

Sita's Story: Lifting the Veil through Courage and Leadership

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Until two years ago, Sita Devi Shah was dismissed as the “shopkeeper woman,” and like other women in her neighborhood of Dhanusha District, she rarely left her home. When she did go out, she always covered her face with the veil of her sari. Then, in August 2005, the ACQUIRE Project's Reproductive Health for Married Adolescent Couples (RHMAC) began in Nepal.



Krusa Shura Purba and his wife, who were neighbors of Sita's, were chosen as peer educators for Ward 8. However, when Krusa's wife had to drop out due to pregnancy, the health management committee asked for new applicants. Sita's husband did not want Sita to apply, but her mother-in-law was supportive, and Sita was chosen to work with Krusa.

It is unusual for women to leave the walls of their

family's compounds, and going door-to-door or holding open meetings were new concepts in Sita's community. After learning the special health issues related to young marriage and the importance of birth spacing and other reproductive health issues, Sita immediately began reaching out to her neighbors. The training in communication skills that she received gave her confidence to hold monthly meetings in her home and to initiate interaction groups for mothers-in-law, students, and others. She hung the plastic coated poster developed by ACQUIRE on the outside of her home, marking it as the home of a RHMAC peer educator.



As Sita became known in her community as someone who had knowledge and information, neighbors sought her guidance. Five women came to her with complaints that sounded like possible sexually transmitted infections (STIs). She referred these women to the health post for an examination. The man in charge of the health post sent them back, refusing to examine them due to their low caste, and said that Sita should examine them herself. Following this incident, a public forum related to health was being organized by CARE under another project. At this meeting, Sita stood up and asked the man to explain his actions. After much grilling by those present, he agreed to see the clients and has since improved his attitude.

Following this incident, Sita received even more positive recognition: A local nongovernmental organization (NGO) hired her to teach literacy classes two hours every day. Sita says that she is

happy to be making use of her Student Leaving Certificate (SLC) education and enjoys teaching. She also continues to volunteer, and she works closely with three special friends (called “Tin Sahti”), accompanying one of them to the clinic for family planning counseling and staying with her while her friend receive her first Depo Provera injection. Every month, Sita holds meetings for mothers-in-law and reports that more mothers-in-law now accompany their daughters-in-law to antenatal care visits. The health management committee was so pleased with her work that they presented her with a special shawl.

In February, Sita was chosen to take part in leadership training offered by ACQUIRE/RHMAC. At this workshop, Sita learned about laws related to health and about the relationship between the national and local governments. The legal age at marriage in Nepal is 18 for girls and 20 for boys; however, this law is ignored in much of the area where Sita lives.

When she returned, she learned that a neighbor planned to marry off his 13-year-old daughter, Sangita. Sita met with the family and convinced them to delay the marriage. She is now working with them to find resources to enable Sangita to go to school. Sita now serves as secretary in the local anti-child marriage committee. This is one of 25 committees that will hold a district-wide conference on child marriage in May. Sita plans to attend and advocate for a free education for girls until grade 10. If girls were able to stay in school at no cost to their parents, it would be easier to delay more marriages like that of Sita’s neighbor.

Prior to Sita’s role as a peer educator, her husband had a small local shop and barely managed to care for his family. Sita’s success and enthusiasm for her work have sparked him to acquire a new shop in Janakpur. He is now very busy and is proud of Sita’s fame.



Sita, with her husband and son



Sita and her daughter in Sita’s “special shawl”

Sita says that now the neighbors look to her with respect and call her “Sita Didi,” a sign of respect, rather than “shopkeeper woman.” Modestly, Sita says that she is a “good Hindu, but she is also open,” and people respect her for that. Sita Devi Shah lives in Thera VDC in Dhanusha District. Married at 16, she is now 26, has three children, and recently decided to have a tubal ligation.

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