



Tourism, Peace and Sustainability: The Story of 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking and Empowering Women of Nepal

By Lucky Chhetri, Co-founder

Background

In 1993, the **Chhetri sisters, Lucky, Dicky and Nicky**, were running a restaurant and a lodge in Pokhara, where they had the opportunity to meet women from all over the world. They met some unhappy and frightened solo female travelers who had been harassed by their male guides, and the idea for their own trekking business, by women for women, was born. They summoned all their courage and started their Female Trekking Guide and Porter Services for Lady Trekkers in 1994.

Lucky Chhetri notes three major factors that inspired them to start the business:

- Requests from solo women trekkers.
- The mountaineering training that the eldest of the three sisters had received.
- The difficult life of rural women from west Nepal.

Although the law states that Nepali men and women receive equal rights, the reality often does not reflect the regulation. Most women are uneducated and underprivileged, working grueling hours in the household and fields. The Female Trekking Guide and Porter Services gave local women an alternative to domestic labor and traveling tourists the comfort of a female guide. It was a natural match, but there were plenty of challenges to face. They were working in a male-dominated profession where women were made to feel unwelcome and education opportunities were limited.



Our aim has been, and continues to be, to empower and develop women through tourism and to encourage sustainable tourism in remote areas where there is little hope for the future.” ~ Lucky Chhetri



To combat these challenges, the Chhetri sisters pushed hard for **instruction** at the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training Institute. This was an eye-opening experience, because they were now able to design their own introductory training program designed for disadvantaged and rural mountain women. The course was tailored to their level of understanding and aims, giving them confidence to join this profession and an eagerness to learn and earn.

The first training took place in 1996 with ten participants. The trekking company 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking was officially registered in 1998. To continue the training program, they founded Empowering Women of Nepal in 1999. Since then, 3 Sisters and EWN have been working closely together to empower women in the trekking industry and to make them independent, confident and self-sufficient.



Between 1999 and 2008 EWN conducted 18 basic female trekking guide-training programs with more than 600 **participants**. The women who entered the tourism business through the program came from all parts of the country; some of them low-caste women who society looked down upon, others socially disadvantaged and facing challenges in life.

Trekking training offers a unique combination of very practical life skills and a broader global perspective, improving cognitive skills and fostering independent thinking. There is a large demand for female trekking staff in the market, but a limited supply of skilled women. EWN and 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking has filled this void in the male-dominated trekking industry.

A guide participant says: “I learned to become an ambassador for my country.” In just one month, women who had no means of earning a living – without additional help – are set on the path to self-sufficiency. At the end of the training, the women enter an **apprenticeship program** with 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking where they earn





wages equal to those of men and acquire field experience working as trainee guides. From their apprenticeship, they gain immediate economic benefits and develop the skills they need to emerge as independent entrepreneurs.

Since 1998, the three sisters have managed to bridge a gap in the market and contribute successfully to women empowerment. Their story has been the topic of many international publications, documentaries films and other media coverage. Thanks to this exposure, more and more women are finding their way into the trekking apprenticeship. The project has received global recognition and awards from different organizations, such as Travel Plus Leisure and National Geographic.

Through the three sisters' work and activities, it is now acceptable for women to work in the Nepali tourism industry. 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking offers its employees not only fair wages (they earn USD \$1,200 annually, whilst the Nepali average is USD \$240) but also benefits such as insurance, tuition fees for their **children** and a savings and credit program. The improvement of the women's social and economic situation also directly influences their families and communities. Through contact with travelers from all over the world a vital cultural exchange takes place, which benefits both sides.

Their wages allow them to pay for university, family, medical expenses, siblings' education and their own businesses, resulting in boosted self-confidence, independence and professional skills. The three sisters have created a platform for women to experience their capacities and interests, which enables them to make their own choices about their future. The program gives the women a chance to expand social boundaries and, in the long run, to contribute to social change and a better quality of life for all Nepali women.

Tourism, Peace and Sustainability

Tourism activities range from leisure to the extreme adventure. In Nepal, adventure-tourism trekking and **mountaineering** are the main attraction. Tourism plays a leading role in the country's economy. It provides huge employment opportunities.

Tourism consists of knowledge, opportunities and development. It provides automatic knowledge of the places, people and the communities within each tourist market. It also allows people to experience different cultures and their communities. Various international development projects have been initiated by tourists. The late Sir Edmond Hillary started a health and education project in the Everest region after reaching the



summit of Mount Everest. The result of this project is that the now-famous Sherpa people are educated, have businesses in Nepal and abroad, and hold different world records on mountaineering. They are happy, sound and peaceful.

Tourism encourages travelers to be involved in humanitarian work, such as volunteering and other social welfare work. It also helps to build peace and prosperity. Modern travelers are socially responsible, often traveling in order to support the local economy and many other issues. Every year, trekkers fund raise for breast cancer by climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.

Peacemakers are working in many ways and tourism is a factor in creating peace. Where tourism is developed, travelers visit, local peoples become involved and engaged in creating employment, building infrastructure, culture exchange and in sharing experiences – all helping to develop and maintain peace and harmony. Peace is a product of people’s emotions, activities, cooperation and good energy; sustainable peace is connected with the local, emotional atmosphere.

Likewise, the 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking Company and Empowering Women of Nepal (EWN) are organizing women treks for peace and development for the arena of community development. These treks are in the remote **mountain regions** of Nepal,



badly affected by poverty and the domestic Maoist revolution. Every year the locals suffer from food shortages, along with many different minor diseases. There is no other source of income other than farming on the barren land.

The EWN team decided to visit the most-affected area of west Nepal, Karnali, in 2003. They walked all the way from Humla to Jumla, via Rara Lake, for 15 days. During the visit, they met community

leaders, individuals, officials and the political leaders. They talked about the current situation of those areas. All individuals and community members expressed the same emotions with a heavy heart, and anger. It was understandable, “hungry people become angry people – and angry people are more likely to become violent people.”

The team felt sad to see all the facts and the harsh situation. The entire area was highly affected by the domestic Maoist revolution and generalized poverty. The local people were suffering from food shortages, different health issues and a lack of income sources. Men were traveling to the cities and India for employment. All local youth were forced to support the Maoist.

In the two years since the west Nepal visit, EWN developed a training package on eco-tourism, consisting of food (local food preparation), health (sanitation and hygiene) and tourism as an alternative income source. This was to meet local requirements for the development of community tourism in the remote mountain areas of west Nepal.

Prior to this program, EWN were working to address a patriarchal society through women's empowerment by the means of adventure tourism, such as trekking, rock-and-ice climbing training and providing employment opportunities.

The Maoist revolution was in process when EWN traveled and the area was not safe. They interacted with Maoist rebels along the way and had intense dialogs with them. They saw a mixture of fear and need among the people. They thought deeply about the areas and the possibilities of doing any productive programming there. But it was not easy. The main reason to extend the program to those areas was to support and maintain peace and prosperity in the country.



There were several reasons for violence in the region, including unrest due to the struggling local economy. EWN found everyone was very desperate and hopeless for his or her future. There was a huge gap between urban and rural economies and other facilities. The training package helped put ointment on the people's wounds by raising hope with the tourism-development program.

The people are now excited and hopeful regarding their future within tourism development. Now the younger generations are engaged to develop and promote tourism rather than just frustrated with their economic situation. Slowly, local people are secure and optimistic to invest locally and to settle down. Peace can be maintained or created. The possibility of **building peace** is an important phenomenon for development, and tourism.