader framework or a broader philosophy that has really tried to

integrate the values that people have in the society within different social categories and framework.

And in that regard, I would say the leadership of the most impacted people, the participation and representation of the most marginalized people, how do we bring the collective solidarity within the disability, within the gender and other movements is also very much important. So it recognizes the wholeness when we talk about disability justice, but it's not only about wholeness, but it also ensures about how do we bring those wholeness from an individual and collective rights movement. And when it comes to individual and collective rights movement, there comes the dedication, the commitment, the sustainability approach, a wellness of people with disabilities, where people with disabilities are put into the center.

And again, they are provided with the values and philosophy of inclusion means. And I would also say the narrative, the definitions of the inclusion is being very much holistically defined when it comes to disability justice. So I would say that though the definition and the understanding and the realization of disability justice varies from one countries to another countries.

So I would say that it depends how the disability justice is being realized, internalized by people with disabilities themselves and how it has been defined by different relevant stakeholders like academia, government, and other people. So it depends on that, but I still, I would say that that brings a kind of comprehensive understanding of disability justice to people with disabilities. Thanks so much Prathima for those fantastic insights.

And I think also you indicated the need for a more kind of global South oriented or geographically located, situationally located conceptualization of disability justice, you know, beyond some of the existing frameworks. And I think there's a lot of work we can do in that regard in our region as well. So moving on from the more general frameworks to look at your specific area of work in terms of the issues faced by women and girls with disabilities, specifically indigenous women and girls.

What are the key issues that this group of women and girls with disabilities face in the context of Nepal? So I would say that when it comes to indigenous women and girls with disabilities, since they have the multiple identities and this multiple identities is again, part of what do you say? People who are in power, people who are or who are in a kind of a structure, institutional structure, because when it comes to indigenous people, I would like to reflect on the traditional customary practices. Those are the traditional institution of indigenous people. And that is totally entirely different from a CSOs.

So I would say that when it comes to girls and women with disabilities from indigenous communities, we know that gender operation, ableism, sexism, including caste ethnicity, though Nepal is not been colonized directly, but we have internal colonization, capitalism, and all this patriarchy is so much part of all these multiple identities. And it is compounded in different forms and aggravated in different forms. When it comes to indigenous girls and women with disabilities, I would say that we have a challenge within our identity that where do we belong? Where do we situate? Where are we actually, where are our position? And for me, I would say that when we want to define our identity most often, I would say that we

realize and we internalize ourselves as a woman, as a woman with disabilities and as an indigenous woman.

But most often our realities are, we are nowhere. We feel that we are everywhere, but most often we are nowhere. And that becomes a challenge most often.

But at the same time, when we talk about the different identities and the intersecting of the different identities, these different identities, again, shifts according to the context and situation. And sometimes it situates you in a very powerful situation and sometimes in a very powerless situation. So it's a power of privilege position or in a underprivileged position.

So it depends on where you are. So in the context of Nepal, I would say that indigenous women and girls with disabilities have one of the challenges related with their individual and collective rights. So how do they bring a space, a common ground where they could bring the features, the qualities of individual and collective rights? So I would say in that regard that most of the international instrument and policies has not been clearly articulated and defined about the collective identity and individual identity.

So for us, it remains a challenge on the ground that how do we figure out our own priorities? Sometimes we have to bring a common kind of agenda, being a woman, being an indigenous woman or women with disabilities. But at the same time, we also have our distinct features and qualities and the challenges that we face in our everyday life. So for me, I would say that realizing all those common tenants and common features and also having those distinct feature, I would say that the issues and the challenges of indigenous people and indigenous women and girls with disabilities in the context of Nepal is the respecting of the collective rights because the individual rights become so much dominant when it comes to and when it has been framed from a Western philosophy, from a Western Eurocentric values of defining the disability and also the disability philosophy.

So for me, I would say that the whole entire philosophy of disability is very much Eurocentric and that does not respect and that does not, what do you say, fulfill the collective rights of indigenous women and girls. And in that regard, it becomes a challenge like us that we have to frame our own narratives of how do we bring those collective rights and individual rights into a common place. And since there is differences of understanding and realizing disability within the indigenous communities from different contexts, like if you look at Australia and New Zealand and other countries, the acceptance and the realization of person with disabilities from indigenous communities and the same kind of understanding in the context of Nepal, we see a huge kind of difference.

So for us, it remains a challenge because there are no enough evidences and information and data on indigenous girls and women with disabilities. It becomes a challenge for us to counter, produce the new narratives from a collective rights perspective or by bringing the common threads of individual rights and collective rights. So that is one of the challenges that we have as indigenous women and girls with disabilities.

But at the same time, as I've already explained about when it comes to indigenous girls and women with disabilities, the historical, systematic, structural discrimination and the indirect discrimination that girls and women with disabilities from indigenous communities face in

their daily lives are not the part of discussion and discourse. It's most often left out agenda and there is no any evidences, report, documents, data on it. And that remains a challenge to tell that how do we face challenges, how our challenges are distinct than the challenges that has been faced by women with disabilities or that has been faced by indigenous women.

So in that regard, I would also say that those historical, systematic and structural discrimination faced by indigenous women and indigenous women with disabilities are distinct and it varies from one context to another context. And those things are not, not brought into the wider discussion within the disability movement and indigenous movement. So that remains the second challenge for us.

The third challenge, I would say that indigenous girls and women with disabilities are not in a situation because they fall or they situate in the lowest hierarchy in the society. So they are not in a situation to claim, to understand, to realize their rights. They even do not know about the basic human rights as a human being.

So when it comes to the lens of gender, disability, ethnicity, and other multiple identities, there is a huge effort, a huge advocacy awareness required to reach to those communities and to sensitize and aware about their rights. So these are the very crucial and fundamental challenges that indigenous peoples and girls with disabilities face. We know that we are indigenous people's right to self-determination, free prior and informed consent, the collective rights of indigenous peoples, and also the importance of indigenous peoples related with their land territories and natural resources are also very much crucial in that regard.

But when it comes to all these kinds of issues and when these issues are again connected with the disability lens and when there is a required of disability inclusion, when it is being seen from a human rights-based approach by respecting people with disabilities and also by understanding their accessibility and inclusion needs, that becomes for the challenge in this wider domain. So I would say that these are the fundamental challenges that we face as indigenous girls and women with disabilities in the context of Nepal, but there are also other challenges related with data, related with the desegregated data and also the facts and findings and also the comprehensive and holistic understanding of disability rights, which does not include the rights of indigenous people or indigenous women with disabilities as a human rights issue. So those are the fundamental challenges that we are facing on the ground.

Thank you so very much Pratima for that very kind of comprehensive tour through some of the key issues faced by indigenous women and girls, especially in the context of Nepal. But I think with lessons that all of us can kind of carry with us when it comes to our national level advocacy, especially when it comes to those multiple layers of intersectionality and the fact that you mentioned that in terms of positionality, that it's not static and that it's something that has to be continuously negotiated in relation to other factors and the point you made about collective rights and the Eurocentric model of individualized rights and how from a global south perspective, maybe the need to rethink rights in a more kind of collective sense. So a lot of things really for us to consider and from that point of key issues, I want to

move on to the topic of movements and in terms of cross-movement mobilization and collaboration.

So in your experience, how did you integrate concerns of women with disabilities with those of the indigenous women's movement and does this collaboration help in highlighting the concerns of both groups? What has your experience been like, you know, dealing with both the indigenous women's movement and also the larger women with disabilities movement, not just in Nepal, but at an international level as well, Pratima, given the great work that you've done in the past? Thank you Niluka for your question. I would say that it's a really very tough job and as far as we have realized, working on the most marginalized groups with multiple identities and trying to understand each identity's needs and the requirement and the definitions and the norms, values of the society. I would say that each identity is crucial and each identity has their own importance and values.

And in that regard, to bring a cross-movement collaboration within the indigenous movements, bringing the lens of disability and bringing the indigeneity lens within the disability has really been a challenge work at the global level also. But what I would say that this has not only been a challenge, we know that as I've already highlighted some of the challenges that we are facing on the ground, but these challenges is when we see these challenges from indigenous people's lens or indigenous women's lens, we have always told that indigenous peoples are not only the challenges, they do have the solutions to move forward. So in that regard, I would also highlight that despite having all the challenges, we are able to also have a solution with the challenges.

And in that regard, we have been able to do a global advocacy with different constituency and having a global advocacy, doing a cross-movement collaboration within the different constituency has remained very crucial. But at the same time, it has also been a challenge in terms of understanding the values, the systems, and also breaking the silos that we have within our movement. So if you look at the entire disability movement also, it is really challenged to see a disability and gender lens.

And again, when it comes to indigenous people's identity, most often indigenous people's identity in many countries, including the United Nations, they are, or they haven't taken in a very right-based approach because most of the issues related with indigenous peoples are connected with their land, territories, and resources. And when it comes to land, territories, and resources, I would say the word power, capitalism, and liberalism, and many things matter when it comes to indigenous peoples. So in that regard, I find that it has really been a challenge at the global level, but I would say that these challenges have also brought an enabling environment to sit on the table, to discuss within us that how do we move forward.

And in that regard, I would say that the discussion, the meeting, the informal and formal meeting with different constituency, with the different institution at the global level has really played a vital role. And in that regard, I would also like to highlight the development partners who has really supported for the work that we have been doing at the global level. So for me, I would say that it has really brought a context and a situation even to internalize within the UN mandate.

For example, I would say that I would like to give you a concrete example of the UN Special Rapporteur on Persons with Disabilities and Indigenous Peoples. So I realized it was long back ago when we used to do our advocacy, having meeting with Special Rapporteur personally, we would hear that their issues, their mandates are only for either for persons with disabilities or for Indigenous Peoples. But having a continuous advocacy and also trying to bring the lens of disability justice, looking the disability justice and framing the narratives and understanding of intersexuality.

And in the later phase, after the 2015, we have also been able to indicate and relate our work with the sustainable development goals. And when we look at the theme of the sustainable development goal, reaching the farthest far, this theme has really helped us to internalize and to rethink ourselves and within our advocacy to understand that who are these people who are left behind. And in that regard, I would say that Indigenous girls and women with disabilities, including other marginalized groups who have multiple identities are the ones who have been left behind.

And that has really been instrumental for us to have discussion and debate and also to frame a kind of discussion that how do we collectively bring a common space? Where do we see the synergy? How do we build a synergy within the different movement? And how do we bring the lens of collective rights and individual rights? And how do we make a clear demarcation of some of the rights that is again related with individual rights and some of the rights which are again related with the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples? And I would say that the global movement and the global advocacy of framing these narratives has really been instrumental to bring those lens and perspectives. And I would also like to highlight that this has really been important for us, not only to know about the challenges, not only to look at the challenges, but also it has clearly made a kind of situation and context and also define our own identity that what do we want? So we have been claiming our identity that we want to be represented, we want to be understood, we want to be indicated ourselves, not as a women, not as a women with disabilities, not as Indigenous women, but as Indigenous women with disabilities. And this is how we are claiming our voices.

And we are also trying to make a clear definition of what does it mean when we say we want to claim or we want to be recognized and respected as Indigenous women with disabilities. And I would say that this, by claiming our identity, we are also defining our distinct identity. And what does distinct identity mean for us? When it comes from a global perspective, what does that distinct identity relate to Indigenous women with disabilities? And we have been able to bring some of the features, some of the philosophy, some of the challenges is our distinct identities.

And this has really been crucial to sit on the table and to discuss with different constituency, like the women constituency, the disability and Indigenous people's constituency. And we realize that there has been progress. I would say that the conversation, the dialogue and the informal and formal meeting that has been held with different stakeholders in different time frame, in different context has really enabled us to have a common ground and to build a collective solidarity within our movement.

So it has also reflected in space to rethink about what we have so far done in the past. And what needs to be done in the future. So I would say that it has really brought a hope, an

inspiration for groups like us who have multiple and intersecting identities to have more debate and discourse around it and to frame our new narratives.

What does it mean for Indigenous women and girls with disabilities? Or it might be for other groups who are persons with disabilities and who are from queer or who are from the Dalit minorities people. So I would say it has really brought a holistic and comprehensive understanding. And that is why in the context of Nepal right now, we are not only talking about Indigenous people with disabilities, but we are equally raising our voices and gathering information data on Dalit people with disabilities, Madhesi people with disabilities who falls under minority groups.

So we are also defining those definitions. What does minority people with disability mean? Is there a difference between the minority people with disabilities and Indigenous people with disabilities? So it has been able to internalize ourselves on our work and on our definitions and values. So for me, I would say that this cross-movement collaboration has really helped and enabled us, an enabling environment to frame and to shape our narratives and definitions within ourselves.

But also it has clearly made a path to move. How do we move forward? So it has really paved a way for us that how do we move forward individually, but also at the same time, how do we move collectively to ensure the rights of groups with multiple and intersecting identities? This is what I would like to add on. That's really fantastic, Prathima.

Thank you so much. And for really showing us how personal level advocacy at the community, national and international level can really lead to tangible changes in the lives of women and girls with disabilities in terms of creating new narratives, new ways of being, new ways of identifying and innovative ways of leading from the margin. So it's really fantastic to hear about your experience and in terms of cross-movement collaboration and collectivization, how powerful a tool that has been for your personal advocacy and the movements that you belong to.

So I really appreciate you sharing that with us. And finally, in terms of the larger women's movement in general, how does the larger women's movement react to the strand of, you know, when it comes to issues of women and girls with disabilities and specifically indigenous women and girls with disabilities, what has your experience been like working with the women's movement and how have these concerns been negotiated within that larger space of the women's movement in your experience? So when it comes to the Global South, the politics of identity, the politics of different social categories itself is a huge discourse, this is what I would say. So when it comes to the issue of women or indigenous people or people with disabilities, every identity has their own kind of nuances and own kind of values and philosophy when it comes to indigenous peoples, even they are not being defined in different countries within the legal entity.

So they are being defined with different terminology and that becomes really a challenge when it comes to indigenous people. But at the same time, when it comes to people with disabilities or women with disabilities, I would say that most countries in the Global South, we still have the same situation which is not a right-based approach. We are still in a kind of charity-based approach.

So to bring these identities and to claim these identities from a right-based perspective and to debate within the women's movement, I would say that the journey has just started. I would say that we are just with a single dot and we know that this single dot has to come collectively with different dots. So it is a long journey.

But as I've already explained, that we have challenges on the ground, but that those challenges have also enabled us to bring some good practices to deal with those challenges, to have some solutions. So for me, I would say that the conversation and the debate, having collaboration and discussion with the wider women's movement, either from a women with disabilities perspective or from indigenous women's perspective is not very easy, but I would say that if you look from a CSO's perspective, if you look from a civil society organization perspectives, there has been some kind of change, reformations and transformations. We know that the civil society's spaces are shrinking at this moment, but at the same time, we also see the collectiveness within the marginalized people's movement.

To some extent, there has been some kind of fragmentations, I know, related with particular issues, but when it comes to overall marginalized issue, I would see that those collective vibes and collective solidarity within the marginalized movement. So in that regard, the conversation and the understanding of disability and bringing an indigenous lens within those larger constituency has remained in a very progressive form in these recent days. This is what I would say.

If you look at 10 years before, the road that I would see was really very difficult, but after the 10 years, we see that there has been radical change. We know that different countries have ratified the CRPD, the CEDAW, the CRC and other international instruments and the concluding observation of those international instruments clearly outlines about these marginalized groups, including women's movement and the issue of multiple and intersecting identities. This has really opened a space and avenues for us to debate around these words.

What does that word mean and how do we internalize those words in our local context, at the community level? What does it mean? And in that regard, I would say that the collaboration and the consultation within the wider movement is in a very progressive form. I know there are many challenges. It is not very much easy to understand and realize indigenous people's rights and disability people's rights as a human rights approach, but still I would say that since there has been a huge group of people who are leading the leadership in different constituency within the marginalized groups.

If you look at the history of people with disabilities 10 years before and now, there has been a radical change in the leadership and also the organization of people with disabilities. This radical change has really amplified their voices to claim and to have collaborations. We know that there are challenges, but within the challenges also they are able to continuously advocate for their rights.

And this continuous advocacy from different labels in terms of documentation, in terms of individual advocacy and institutional advocacy within the marginalized groups movement and within the larger women movement has enabled a space to think on themselves. Because every time in every kind of discussion we are questioning to them, where are we?

Isn't it? Have we really done a justice? Are we really working on a human rights-based approach? So these are the fundamental key questions that is being questioned every time, in every forum, in every movement. So this brings these questions, repeated questions has really been able to think about what does human diversity mean? What does women diversity mean? Why there is a need of shift of power from the people who, of the people who are in a, who were in and who are in a kind of privileged position.

So it has been able to change those kinds of questions and those kinds of frameworks that has already been framed. So in that regard, I would say that the larger women's movement has been able to bring those dots into the conversation, but I know that the conversation has not turned into a reality and it takes time. So for me, I would say that there is a collective effort required from the marginalized groups constituency, like organization of people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, Dalit, LGBTIQ community.

So those collective movements and collective voice can change these narratives within the larger women's movement to build a common ground at the same time, and also to have a distinct, what do you say, identity within those common grounds. Fantastic. Thank you so much, Pratima.

Actually, what you said gives me a lot of hope because it is about really planting seeds of cross-movement collaboration and the wider condition of intersectionality within the women's rights movement. As you said, the conversation has started, but it'll take time for that to kind of translate into reality and that to some of persons like you at a global level are really contributing to the expansion of that dialogue and to the realization of those commonalities within a framework of intersectionality. So a lot of great work that has been done to date and a lot of good work that we all need to do together in the future at a collective level, across the different regions.

And I really hope that those of you from the DSROI 2021 program watching this interview really gained a lot from Pratima's insights. Pratima, thank you so much for joining us today and for sharing your wealth of experience and insight and keen observations about the larger socio-political landscape that we face. And hopefully you will continue to join us again in the future as we kind of develop and grow as well.

Thank you, Pratima. Thank you, everyone. We will post questions and additional resources connected to the different aspects that Pratima spoke about today in her radical action interview.

And that said, I will say goodbye. Thank you.