

# Indila's Story

## One Girl's Fight to Stop Child Marriage

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### Background

Dhanusha, with a population of 600,000, is a poor region of Nepal, suffering from the effects of drought and high unemployment. At least 40% of the males in the area migrate to other countries, including India and Saudi Arabia, for work. Education is free for boys and girls until grade five, but girls often drop out of school in order to help their families. Still, families, particularly large ones, often feel it is a burden to support girls. The threat of a dowry that increases with the age of the child also contributes to parents' arranging the marriage of their daughters at a young age.



In Dhanusha, as in much of Nepal, childhood is very brief. It is common for children to be betrothed as young as 5 years of age. The couples usually do not start living together until they are 12 or 13, when the girl moves to the husband's family house for her "second marriage." These marriages take place in spite of the fact that the official legal age of marriage in Nepal is 18 for girls and 20 for boys.

### Indila's Story

Indila Nayak is an engaging 16-year-old girl who has already challenged tradition and her family twice, delaying her marriage for the past three years. Indila, who lives in Kurta Village Development Committee (VDC) in Dhanusha, loves school and is determined to graduate. She plans to become a staff nurse as a way to contribute to her community and improve health care for women. Health services in Dhanusha are inconsistent, and due to pregnancies at young ages, the women are especially vulnerable to poor health care.

Indila knows that she cannot put off her marriage beyond age 18, but she will insist that her husband pay for her nursing education. When Indila was 13, her parents informed her that they were about to accept a marriage proposal for her. Indila managed to persuade them to put her dowry into an interest-bearing account until she was older. Although they feared that she would be beaten and shunned by the community, they agreed to her suggestion and allowed her to continue to attend school and live with them at home. Indila was happy and worked hard at school and helped her mother at home.

Two years ago, however, when Indila was 14, her parents approached her again, as they had the opportunity to marry off Indila and her older sister at the same time. This time, Indila needed help to convince her parents to continue delaying her marriage. The Reproductive Health for Married Adolescent Couples (RHMAC) project (managed by The ACQUIRE Project) had started a project in Indila's community and a 24-year-old woman named Pinky Shah was the Peer Educator for the local ward. Pinky had been married at age 14, and until she became a Peer Educator, had been a housewife who rarely left her home. Indila was inspired by Pinky's courage as she went door-to-door, talking to young couples about family planning, about delaying their first birth, and about other reproductive health issues. Indila also learned that Pinky had the support of the VDC leaders and other influential leaders in the community. With this kind of support, she thought that Indila's parents would listen to Pinky.



Pinky Shah agreed to help Indila because she believes that young marriages are the root cause of many of the health issues women face. Delaying the first birth remains a challenge, but since the legal age at marriage is 18, she believes that it is possible to convince people to obey the law.

Indila and Pinky planned that Indila's parents would see Pinky's visit as just part of her job as a Peer Educator, not as a consultation on Indila. Pinky managed to convince the parents that the law is designed to protect young girls from the dangers of early childbirth and to ensure that they are educated. She noted that she had met their daughter, Indila, and had heard from teachers that she is an excellent student who wants to be a nurse. Pinky pointed out that well-trained nurses were needed in their community and that the family would be doing a service in allowing Indila to continue her education. The parents agreed to postpone Indila's marriage until she is 18, and Indila is now in grade 7.

Although Indila is a strong advocate for herself, she also wants to support the other girls in her community. Pinky organized an interaction group for students, and at the group's meeting, there were discussions about reproductive health issues for adolescents. Many felt that delaying marriage was critical. Many also learned of the legal age of marriage for the first time. Indila attended this meeting and was surprised to learn so many other young people, including boys, supported her ideas. An Anti-Child Marriage committee, led by youth, was formed, and Indila helped to plan their first rally. The core group is comprised of 11 adolescents. Since the first meeting was held more than a year and a half ago, several rallies and oratory competitions have been organized and wall paintings with key messages were created.



Indila and the Anti-Child Marriage Committee of Kurta VDC, Dhanusha, Nepal

Recently, a letter composed by the committee was sent to key leaders, including the VDC chairmen and the heads of all eight political parties, inviting them to a workshop. The workshop was well-attended and the leaders, seeing the youth as important allies, have formed a Social Norms Monitoring Committee and have agreed to the following norms:

- Free education for girls until grade 10
- Upholding of the law regarding minimum age of marriage
- The right of girls to at least complete grade 8 before marriage

Indila is pleased that she is no longer alone in her fight. She is now part of a collective that is gaining momentum, with a district-wide conference planned for May. Individual issues are now part of a public and transparent process.

Although Indila accepts that her marriage within two years is probably inevitable, she says that she now has the strength to demand that her husband cover the costs of nursing school. She will also delay her first pregnancy until she finishes her studies. With the growing attention to changing social norms in her community, she believes that the status of women will eventually improve, and that women's improved health through birth spacing and access to family planning will also become a reality.

*Photo credit: Nancy Russell*