

महिला विरुद्धको हिंसा र एचआइभी/एड्स बीचको अन्तर्सम्बन्ध

अव्यक्त आवाज

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UNSPOKEN VOICES

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The Intersection between Violence against Women and HIV/AIDS

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The VOICES project was implemented from September 2007 to May 2010 by Equal Access Nepal with the financial support from the United Nations Trust Fund in Support of Actions to Eliminate Violence against Women. VOICES used radio programme as an education strategy to lead to greater awareness and knowledge among women and men about the intersection between Violence against Women and HIV in Nepal. The project resulted in more women seeking available services and taking collective action in their own communities on issues related to Violence against Women and HIV and AIDS. At the core of the project was the radio program *Samajhdari* which was broadcast through the Radio Nepal Network and other independent radio stations. In June 2010, *Samajhdari* won the One World Media Special Award, which is given each year to an outstanding media project or organization working on the ground in the developing world.

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One World Media Special Award 2010

Winner: Radio Program *Samajhdari* - Equal Access Nepal

The One World Media Special Award is given each year to an outstanding media project or organisation working on the ground in the developing world.

This year, the Special Award goes to Equal Access Nepal (EAN), for their radio programme, *Samajhdari*.

Samajhdari (meaning mutual understanding) is a 30-minute weekly radio programme in Nepal that regularly reaches up to one million listeners. It aims to cover the correlation between Violence against Women and HIV/AIDS from the listener's point of view, providing discussion and advice on situations that affect real people – and particularly women.

Every programme begins with a real dilemma that a listener has faced. These dilemmas have much to do with both Violence against Women and HIV/AIDS - such as 'I am a sex worker and if I say no to my clients' demand, they beat me. What can I do?' or "My husband forces me to have sex when I don't want to. How can I say no?"

The presenter then brings in a range of voices to comment on the issue, including other listeners and experts from the field. One pioneering element is the twelve Community Reporters who go into rural areas and collect much of the content that is then used for broadcast. These women are all survivors of violence, and this gives them an unrivalled insight into the dilemmas being discussed.

Samajhdari, and the VOICES project of which it is a part, have made a huge contribution towards changing the social landscape in Nepal, through doing exactly what they claim - encouraging mutual understanding.

Courtesy: http://oneworldmedia.org.uk/awards/shortlist-winners/special_award



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Foreword

Established in 2004, Digital Broadcast Initiative, Equal Access Nepal is a communications for development non-government organisation which combines the power of media with grassroots community mobilization, in order to bridge the digital divide and bring vital information to those who need it most. Equal Access Nepal broadcasts programmes through a national network of radio stations, including the Radio Nepal Network and over 100 independent and community-run FM stations. The vision of Equal Access is a world in dialogue where all voices are heard and respected. Equal Access Nepal shares this mission with its international partner Equal Access International. Equal Access International currently works in a number of countries across South and Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East, including Nepal, Cambodia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Chad, Niger, Bangladesh and Laos to address the most critical challenges affecting people in countries addressing issues including women's and girls' empowerment, youth lifeskills and livelihoods, health, human rights, peace building, education and good governance.

Equal Access expresses its sincere gratitude and appreciation to the following organisations: United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), Samjhauta Nepal in Mahottari District, Makwanpur Mahila Samuha (MMS) in Makwanpur District, Mahila Aatma Nirbharta Kendra (MANK) in Sindhupalchok District, Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC) in Dang District, AAWAJ in Surkhet District and Rural Women Unity and Development Centre (RUWDUC) in Dadeldhura District who joined hands with Equal Access to realize the objectives of the VOICES project. We are also thankful to the Radio Nepal Network, and our sixteen independent FM partners for helping to make the programme a successful social campaign.

Equal Access Nepal is also grateful to the Equal Access family and the *Samajhdari* Community Reporters for supporting VOICES and making *Samajhdari* an effective voice of the otherwise voiceless.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Deependra Joshi", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Deependra Joshi
Country Director

Introduction

As I was compiling stories for this book, I was made speechless by one woman's story: "[my husband] ignored all my pleas not to have sex without using a condom saying that it was his last wish. As a result, now I am living with HIV. But after his death, my father and mother-in-law accused me of transmitting the disease to my husband and beat me." When I read this, my mind went blank, I could not think. I was in shock. When I recovered, realizing how deeply her story had affected me, I imagined the courage it must have taken the woman to express such a sensitive time in her life, how she must have suppressed her feelings for years. Some, like this woman, have wanted to express their agony in this book but wanted to keep their identities secret. Mirroring this continued suppression and anonymity, we have called this book "Unspoken Voices". We believe that this book can become a significant document to uncover the individual personal truths that sit at the heart of the intersection between HIV/AIDS and Violence against Women.

In Nepal, women are prone to violence simply because they are women. Violence against them puts them at risk of HIV infection and discrimination and they tolerate more degrading, violent, and strict social norms than men in these situations. Within the VOICES project, supported by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, Equal Access Nepal produced the radio show *Samajhdari* (mutual understanding) to analyze the relationship between HIV/AIDS and Violence against Women. To my knowledge, the programme was the first to do so in Nepal. As production began, I felt we should collect these stories into a book to be "heard" again and again through reading. Such an account would be a valuable document of humanity for every person. With that aim, in 2010, six media professionals became fellows at Equal Access and investigated and compiled stories that documented and clarified the intersection between HIV/AIDS and Violence against Women. These stories and those of *Samajhdari* listeners are collected in this book. We hope they explain that which is deeply rooted in our society and has not yet been written, told, heard or expressed, except through *Samajhdari*.

I am grateful to the fellows and those they interviewed and to the listeners of *Samajhdari*. And I express my sincere gratitude to Shyam Krishna Sharma, who carefully proof-read the original Nepali version of these stories.

Jaya Luintel
Program Coordinator
Equal Access Nepal

Saved by *Samajhdari*, savior of others: Kamala

From a conversation with Kamala Bhandari, Samajhdari Community Reporter, Sindhupalchowk District

Namaskar! My name is Kamala Bhandari. I live in Kiuel VDC, Ward No. 1, Sindhupalchowk District. I was married at sixteen, before I really did not understand what marriage was. I didn't know getting married would stop me from going to school. My parents felt that it was enough if a girl could read and write, so they decided to arrange my marriage.

After getting married, I learned that my husband suffered from mental illness. Initially, my in-laws had promised to allow me to continue my studies, but in the end, they stopped me from going to school. My husband didn't support me in a single activity. Instead, he dominated me. I tried hard to make him happy. I helped treat him for six years, but ultimately he hung himself. My family and neighbours blamed me and treated me as though I had killed him. I was so tortured by my mother-in-law that living with her was very difficult. At that time, my elder son was six and my younger son was one-and-a-half. My family was plotting to throw me out and I realized I had to do something. I had heard that Mahila Atma Nirbharta Kendra helped women in trouble, and so I went and begged for help. They told me that Equal Access Nepal needed women to train as Community Reporters and suggested that I attend the training. In this way, I had the opportunity to become a Community Reporter.

Until the training, I didn't know about Violence against Women, HIV, trafficking, and so on. I couldn't even identify the violence of my own situation. After the training, I began to record and send audio of the experiences of women from my community to *Samajhdari*. This programme encouraged me to believe I could make a difference. It boosted my confidence. I regained respect in my community. I could have been trafficked; I could have been HIV infected. I feel that my involvement as a Community Reporter removed me from these risks.

The "back then" Kamala was at risk but she has turned into the Kamala who encourages women at risk to speak up for their rights. Between the past Kamala and the present Kamala, there is an immense distance.

Violence against women, sex work and HIV

Sita Sharma, Gorkhapatra Daily, Fellowship Grantee

“Prostitution”, or sex work, is both a sensational and risky occupation. Society recognizes it as something loathsome and bad. In Nepal, it is illegal. Research shows that in Nepal, over fifteen thousand women, mostly in urban areas, are in this profession. Of these women, three thousand are in and around the tourist area of Pokhara. These women mostly range from fifteen to 35 years of age. Some have stabilized their family’s economic situation from the money they make as sex workers and others have paid family debts.

Some Nepalese women are subject to violence due to custom, social structure, and patriarchal oppression, but for sex workers, violence is a part of their profession. Poverty, a lack of education, a lack of control over property and abuse by in-laws on the pretext of a low dowry are some of the many reasons that women are forced into sex work. That “prostitution” is illegal means that women engaged in this work face two sets of hardships: first, they are at risk of HIV and second, they suffer at the hands of police who punish them.

“I joined this occupation due to the poverty of my family and lack of other employment options” said Sunita (pseudonym), a girl of sixteen working as a sex worker in a restaurant in Pokhara, since last year. She traveled to Pokhara with the idea that she would be employed as a cook or a janitor in a restaurant. But because of unexpected circumstances, she was forced to be a sex worker. Sunita’s tears rolled down her cheeks as she spoke: “I had to have sexual intercourse with eight to ten men a day in order to fulfill my financial needs.” According to Sunita, women who work in bars, cabins, and restaurants are economically, mentally, and physically exploited. She regrets becoming a sex worker at the early age of fifteen, but she only started because of the promise of money. She cannot find another job and feels she cannot stop being a sex worker. Sunita said, “I would give up this occupation immediately if I could manage to make ends meet by other means.”

Many women engaged in this profession in Pokhara are from the districts of Kaski, Myagdi, Parbat, Baglung, Syanja, Lamjung, and Tanahu. The suffering endured by these women is great. It is difficult to tell the stories of women engaged in prostitution. They are scared of living without money; they are afraid of HIV infection and its eventual outcome; they are exploited by hotel owners and clients; they are humiliated by the police. They face hatred, rejection and violence time and again.

It is the responsibility of society and the state to manage free sex education, provide routine exams, and create an environment in which women such as Sunita have rights and are protected instead of punished. These women experience hatred, humiliation, and maltreatment. Many of them quickly die of AIDS without having had treatment for HIV. The women report that many in their profession commit suicide.

The story of sixteen-year-old Kalpana (pseudonym) from Myagdi District is no more miserable than others. Unable to bear the mental and physical agony of poverty and mistreatment from her step-mother, Kalpana left home for Pokhara. There, she started working at a restaurant as a sex worker. “Who would wish to do this hellish job?” she asks quietly. “It started when I couldn’t find any other way to sustain myself. I didn’t encounter a kind man in three years.”

Maya (pseudonym), illiterate, twenty-four, came to Pokhara with her one-year-old daughter when her drunkard husband’s physical torture became unbearable. She started working as a sex worker. No other job could sustain both mother and daughter. She thinks of the days she spent in the road, imagining that a passerby might help her. Crying, she relates, “Women working in restaurants should not be looked down upon. They have problems that make working there compulsory.”

The wages of sex workers in restaurants is low. They do not get salaries on time. Many women are deceived by restaurant and bar owners who say the work will be to cook food and clean the hotel. But once they enter the bar, they are forced to work as sex workers, sexually exploited daily by both clients and bosses. If a girl refuses to have sex with clients, she is physically and mentally tortured by her boss. After severe beatings, in some cases, women are forced to leave the establishment. Men who come to them are shopkeepers, drivers, contractors, retired employees, tourists, and social workers - from all walks of life. If these women do not obey their clients, they are often abused physically. Most of the clients do not want to use condoms.

I am saving my sisters

My name is Nira (pseudonym). I was a sex worker for about four years in restaurants in Pokhara. Last year, I changed professions. Now, I visit restaurants and hotels to inform sex workers about violence, sexual health, condoms, and HIV and AIDS. My home is in the slum area of Pokhara. One and a half years ago, I married a driver, but after he learned that I had been a prostitute, he divorced me. I grieved after the divorce, and my grief doubled when my parents publicly rejected me as an immoral daughter. Public abuse and hatred became my greatest problem. But I did not forfeit my mission or resume prostitution. I remain content in life because I help women who are forced to work as sex workers just as I was.

Although the government conducts many campaigns in order to educate women and raise their economic and social status, these programmes have failed to reach many target groups. Weak legal implementation mechanisms have encouraged the oppression of women by bar and restaurant owners. Women become victims of violence because of the selfish interests of owners. If the government does not take immediate action to make this profession oppression-free by creating, passing, and implementing protective laws, rather than making prostitution illegal and punishable, women working in the sex industry will always face violence and be at risk of HIV infection.

I went to see a doctor after 25 years of infertility

From a conversation with Shree Narayan Madhar, Mahottari District

I am 42 now. We are only two in family: my wife and me. I got an opportunity to participate in legal literacy training organized by the radio programme *Samajhdari* in my village. Through this training I learned about Violence against Women. While learning about Violence against Women, I realized that what I had been doing throughout my life was nothing other than violence. It has been 25 years that my wife and I had been married but still we don't have a child. Initially, I thought it was my wife's fault. But after the training, I learned that a man can also be at fault if there is no child. I also learned that it is a male hormone that decides if children are boys or girls. Earlier, I thought that my wife was solely responsible for not having a child and thus took her to many traditional healers to get her treated. I thought I had not mistreated her for not having a child, and that she had only to bear other's ill-comments. She was so unhappy. But lately I have been consoling her not to worry much about it. I also have started to listen to the Radio Programme *Samajhdari*. I hope to learn many things from *Samajhdari*.



Samajhdari encouraged me to get an HIV test

From a conversation with Kamalai Thing, Churiyamai, Makwanpur District

I learned about different types of violence experienced by women from the radio programme *Samajhdari*. Through *Samajhdari* I learned about drunk men who beat their wives, violence done to girls in the name of dowry, incidences of HIV and AIDS, the trafficking of girls, rape and other things. Because of the programme, I know that housewives are at high risk of HIV infection. My husband used to be a driver and would stay out of house often. I thought I might have contracted HIV and so I went to get my blood tested. Nowadays, I encourage my fellow women to test their blood to ensure that they are free of HIV. Not only that, but I also encourage them to use condoms while having sex with their husbands, especially in cases when their husbands stay away from home often.

High risk of dual pandemics: HIV infection and violence against women within one household

Rakesh Chaudhari, Nepal FM, Mahottari District, Fellowship Grantee

The number of workers that go abroad is growing, especially from the Terai districts such as Dhanusha, Mahottari and Sarlahi. No sooner does the visa arrive than the husband hurries abroad, leaving his newly-married wife at home. It is sometimes found that when a husband is absent, a wife is physically and mentally abused by her family-in-law, but few such events are disclosed publicly. Men who work in India or other countries are infected by HIV through unsafe sex. This is how women become HIV positive even when staying inside their own houses. Women without husbands are subject to violence by their own relatives and family members. This kind of violence against women is not apparent beyond the perimeter of home in order to avoid social discrimination.

Some women say that it is self-defense to keep their HIV infection a secret. Babita (pseudonym), thirty-four, is one such woman. She explains, "I am a widow. If they know that I am HIV positive, they will isolate me from the village. I am already tormented by my own relatives."

Most cases remain undisclosed

During long absences from their husbands, women are subjected to violence inside their own houses and are sometimes forced to have sex with the fathers- or brothers-in-law or husband's friends. According to victims who tolerate sexual violence or unwanted sex, they do not go for HIV testing. People from the Districts of Mahottari, Sarlahi, Dhanusa, and Siraha and those who have returned from India go to the Family Planning Association in Bardibas, in the Central region of Nepal, for free testing. "All kinds of information is kept secret", Programme Director Dhiraj Paudel stated. He added, "If they are infected with HIV, people will hide personal information. Out of 48 HIV positive cases, 20 are women. A few days ago, a sister-in-law and brother-in-law from the same house were found to be HIV positive in Sarlahi." Poudel added, "They did not disclose their names."

No organisation has data on how many women are forced to have sex with family members or how many, as a result, are infected with HIV, but forced sex is recognizable as a link between violence and HIV. Urmila, the president of Bishwasilo Mahila Samuha, an organisation working in the area of HIV and AIDS, posits that 10% of the women who come in contact with the organisation have been infected through forced sex. Forced sex is just one of the most extreme types of violence that a woman can face within the home. This issue is the issue of secrecy. When a woman is sexually abused within the home, this can

lead to HIV-infection. And, if a woman is HIV-positive, she often experiences violence. That these issues are often kept within the home is not in itself the issue, however. While HIV positive women can be at risk of violence if their HIV is kept a secret, there is often resistance by the women themselves to disclose their HIV status publicly.

Beginning of secret gatherings

People living with HIV have established the group Mahottari Plus in Mahottari District. Out of nineteen board members, eight are women, five of whom have lost their husbands to HIV. While establishing the organisation, it was difficult to include women as members because their families and communities were not aware of their HIV status. This is changing. HIV infected women in Dhanusha District, have started raising their voices for women's rights through Bishwasilo Mahila Samuha.

Rekha Jha, the president of the Women's Awareness Group, said that in many instances, HIV positive women were subjected to violence, including physical violence, isolation, polygamy, and divorce. The cases of women who are infected with HIV due to forced sex with non-husband family members are neither reported nor publicly expressed.

Harekrishna Shah, President of Mahottari Plus

▶ **What kind of organization is this?**

This is an organization run by HIV positive people.

▶ **What is the objective of establishing the organization?**

I was motivated to establish this organization when I found out that a HIV infected youth of 30 from a neighboring village committed suicide.

▶ **What does it do?**

It helps HIV-infected men and women.

▶ **How many and what kind of members are associated with this organization?**

We have 19 members of whom eight are women. My wife is also one of the members. Among the women members, five have lost their husbands.

▶ **What is the condition of HIV-infected women?**

Their condition is miserable before they come here. After they come, it's good.

▶ **How did you persuade HIV positive women to become members of this organization?**

This is the organisation for HIV positive people. If we know that a woman is HIV positive, we try our best to convince her to join our organisation. Even their community might not know the fact that these women are infected. They do not want to disclose this information because they fear be detested.

▶ **Are the women infected by their relatives also among the members?**

No woman has told us of this reason for infection so far. They do not overtly talk of these issues because of familial and societal fear.

I can now talk about condom use with my husband

From a conversation with Sharada Devi Oli, Sindoor Radio Listeners' Club, Dadeldhura District

I have learned about HIV and violence against women through *Samajhdari*. I didn't know about these things before listening to the radio programme. My husband has been working in Qatar for the last two years. Now I can share things with my husband that I have learned from the programme. These days, I make my husband aware of staying away from un-safe sexual practices and other risky behavior via telephone. I can also talk to my husband when he is here with me about using condoms until he gets his blood tested. I did not know about these things earlier and could not speak up either. But these days, I share things I have learned from the radio programme with my mother-in-law and the other in-laws in my family. They also show their keen interest to learn things from me. Through the radio programme *Samajhdari*, I learned about the status of women in our society. Women are bound to be under the control of their husbands or other males in a family. As a result, they can't speak up for themselves, and can't question their husbands and other males. This can lead needlessly to HIV infection, which can again lead to violence. But since I have started to talk to my husband openly and have started to raise questions, I am sure that I can stay away from the risk of getting HIV. The radio programme *Samajhdari* has contributed a lot in boosting my confidence.

My husband used to rape me everyday but now he has changed

From a conversation with an anonymous woman from Makwanpur

Samajhdari has brought about a drastic change in my life. My husband used to rape me almost every day. Sometimes he would even force me to have sex during the daytime when I was not interested at all. He held the misconception that it was his right to have sex with his wife whenever he wanted to. Even upon expressing my disinterest he would not let me go. But after I started listening to *Samajhdari*, I encouraged my husband to listen to the programme. Once, we both listened to the one of the episodes of the programme. The programme was dealing with the issue of marital rape. After listening to this episode, I found a change in his behavior. Since then, he has started to understand my feelings. Nowadays we have sex only after mutual consent. He also realizes that what he did in the past, it was violence against me.

Housewives: Vulnerable to HIV infection

Dhirendra Sinal, Shuklaphanta FM, Kanchanpur District, Fellowship Grantee

HIV/AIDS has become one of the major issues in Nepal's Far-Western districts in the last few years. Overwhelmed by poverty, unemployment, traditional beliefs and lack of education, women in this region are fatally affected by HIV. These infected women are subject to various forms of discrimination, including familial, social, and moral. They are assaulted and isolated from their families. Compelled to bear violence in the name of tradition, women are subject to increased violence because of their HIV infection. Although gender-based violence and HIV infection are two different things, they are closely associated with each other in the Far-Western Development Region of Nepal. Because of the lack of public awareness and education, women live as second-class citizens. They have control over neither household nor personal affairs such as reproduction. Women in this region lack both the knowledge and an environment to talk about their issues. They do not have the freedom to talk about sex or reproduction even with their husbands. To this day, there is a tendency to question a woman's chastity if she talks about sex and reproductive health. It is because of these reasons that HIV infection in women is increasing in the Far-Western region.

Migration and HIV infection

In the absence of employment opportunities in Nepal, many youth from the Far-Western Development Region go to India. Unfortunately, many return infected with HIV. Most of them are uneducated. As a result, they have unsafe sex without understanding the increased risk of HIV infection. Then, knowingly or unknowingly, they might transmit this virus to their wives when they return to their homes while on leave from work. Lal Bahadur Dhama, Programme Coordinator of Nepal National Social Welfare Association, which is running a Voluntary Counseling and Testing Centre (VCT) in Kanchanpur, said that 95% of total HIV infected people whom they see that have gone to India for employment. Although women are taught how HIV is transmitted by several HIV education programmes, they cannot ask their husbands to use a condom. If they ask their husbands to use a condom, they are suspected of having illegal sexual relationships with others and are severely beaten. In a society where husbands are worshiped as gods, it is impossible for the wives to talk about HI and thus to remain safe. Women's Rights activist Usha Pandey said, "HIV was brought into our society by men. Society has granted unnecessary freedoms to men who are

not loyal to their wives, whereas women are under different social constraints. Neither men nor women nor society is aware of the fact that having sex with one's wife without her consent is violence. A more serious form of violence is forcing a wife to have sex with her husband, even after he knows that he is HIV positive."

In the context of the Far-Western region, women are infected by HIV to a greater extent than men although it is brought into the region by men themselves. Because of traditional beliefs and lack of education, women have suffered from discrimination and different violence for years. Women's Rights activist Menuka Basnet believes that HIV infection has increased Violence against Women in Far-Western regions because gender-based violence and discrimination have already been in practice for years. She said, "All women have experienced violence of one kind or another. HIV has intensified discrimination and Violence against Women. But no research has been conducted regarding the nature of discrimination and the problems endured by women who experience both. These women suffer from mental torture. However, the public is only aware of physical assaults and sexual violence." This claim of Menuka Basnet can be substantiated by the bitter experience of an HIV infected woman, Parbati Biswakarma from Kanchanpur. She said, "I was infected with HIV because of my husband. I found him seriously ill when I went to India to see him after hearing that he was sick. After I discovered that he had AIDS, he told me he was going to commit suicide but I refused to allow this, thinking of my children and returned home along with him. I had my blood tested and it was diagnosed that I was free from HIV. But, during his final days at home in Nepal he ignored all my pleas not to have sex without using a condom saying that it was his last wish. As a result, now I am living with HIV. But after his death, my father- and mother-in-law accused me of transmitting the disease to my husband and beat me. Furthermore, they said that I was the cause of my husband's death. Now I am living with my children in a separate house. My in-law's family does not take care of my children at all. Once, I was admitted to Dhangadi Hospital for eight days and during this time no one from my husband's family cared for my children. I think I am neglected perhaps because I am not their daughter." The story of Radha Luhar of Daiji VDC, Kanchanpur District is similar to that of Menuka Basnet. She was also deprived of family property simply because she was HIV positive. Radha said, "In the initial days, I was not even allowed to sit on the same bench as other family members because of their fear of transmission. They beat me several times and asked me to leave the house. With no family inheritance, I was separated from family."

Society and family rejection

Like Radha and Parbati, many women of the Far-Western regions face not only social and family rejection, but are forced to leave their houses after their HIV positive status is revealed. Prakash Pandey, who has been working for HIV positive people for five years, says that HIV positive women suffer from both violence and HIV. He added, "There are ample examples that prove the claim that the cases of Violence against Women are rising due to HIV infection. For instance, women whose husbands die of HIV are forced to leave their houses; they are not supported by their in-laws family members even in times of trouble; and they are charged as responsible for transmitting

HIV to their husbands, whereas their husbands were the ones to transmit the disease to them.” Lal Bahadur Dhama, the programme organizer of the Voluntary Counseling and Testing Centre (VCT) operated by the Nepal National Social Welfare Association (NNSWA), said, “Violence against Women and HIV are cause and consequence of each other.” He explained, “Our society has not taken the issue of HIV positivity easily. Violence against Women has been in existence here for a long time. But HIV has escalated this form of violence. If women are found to have HIV, they are isolated, physically assaulted and mentally tortured. The surprising fact is that husbands transmit HIV to their wives, and in return, women are subjected to violence. We find that most wives have been infected due to unsafe sex with their husbands.” Women such as Prava Dhanuk whose husbands die of AIDS are discriminated against widely because of their HIV positive status. Prava Dhanuk said, “I am isolated nowadays. People behave towards me as if I had killed my husband. My child is also treated differently. I would not have been discriminated against to this extent had my husband died of some other disease. I alone have undertaken the responsibility of my child. I feel sad to be treated this way. But I can’t give up.”

Dual work responsibility for women

Yamkala Pandey, a journalist, met with HIV positive women from Western Nepali districts including Banke, Doti, Achham, Dadheldura, Kailali and Kanchanpur, when she travelled in the region for 15 days. She met some women whose husbands were already dead. Despite being young mothers and infected at early ages, Pandey noticed that these women were performing their family responsibilities well. Sangita Nepali, an inhabitant of Kailali, was one example. She says, “My husband was HIV positive before he married me. Although he knew this fact he did not tell me. And he transmitted the infection to me. Now he is no more in this world and I have to take care of my two children alone. After his death, my family kicked me out.” She asks, “Who will take care of these two children if I don’t?” According to Pandey, who has studied gender discrimination in the Western region, many women are like Sangita. “Between a wife and husband, if it is the latter who becomes infected first, instead of seeking treatment, they keep their status a secret and die, leaving sole responsibility of the children with their wives. This is our society where freedom is meant for men and responsibility and constraints are meant for women. Violence against Women is still perpetrated and I consider this to be the primary reason for the HIV infection.”

Women of the Far-Western region are innocent, spending their lives waiting for their husbands, while they are made to suffer violence from their own relatives. They are prone to being infected with HIV by their own husbands.

I freed myself from marital rape

From a conversation with Champa (pseudonym), Samajhdari Listener, Dang District

When I listened to an episode of *Samajhdari* that talked about marital rape, I was surprised to learn that sex, even between husband and wife, without consent, is considered rape. I got married at an early age of 13. I am 29 now. Since the day I was married, my husband had forced me to have sex almost every night. For the initial days, I had to have sex with him even before I had gone through puberty and before I had started menstruating. I was fed up with his behaviour but I could do nothing. I didn't know that it was violence. But after listening to an episode about marital rape on *Samajhdari*, I finally learned that it was violence after 15 years of marriage. Once I learned it was violence, I tried to convince my husband. He did not listen to me. I told him I had learned that it was through the *Samajhdari* radio programme, and convinced him to listen to it too. He then started listening to the programme and it has brought about many changes in him. It is *Samajhdari* that has freed me from the pain I faced every day for 15 years of my married life.

Women living with HIV experience more violence

Santa Basnet, Radio Sagarmatha, Kathmandu Valley, Fellowship Grantee

Sita (pseudonym) is an inhabitant of Makwanpur district. Her husband was a driver who became sick all of a sudden and was taken to the hospital. When his blood was tested it was discovered that he was HIV positive, which came as a great shock to Sita. Shortly after this bad news, he died. Sita felt unbearable pain and said that since her husband died, her problems have piled one on top of another. Despite this, she dared to go to the hospital for a blood test where she discovered that she was also HIV positive. After her husband's death, she hoped her family would support her. But when her family ostracized her, she felt as though the land under her feet was slipping away and she could not find anything to hold on to. Remembering this, she said, "After 13 days of post-funeral-rites, my family members and neighbors urged me to go to Kathmandu, to a rehabilitation center. There was no place for me in their home. I was miserably weak at that time; I could not even walk without others' support." The death of her husband forced her to endure severe familial and social demands. Nobody spoke to her and to preserve her family prestige, she was sent with her three children to a rehabilitation center in Kathmandu. She has since returned to Makwanpur.

Bina (pseudonym), an inhabitant of Hetauda municipality, is now thirty. Two years ago, she was infected with HIV by her husband. In the last two years, she has experienced extremely bad treatment and abuse from her family and society. She said, "After I was infected with HIV, the attitude of my family and society towards me, the infected one, has changed drastically. My neighbors look at me askance when I walk and move in my own community. It has become difficult for us to live."

This hurtful behavior has affected not only people living with HIV but also people affected by HIV/AIDS. If a husband dies of AIDS, his wife comes under social scrutiny. An HIV infected woman named Sarita expresses, "Though they are not HIV positive, people point at them and imply that they are the infected because their husbands have died of AIDS. The affected women have to endure their family's mistreatment as well."

Discrimination by health services

Within Nepal, Mawkwanpur District in the Central region of Nepal, is one of the districts with relatively high HIV infection rates. According to the District AIDS Coordinating Committee (DACC), there are one hundred and seventy people openly living with HIV or AIDS. However, the district lacks the facilities to offer dignified treatment. People living with HIV or AIDS say that “Doctors’ behavior in hospitals is not good. Though they are knowledgeable, they do not put their knowledge into practice. If the doctor diagnoses people who have come for treatment as HIV positive, doctors refer them directly to Kathmandu. I wonder whether the medicines available in Kathmandu are different from those in Hetuada.”

Because of this discrimination, women living with HIV hesitate to tell anybody of their status. Programme Director of Makwanpur Women’s Group, Radika Chaulagain,

An interview with Bina (pseudonym), *Samajhdari* Listener, age 30

▶ **How were you infected?**

My husband used to work as a contractor. Initially we did not know about his HIV status. I think he transmitted HIV to me. Only after his death did I come to know. I was mistreated by my family, relatives, and neighbors.

▶ **What did you do after that?**

After my husband’s death, villagers spread the information that I was also living with HIV. I shared my situation with a close friend. But she did not help me. Still today, when I pass by villagers, they point at me as the “HIV infected one”.

▶ **Are you getting any treatment?**

I haven’t used medicines yet, my CD4 status is good. My daughter takes ART.

▶ **Are you busy working these days?**

I counsel people about HIV and AIDS in Basamadi, Makawanpur. I give people information on what HIV is, and the four methods of transmission. But even though I do this work, I cannot publicly express that I am living with HIV.

▶ **Who are prone to HIV infection and who are not?**

We are all at risk of infection and should use preventive measures.

▶ **Why is it difficult to express publicly?**

Infected women have a tougher time than infected men in our society. People may label a woman as morally lax or question her character. My child might not be admitted to school if my status was public. The attitude of the general public towards me would change drastically and I would certainly face violence and harassment.

who works with HIV infected and affected females in Makwanpur, said, “In this district, women have not broken the ice to face difficulties because there is no support for them. Though there are many organisations working in the field of HIV/AIDS, they do not have specific programmes to support infected women. The result is that some women get Anti Retrovirals secretly from India.”

HIV infection

“Six VDCs of this [Makwanpur] district are along the Mahendra highway. Most of the men in every family from these VDCs are drivers. Their occupation is one of the major causes for the increase in HIV infection rates”, says the Director of Makwanpur District Hospital Dr. Indra Prasad Prajapati. He continues, “If we analyze the history, sex workers in Makwanpur are high-risk because of their central location, compared to other districts. Every other house owns a truck. Truck drivers leave their homes for many days. They are young, and undoubtedly they desire sex. So after completing research, we started a counseling campaign that takes place they park and near their residential areas.” According to Maiti Nepal, a local NGO that also works to protect a high number of girls in Makwanpur at risk of being trafficked, “the numbers of people going to India and other countries for employment has been steadily increasing.”

HIV infection has had a devastating effect on housewives. They fear physical and mental abuse imposed by neighbors if they are found to be HIV positive. Due to family and social pressure, they do not want to express the despair that they endure and instead continue to live in fear and silence. The coordinator of Makwanpur District AIDS Coordinating Center, Gobinda Bishwakarma, says, “They [women] fear being known to be as HIV positive, which is why infected women do not come to us. However, of the women who do come, it seems have suffered violence both before and after their infection.” Because they are subjected to violence, these women keep it a secret from their family and society that they are coming to the Center and are getting treatment. Although there are three volunteer counseling and test centers in Hetauda, which is the District Headquarters of Makwanpur, for women who need treatment, including the facility for T-cell counting and antiretroviral therapy, they must travel many miles outside the district to Kathmandu, Bharatpur, or Birjung.

***Samajhdari* made me aware of my responsibility**

From a conversation with Hari Babadur Badi, Samajhdari Listener, Surkhet District

Samajhdari has inspired many changes in me and in my community as well. I used to spend all my daily income on alcohol and fought with my wife. I even used to beat my wife and children when I got drunk. When I started listening to *Samajhdari*, I learned that I had been a perpetrator of violence towards my wife. I promised then that I wouldn't repeat that behavior in my life again. I felt my responsibility towards her and I understood why a husband and wife are two wheels of the same cart. I used to get drunk almost 24 hours a day, I used to earn NRs 100 and spend NRs 200 a day. But now I realize that if only I can save some money, I can pay for my children's education. I also share my knowledge with people around me. Some of them have already begun practicing in their changed behavior. I have also started discussing things with my wife. I even help her with household chores: fetching water, washing dishes and clothes, and cooking food. *Samajhdari* taught me that household chores are not only the responsibility of my wife. People often say negative things when I help my wife with household chores, I try to convince them that there is no problem in doing household work. I even encourage them to listen to *Samajhdari* by going to their houses to collect them to listen to the programme in a group. I tell them that the radio programme *Samajhdari* is not meant only for women.

Displaced HIV positive women are entangled in troubles

Padamraj Joshi, Annapurna Post, National Daily, Fellowship Grantee

It was not the fault of Mahima Shrestha that she became infected with HIV, but because of her HIV positive status she had to leave her home. An inhabitant of Balaju, Kathmandu, Mahima was ousted from her home when her husband died of AIDS after four years of marriage. Mahima was infected with HIV by her husband. Once her husband's family discovered that she was living with HIV, they accused her of committing a number of offenses and made her leave the family home. Since then, Mahima has been living in Kathmandu.

Twenty-nine-year-old Devaki Pariyar of Paatal VDC, Achham District, came to Kathmandu after she was forced to leave her home. Devaki and her young child were obliged to ask for help from different organisations in Kathmandu after the death of her HIV infected husband. Devaki has stomach problems but she can't afford treatment. Describing her experience of being displaced, she said, "If my health was sound, I could work as a laborer for a living... but how can I work to sustain myself in such an unhealthy situation? How can I educate my child?" Devaki also revealed that her family had accused her of killing her husband and then forced her to leave her home.

The situation of Dhana Nepali from Doti, Kailali District is similar to that of Devaki - Dhana and her husband were forced out of their village when neighbors learned that the two of them were living with HIV. Dhana and her husband have lost a son and a daughter to AIDS. Then they think of how their community treated them, they say that they felt like dying. As a displaced person, Dhana said she could not get even afford a spade to dig a grave to bury her son in the bank of the Mohanaa River. After her son died in Seti Zonal Hospital while he was under treatment. "What can be more miserable than this?" she exclaimed.

Saraswati Badi of Kailali; Rangi Saoud of Markidada; Pashupati Pariyar of Achham; Bimala BK of Chandika; and Basanti Pariyar of Marku are five women who were discriminated against and displaced from their communities simply because they were HIV positive. Throughout the country, women like them are being subjected to domestic violence whereas others are living a panicked, displaced life. Saiman K.C.,

My future is dark

My name is Shova (pseudonym) and I am 22-year old. I am from Pokhara. My family has five members: one brother, two sisters, my mother and me. My father was a chronic drunk. He would spend all his money on alcohol. When we started going to school, my mother had difficulty running the family. Then my father got lung cancer because of his alcoholism. We admitted him to Manipal Medical Hospital and spent a lot of money, but he did not recover. Six months later, he died. Our problems increased.

After his death, my mother's health deteriorated because of intense anxiety, so I had to shoulder the family responsibilities. We were destitute. Nobody helped us. My neighbors did not lend me money because they feared that a drunkard's daughter like me would not pay them back. I left school during class nine thinking I could help my brother and sister, in their studies. I started working at a dance restaurant as a waitress while I ran the family and payed my brother and sister's school expenses. Initially, my monthly salary was only fifteen hundred rupees.

My job brought happiness not only to my mother but also to my brother and sister. My job was our only income. But our happiness did not last. My job was to make the customers happy by any means. I had to bear abuse; the customers even caressed my body. I started drinking alcohol to decrease my tension. Customers proposed five thousand rupees for one night. I could not stop myself from saying yes because of the sad condition of my family. My mother worried when I returned home late. Usually, I lied to her and said I had stayed at my friend's house, and sometimes I reassured her by saying that I had spent the night at my aunt's house.

Our living standard increased. I didn't want my brother or sister to discontinue their studies. I was ready to do anything for them. I had sexual relationships with many customers for one year, sometimes I slept with three people in a day. My mother began recuperating after I started earning more. She was ignorant of my high source of income. My brother and sister passed the School Leaving Certificate examinations. My mother insisted that I marry someone and lead a good family life. I could not expressly reject my mother's advice.

One day, the restaurant owner told all the waitresses and dancers to have their blood tested for HIV. After five days, it was reported that I had been living with HIV. On that day, I did not go to the restaurant and wept for the whole day. The owner knew I was living with HIV. He did not pay my salary for two months' and started mistreating me. When his domination became intolerable, I left the job and stayed home for a few months. Now, my brother and sister are studying in Pokhara. I came to Kathmandu last year, telling my mother that I was searching for a new job. I could not find another job, which eventually compelled me to resume prostitution. I am not sure how long I will survive. I have no wish to live anymore. What can I do? There is no way out. I have sacrificed my happiness for my brother's and sister's education and the happiness of my mother. My future is dark.

from Navakiran Plus, an organisation of people living with HIV in Dhangadi District, said that the number of such displaced people was growing.”Displaced women living with HIV are suffering from two pandemics. Also, they lack money to buy medicine and they live a displaced life with their children after they are forced to leave their own homes. While some of them have left for Kathmandu hoping to get shelter, others live at the District Headquarters and ask for help from different organisations. Economically destitute, their HIV status delivers two more responsibilities to these women: to take care and educate their children, and to take care of their own health. Some children of women who have publicly expressed their HIV positive status, with the help of various organizations, are educated in Kathmandu as well as in villages near District Headquarters. However, women do not want to reveal their HIV status due to possible social injustices that would prevent their children from being accepted into schools. These women’s worries are made worse by economic insecurity. One displaced woman living with HIV said that she would have found life easier if the government had taken responsibility for educating her children. After donor agencies including Global Fund expressed reluctance to assist HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, more problems are likely to occur. Mathura Kunwar, vice-president of the Federation of Women Living with HIV said, “It is not the fault of the women that they are infected with HIV. We are infected because of unsafe sex with our husbands whom we worshipped as God. But society finds us guilty and forces us to leave our homes.”

Kuwar Mathura has been involved for the last fifteen years in the treatment and rehabilitation of women living with HIV. She explained that young husbands who go to India or foreign countries for employment leave their wives at home but cannot control their sexual desires. They contract HIV through unsafe sex with sex workers. Gorakh Nepali, the president of Godavari Plus, an organisation working for the rights of HIV positive women and providing services to them in Kailali District, said that it was because of husbands that HIV infection among housewives is increasing. 90% of youth from the Far-Western Development Region go to India for employment, Mr. Nepali said, but they cannot earn enough money and stay in India only for about two years. They have unsafe sex with sex workers from whom they contract HIV. This has resulted in an increase in risk of HIV infection among their wives.

Most women who contract HIV from their husbands are now living alone. Shanti Pariyar explained that her husband had been an employee in Mumbai, India. He would come home once every four years. Gradually, he started showing signs of illness and falling sick. He was HIV positive but he did not inform her about it. He died of AIDS two years ago. Because of him, Shanti is now living with HIV. Remembering her past, Shanti bitterly expressed, “After his death, my family wanted to expel me from the house. My family knew that I was HIV positive and all the members including my father-in-law, mother-in-law, and brother-in-law joined together to force me to leave the house.”

Sahana Rajhandari, a resident of Maitidevi, Kathmandu, had to leave her house a few years ago simply because she was HIV positive. Her educated family branded her a

guilty woman and refused to grant her any share in the family inheritance. Unable to tolerate these mistreatment, she filed a case against them in court. A court decision granted her a share of her family inheritance. Now, she lives in her own house. But she still has to face violence in other ways. Courts do not favor all women who are HIV positive and who fight against violence in the way that Sahana did. Many other women are poor and cannot speak for their own rights. Mira Kuwar, the former Vice-Chairperson of Shakti Milan Society, an organisation working for HIV positive women, said that most HIV positive women are illiterate. She said, “Since we are illiterate and poor, patriarchal society has dominated us for a long time.”

According to the data provided by the National Centre for AIDS and STD control, 15,043 people were registered as HIV infected by December 15th, 2009. Among total HIV infected women, 27% are housewives and among these 27%, 21% live in rural areas and 6% live in urban areas. Amongst all HIV positive housewives, most have been displaced from their homes. Some only know about their HIV status when they are on the verge of death and after their husbands have already died. Lawmaker and Advocate Sapana Pradhan Malla said, “In our society, women are not given the right to speak, refute, and argue, which not only contributes to Violence against Women but also weakens their physical condition.” She added, “Such problems are an outcome of traditional religious and cultural beliefs regarding women as commodities to be used by men in any way they like.”

We talk about condoms openly in our community

From a conversation with Dulari Devi Barahi, Community Reporter, Mahottari District

My name is Dulari Devi Barahi. My home is at Ikrahiya VDC of Mahottari district. Before working as a reporter in the radio programme *Samajhdari*, I used to work in the health sector. I have worked as a Community Reporter for *Samajhdari* for two years. Some important things that I have learned so far are the skills a radio reporter needs: operating a zoom recorder, taking an interview, recording, and so on. Aside from these practical skills, I have also understood how a woman becomes HIV positive - because of violence against her. In addition to that, I have learned about other sexual reproductive health issues such as uterus prolapse and the importance of condom negotiation. In our society, people do not openly discuss condom use. Working on *Samajhdari* has taught them to speak up about these issues. I have applied my learning to my own behavior and shared the information with others, too., Once I found a couple in my village who fought about using a condom. I counseled them about the importance of using condoms. These days, they openly share that using a condom is not a big deal. In addition to this couple, there are many others who have started asking me about condom use, Violence against Woman and HIV in an open way.



I made my husband agree to go for blood testing

From a conversation with Shanti (pseudonym), Makwanpur District

My husband worked for a long time in Delhi and Mumbai in India. When he got back from his work in India, he grew thinner and he suffered from a bad fever and many other diseases. When he was in India, I would listen to *Samajhdari* and it was from that programme that I learned about HIV and AIDS. From that programme, I learned that housewives were getting HIV because of their inability to talk about sexual matters to their husbands openly. Because I knew these things, and also since my husband was getting thinner and thinner day by day, I feared that he might have HIV. But I was tense about how to tell him. I was worried and tense for a few days. I feared that he might scold me if I talked, or he might beat me or he might also suspect me. Equally, I feared that he might have HIV. But one day, I collected all my strength and talked to him about these things. Initially he got angry with me. He stopped talking to me for many days. He did not listen to me. However, I did not stop talking. I tried convincing him that a simple blood test would ensure our HIV status. And finally he agreed to go for testing. Thank god he was safe from HIV! We both live happily ever after.

Child marriage: Adolescent girls are at high risk of HIV infection

Rekha Kusum Regmi, National News Agency, Fellowship Grantee

Due to rampant poverty in her family, Santa Dhakal from Dang District was forced to marry a man who worked in Mumbai (India) during class nine at the age of seventeen. They were married in 1998 on the 16th of April, when he was in Nepal. But her married life was short-lived. “My husband left for Mumbai on the third day of our marriage. He returned to Nepal frequently, but we did not manage to stay together,” she related. After less than one year, her husband died.

Her struggles began when her husband died. “I hadn’t stayed with him more than 20 days, and I was all alone, my life was miserable”, she expressed unhappily. “I did not have the support of my husband or family or relatives. I have no children. If I did, they would be more wretched than me”, she said.

Symptoms of HIV could be seen when her husband returned from Mumbai. Santa had to tolerate accusations from her family for her husband’s poor health. Her father-and-mother-in-law thought she was responsible and called a traditional healer and sacrificed a male-goat.

“I cannot express fully the assaults from my family. 45 days of post-funeral rites felt like 45 years. They tried to kick me out of the house. They scolded me bitterly; they said I was dead to them. They said I murdered their son.” Tears rained from her eyes as she continued, “My parents rejected me. They didn’t even call me during Dashain to put on tika because I was infected with HIV.”

She finally found a report from Teku Hospital, which her husband had hid in the roof of the house. It stated that her husband had been HIV positive.

Her parents decided to arrange a second marriage for her, but she decided to have a blood test first. After selling her jewelry, she gathered eight thousand rupees and traveled to Kathmandu for the test. “After the doctor saw the blood report, he suggested that I not marry. I was already infected with HIV.” Although she fights in

her district for the rights of women like herself, Santa still struggles to transform this dark phase in her life.

Santa is a representative case. Many girls are forced to marry early in Nepal and endure inhuman treatment like Santa did. Although Nepal is changing, early marriage is still practiced due to the conservative attitudes of parents who think that if they do not arrange a marriage for their daughters, that the daughters may choose an immoral path. They wrongly think that girls must go to a husband's house eventually. Although the government has endorsed the saying "bihe baari bis barsa paari" (marriage after twenty), half of all girls ages fifteen to nineteen get married before they reach twenty. Among this group, according to the report of the Beyond Beijing Committee 2007, 70% become pregnant before eighteen. The Interim Constitution of Nepal defines girls below sixteen as children and international law defines a child to be below eighteen. But Nepalese tradition goes against these laws, and the rate of HIV and STI infection among adolescent girls is increasing.

According to the National Centre for AIDS and STD Control, 15,406 people were infected with HIV in Nepal before February, 2010. Among them, 679 were between 10-19 years, of whom almost half (300) were women. Dr. Hemanta Ojha, who works at the Centre, said early marriage holds a high risk of STI transmission because of ignorance about reproductive health. He adds, "There is a high risk of HIV infection among those who have STIs. In comparison to ordinary people, people infected by STIs have nine times the risk of being HIV infected." He recommends early diagnosis of STDs and reproductive health education for adolescents.

According to Prakash Nepal, Programme Director of Dang Plus, who has been working in the HIV/AIDS sector for the last two years, 107 people are known to be infected in Dang, including 69 men and 38 women. Of the women, half are infected by HIV due to early marriage. "Dang Plus has estimated that more women are being infected with HIV and STIs. To calculate exact figures, Dang Plus runs a number of focused programmes to identify HIV infected," said Programme Director Mr. Nepali.

Bipul Pokhrel, a journalist, asserted that a young girl marrying an older man working abroad would increase the girl's HIV infection risk because young girls are forced to engage in sexual conjugal life at an early age. "Because of the age disparity and social structure, the men are often involved in unsafe sex before and during marriage. This is the main cause of HIV infection in women", Pokhrel concluded.

Girls in early adolescence are unaware of their reproductive health. Early marriages create many risks in their lives. They do not have the maturity or courage to protest against forced sex, and they cannot speak out against the violence to which they are subjected. They are condemned to tolerate sexual violence inside their own homes. Early marriage adds many woes to their lives.

Understanding husbands

Pawan Neupane, Equal Access Nepal, Samajhdari Producer, Kathmandu District

Three understanding husbands - Ram Chandra Bhatta of Dadheldhura, Dayaram Thakur of Mohottari, and Rajkumar Thapa of Sindhuli - will surprise people who believe that men are inherently prone to violence against women. In a patriarchal society such as ours, where the number of men torturing their wives is high, the positive attitudes and conduct of a handful of men challenge the fearful concept of men only as perpetrators of violence. Ram Chandra Bhatta of Dadheldhura, an employee of the Agriculture Department of Nepal, got married to a fifteen-year-old eighth-grade student named



“I always try my best not to leave any room for misunderstanding in our life. Understanding between us is the basis of our relationship.”
- Ram Chandra Bhatta



“I give all the money I make in the foreign country to my wife. I feel proud of it.” - Dayaram Thakur

Sukuntala. After their marriage, Bhatta helped his wife to pursue her studies rather than asking her to stop. Now, Sakuntala Bhatta holds a Masters Degree in Political Science.

Compared to other regions in Nepal, people from the Mid and Far-Western region hold stronger beliefs in customs and traditions that harm women. But Ram Chandra never adopted traditions rooted in superstition; rather, he always stood against them. Shankuntala says her husband's new way of

thinking has enabled her to move forward in life.

Dayaram Thakur, who comes from Ikarhiya, Mahottari District, is another example of a man who holds the belief that the prosperity of women and the entire family is not

possible until women are empowered and gain economic responsibility and ability. Dayaram says, “In my society, the belief that men should not help women is prevalent. But I help my wife in cleaning the kitchen and washing clothes. I buy vegetables



**“I am always conscious about not hurting my wife.”
- Rajkumar Thapa**

on my own and prepare them for cooking. I also do all the household work.” Engaged in tailoring and agriculture, Dayaram has helped his wife, Dularidevi, and create an easy environment for her to become empowered. Praising Dayaram’s role in the house, Dularidevi says, “he helps me cook and manage all the household work when I work outside the house. He has also had a big role in educating me. Such helpful conduct has made him a good husband.”

Rajkumar Thapa from Shitalpati, Sindhuli District, is another example of a good husband. Forty years old, Rajkumar spent twenty years teaching. During his teaching

career, he played a helpful role in his family. While talking about the role performed by her husband, his wife Mrs. Sitadevi says “I engage myself in economic activities more than he does. I take all the economic responsibility. Various organisations request me to be a member of their organisation. Now I am engaged in several small groups in our village. He supports me in my every activity. After finishing all the household tasks, he leaves for school. After school he not only manages fodder for the cattle and cleans their shed, but also prepares dinner. If he gets time, he also helps the villagers.”

Ram Chandra Bhatta, Dayaram Thakur, and Rajkumar Thapa are three of the ten excellent responses that the *Samajhdari* producers chose as winners of the “Understanding Husband Contest” which was conducted by the production team. The competition asked for letters that would detail why each contestant considered himself to be a most understanding husband.

The ten finalists and most understanding husbands were: Nihindra Prasad Acharya from Bhodsipa, Sindhuplachowk; Shovakanta Rao from Mahattari; Raghunath Parajuli from Parbat; Somebahadur Lama from Makawanpur; Jaganarayan Chaudhari from Dang; Jivanlal Chaudhari from Kanchanpur; and Taranath Parajuli from Bhojpur. They are not husbands of words but of actions who put the concept of mutual understanding into practice.

Can we not take a lesson from the understanding husbands who understand their wives’ desires, accept the decisions of their wives to bear children or have sex when they wish, and who are loyal to their wives? Can we not support their education and take responsibility for household chores? Can we not remove the beliefs that men are solely responsible for violence against women? And why do we not instead centre our campaign on dissolving parochial patriarchy?

Household chores are not only a woman's responsibility

From a discussion with Nihindra Prasad Acharya, Samajhdari Listener, Sindhupalchowk, for the 24th episode of Samajhdari broadcast on December 12th, 2008

My name is Nihindra Prasad Acharya. I live in Bhodsipa, Sindhupalchowk district. I teach in a local school. There are six members in my family which includes me, my wife, my parents and my daughter and son. During my childhood, I noticed my sister-in-law, sisters and mother working in the house. My elder sister used to go to school with me but later I learned that she was only there to take care of me. Once I was able to take care of myself at school, she started doing household chores. I was so disturbed by this fact that I promised myself that when I became mature, I would not allow my family to perpetrate this kind of violence. Since then, I have always tried my level best to maintain violence-free behavior. I see many people dominate women, discriminate against them only because they are women, and differentiate work to be done by men and by women. I never liked this. I feel motivated to speak against Violence against Women. I apply this in my own life first. Thus I chose home science, which is supposed to be studied only by women, as my major subject of study during high school. I passed my intermediate in home science as my major subject from Sano Thimi College.

And then I translated the knowledge that I had gained during my studies into my behavior. Nowadays, I help my mother, sister-in-law, and wife do household chores. I do almost all types of chores including cutting hay, sweeping, cleaning and so on. People make fun of me, calling me the president of a wife's victim group, or the youngest daughter-in-law of the house, but I turn a deaf ear to them and continue. I do my work myself, wash my clothes, and support my wife in household tasks. Since I have continued to be who I am and do what I do, some people who made fun of me in the past have started to become more supportive and even encourage me these days. There is equal participation between me and my wife in every decision. We participate equally in every discussion. I feel that the gender issue is not only limited to discussion among women, instead, it is related to men and the entire family. Therefore, whatever the problem is, I discuss it with my wife and respect her say and decision-making ability. I have understood that a woman can do everything that a man does if provided the opportunity. Therefore, I have tried very much to make such an environment at home where my wife can go outside to learn things. She is involved in many local level committees. I even take her with me to programmes in my village. The pressure

of household chores is high during the morning and evening, we work together to get them done. We often schedule farm work during leave days and do it together. I have seen many women who do not eat food before to their husbands, but that is not the case in my house.

My female colleagues at my school use to not come to school during their periods. I convinced them that menstruating is a regular and natural phenomenon, so they didn't need to leave school and then they began to come to school during their periods.

My parents take my perceptions in a positive way now. They also encourage me to continue being who I am now. As they suggest, I will continue respecting women, I will never forget that male and female complement one another. I won't do anything that adds to violence against women and will encourage others to join me.

A harmonious relationship as a result of faith and honesty

From an interview with Karna Bahadur Dhenga for 39th episode of Samajhdari broadcast on March 27th, 2009)

I have been working for the Indian military. I stay in India because I need to earn money for my family. However, the memories of my family haunts me while I stay there. I keep a photo of my family with me all the time. I telephone my wife once every two or three days. She is equally concerned about my well-being. We also talk about the importance of being honest regarding sex whenever we talk on the telephone. I know that many Nepalese men have to leave their families to work in India and other foreign countries. I also know that they might get involved in risky behavior and that this is how they get HIV and transmit the virus to their wives, too.

Since I know all these things, I always stay away from any such risky behavior which might lead me to become HIV infected. I never undertake a sexual relationship with anybody other than with my wife because I know having external relationships would create disorder in a faithful relationship between husband and wife. Most significantly, these risky relationships could end our lives. Thus, I am always committed to maintaining a faithful relationship with my wife even if I am away from her and I also have strong faith in her too. Because of our honest relationship, we have mutual understanding among each other and because of this understanding we have happy lives.

A husband who holds his wife's will above society's commentary

From an interview with Ghamaraj Timilsina, Samajhdari Listener, Makwanpur for the 50th episode of Samajhdari, broadcast on June 19th, 2009)

I am involved in farming business. From the very beginning, my wife and I had a good understanding and jointly protested against negative aspects in our society. We did not have any children for a long period of our married life. Many people spoke against us; some of them made fun of us saying we were an “infertile couple”. Most of them tried to convince me to take another wife. But I was committed to my decision that a second marriage should not happen only because of the lack of a child. If somebody came to me to convince me to get married a second time, I would scold him or her and ask them to stay out of other's business. There was also tension within my family because of our not having a child. My parents were also sad for us, and I tried to console them. I told them getting married a second time was not a good solution to the problem. My wife also was sad at being unable to conceive but I tried all the time not to let her feel so. I also asked her not to blame herself solely for not having child. Instead of getting worried and listening to others, we started going for regular doctor's checkups. Whatever was the case, there was understanding and deep love between us and also the faint hope of being parents. The same hope ultimately led us to the beautiful feeling that being parents after eight years brings. I have learned that as husband and wife, those who keep faith in each other will definitely have a good result. People who made fun of us in the past now realise that we are an ideal couple. We are very happy now.

I encouraged my wife to explore the world outside our home and learn new things

From an interview with Bhuwan Pandey from Kathmandu for 72nd episode of Samajhdari

I run a catering business in Lalitpur District. My wife used to be too shy. She needed company when she went out of the house for some reason. I tried a lot to make her feel at ease with others. I encouraged her to take part in trainings in order to boost her confidence. Now, she has developed confidence. She is confident enough to go out on her own and is able to handle any kind of situation alone. To enable her go outside the house to learn new things, I decided to share the household work so that she would be free. Thus, I started doing household chores along with her. These days, I take the lead in doing the household work in the morning, I take care of our child, wake him up and prepare lito [porridge] for him. I then clean the house, cook the food. During this time, my wife goes to learn how to stitch. To take care of my child is my first priority. I still remember how my wife became unconscious while giving birth to our child. I

think that I am blessed ever to have had child, and the least I can do is take care of this beautiful gift. I understand my responsibility to look after my child.

It is because I have taken half of my wife's responsibility that she can go out and assume various other responsibilities. And I know this has ultimately benefited me as well. Since my wife started earning money, she has been supporting our family financially as well. And her support is undoubtedly good for my family.