

Sunita's Story: A Woman of Courage Leading the Way for Others

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Sunita Varnawal is like many women in her village of Dhore, in Nepal. She is 25 years old, has been married for six years, and has three children. She has never traveled outside of Parsa District. Yet she has been able to have a dramatic impact on the lives of women in her area.

Sunita has been a peer educator for the Dhore Village Development Committee since the beginning of the ACQUIRE Project's Reproductive Health for Adolescent Married Couples (RHAMC) program. Through the RHAMC, Sunita has gained communication skills that allow her to discuss difficult topics openly with men and women, either privately or in group situations.

Initially, she had hoped that she and her husband could work together as peer educators, but health officials and local advisors decided that the 18 peer educators should be spread among the community's households, one per family. So Sunita works with Raknesh Varnawal, a neighbor; he visits the men in the area, and she is responsible for talking to women about reproductive health issues.

The support of Sunita's husband, who works for the local post office, has been critical to her success. He participated in training on equity offered by the government's Women's Development Office a few years ago. There he learned that *"men and women are two wheels on a cart and they must work together for the cart to move forward."* After attending this meeting, he encouraged Sunita to become active in the community. Since then, she has been a social mobilizer and a leader of a savings-and-loan group for the Women's Development Office. The savings-and-loan group, which has 125 members, has saved Rs 87,000 to date. These funds are used for loans for businesses or for emergencies, especially emergencies related to health. Sunita says that the peer education communications training has given her the confidence to introduce reproductive health issues into these meetings.



Sunita and her proud and supportive husband

She notes that at one time, when local women experienced symptoms of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), they would hide them; now, they go to health facilities to be examined. Sunita has become recognized in the community for her knowledge, and now many husbands come to her with questions related to HIV and AIDS. Her training as a peer educator allows her to answer their questions with

confidence. Although there are many jobs locally due to the many industries in and around Birgunj, a number of men still work outside of Nepal. The issues of STIs, HIV, and AIDS are important and are now openly discussed.

In Dhore, the local health post, which is staffed by a maternal community health worker, an auxiliary health worker, and a village health worker, is currently located inside the Village Development Committee's office, with no separate space for privacy or proper examination. As part of her job as a peer educator, Sunita was recently conducting a student interaction meeting. During the meeting, the students raised the issue of youth-friendly health services, along with other reproductive health issues. Following this meeting, the youth (both girls and boys) formed a group to advocate with the Village



Sunita and her "tin sahthi"- her three friends.

Development Committee. They then organized a meeting with the influential leaders in the village and raised the issue of the lack of private space for examinations and other important services for women and families. At a subsequent mass meeting, community members made the building of a separate health post a priority, along with proper drainage and an accessible road. The money has been allocated and construction has begun. Now Sunita monitors the spending of the money.

As part of her job as a peer educator, Sunita reached out to three friends ("tin sahthi"), to provide one-on-one counseling related to reproductive health. In the beginning, the husbands of Sunita's tin sahthi, Renu Ranju Devi, Momita Devi and Premila Devi, felt that Sunita was making trouble for them. They refused to allow the wives to leave home to attend interaction meetings. However, Sunita continued to meet with them in their homes, and then she invited

their mothers-in-law to an orientation meeting. Following this meeting, the mothers-in-law became the advocate for their daughters-in-law. Momita, Renu, and Premila are all now allowed to leave their homes to be part of the savings group, and two have adopted contraception as well. (Momita and Premila were accompanied by their mothers-in-law and chose the pill; Renu's husband is working outside the country, but she will discuss family planning with him when he returns.) The mothers-in-law agreed that they had been afraid of family planning methods, but now feel like they have more information. They support their daughters-in-law going to savings groups or other trainings, as they see that their whole family will benefit from the young women's improved knowledge.

Sunita considers herself a role model for other girls and women in her community. In the beginning, some husbands would not allow their wives to talk to her. Now, they see her as a valued leader in the community. In part as a result of her advocacy, the community has already started to change their attitudes toward child marriage. Sunita says that she knows of no one who has married under the age of 20 in the past two years. This environment has made it more acceptable for other changes (although it is still very rare for women to leave their compounds). Although Sunita may never leave Parsa District, hopes she is happy when people say good things about her work as a peer educator and community leader, and hopes that her story can serve as an inspiration to women around the world.

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