

# **SAMDRUP JONGKHAR INITIATIVE**

## **DEWATHANG, SAMDRUP JONGKHAR**

### **BRIEF NOTE/REPORT ON SIX WOMEN SOLAR ENGINEERS AT BAREFOOT COLLEGE, RAJASTHAN, INDIA.**

**Prepared By Cheku Dorji**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

**The Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative (SJI)** is Bhutan's first civil society based organization founded on the vision of Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche. This vision was publicly launched on 18<sup>th</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> December in the presence of His Excellency Prime Minister Jigme Y Thinley, high Government officials and people of Samdrup Jongkhar at Choki Gyatso Institute for Buddhist studies in Dewathang. The SJI aims to improve the living standards of people in Samdrup Jongkhar Dzongkhag and establish food security and self-sufficiency, while fully protecting and enhancing the natural environment, strengthening communities, stemming the rural-urban migration trend, and fostering a cooperative, productive, entrepreneurial, and self-reliant spirit. The four pillars of the SJI are:

- Organic farming
- Appropriate technology
- Zero waste and
- Education Reforms

In collaboration with the well renowned Barefoot College in Rajasthan, India, the SJI has sent six women from the very remote Lauri Gewog in Samdrup Jongkhar Dzongkhag for six months to be trained in solar lighting.

#### **2. OBJECTIVES OF THE TRAINING**

- To solar electrify 500 households in remote villages in Lauri Gewog that currently cannot be reached by electricity.
- To train six women solar engineers who will be able to install and maintain the solar energy systems in their villages
- Provide rain water harvesting systems for five schools in Lauri Gewog.
- Spread the benefits of solar electrification more widely within S/Jongkhar

It should be noted that it is most unusual in Bhutan for illiterate villagers, especially from remote

villages, to be sent abroad for training — a privilege and opportunity that is normally reserved for civil servants. The Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative is breaking significant new ground, as it also did in sending ordinary farmers recently for three weeks of organic farming training in India, in having training programs for ordinary villagers like these six women from Lauri gewog.

### **3. Profiles of 6 women who were selected for Barefoot Solar Engineer Training from Lauri**



**Dorji Pemo**



**Jambay Yangzom**



**Dorji Tshomo**



**Kinzang Choden**



**Kelzang Lhadon**



**Tshering Zangmo**

On 10<sup>th</sup> March 2011, six women from Lauri Gewog arrived at the SJI office in Dewathang around 7:00 PM. Their arrival coincided with the farewell dinner for SJI researchers and the women were asked about their views on the training and how they felt about being separated from their families and small children.

On 11<sup>th</sup> March 2011, Dr. Tashi Colman briefed six of them about the training and when they heard they would not have a translator at Barefoot College, the women were quite worried. Moreover, they left behind little ones, which became a cause for concern for everyone. We sought advice from Mrs. Thinley from Tarayana Foundation who had experience in the past

dealing with and escorting some women to Barefoot College through Tarayana Foundation. She confirmed “there is no problem without translator and everything will be okay with time.” We also consulted Ugyen Wangchuk at Chokyi Gyatso Institute, Dasho Neten Zangmo of the SJI Executive Committee and others about our concerns. All agreed that the Bhutanese rural extended family system in the villages would ensure that the women’s children would be well cared for and that the life-opportunities provided to these women would greatly benefit their children in the longer term and far exceed the costs of their leaving their children in the care of relatives. Everyone we consulted told us not to worry and this eased our considerable initial concerns.

The women themselves expressed to us greater concern about translator and economic issues than about the issue of leaving their children with relatives. They were particularly concerned about not being able to work their fields for the coming six months, and that this might imperil their food supply and ability to feed their families for the next season. We checked this concern with Bunker Roy by telephone, who told us the women would get about \$US 500 each after completion of the course. When we translated that to ngultrum and informed the women, they were quite satisfied on this score, and felt that this monetary compensation would certainly compensate them for lost production and enable them to feed their families for the succeeding season.

On 12<sup>th</sup> March 2011, Linda Panno, one of the SJI researchers, met with the six women solar engineers to discuss their views and concerns. They convinced Linda that they were feeling very insecure about traveling by themselves in an airplane. They had never even travelled outside their gewog and could only speak Tsangla Lo. They were not able to either understand or read English or Hindi and so were quite afraid of how they would manage in Guwahati and Delhi en route to Barefoot College. Kuenzang Choden from Momring village said “I have never seen a plane, just I heard and there is no way we can go by ourselves. My husband even told me to come back if there is nobody escorting us until our destination.” We discussed this issue and Linda Panno followed up with a phone call to Dr. Tashi Colman and it was decided that — to ensure their psychological wellbeing and ease their very palpable expressed fears — they would be escorted to Delhi by Ms. Sonam Keba, Assistant lecturer at the Jigme Namgyel Polytechnic and SJI volunteer, who would personally pass them over to the Barefoot College representative at Delhi airport who would transport them the same day to Barefoot College. The women were very relieved at this assurance, and then seemed confident enough to go.

### **13<sup>th</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> 15<sup>th</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> March 2011**

As per the schedule, the six women were supposed to leave on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2011 via Guwahati airport but unfortunately due to a strike in Assam they had to stay back till 17<sup>th</sup> March 2011, and Tashi Colman arranged for their air tickets to be re-booked for that day instead.

On 17<sup>th</sup> March 2011, they started their journey from Dewathang- S/Jongkhar and to Guwahati with me, Cheku Dorji, and Ms. Sonam Keba. We reached Guwahati airport by 2 PM and the flight was scheduled to take off at 3:30 PM. After that, Sonam Keba took care of everything en route and in Delhi, and I returned to Dewathang.

According to Ms. Sonam Keba, the women were really excited with everything new and were especially excited when the flight took off into the air. They reached Delhi airport around 6 PM and were received by Bunker Roy's people who came from Barefoot College to greet them. On the same day they were taken to Barefoot College in Tilonia and arrived at approximately 1am.

All their expenses for transportation to and from their villages and fooding were borne by the SJI except for one week of accommodation in Dewathang, which was provided free of charge due to the kind generosity of Dasho Tashi Dorji, at his residence. The women's return air tickets were paid by the Indian Embassy in Thimphu through arrangements with Bunker Roy's Barefoot College.

Recently, I had a 35 minute conversation with the 6 women solar engineers from Barefoot College and tried to picture what is happening there. It seems everything is fundamentally fine and okay. I had a conversation with each of the six women in turn, and I think right now the key adjustment they face is that they are not so familiar with the atmosphere there and are still getting used to their new surroundings. They reported that their training started from 21<sup>st</sup> March 2011. Kinzang Choden said "As per the trainer, the six of them from Bhutan are learning better than the other 16 women from other countries at Barefoot College." Classes start at 9 am each day, and run until 5 pm including lunch break. They learn in a very practical way. Each of the women also received one mobile each, Rs 1000/- for their voucher so that they could call home, and each of them was given two pairs of clothing.

Kelzang Lhadon said "Difficulty we are having is language problem but I think it will work out may be after one month."

Dorji Pemo said: "Training is good as far as I'm concerned." Unfortunately, Dorji Tshomo got sick and was admitted to the hospital for a couple of days. Now she is better and feeling fine. They were so excited to talk with someone from Bhutan in Tshangla lo which they have missed for a long time. Jambay Yangzom said "Here the place is very remote and there is nothing to hang out nearby and we hardly see any shops also. I think this is very good but sometimes it is very hard to learn because we cannot read and write. We are hoping to learn as much as we can and we will implement the same thing in our villages."



**After the completion of six months course from Barefoot College in Rajasthan, Tilona, India:**

- The six Lauri women will be sent to Barli Development Institute for Rural Women in Indore for 15 days training in solar drying techniques.
- They will be taken for a religious pilgrimage in Bodhgaya
- Upon return to Samdrup Jongkhar, they have to report to SJI office in Dewathang with training completion certificate
- They should certainly benefit the people of Samdrup Jongkhar as a whole, especially in presently non-electrified villages, other than those of Lauri Gewog alone.
- They have to be stationed in their local communities for a minimum of 5 years following the training in order to implement and maintain solar electrification and other specified projects.

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