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Enhancing Rural Women's Technical and Vocational Capability through Homestay Initiatives in Nepal: An Ethnographic Exploration

Chet Nath Kanel*, Prakash Chandra Bhattarai, Laxman Gnawali

Kathmandu University

Abstract

'Homestay tourism' occupies significant space in Nepal's tourism sector, and these homestays are mostly operated by women, who are often informally educated and have less access to modern skills and knowledge-gaining opportunities. However, limited information is available on rural women's experiences in such endeavors. This paper elaborates the experiences of rural women who received various types of technical and vocational training in the process of developing and managing community homestays in rural areas of Nepal. The study was carried out using qualitative approach (ethnography) in the Mahabharat Hills of Bagmati Province administering various qualitative tools, such as participant observations, 'bhalakusari' (intimate informal talks/'kurakani'), focus group discussions (FGDs), and study of local artifacts. A total of seven homestay operators (women) were engaged in the close observations and 'bhalakusari'. Additional reflections were also gathered from other stakeholders: the family members, tourists, local leaders, as well as the community facilitators. The findings suggest that homestay tourism in the area has been playing significant role in the process of transferring technical knowledge and vocational skills to these rural women, so that they are inspired and motivated to engage in the homestay enterprising with better confidence. The study also concludes that homestay operators' limited educational and literacy skills, and less exposures have put difficulties in the learning and capacity development processes. Suitable training courses with local and/or simple Nepali language, along with adequate reading/supporting materials and continued facilitation and backstopping are some of the practical implications suggested by the study.

Keywords: community homestay, enterprise, rural women, technical and technological education, vocational

Introduction

Nepal's tourism greatly contributes to earning foreign currencies; and towards improving local socio-cultural and infrastructural conditions (Ministry of Culture, Tourism and

Civil Aviation [MoCTCA], 2020). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (now called UN Tourism) (UNWTO, 2022) also claims that tourism has been one of the most thriving economic activities of the 21st century, with increasing roles of the private sector

* Corresponding email: chetnathkanel@gmail.com

(MoCTCA, 2016; Nepal Tourism Board [NTB], 2019). Equally, it helps enhancing local capacities and empowerment processes (Sharma, 2019). In such cases, local men and women's active participation is crucial in order to increase community engagement in tourism destinations (Lama & Job, 2014). Nepal's several conservation and tourism/ecotourism projects and destinations, such as Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Project (TRPAP), Eco-Himal Tourism Initiative, the Great Himalaya Trail Project (GHT), etc. have proved that participatory and community-based tourism activities can greatly support in the overall capability enhancement of the local communities, particularly in the rural areas (Choegy, 2011; United Nations Development Program [UNDP]/TRPAP, 2007). Through tourism and social mobilization, the capacity development activities are mainly focused on creating a teaching-learning environment in the target areas. Homestay tourism has been considered as one of the promising economic and social activities in the rural parts of Nepal, where community homestays are in growing trends (Sedai, 2018; Sharma, 2018; Taragaon Development Board [TGDB], 2016; TGDB, 2024). Homestay enterprising in Nepal mostly involves women (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013); since they are more familiar with traditional hospitality, food items and also experienced in household chores (Kandel, 2016; Pasa, 2021). According to Choi and Cai (2022), community-based tourism (CBT) endeavors also primarily put emphasis on developing locally-owned food and beverage services, so that they can have their own 'destination image'.

Similarly, according to the MoCTCA (2010), community homestays, as a key approach to CBT in Nepal, have been playing important roles in promoting women's motivation as 'main players' of the system. Equally, CBT approaches employ various ways and strategies in order to develop homestay operators' skills, knowledge and attitudes through a number of events including basic orientation on tourism/sustainable tourism, exposure visits, technical and vocational training courses, waste management and environmental sanitation campaigns, and so on (TGDB, 2016). Due to

some good examples from different villages of Nepal such as Sirubari, Ghalegaun, Ghandruk, ACAP region (various villages), Shree Antu, etc. community homestay initiatives are gradually being adopted and spread out in other parts of the country where CBT development activities are in operations (Kanel, 2020). Homestay related training and exposure visits have helped local communities' overall capacity development and their empowerment processes as well (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013). Most often these homestay operators are adults, with less formal education but with lots of experiences (Kanel, Bhattarai & Gnawali, 2023). However, little is known about what and how these rural women (or the homestay tourism's main 'drivers') actually learn and what types of difficulties do they face in grasping and retaining the learned knowledge and skills in their day-to-day vocational life. Also, limited empirical knowledge is available on the contribution of homestay-related training in overall technical and vocational capacity development (TVCD) and related enterprising. Now-a-days Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has got priority in Nepal's secondary schools; and, TVCD is focused more on the involvement of adults in various professions/work-forces. Despite this, less research has been done in these fields.

Thus, this descriptive study is designed to explore mainly focusing on three pertinent areas of inquiry: i) How the homestay-related training and learning programs are helping homestay operators in the rural areas to develop their vocational capacities; ii) What (contents) are they actually learning?; and, iii) What types of challenges do they face in the learning practices and processes?

Literature Review

Concept of Homestay and Homestay Enterprising

Globally, homestay has emerged as a new phenomenon in diversifying both accommodation facilities and tourism products/services with sustainable and resilient concepts (UNWTO, 2022). The homestay accommodation system enhances tourist-related services and satisfaction with an enhanced enterprising capacity in the tourism

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development process (NTB, 2011; Pradhanang, 2002). Homestay enterprising is also considered as an indigenous and traditional skills-oriented business which is believed to spur cultural interaction and revival, bolster employment, alleviate poverty, curb rural migration, and empower local communities if managed properly, responsibly, and sustainably. Additionally, such initiatives could encourage the locals and concerned stakeholders to diversify tourism products and explore new tourism sites/activities. Thus, in brief, homestays not only provide food and shelter to visitors but also enrich the value of cultural and heritage tourism in the locality. It is also advocated that rural area-based homestay tourism activities provide with several seen and unseen opportunities for the local communities/villagers - both directly and/or indirectly engaged (Kanel, 2020; Kunwar, 2002). Homestay enterprising has several connections with other enterprises too (TGDB, 24), since tourism is considered as an integrated and complex industry, or also called the 'industry of other industries'. Since homestays are intended to develop multiple capitals and capacities, including social, economic, human, physical, etc., homestay enterprises are run by family members, mostly women (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Government of Nepal [GoN], 2019; NRB, 2015). They are also involved in micro-finance activities with the objective of empowering them (KC, 2013; Lamichhane, 2020). Homestay hospitality activity starts with the welcoming of the guests (Kunwar, 2002). The homestay hosts are always ready to welcome the guests anytime they arrive (Lama, 2014). Homestay is also a part of 'sustainable tourism initiative' (Bhatt, 2015; Kandel, 2016; Lama, 2013; UNWTO, 2022).

As key catalysts, homestay operators' capacity development and empowerment issues encompass various concerns, such as the nature and extent of the empowerment-related activities, the empowerment process, and the local stakeholders' experiences in those capability enhancement and empowerment efforts (Kanel, Bhattarai, & Gnawali, 2024). The homestay training packages include, among others, homestay management, food

preparations, health and hygiene, waste management, tour package development, proposal development and budgeting, menu (*tariff*) development, code of conduct development, etc. TRPAP's experiences showed that "little effort could make big changes in disadvantaged and marginalized households" (UNDP/TRPAP, 2007, p. 33). Local-level institutional development, minor infrastructures, different types of training, and capacity development initiatives were instrumental in uplifting the status and dignity of these grassroots people. It is, therefore, that the actors urgently realize sustainable supporting mechanisms and local capacity development efforts. As advocated by Blanchard et al. (2012), applying cost-effective methods in such training and workshops becomes vital, ensuring sustainability and ownership of the locals. This equally relates to homestay learning and enterprising as well.

Vocational Capability Enhancement through Homestay Training

Being an integrated industry, rural tourism and homestay enterprising has the potential and role of enhancing local human resources and capacities along with making them more accountable and responsible. Sen (2009) believes that such enhanced capacities contribute to a person for more choices of freedom and secured 'social justice', who sees 'freedom' as significant aspect- "making people more accountable" (p. 19). Local capacities and leadership can bring many positive changes at local levels to a greater extent. Nyaupane and Chhetri (2009), and Nyaupane et al. (2020) also suggest that local adaptive skills are crucial for developing management skills and resilient capacities. These are possible through different supportive interventions. Despite the fact, Sedai (2018) blames that there has been little effort to deliver systematically developed training and capacity development packages with the above objectives. Community homestays' contributions to local-level learning, capacity building, and related issues are well acknowledged.

In rural area-based tourism, the community learning processes mainly focus on the contents like tourism and environment awareness

program (TEAP), learning green development through conservations and plantations, cultural heritage preservation and effective performance, waste management, hospitality management, house-keeping, cooking, baking, local guiding, local resources management, community museum establishment, and development, etc. According to Lama (2014) and UNDP/TRPAP (2007), various organizations and projects in Nepal gradually developed and adopted such contents and curriculum in formal, informal and non-formal homestay-focused technical and vocational capacity development training and education programs and activities. Although limited, local knowledge and practices are also reflected in the contents and courses. Such traditional and local knowledge and skills are further improved with new knowledge and skills in order to increase efficiency and profitability. Homestay learning is also a part of the overall capacity building of the local stakeholders in tourism development and related endeavors. Such overall capacities mainly include technical and vocational capacity, motivational and empowerment capacity, and business leadership capacity. It is said that learning is an active process "that needs to be stimulated and guided toward desirable outcomes" (Crow & Crow, 2008, p. 225); and learning helps to know and to do better; nevertheless, all the learning may not be applied in actual work/field although sustainable development efforts are greatly expected (Bagale, 2015). Thus, the homestay development and capacity enhancement processes start simultaneously and go continuously.

Likewise, such homestay interventions often play an integral role in enhancing not only the operators' technical and vocational capacities, but also a wider spectrum of personal development, household management, and integrated community development activities; for instance: health and sanitation, waste management, drinking water, irrigation, trail improvement, infrastructure development, institutional and social cohesiveness development, educational development, etc. (Kanel et al., 2024). In this context, KC (2013) and Lama (2013) also claim that women's leadership and confidence development

through tourism is much appreciated and apprehended. Along with their capacities, they gradually learn how tourists can be attracted to their villages or communities (Pandey, 2011; Pyakurel, 2013) so that "mutual benefits" would be possible (Sen, 2009; Sen, 2010). Despite this, there are lacks in training and promotional efforts in some new homestay/CBT/rural tourism destinations (Kanel, 2020; Sedai, 2018). Likewise, there are several research gaps, particularly on the homestay training needs, suitable training packages, effective and practical delivery mechanisms, utilization of training programs, equity issues in capacity development and benefit sharing, and so forth.

Methodology of Exploration: *Bhalakusari*, a Dominant Tool

In this research, we adopted qualitative inquiry approach. Within the qualitative approach, ethnographic method of exploration was employed.

We followed the ideas of Bogdan and Biklen (2011), Bryman (2008), Dawson (2013), Denzin and Lincoln (2018), Gobo (2011), and Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) in designing and implementing the research approach and tools. We have adopted interpretive paradigm with a reflective approach, which enabled us to seek the meaning of the social world of homestay operators in the study area. According to Campbell and Lassiter (2015), Creswell (2012), Kahn (2011) and Saldana (2015), the ethnographers observe, participate, interact, analyze, reflect, write, rethink, and describe cultures, their members, and their involvement with them. For the study, we chose one of the homestay sites ('Mahabharat Hills'-MH; name changed) in the Bagmati Province. The Province is the epicenter of Chepangs' inhabitation in Nepal (CBS, 2011; Gautam & Thapa-Magar, 1994). The study site (MH) is also dominantly resided by ethnic people Chepangs. Other castes are Giri-Puri (also called 'Dasnami'), Magar, and Brahman-Chhetri. Here homestay tourism development efforts—although in limited scale—are going on for almost two decades. All initiatives here have been geared towards developing hill tourism, like 'hill-station tourism' based on community homestay initiations. This area is

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one of the famous rural tourist destinations in Nepal. Out of 12, three homestays have been run by Chepangs in this site. Chepangs have their own language (but no separate script), rituals, foods, and costumes. Irrespective of difficult life conditions, Chepangs' unique lifestyle, traditional cultures, and geographical landscapes ("although there are hardships": Gurung, 2016; Khanal, 2014) are great assets/resources for CBT development/promotion in the MH. Other homestays are run by Magars, Dashnami and Brahman/Chhetri.

Considering the nature of the inquiry, we designed the research to adopt a purposive sampling technique. Thus, in this study, the research participants were the female homestay operators of the site. Families having homestay experience and able to provide such services at present were the main basis for selecting as 'research participants'. Out of those 12 homestays in the area, seven homestays (ethnic representation as: 3 Chepangs, 2 Magars, 1 Dashnami, and 1 Brahmin-Chhetri) were in primary focus of the study. In this study, for anonymity or ethical reason, their changed names (re-naming) have been used in this way: Aaita Kumari, Som Maya, Mangala Devi, Buddhi Maya, Bihi Devi, Shukrikala, and Shanishchara.

In the study process, in addition to those seven homestays, other homestays were also briefly observed; and other members of the selected homestay families were also consulted for further enriching the information. Likewise, a local tourist guide (as an initial 'gatekeeper') was also mobilized (details can be found in a journal paper by Kanel, Bhattarai, and Gnawali, 2023). In the study, homestay operators' day-to-day life/activities, particularly focusing on homestay operational works and other cultural activities were observed and experienced by the first author. The field research was accomplished from 2019 to 2021, spending some twelve weeks (intermittently) by the first author. During the study processes, different ethnographic techniques and tools were applied for qualitative data collection, including staying in homestays, regular observations, *bhalakusari*/ '*kurakani*' (Dhakal, 2021), and focus group discussions (FGDs). In the FGDs (in total 3 events), there were minimum eight

and maximum fourteen participants in each discussion session. Each FGD lasted for about 1.5 to 2 hours.

The scratch notes ('rough notes'), field notes (elaborative notes from those rough notes), conversational interview/*bhalakusari* records (audio) and transcripts, photographs (with their prior approval), local artifacts, and key participants' diaries/copies, as well as the homestay management records, were the main sources of research data. *Bhalakusari* ways of local conversations played dominant roles in the research process. Based on the observations and formal/informal conversations, initial notes were prepared in Nepali language, and while preparing the detailed transcripts in computer, they were directly translated into English by the lead author. Transcript notes were highlighted with different colors for seeking key patterns, major themes and issues/challenges. The data were further synthesized and analyzed manually and appropriate themes/sub-themes; and key issues/insights were re-developed and derived to illustrate the field reflections and insights.

Research participants' prior consent, anonymity, multiple sources of information (triangulation), summarizing the collected information at each event/step with the key research participants, etc. (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015; Dawson, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) were some of the key strategies adopted during the research process for maintaining ethical standards and enhancing the credibility of the information/research insights.

Technical and Vocational Capacity Building through Homestay Initiatives

The field reflections suggest that the homestay initiatives have brought different opportunities for the locals to be a vocational person or an 'entrepreneur'. The homestay operators of the MH have been able to learn in many ways and through different strategies, as we found from the observations, *bhalakusari*/ interactions, and other sources of information. In the words of Kolb (1984), the homestay operators' own strategies and facilitated ways of teaching-learning come under their life-long learning initiatives too. The following sections elaborate

how technical and vocational matters are learnt by the locals, what types of contents are in use in such endeavors; and, what challenges and difficulties are being faced by the homestay operators, mainly by the women of MH.

Homestay Initiatives and Learning Opportunities

Life-long learning is a well-established perspective in education and training (Kolb, 1984). Such learning continues in formal, informal, and non-formal ways. Here also, locals have learnt different matters associated with homestay development and management. Different packages developed by various organizations like Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hotel Management (NATHM), Nepal Tourism Board ([NTB], 2011; 2022), Taragaon Development Board (TGDB) are delivered by various resource persons being mobilized by UN Project, INGOs, NGOs, and GOs (NATHM, 2022). At the same time, locals also share their experiences and learning with the trainers/educators. They have learnt various knowledge and skills through training and workshop programs, exposure visits (of best sites), family (intergenerational) and friends/peer, community of practice, exhibitions and fairs, from tourists/ 'guests', through digital ways, and sometimes from their kids (such as, new internet-based technology or 'ICT', English language, etc.).

For example, 'hospitality' (more importantly welcoming and giving farewell to the guests) aspects were learnt from an exposure visit to (Sirubari and other places). As a result, in the observations and *bhalakusaris*, it was found that a single or solo guest or group guests coming without prior information are greeted with just 'greetings' (*abhivaadan*, *namaste*, etc.). Whereas, guests coming with prior information are welcomed/greeted with flower-bunches/garlands/*tika* and also a 'welcome drink.' In this context, research participant Bihi Devi shared:

After we learned from the Sirubari visit, when there is no big group of tourists, it is difficult for us to manage a welcome program by the local homestay management committee. Individual or small groups of tourists are welcomed by

the concerned homestay operators only in a simple way. In that case, instead of finding flowers and garlands, the welcoming of the tourist is managed simply by exchanging 'Namaste' and available drinks like water, tea, or sometimes 'raksi' (local alcohol). Welcoming guests was not new thing for us, but welcoming in group with special flowers and tika was a new practice for us, which we learned from Sirubari.

According to them (FGD, where Shukrikala and Bihi Devi's husband were also there), the technical and vocational training and exposures were helpful in improving existing knowledge, skills and also developing positive attitudes towards homestay enterprising for better earning and better learning. Likewise, the FGD participants shared that they learned so many things about homestay management, including theoretical (knowledge) and practical (action-oriented) subject matters. It was notable that exposure visits and training programs complemented the overall learning process. The participants also claimed that the exposure visit was more important to get motivated and develop confidence by 'seeing and believing'; while classroom based teaching and learning opportunities provided more confidence in speaking and expressing, including knowing and practicing some English words. In an observation, one of the participants showed a note-book (artifact) maintained during the training event, in which all the English words and other useful information could be seen. Studying their wall-matters and other artifacts (e.g. diary, visitor register, etc.) as well some senses could be made that they are continuously thriving for learning new English words, even standard Nepali words.

The homestay (rural tourism) program not only provided trainings related to hospitality and gardening; but also provided some handicraft-based skills, which were boon to improve their economic and social status in the village. And, a handicraft (bamboo-based) entrepreneur (male) shared that the homestay enterprising and handicraft-making initiatives are directly linked; thus, training received from various organizations have been useful. According to them, the training opportunities were

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instrumental to refine or improve their traditional skills of making bamboo-based crafts, e.g., *mudhaa* (stool) and also some decorative items (such as newspaper-stand, letter-box, mirror-frame, photo-frame, pen-stand, *churi*/bangles-holder, etc.). Those items are purchased by the visitors as '*koseli*' or '*samjhanaako chino*' (local souvenirs) from the village. Scholarships on homestay tourism (Kandel, 2016; Pasa, 2021; Sedai, 2018) also highlight such benefits, concerns and perspectives.

According to the participants, many subject-matters were covered during the training/workshop programs and exposure visits, and further reinforced by occasional exhibition-oriented programs and festivals/fairs held locally in the district/province headquarters or/and the capital city of Kathmandu. Many types of handicrafts and several types of food items were displayed/on sale. According to participants Mangala Devi and Shanishchara, they enjoyed it and learned so many things from that exhibition. This experience also illustrates that exhibitions and fairs could also be good tools for local capacity enhancement and technical and vocational confidence-building.

The study has found eight key ways and sources being adopted in the field for teaching-learning new techniques and technologies, including:

- i) Learning through traditional ways or 'intergenerational knowledge' transfer and self-experiences;
- ii) Learning through self-experience ('learning by doing');
- iii) Learning through training and workshops (formal classes/ sessions);
- iv) Learning through observational (exposure) visits, exhibitions;
- v) Learning through peers/ groups/ networks ('community of practice') (Wenger, 2004);
- vi) Learning through host-guest interactions and guests' feedback;
- vii) Learning through different digital modes/ICTs and media (mass, social); and,

- viii) Learning through kids.

Among those ways, "learning through training and workshop events" occupies significant space in the overall learning and capacity development process. All formal and informal training/ learning activities are based on certain curricula and/or manuals developed by various institutions. As the next key finding, the following section depicts the major contents being used or delivered for the purpose.

Key Technical and Vocational Contents of the Homestay Training-Workshop Events

The study found a wide range of technical and vocational contents being delivered during various training and workshop events in the homestay destination. According to the participants, even the exposure visits or field trips to famous homestay sites helped cover those contents formally or informally. For example, in an interaction, a research participant Som Maya was trying to remember the key contents of those exposure visits to Sirubari as follows: tourist-welcoming styles, food items, cultural shows and entertainment, guest distributions, local pricing system, management of tourism attractions, guiding, communications with guests, billing and payment procedures, equitable benefit sharing, guests' farewell, etc.

To be particular, during the study period, we also reviewed a homestay training course curricula/manual being used by various organizations/ individual consultants while running homestay management training which was developed in the initiation of the Nepal Tourism Board in 2011 on the occasion of 'Visit Nepal Year- 2011' (Bhandari, 2010; 2013). The curricula-based training programs were mostly run for a week as 'basic training', and the course duration depends upon the resources available with the training organizer(s). As per the tourism trainers met in Kathmandu, in such cases, theoretical parts of homestay management are shortened, and the 'cooking' (food and beverage preparations) part is given more emphasis. In the inquiry, it was also found that a minimum of 3-day homestay training and a maximum of 10-day training events supported by various organizations are common in the homestay field. And in some cases, 2 to 3 days'

refresher or follow-up training have also been organized by the concerned facilitating organizations. As described above, those training packages have been mainly developed by NATHM, NTB, and TGDB (NTB, 2011). Based on those models, other NGOs/INGOs have also made some tailor-made courses to suit local contexts in their working (target) areas. The training manual by NTB is the latest one in the homestay arena. These basic and modular courses are further refined/tailor-made by various local private companies and CBOs involved in the homestay and 'small hotel and lodge management' (In the MH context, as we prefer to say 'hometel': 'होमटेल') training. The key organizers of such training courses include local governments, colleges, private companies, including the Federation of Nepali Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI)'s branches, and individual consultants/ professional trainers.

The seven-day modular training manual developed by the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB, 2011) to provide homestay training to the homestay operators of various parts of Nepal, included subject matters like i) Introduction to tourism, tourism in Nepal, homestay tourism, ii) Importance of tourism, benefits, types, positive and negative impacts, iii) Homestay operation and management techniques; iv) Reception; v) Housekeeping; vi) Food and beverage production and quality control; vii) Food and beverage service and hygiene and sanitation management; viii) First aid and general treatments/precautions; ix) Ethical/moral issues (codes of conduct) in homestay tourism; and x) Packaging, promotion, and marketing of homestay and local tourism products/services.

Initial development of the training curricula was made by TGDB and NATHM, and later it was further promoted by NTB and other organizations. Figure 1, depicts the key contents of the homestay training and workshops run for capacitating community homestay operators in Nepal.

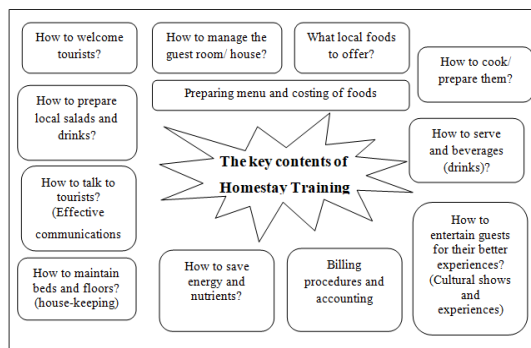


Figure 1: Key Contents of Homestay Training

(Source: NTB, 2011; and field notes of the lead author, 2019-2021)

According to the FGD participants (primarily expressed in the second event of the three FGDs), the trainers/instructors mostly dealt with the theoretical parts and often spent less time on practical aspects. In addition, contextualizing the practicalities of the contents, a freelance homestay trainer in Kathmandu, who has been conducting such courses for the last two decades, shared:

If homestay training is delivered with full emphasis on practical parts, it is very costly and time-consuming. Our training events have covered many things as 'tips,' but not in full or wider detail. Sometimes, training courses are completed with some 'demonstrational' sessions only rather than giving a chance to everyone to 'practice' in the classroom. If we do so, we need lots of materials and time, which is generally out of our expectations and budgets. Perhaps due to this, they usually do not care about how much the participants have learned or will learn, but they are more concerned about the total number of participants; because more participants will justify the 'rationale' of the training conduction and the cost-matters. This is a ground reality. What can we do?

Overall, content-wise, the homestay operators have gone through different topics and contexts - formal training sessions or observational tours organized by various facilitating organizations (UNDP/TRPAP, 2007). In addition to these directly-related topics, participants are also

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taught/self-learn about enterprising, local environment conservation, waste management, cleaning campaigning, health and hygiene maintenance, and so on. It depends on the institution's purpose, intent, resources, and other factors involved in local capacity building so as to enhance 'enterprising' skills or business capacities of the homestay operators. In the process of multiple enterprise development in the homestay site, in addition to homestay training and exposure, some of the participants have got opportunity to take part in various skills-oriented training programs such as *mudhaa* (bamboo-stool)-making, wood-based souvenir items-making, bee-keeping, green vegetable production, and so on. In this case, UNDP/TRPAP (2007) also reported that at least thirty types of training were given to local beneficiaries in the target areas. Among them, literacy, leadership, and entrepreneurship development training were also there. Those all training helped develop local technical and vocational/enterprising capacities of the homestay operators too.

Utilization of Technical and Vocational Learning and the Challenges Experienced

In this study, we were particularly interested in observing the cases of different enterprises within the homestay families and their neighbors. We tried to get their actual field 'experiences' (Kolb, 1984); thus, in addition to observations of their day-to-day 'business' life, we held *bhalakusari* with those homestay operators regarding their learning and initiations (utilization). In the same connection, in a *bhalakusari*, a research participant Shukrikala shared:

After I learned the skills from a five-day mudhaa-making training, I have continuously produced bamboo mudhaa, which are sold locally. Sometimes, domestic tourists also buy these mudhaas. Annually, I earn about five thousand rupees from mudhaa-making vocation only. It is good money for me. I mostly make such mudhaas in my leisure time and sometimes at night.

Here, Shukrikala shared her business experiences very interestingly. Her representative voices helped us understand the local situation and reality. One day, in her yard,

we also met some domestic tourists buying those handicrafts. One of the female tourists (from Hetauda, Nepal) also told us that the handicrafts need to be refined and diversified to satisfy different types of tourists. At the same time, they were happy to share that women's involvement in different types of enterprises could be a model work for other villages too. She said, "*Sometimes we buy such things just to encourage women entrepreneurs*". And, from such voices too, it was easy to draw a lesson that vocational learning and capacity-building issues are directly associated with the overall performance of the homestay enterprising to increase additional income sources.

In a separate *bhalakusari*, the same research participant, Shanishchara, remembered:

Due to homestay and rural tourism development program, we got chances to take part in several training courses, and many organizations were coming to conduct different types of training courses for us. Many organizations provided training, training, and only training; and obviously, women got more opportunities than men.

Aaita Kumari, in the same context, lamented that she also attended more than six training courses in the last 3-4 years, which provided her with good skills and knowledge for running the homestay business, along with some additional modern farming-skills, like seasonal and off-seasonal vegetable farming, bee-keeping, poultry-keeping, smokeless stove, organic farming system, etc. In our observations too, we observed some bee-hives, green vegetable production, poultry farming, etc. They were trying their best to utilize the essences of those training and learning. Supporting this fact, in the FGD, one of the then VDC officials (male leader) also remarked that many organizations and projects had poured their inputs into developing technical, vocational and empowerment-related capacities of locals, and those training courses - to some extent - helped the participants handle different types of businesses and enterprises in better ways; however, most of the training courses provided were of very short duration, and some were just 'in the name of training'.

At this point, relating and contextualizing his concern, we were trying to gather more information regarding various difficulties and challenges experienced by the homestay operators in the learning and adoption processes. They have faced some challenges that are associated with both the 'learning parts' and 'utilization (execution) parts'. In this context, for example, in a joint *bhalakusari*, research participants Buddhi Maya and Mangala Devi together shared that sometimes travel times were longer than the total duration of the training courses, which gave extra burden to the participants.

These indications give a sense that the training venue and the duration are crucial things to be considered while organizing capacity development courses in the areas like MH. Local experiences have also shown that too much information is given in a single training; and, they are mostly in 'English-mixed' (locally called '*Nenglish*' or '*Nepangreji*') sessions, which were difficult to understand for the locals, who are mostly less educated or 'illiterate'. In a FGD meeting, one Dashnami female member of the local homestay committee and also the member of the local cooperative said that the trainers coming from Kathmandu or from other city areas cannot speak simple (understandable) Nepali language, which also causes problems in properly understanding, which is a common phenomena in 'adult education' (Kempfer, 2009). And, she was further commenting that the trainers pay little attention towards providing reading or supporting/resource materials, even to the participants who are able to read and write. Likewise, a male member (Magar) of the homestay committee was saying that the training organizers provide inadequate materials for practical courses, which creates impediment in learning practical (vocational) matters. Previous researchers, like KC (2013), Pasa (2021), and Sharma (2017), indicate that low level of literacy is a common phenomenon of Nepali rural settlements; however, alternative methods could be used in such training courses so that more internalization of learned matters would be possible. In this context, in a *bhalakusari*, a research participant Aaita Kumari frankly shared her feelings and

experiences:

Sometimes we feel difficulty in listening (and grasping) in the classrooms or training programs as most of the trainers/instructors use too difficult words for us. And, sometimes, they even don't write such difficult words in the white-boards or chart-papers. And, sometimes we don't get any allowance from the training, which is also a difficult part for us as we must earn some money every day for our daily living. These types of things need to be considered by the training organizers.

In the same context, another research participant Som Maya added: "*As compared to male members, female members get less chance in training and exposure programs, but these male members use lesser amount of learned skills and knowledge.*" This was another issue of equality and equity associated with community homestay development, which is generally considered to be pro-women and equitable business. It is well acknowledged that homestay tourism can make gender-balanced economic, social, cultural, environmental, and other multitudinous contributions to the community even in families of low income, low educational attainment, and low levels of governmental support.

Likewise, in the FGDs, some participants were expressing that limited material support from the supporting organizations during learning times and also during practicing (post-learning) times, actual implementation hasn't happened at anticipated level. Poor micro-finance facility, low number of tourists in the area, unequal distribution of tourists in the homestays (and primarily due to 'hometel' development in the area); inadequate promotion and marketing, limited support from local and other governments; and, so many other factors like earthquake of 2015; COVID-19, and others were also reported by the locals as challenges in the process of using learned skills and knowledge in order to actively engage in the homestay enterprising. Despite these, the homestay operators of MH are still trying to cope with various challenges and hurdles in order to develop the place as a homestay

destination. According to the local social mobilisers, the homestay entrepreneurs are actively seeking support from provincial and federal governments, especially to cope with post-COVID situations. They are also seeking refresher courses to refresh themselves from technical and technological points of view.

Discussion

In this research, the researchers were guided by the philosophy that each person and each community has different experiences, methods, opportunities, abilities, perceptions, and 'capabilities' (Sen, 2000). Different homestay operators have different experiences and feelings too. The theory of 'Capability Approach' (Sen, 2000) suggests that capability, freedom, and poverty are directly associated, and, for a greater level of freedom, "all types of deprivations are to be removed including political liberty and basic civil rights" (Sen, 2000, p. 15), which are ensured through various types of training and capacity-building initiatives. In such a case, an integrated and fostered understanding, and respective roles of different actors plays vital roles in developing human capacities (Sen, 2009, 2010). Likewise, as Kolb (1984) advocates, the 'Experiential Learning Theory' fits better in the context of homestay as well since homestay always gives emphasis on existing experiences, skills and knowledge for an enhanced capability. Experiences lead to further development and actions, which also become vital for developing human resources and capacities combining with traditional and indigenous knowledge and skills; because, in the experiential learning process, according to Kolb (1984), almost every individual uses all learning modes to some extent. However, despite that fact, each person has a preferred learning style and has different levels of knowledge, skills, and experience. It is said that a good instructor/ teacher/ educator/trainer can have different approaches and processes in the overall teaching-learning processes including listening, observing, reading, group work, pair work, discussion work, active learning, teacher-centered activities, participant-centered activities, question and answer session, hot-seating, role play and through playing different games. These all methods are intended to facilitate

effective learning processes. However, as our field reflections revealed, use of these processes and methods primarily depends on the interests and capacities of the trainers/teachers as well as of the learners.

There is no doubt that capacities are developed through continuous learning and experience (Kolb, 1984). In CBT initiatives, participatory actions and group learning processes, including the 'community of practice' (CoP) (Wenger, 2004), exposure visits, class-room based teaching, regular practice, and also different events/exhibitions can play vital roles. NTB, MOCTCA, TGDB, NATHM also gave emphasis on such matters while developing the homestay development training manual/packages. Overall, homestay operators of MH have learnt several skills and knowledge and got motivated towards developing and managing homestay business as a technical and vocational profession mainly for an additional income source and other multitudes of cultural and social benefits (Kandel, 2016; Pasa, 2021; TGDB, 2016, 2024), and to some extent, environmental benefits as well (Bhatt, 2015; Lama, 2013). Understanding gender roles is also very important in such capacity development and empowerment-focused endeavors since there are a number of issues connected to gender roles, responsibilities and strategic needs in the process of learning, capacity enhancement, and overall homestay management processes (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Adeyeye, 2021; Bhasin, 2003; Rai & Joshi, 2020; Volker & Doneys, 2021). In the study area, women have played more roles than the men in the day-to-day management of homestay, and guest management as well. Women's self-initiative to learn new things and capacitate themselves is more visible in the area. As the 'Experiential Learning Theory', and the 'Capability Approach' emphasize on the step-by-step learning, experimentation, re-learning and gradual development of capabilities, the homestay operators in the MH have also been taking multiple initiations for advancing knowledge, skills and attitudes towards self-empowerment and economic progress through better homestay management, despite several challenges as discussed above.

Conclusion and Implications

While exploring the role of homestay-related technical and vocational training in the overall capacity development of the homestay operators in the MHs, we came across different formal, informal, and non-formal means and sources of teaching-learning. And, such learning activities have taken place with number of ways and practical strategies. In the overall technical and vocational capacity development of the women homestay operators, proper use of available training curricula and manuals as well as the mobilization of appropriate trainers (with local knowledge and familiarity) has always been a matter of concern among the local beneficiaries. It can also be revealed that the homestay training package itself was a well-defined and satisfactory package from the view-point of contents; however, those contents/subjects' practical and theoretical aspects are not balanced. Local resources- and knowledge-based contents are hardly developed. Likewise, practical aspects of the training have also been inadequately addressed in the study area.

Despite some limitations, such TVET-related and managerial skills-oriented teaching-learning tools and techniques have helped the homestay operators to be able to share knowledge, passion, concern, and ideas among the team-members and with tourists. Facilitated technical and vocational courses have also helped the locals to develop their overall capability and readiness to start-up and scale-up their homestay businesses in the area. In the same manner, as we presented eight different categories of learning sources and ways, these have prudently helped the homestay operators to capacitate themselves in running the homestay and associated ancillary enterprises. Viewing the importance of homestay as a key tool to develop local capacities with multitude of benefits, more facilitation and backstopping support could produce better results not only in the technical and vocational capability development of homestay operators, but also the whole community through the proper use of 'community of practice'. To implicate more practically, technical and vocational contents derived from local perspectives, conducting training and workshop in understandable

languages, emphasizing on traditional and experience-based learning approaches, providing more reading/supporting materials, integrating more exposures in the overall capacity development programs would further facilitate the learning and capacity development practices of the community homestay operators of the study area. The practice could have wider implications with the similar phenomena of community homestay development processes in Nepal and elsewhere.

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