

## News & Insights

“When these women start out, it can be just a basket on the street.”

Interview with Nina Schriver, founder of WAWCAS



2008 saw the creation of the women entrepreneurship program WAWCAS (Women at Work Children at School). The brainchild of Nina Schriver and Sangeeta Shrestha, WAWCAS focuses on business and social development training and education and small loans, to give women living in deep poverty, their children and families a chance to get a better life. The program is designed to empower and equip women from the poorest parts of Nepal, to become business owners and entrepreneurs.

For 18 Nepalese women in 2008, it was a chance to start businesses and ensure schooling for their children. For Nina Schriver, it was a proof of concept for something that could create lasting change. “We started out with 18 women. After 100 women, we had kind of a proof of concept, with 98% of the loans paid back and 95 % of the women still running their businesses” said Nina Schriver, who started the program in 2008 with Sangeeta Shrestha.

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Over the course of 16 months, the women receive a small loan, as well as training in various fields, such as:

- Business Development
- Financial Management
- Women rights
- Child rights
- Non-violence
- Nutrition

The program involves the grouping of 25 participants. “We gather the women in groups, so they can support each other and their community. We work with them for 16 months, with training twice a month, home and business visits twice a month, and a monthly meeting between the 25 women in their groups,” Nina continued.

Since the program began, 4800 women have participated and started around 4300 new businesses. Some of the women start businesses together, hence the lower number.

Women enrolling in these programs, are often met with skepticism, from the communities in which they live. This initial skepticism is very important to quash out, according to Nina Schriver. “The closer relations must change their perception of these women. When the women start out, it can be just a basket on the streets. When they start making money, the initial skepticism goes away, and the support of the community comes with the businesses growing,” she said.

Nina Schriver envisions WAWCAS and the businesses that the women are creating as a steppingstone, not just for the women, but for their children and families as well. She stated: “The aim is to help the next generation, through their mothers. To be able to give kids a better start, so they’re not dependent on school donors, only their mothers.” By starting with the mothers, the WAWCAS program hopes to give kids a better chance of going to school and further the growth in the community, that they’re mothers started.

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Running the WAWCAS Program in the middle of a global pandemic also presents challenges for Nina Schriver and her colleagues. Covid-19 is casting a shadow over the future of the women and their businesses. “The country has been in lock down almost every single week since March. The communication on how to handle Covid-19 is not very clear, and the healthcare system has major problems handling the situation. The women lose their businesses and the women, that were in training when the lockdown started, are very afraid of what will happen to their life and newly started enterprises. We have established crisis communication, as many of our trainers are stuck in remote mountain villages,” she said. The trainers check in with the women once a week and the trainers participate in a call-in meeting once a week.

Nina continues, “The women will always face challenges, which is why we help them structure the women groups to anchor them together.”

The ultimate goal of the program, according to Nina Schriver, is to help empower women to become self-sustainable financially and personally and being able to provide their children with access to schools and better living conditions. “Support from companies like SCADA International makes a big difference. Every time we get support, we can help more women. But it’s not just helping the individual woman participating in the program. It also helps the families of these women and the community the women live in and where they develop businesses. The mothers become role models and an inspiration for others in their communities. It’s really about taking leadership of your own life and believing in the value of yourself as a woman,” Nina concludes.