



# “With my whole heart”

EXPANDING THE HORIZONS OF EQUALITY



PALLAV RANJAN  
with VIDHEHA



## About the Publisher

Volunteer Services Overseas (VSO) has been in Nepal since 1964 and is currently implementing development programmes in 20 districts of five provinces of Nepal. Using the Volunteering for Development (VFD) approach, VSO aims to be more responsive to and actively engaged in supporting disadvantaged groups.

Currently, VSO Nepal focuses on the themes of education; sexual and reproductive health and rights; youth; livelihoods; gender and inclusion; governance; and climate change and resilience.

Strengthening Access to Holistic, Gender Responsive, and Accountable Justice in Nepal (SAHAJ) is one of the projects within UKAID's Integrated Programme for Strengthening Security and Justice (IP-SSJ). It is a consortium project led by VSO with International Alert (IA) and other partners including Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD); Antenna Foundation Nepal (AFN); Emory University; SAMAGRA and MAHURI Home. It covers 13 districts in Lumbini Province and Province 2.

The project aims to reduce vulnerability towards different forms of gender-based violence (GBV) particularly against women and girls by breaking the culture of silence around GBV and increasing access to security and justice services.

SAHAJ worked to bring positive transformation through diffusion by creating an enabling environment to expedite positive changes in social norms around breaking the culture of silence surrounding GBV; publicizing changes related to social norms; and reinforcing new behavior and norms.

Different approaches were used to establish positive social norms by SAHAJ. Various diffusion components were designed to strengthen coordinated effort in transforming harmful social norms and practices around GBV with specific considerations on breaking the culture of silence and increasing justice-seeking behavior.

# With my whole heart

EXPANDING THE HORIZONS OF EQUALITY



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## *With My Whole Heart Expanding the Horizons of Equality*

by Pallav Ranjan  
with Vidheha

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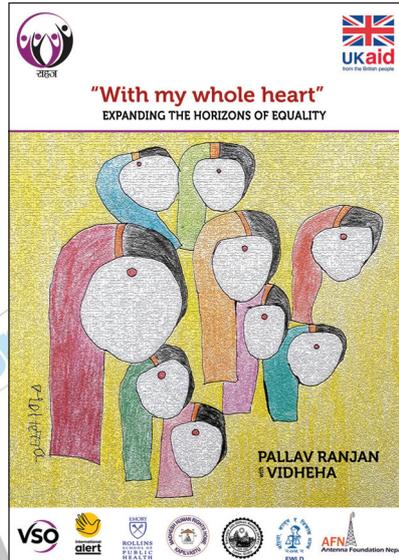
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# CONTENT

## SILENCE IS NOT A SOLUTION

How speaking out changed a woman's life

Republica

5

## GENDER BASED VIOLENCE DURING A PANDEMIC

A trend analysis

People's Review

7

## YOU ARE THE DIFFERENCE

Volunteers transform women's lives

The Rising Nepal

9

## MOTHER, HOW CAN I HELP?

Work Takes Over Women and Girls' Education in Nepal

Setopati

11

## THE HARD CHOICE

Women and girls choose not to seek health care during the pandemic

People's Review

13



# Silence is not a solution

## How speaking out changed a woman's life

**H**ome.  
Family. Love. Security.

These are the mainstays of our lives. But these words mean different things to different people, especially to women and girls in our part of the world.

In an ideal home the bed is clean and warm, food is tasty and plentiful, love is abundant and easy to access, words are full of kindness and encouragement, clothing is not only for the weather but also to make you feel attractive, hot water and refreshing soup is for when you are ill, and there are shoulders to lean on and plenty of support to receive, even if you are at fault.

But for Shradha (name changed), who is 45 and runs a little shop and hands over most of her income to her husband, the "home" she shares with him, her son, daughter-in-law and the extended family was a place of fear, coercion and beatings. From the time of conception to the ending of life, women and girls like her can face rejection, aggression, deprivation of nutrition, health care, adequate clothing, education and a life of abuse and discrimination.

I think my daughters understand that they have a father who will do his utmost for their wellbeing and has love

for them that covers his skies. I hope they will grow up with quality education, opportunity to explore their creativity, and inherent strength that will allow them to face up to systemic gender discrimination that prevails in this world that they have been born into. I tell them they should raise their voice when facing violence or injustice and seek support if need arises. Programs like SAHAJ make a difference in rural areas where women's rights are most vulnerable by creating a supportive and enabling environment wherein people can speak out and be assertive and claim their share of equality and dignity.

For Shradha and her family, the intimidation, the mental and physical abuse were a "normal" they suffered in silence and took as a part of living. It really is difficult to know what a home should be when you have no examples to compare yours with; it is impossible to know how a family can enrich your living when it acts to destroy your self-worth; offering up your life, dreams, everything you can be to your partner in exchange of abuse is not exalted as some regional movies and community leaders might portray.

Ours is a world where lawsuits are active against global leaders including Google, Twitter, Microsoft,

Disney and Oracle for discrimination against women. An audit of Google found "systemic compensation disparities against women pretty much across the entire workforce." And away from the exalted world of high technology, where floors are earthen, walls are shaped of bamboo, and the buffalo calls, women and girls are considered for feticide, suffer lack of decent care, and are deprived of equal opportunities.

In case of Shradha and her daughters, security was little food, a roof over the head, and perhaps a feeling that they did not have options. Fortunately, Shradha's world opened up when her daughter Prerana received an opportunity to look at life through a different lens through a social norms transformation program called

**In case of Shradha and her daughters, security was little food, a roof over the head, and perhaps a feeling that they did not have options. Fortunately, Shradha's world opened up when her daughter Prerana received an opportunity...**

SAHAJ. She learned that it is important to speak up and it is important to seek justice. Armed with this knowledge, Prerana acted when she saw her mother beaten severely by family members. She went to family-centered facilitators who work in the region to champion women and girls' rights and fight against gender-based injustice.

The facilitators inspected her mother's condition. Then they involved the police. The police acted. The extended family was brought together

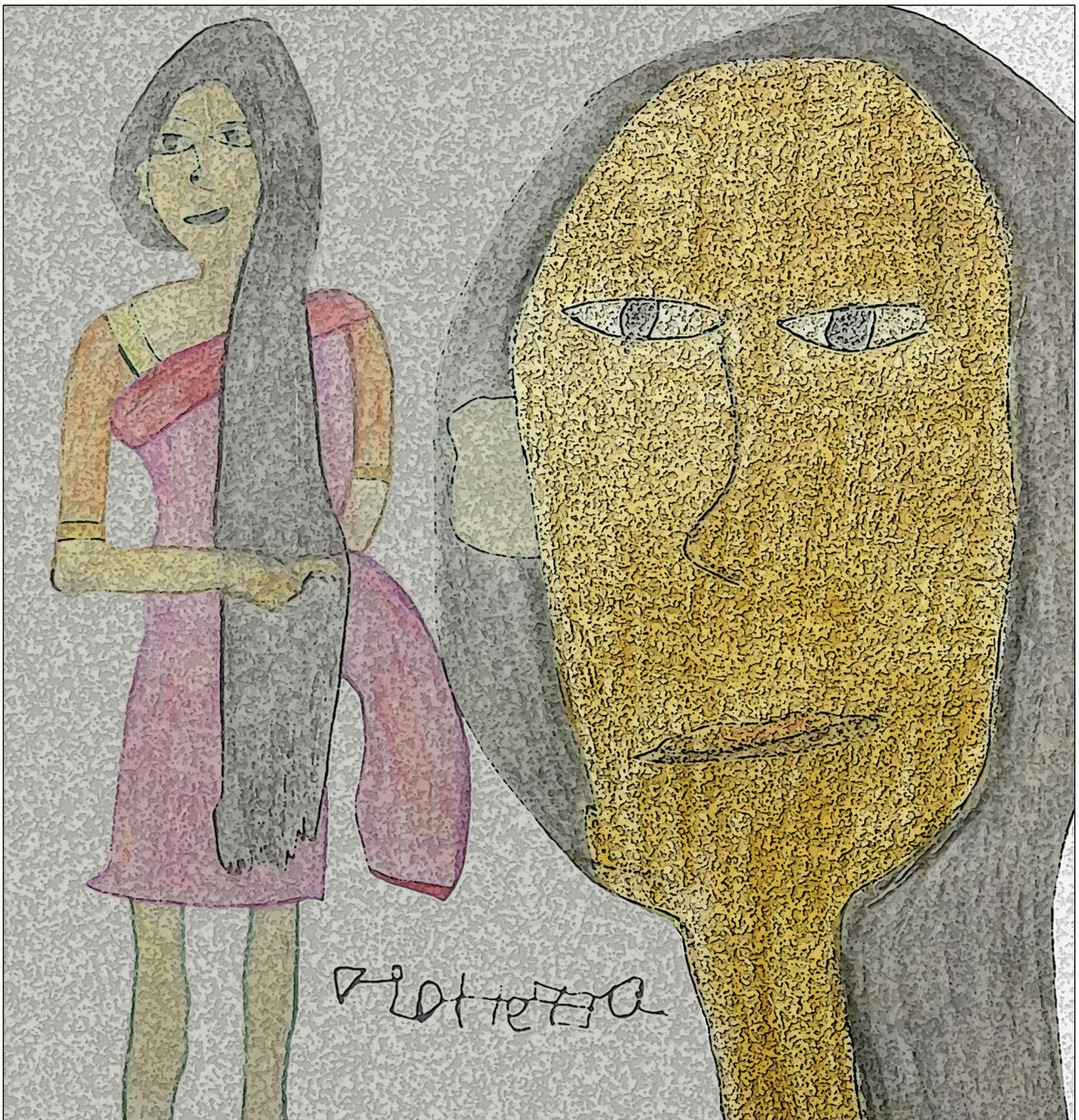
and legal consequences clarified by the facilitators as well as the police to them. Shradha was able to speak out about her life in the family, her slave-like conditions, her contribution to the family, and her lack of rights within her home.

I watch as my daughters play music, publish their work in journals, exhibit artwork, and learn from national and international educators. Their teachers, friends, and family members encourage them to speak up. Every human being

can and should express their aspirations, opinions and seek justice when wronged.

For Shradha, I am glad that since she and her daughter broke the cycle of silence and sought justice, things have improved significantly. Follow-up visits by social family-centered facilitators show that not a single act of aggression has taken place against them since they chose to speak out. Their life is now much better.

Published in "Republica"



# Gender-based violence during a pandemic

## A trend analysis

All over the world, and in Nepal, the pandemic restricted human movement, caused economic downturns, and brought families and relationships into limited confines over prolonged periods. The resulting stress increased crime and violence, especially against women and girls.

According to the World Bank, 35% of women worldwide experienced physical or sexual violence pre-Covid. When Nepal underwent a nation-wide lockdown from 24 March 2020, there was a sharp rise in domestic violence, sexual assault, and female suicide. Domestic violence hotlines received 42 incident reports in Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) work areas pre-Covid: they report that this increased to 378 once problems started, an 800% increase.

With many men losing their jobs in the nation or returning home debt-ridden from other nations where they had migrated for work, families faced stressful times deprived of optimism and opportunities. The negativity left women and girls particularly vulnerable.

UNFPA projected that every three months of lockdown would result in 15 million cases of gender-based violence worldwide and more so in developing nations like Nepal. Even as women and girls in Nepal faced increasing violence, the country faced difficulty in collecting accurate and timely data due to a wide diversity of geography, ethnicity, religion, language, and economics.

An unpublished report by SAHAJ collected gender violence trends in 13 districts of Nepal, mostly of the Terai belt, over the last three quarters of 2019 and the first two quarters of 2020. The study tracked domestic violence, sexual harassment, child marriage, witchcraft and dowry-related crimes, and rape.

Gender based violence was mostly perpetrated by partners and family members, rape and sexual harassment being most common. Eight-months of documentation prior to the lockdown, 12,000 women reported instances of domestic violence to various authorities: however, Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC)

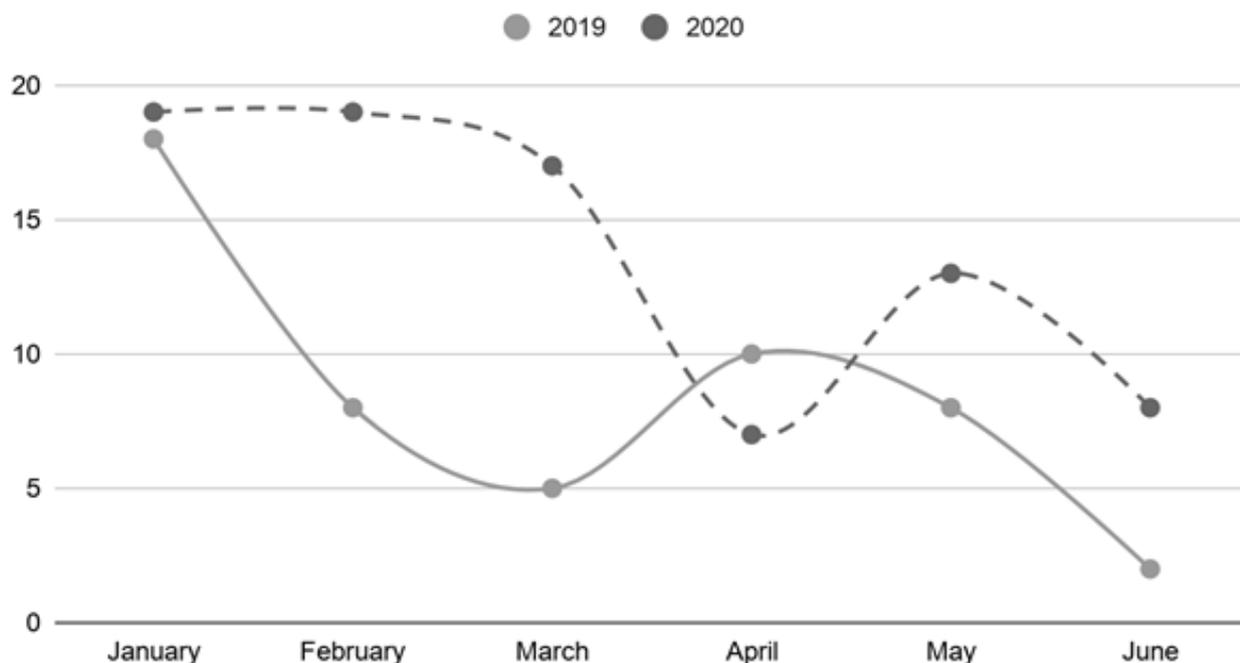
reports that of these only 465 cases were reported to the police.

National Women Commission's toll-free phone recorded 885 calls related to domestic violence between April and June 2020, over two times the number of calls received prior to the lockdown. Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC) reported 465 cases of gender-based violence within two months and Nepal Police recorded 4,016 suicides over 10 months ending in April 2020.

The circle of silence surrounding gender violence

**With many men losing their jobs in the nation or returning home debt-ridden from other nations where they had migrated for work, families faced stressful times deprived of optimism and opportunities.**

## Domestic violence and its frequency in 11 districts studied



was already strong, boosted by local traditions, habits, and the general reluctance of women to reach out to the authorities for the fear of being shamed. In many cases, losing the option to access police and judicial help due to the lockdown exacerbated the situation.

“She was in India with her parents and her husband had to go there to bring her back. He beat her saying that they had to quarantine because of her. No one did anything,”

reported Lalita Shah, a district committee member of women’s human rights division of the Nepal Patrakarita Sangh.

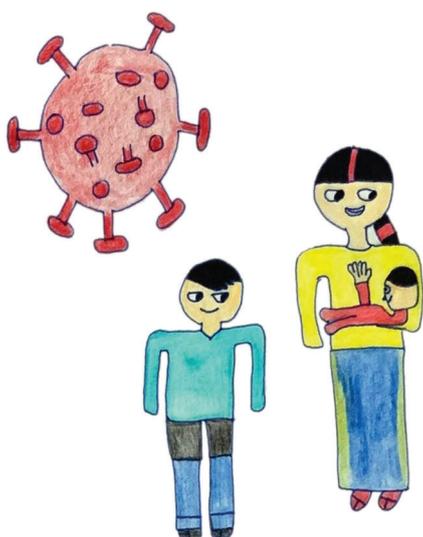
SAHAJ, which is implementing a gender-based program targeting families in the 13 districts studied, says that impact programs that reach directly into communities show positive impact by raising empathy and understanding, collecting data, working with social norms, and breaking the culture of silence surrounding gender-based violence.

“People did not seem interested and were evasive when discussing gender-based violence initially. However, programs that highlight gender issues are ongoing and they are attracting the attention of the community,” says Ankush Srivastav who has been declared a gender champion in Kapilvastu.

The radio was used to bring about change. “The radio is popular and has a very wide reach, more so than the internet,” says Sudha Sharma, a journalist from Dang district, and the messaging reached out to families and communities effectively during the time of closure according to the study.

Willingness to talk about abuse by partners, relatives, and neighbors; greater awareness and exposure through mass media; use of establishments such as schools and colleges to generate education; increased research and data collection; and capacity building of community, state, and civil society actors can help women and girls as they seek to seek a more just society, the study found.

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# You are the difference

Volunteers transform women's lives

**A**ged just nine, I planted corn, swept floors, carried stones at a village as a volunteer. My education at St. Xavier's Godavari mandated such giving back to the community. Aged 16, I started volunteering at a library and continued this work until I was nineteen. That was when I founded Spiny Babbler where volunteers still play a large role. Over a quarter of a century, more than 750 young people came from 14 nations around the world to contribute to the organization and its work.

Therefore, I was intrigued by Sunil Sah who is a volunteer for SAHAJ and works to identify and help survivors of gender violence in the Terai plains. A difficult issue to engage in that geographic region, especially when trying to address the issue of violence against women and girls, he opens new thoughts in my mind on how volunteerism can transform the male perspective and the lives and women and girls in a positive way.

Imagine you yourself being a volunteer. It's a hot day, painfully hot. You have heard a horrific tale and have built up the courage to address the situation. You walk into this room in a village, the air pulsates with heat and the

noise of insects is omnipresent. A wall of strong smell hits you as you enter the room.

In front of you, in the semi-darkness, a woman lies in bed unable to move, unable to speak, traversing the conscious and unconscious worlds. Burns cover half her body and with chagrin you see flies have settled on her wounds. What happened here? She had asked her husband who had returned to Nepal in the middle of the Covid pandemic having worked abroad to quarantine for a couple of weeks. In great rage, he had poured kerosene on her and set her on fire.

This happened a month ago and she has yet to get proper medical treatment having been turned away by medical center after center due to complications, lack of skills to deal with the condition, and lack of funds for treatment at a specialist health facility. This woman, strong in mind and will, struggled with the pain, the lack of care and treatment, infections and the horror, and came this far alive though, now, she was fighting a losing battle for life.

Think of what you will do. How to get help for her, eke out as much support from your contacts as possible whether they are doctors, hospital administrators, police personnel, the National

Women's Commission, or individual donors. You and your friends take her to hospital after hospital, urgently arranging attention, transportation and medicine and buying time. Then she is able to speak, able to move, and rise up to a better life, nestle into the love of

**Imagine you yourself being a volunteer... You walk into this room in a village, the air pulsates with heat and the noise of insects is omnipresent. A wall of strong smell hits you as you enter the room.**

her father and mother and an assured tomorrow.

Sunil Sah comes across as thankful, having done this. "As you know that I cannot do this on my own. I have the support of many other volunteers and supporters." He thanks SAHAJ, the project he is associated with, and fellow volunteers for giving him the opportunity to make a difference. He is surrounded by fellow

volunteers who go beyond professional responsibilities and obligations. These anti gender-based violence volunteers are champions. There are journalists, lawyers, psycho-social counselors, community workers, and there are survivors of gender violence among them.

Sunil's phone rings. It rings from early in the morning to late at night. A woman calls to ask for help: her husband is involved in multiple marriages. Someone else calls: her boss is abusing her. He looks at his list of contacts and seeks out fellow volunteers who can rescue the victims, help

them recover physically and psychologically, initiate police action if necessary, seek legal redress and fight court cases and achieve justice. The support required is extensive.

Because of them, the Cyber Crime Bureau is working on a case of a young girl whose family is devastated – her "fiancé"



posted inappropriate pictures of her on the internet. She and her mother are traumatized and socially ostracized (her father passed away leaving them especially vulnerable). Group counseling, much encouragement, and the filing of proceedings at the Rajbiraj court helped her create a safe distance from committing self-harm.

Renu, a volunteer, walks the villages: sun, rain, and the Covid virus notwithstanding. She is a counselor with a strong network with the police, lawyers, and journalists. Manohar, another GBV champion, sits behind a

features desk for a respected journal. He helped bring four men to justice, their crime? Intimidation of a young girl and her family when she became pregnant through rape.

Going beyond specific interventions, Sunil and his friends partner with local authorities, security organizations, collect financial help, create legal and socio-psychological linkages and plan ahead. With SAHAJ, they are setting up a network of youth clubs that will highlight positive masculinity and attempt generational attitude change – they are working with 80 families (320 people) in the

Terai helping them appreciate the role of daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers. They are sharing their experiences and knowledge with municipalities and local leaders through meetings such as the one that took place in Janakpur.

Having been a volunteer myself, I find that they offer real help, greater understanding, increase tolerance, and allow for wider perspectives that lead to respect and appreciation. I feel inspired, it is through the work of people like Sunil that social justice can prevail.

Published in “The Rising Nepal”

## Mother, how can I help?

### Work takes over women and girls' education in Nepal



ut in a small community of Kapilvastu – that part of the Himalayan country of Nepal where lands are flat, the sun is hot, and cold waves of a winter can take lives – is a narrative on how things have changed for young women and girls with the coming of a new virus and the lockdown and downturn associated with it.

Schools and colleges that were shut down to save lives are still closed. What was to be a few days of closure turned into weeks and the weeks turned into months. Now it's almost a year gone, yet some of the school benches are

still collecting dust and the white boards remain blank, thoughtless.

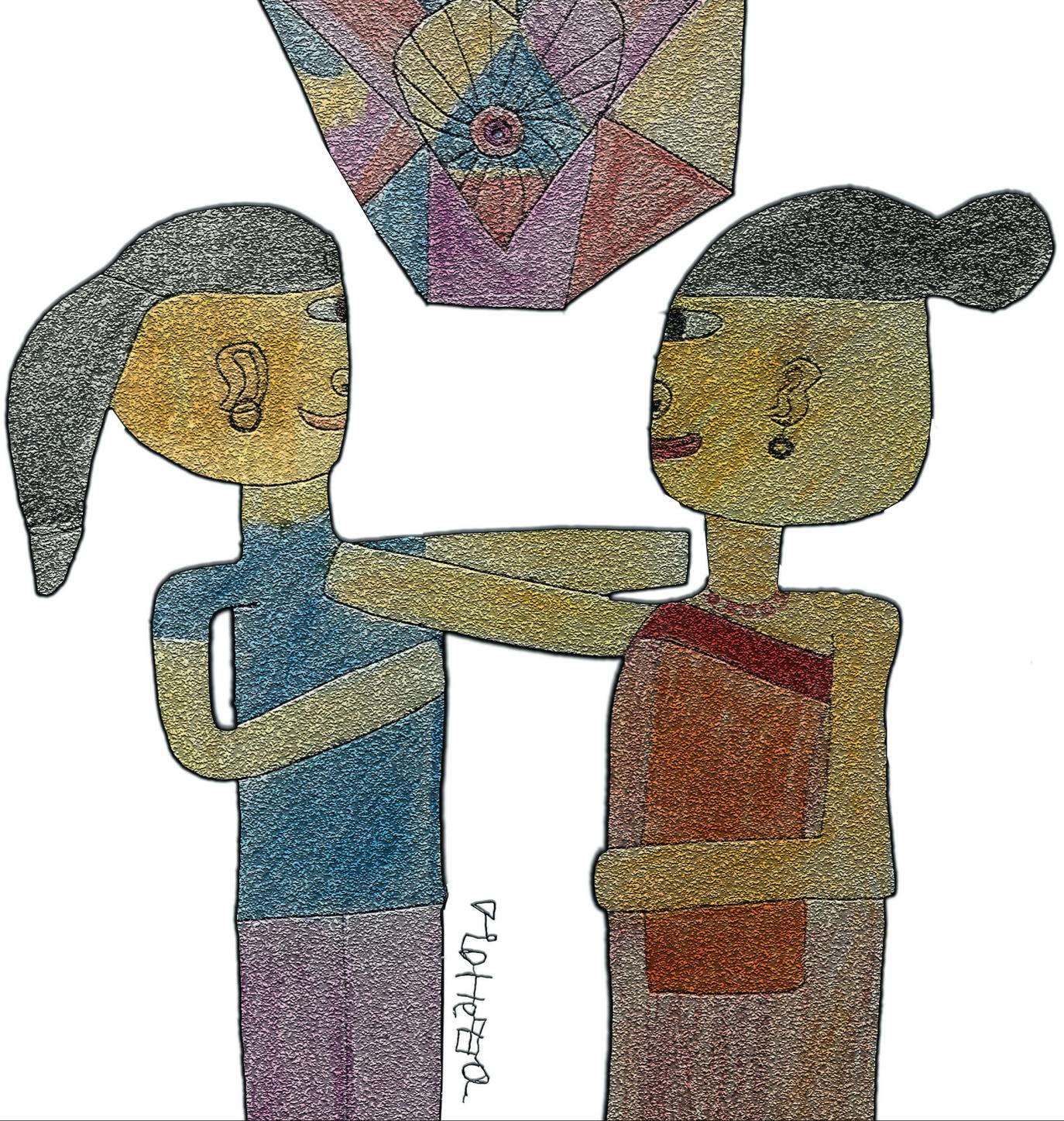
The classrooms used to be alive with giggles, whisperings, questions, and learning. The teachers, the administrators, young people, especially the young women and girls are still at home trying to stay safe.

Babita Chaudhary [name changed], who works for my family in Kathmandu has two daughters. And out here, in the capital of the country, this woman of the Terai worries about her 17 and 14-year-olds. One is in grade 11 and the other in grade 8. She looks at

my 2- and 7-year-old daughters in amazement as they learn on their tablets.

Babita thinks of the opportunities that her daughters are missing and says her daughters' school doesn't think about them until the time rolls around to collect their fees. She mumbles that her daughters' school is not entirely to blame, her family does not have a computer or internet connection: her daughters cannot attend school even though the school is offering online learning.

Babita is paid a decent wage. She has lived in Kathmandu for



more than a decade, yet she is facing a challenge when it comes to investing significantly to give her daughters an education. The money she saved for other things such as health care in case of need will now go into buying a laptop (to be shared by her two daughters) and money for vegetables, meat and milk will go towards paying for an internet connection.

And, in the meanwhile, back in Kapilvastu, set in the region Babita's family comes from, the situation is not favorable for online learning! Very very few women and girls have access to computers and education ready internet connectivity or any internet at all. SAHAJ recently studied 226 of the women and girls surveyed in Kapilvastu prior to the lockdown in association with

Emory University of Georgia, USA.

88% of the young women and girls interviewed reported that they were not going to school. Twenty-nine percent said there was greater financial stress in their families with up to 14% saying they skipped meals and up to 31% saying they skipped medical treatment due to lack of money.

As education, nutrition,

and medical care took a hit, young women took on added responsibilities. Seventy-five percent of the girls helped adults, providing emotional support. Seventy percent helped with cleaning and other tasks around the home and farm.

Time that was previously spent studying was sacrificed as they tried to teach and take care of their siblings. Around them, they perceived increased alcohol consumption, rise in conflict within the households and decreased social interaction. Return of absent family members added to the stress with those who returned having lost jobs and needing family support to adapt to a new reality.

The findings of this research report by SAHAJ is similar to the findings of a study conducted by WOREC. Some perceived a rise in domestic

violence and most felt less safe at home. They felt afraid of the male head of the family, whether it be a husband or a father. The circle of silence surrounding violence grew stronger as most of them did not tell anyone about their experiences. One in five women perceived very high likelihood of gender-based physical, psychological, and sexual violence. They said that women and children could not escape abusive households, did not know how to report gender-based violence to agencies that could help them and were worried about confidentiality.

Yet, these women and girls persist in hope. All the 88% women and girls who lost access to education look forward to getting back to school. More than 80% of mothers are grateful for the extra help provided by their

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daughters. Younger children in the family have found caring playmates who help them have fun and help them with their studies at a time when there is no school. These are testing times and the women and girls of Kapilvastu have made a telling contribution to the lives of the people around them giving hope to humanity as it looks towards better days.

Published "People's Review"

## The hard choice

### Women and girls choose not to seek health care during the pandemic

**T**wo recent studies, one by SAHAJ in association with Emory University and one by MIRA, highlight the peril that women and girls face when there is adversity such as the ongoing Covid pandemic. According to the first study, more than 30% of

women chose to forgo medical care during lockdown while according to the second study, 76% of women who died during maternity did not to seek care on time.

Women and girls have suffered some of the greatest impacts of the pandemic.

Mrs. Samiksha M. Shrestha, a mother of three, said that she was really scared when she started showing symptoms. "Just thinking about going to the hospital was a nightmare for me. I prayed that I only had common cold. I was also thinking what if someone



PALLAVI RANJAN

families that I

young people and their opinions. Daughters in these homes are unafraid to share their

The ideal families that I have worked with deeply respected their young people and their opinions. Daughters in these homes are unafraid to share their ideas and opinions and elders take their ideas on board in every day decision-making.



infected me at the hospital, it would have a devastating effect on my family. When I tested positive I felt very much alone and my confidence was really shaken. I genuinely felt what other people who are ostracized by our society must feel.”

A UN Women study in Nepal has found that women’s financial security had decreased and this has had direct result in their ability to

make decisions on their own health. The finding that 92% of women that lost their lives during maternity did not make their own incomes giving them less power to make decisions on their own health care is shocking.

The impact of the pandemic has been devastating on the medical community as well. Dr. Basudha Khanal, MD, had to stay away from home in order to respond to the growing

medical need of Biratnagar, her city. As a pediatrician, she worried for her own children’s health and met them only after six months. Dr. Sunita Dangol also was similarly concerned about returning back home to her family and her lovely daughter and son.

Mrs. Ankila Bajracharya (name changed) is a staff nurse at a major Nepalese hospital. When the hospital was declared a key Covid response center,

she felt so much pressure at home that she left her only child, husband, and in-laws and went to live with her parents – there, too, in the furthest corner of the house and with very little contact with others. “Neighbors, family members, friends, and others that I thought would support me were really scared of me and did not want me in their communities,” she said. Despite hospital grade preventive steps and PPEs, she tested positive and it was only after isolation and recovery that her family

accepted her back as they now felt that she was immune.

The study by SAHAJ shows that many of the women have grown more assertive during this period. Alimun Nisha is 17 and lives in Rupendehi. She was in grade 10 and a member of the awareness and trust building group “Rupantaran” or “Transformation.” She firmly stopped her proposed arranged marriage and got her family to invest the dowry fund into her education. “This money will help me become an engineer!” she said as she talked about

her hope to be able to stand on her own two feet so could tackle crises and problems that will come into her own life, into the lives of the family, or the community. Seventy per cent mothers in the districts studied have also been very pleased to receive more help from their daughters, female members of the family, as well as from men in the family as they dealt with the impact of the pandemic in their daily lives.

Published in “People’s Review”

## A life free of fear

### Why are women and girls afraid of their fathers and husbands?

**R**ecent research in Nepal by Emory University and SAHAJ found that 66% of young women and girls are afraid of men in their families, especially fathers and husbands. While, 45% felt afraid sometimes, 11% felt scared often.

I am a father of two daughters, one is two and the other seven. I know that my older daughter is a little afraid of me. “Did you finish your homework? Why don’t you practice your music? Please put your stuff away. Can you not do that please? Did you finish reading the book?” These are

questions that have to be asked and once in a while say about two or three times every year timeout sessions have to be doled out. I worry about how I can be a kinder, better father.

I was 16 years old when I started working with children and other young people. I have been a tutor, volunteer, teacher, counselor, an children’s program lead, administrator, and a planner that has influenced, to a degree, young people four to 20 years old.

Over three decades, I have had direct say in the activities of more than a thousand young

people. Yet it made the hairs on my back stand when I read in the SAHAJ study report that girls share, “A higher burden of labor, decreases in family conflict and financial security, the return of absent family members, and alcohol use by an adult were associated with several categories of fear and a reported decrease in feeling safe in the home.” Its unimaginable to me that our daughters do not feel safe at home.

The young people I worked with, some were very poor or abandoned, unable to afford

# Volunteers Transform Women's Lives

quality education and care. Some came from families of multi-millionaires and had several servants assigned to their wellbeing, including security guards. Whether the families came from the high mountains or the Terai plains, whether they suffered poverty or were rich, they faced the same question: how to best bring up their child?

to give preferential treatment to their sons. However, much changed for a new generation of daughters. Friends remained immensely happy and chose to be with one daughter or two, giving them the same love as they would a son. Very blessed with two wonderful daughters, I tell my friends sometimes, "We should start a club for those of us who have daughters only, there are so many of us!"

throwback to read of daughters who are scared of family (especially fathers) with 86% of them never sharing their fears with anyone. A VSO survey documents that 21% of respondents perceived an increase in gender-based violence in their community and less access to safety nets since the start of the Covid lockdown.

**As a father, though, I would like to be approachable even though I would want my daughters to accept responsibility and be accountable. I would like them to feel that I am always there for them and do not end up alienating them.**

Bringing them up, I have seen families that are firm with their children while teaching them empathy and giving them care bring up their daughters best. Full freedom without consequences turned most children into a bother for the people who come in contact with them and for the families themselves. The most difficult of situations came about when children were given full freedom and then meted out stern punishment when things became difficult.

The ideal families that I have worked with deeply respected their young people and their opinions. Daughters in these homes are unafraid to share their ideas and opinions and elders take their ideas on board in every day decision-making. Though rebellious, they stay within boundaries, healing the damages when they break free, as they should. They care about their grandparents, uncles and aunts: the old as they faced old age, disease, and death; they have great compassion for their parents and siblings and are willing to support everyone the best way they can. They are happy to visit cousins and the extended family knowing that they belong.

Even then there was conflicts within families, among parents and grandparents, children and adults. In my family where father and mother tried to treat me and my sister as equals, yet there was a struggle with the extended family. There was no denying that Nepalese traditional families continue

My generation was afraid of fathers, teachers, police, authority in general and shameful of family members that were "different." Most of us faced corporal punishments. A significant number of us, I believe, have stunted empathy, reject our larger families, stay away and remain uncommunicative, and have only made peace with ourselves and our dear ones after many years or not at all. The opposite is true of how people treat their offspring now and it was a concerning

But in this new world where parents want to be understanding of their children, where corporal punishment is not an option, it was easy to be draconian using psychological, verbal, and, later, financial means to create control.

When there was lack of togetherness, it resulted in young people following a different philosophy

is on... as you... In... woman... speak... worlds... chagrin... What... husband... of the... quarantine... he had... This... yet to... turned... due to... the condition... a specialist... mind and... are and... me this... using... Think...

Imagine... a hot... horrible... address... the morning... help... someone... calls to... involved... in multiple... seeks out... the victims... seek legal... address... Because... working...

togetherness... a different philosophy... meetings... Janakpur... Have...

and understanding of life: estrangement and disagreement was addressed ultimately with tolerance, acceptance, and a bringing together.

There is really no one way of parenting, educating, and bringing up young people. Governments, media, societies, neighbors and family members can point to how things "should be" and that in itself is flawed considering that each geography, culture, language, community, family, and individual is different. "I really do not want to be friends with my kids.... It is my job to make sure that my kids are taught what is right and what is wrong. It is my job is to teach my children how to become great human beings. I am okay with my kids thinking I am not their best friend. I am okay with my kids being upset that they're disciplined."

As a father, though, I would like to be approachable even though I would want my daughters to accept responsibility and be accountable. I would like them to feel that I am always there for them and do not end up alienating them. I will never judge them. I want them to be independent, able to make their own decisions and stand up to injustice from outside the family or from their father.

I accept that my daughters can be afraid of me and will consciously try to make sure that I am approachable and



caring. For the many fathers of this world, it is always good to remember that one day our daughters will leave home and build their own lives. It is up to us create relationships with our daughters that they will find comfort in, that they will want to come back to, and pass on to their own families. Insights of my daughters two and seven years of age, the children, their

parents and grandparents, and efforts of SAHAJ, VSO, WOREC and others who work in this field help improve us as individuals, families, communities, and fathers. Let our daughters' hearts be free of fear in this wonderful world and at home.

Published in  
"Annapurna Express"

# The bride

In the Terai, young women set an example

**A** gorgeous young woman sparkling in happiness: clad in a bright yellow sari, intricate local jewelry, complex mehndi patterns in the hot Terai flatland sun, in the village of Badebarshain in Saptari district.

The men of the village have been singing and dancing her praise for 10 days and nights. The women began singing and dancing five days ago. Her father croons in a crackling voice: "You are my whole heart, who is this new man coming into your life? Will he treat you right?"

Dancing to the rhythm of drums, wailing winds, and twanging strings: they celebrate the person she is, they praise her father and her good family, and speak of a bright new life that awaits her. The women are lamenting, "Will the groom pamper this amazing girl, our own princess? Will she smile forever?"

But beyond this lovely memorable day, the reality that awaits may be quite different and gaspingly, shockingly cold. In some homes there is

work, early morning to night with women (particularly the mother-in-law and sisters in law) waiting to stamp their authority on her and abusive men. Some homes are looking forward to the dowry and financial reward"s" from her

**She is already behind in her studies – girls go to school later in life in this area, so at 16, she is in grade 6, four years behind the national normal – it is the very rare family that will encourage her to study further. She will have no control over family money or her husband's income, elders take full control of financial matters.**

parents for taking her into their homes (where is the land that was promised? they will ask of her, the motorbike, the money to add one more storey to the house so "you" can live in comfort, where are the funds that will pay off the family debt?).

She is already behind in her studies – girls go to school later in life in this area, so at 16, she is in grade 6, four years behind the national normal – it is the very rare family that will encourage her to study further. She will have no control over family money or her husband's income, elders take full control of financial matters. Her husband and she will have little time to themselves so quality conversations that explore wishes, ambitions, and plans will be at a premium.

With the passing of months and year, if she is not expecting a child, or unable to deliver a male heir, questions will be asked, significant pressure will build: maybe her husband needs to marry someone else! If she delivers a daughter, or two, things may well become



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intolerable. A son means he will bring home a daughter-in-law who will bring riches, a daughter means the son-in-law will have to be paid a princely dowry (illegal by law, but still practiced).

Our princess, our beautiful Cinderella, may well have

cinders and dung and hard work and hurtful words to keep her company for many years of her life.

But wait, in the village of Badebarshain, there are other young brides who have a "different" idea. In this village, mostly lived in by the Dalit, Muslim, and the marginalized, 80 recent brides are waiting for her, to take her under their wing.

They have been learning, honing their potential, breaking the cycle of dependency, with the help of counselors from VSO (Volunteer Services Overseas) and many are running their own business whether it be as tailors, grocery shop owners, tea huts wallis, and or small farmers with goats, cow or buffalo.

They know of this new marriage and realization and comradery has made them powerful. The 80 young bride network, has trained with the local municipality and Strengthening Access to Holistic, Gender Responsive, and Accountable Justice (SAHAJ).

They have access to friendships, phone lines and counselors, they can turn to people for help within and without their own family. Their fathers in law, mothers in law, husbands and other member of the family have been with them in discussions on gender rights, marriage solutions, income generation, education, and right to self-determination.

Because of strength in numbers, they are always seeking to add to their numbers so when the marriage takes place and the young woman is in her new home, she is visited by other brides in the neighborhood. The family gets linked to the counselors and trainers who bring everyone together, the bride, the groom, the elders, and middle aged and the young in the family and everyone gets to say their say, everyone gets to view this world from someone else's perspective.

Building tolerance, creating sustainable cooperation, working and improving together is not an easy task where centuries of established tradition have to be tweaked. But when others who have been through the experience take the trouble to hold hands, explain kindness, working family relationships, entertainment, respect, learning, and earning for independence and contribution to the family, messages are easier understood.

Our princess may not live a fairytale, but her life will improve, she will be at less of a risk, she will be better understood and find greater happiness as she communicates more, shares her feelings, learns how to improve her livelihood, gain new skills, and try and make an income.

Published in "The Rising Nepal"



ADITHYAN

# Keep the love

THE RISING NEPAL

Negativity towards young people's choice has to stop

February 26, 2021

In Terai

Anyone who has been in love understands intensity, instability, desperation. And the traditional society, as it watches young people "suffer" love, has reason not to trust their decision-making as they undergo this "condition" because love does not consider social mismatch, caste and religious barriers, financial security, future comfort, or personality match all of which are all "important" to make life a "success."

This is why most world societies had, at some point during their development, matchmakers, pre-planned marriages, and chose to override young people's choices. Guided nuptials used to be common in most cultures and they are still common in our society and many developing or even developed societies (though they may not be made so ostensible).

In today's middle-class Nepal, social stigma is attached to partnerships or marriages made out of love fundamentally contradicting centuries old practices of having multiple partners, polygamy, bigamy, carnal relationships (evidenced in

century old temple carvings), and sensual exploration. Young people in love are held up as dubious examples and when and if their relationship or marriage fails, there is glee and many "told you so" moments. Mishaps are used to demean-discourage-dissuade others who may let emotion rule over cold hard logic.

When I was 14, in the hill village where my mother was the "dacterni" or "the doctor," people, especially women and children, died during childbirth, due to treatable pneumonia, infections caused by farming tools. Having saved many lives, many trusted her. I saw her persuading families to carry women to Kathmandu so childbirth would not take their lives and that of their child, I stood by her side as she told the jhankri off for telling pneumonia patients not to take medication (the gods would be angry as medicines were unholy, he said), I avoided watching her treat horrid injuries to women's hands caused by janto foot mills. I also piped in when she talked to women, asking them not to marry off their daughters before they came of age. Girls

were often married off at 12 there even in the mid-80's.

Many women listened to her, they did not marry off their girls at 11 or 12. A year passed and when I went to the village during the holidays, most of the girls who had not been married off had eloped, mostly into "inappropriate" marriages. Nirmala (name changed), a child of Saptari in eastern Nepal, also fell in love and married Ram three years ago. The marriage could be called totally inappropriate from the parental point of view but they gave in to her persuasion and passion. Love is indeed blind. As soon as Nirmala entered her groom's home, she lost every freedom. She had to cover her head and face with a burka at all times. Her husband would never speak on her behalf in front of his family. She was not allowed outside the house without a male chaperon.

The flame of love settled, turned to embers and what warmth was left was about to die a desperate death when the family received visitors. It was these visitors that changed things: the social mobilizers of the "Rupantaran" program which works to help women



her love and care as Nirmala helped out at the family shop with her husband.

Yes, this was a single case of change but when new ideas permeate into the home, love spreads across the family: with a little help, the family changed forever. Perhaps the whole community will change soon as they watch Nirmala and her sister-in-law go to college in suruwal kurta, as they talk to her and her husband at the shop. Perhaps they will realize that its worthwhile accepting the stirring of young hearts and help keep the love.

Published in "People's Review"

and girls. Supported by the FCDO, Strengthening Access to Holistic, Gender Responsive, and Accountable Justice brought different ideas into a reluctant household.

Persuasion and assurance led Nirmala, her in-laws and her husband to counselling sessions. Uncomfortable topics such as helping each other out around the home (why should only women clean and cook and wash?), discrimination between daughter and son (examples of girls who took care of aged parents while sons and daughters in law abandoned them), comfortable clothing even if burkas were required, education for women, their ability to make an income for the family, healthy and sanitary habits, were some

of the topics that needed discussion.

Months passed, things changed so much that one day Nirmala emerged from home in suruwal kurta and went to the local college and enrolled herself in the health and population faculty to pursue a bachelor of education degree. Love that could have been another failed example to gloat over was rescued. Nirmala's life became better as did that of her husband and in-laws. Another young woman of the family, Kumari, also followed in Nirmala's footsteps and enrolled in college.

When Nirmala gave birth to a daughter, family members named her after a goddess and in-laws, who would have preferred a grandson, gave

**As soon as Nirmala entered her groom's home, she lost every freedom. She had to cover her head and face with a burka at all times. Her husband would never speak on her behalf in front of his family. She was not allowed outside the house without a male chaperon.**

# 80 brides shine together

In the Terai, newly married young women set examples

Imagine a quiet village setting. Homesteads made of earthen tiles, bamboo walls caked over with mud, a few affluent homes of baked bricks. It is morning, almost lunchtime, women in the houses are cooking: some using fuelwood, some using dry dung, and some using liquid petroleum gas.

The younger women, the new brides of the village are abuzz, they have a thing planned for today, a place to get to. No, it's not a religious ceremony, it's not a festival or a party that brings them together. They have actions that need taking. They have been training, they have been starting businesses and 80 brides of the community are in the process of a big venture, they are planning a cooperative.

There is energy among these young women of the village today. They finish their work and with the blessings of the family elders, they bid farewell to everyone and they stream out of their houses to meet each other.

Six months ago, they and their families joined a SAHAJ program. There were discussions regarding what

women can do, how they can help each other, how young people can be taken care of and how they can contribute to their families.

Fathers in law, mothers in law, husbands and wives, sisters in law and the whole family took part in sessions where traditional practices, both positive and negative were discussed, ideas on how to improve the lives of women were generated, tolerance and acceptance, better interrelationships, improved health and sanitation, and income generation were discussed.

After much back and forth, training was held: 92% of the women who died during maternity did not make cash incomes according to recent study by MIRA. And there was consensus that young women had to be more in control of their lives.

They and their families learned about gender rights, potential for violence, how to break the cycle of dependency, and they learned how to make money! Everyone learned business and transactional basics, some trained in tailoring, running ration shops and food stalls, some chose

to learn goats, cow or buffalo farming.

This knowledge and their comradery made them confident. The 80 young brides built a network that spanned Siraha and Saptari. They identified need and trained under the local municipality and SAHAJ. They sought and received the support of their family and communities, they arranged access to security and phone lines and identified who they could turn to for help within and without their families.

Their fathers in law, mothers in law, husbands and other member of the family joined them and helped improve their conditions, helped them seek solutions, achieve income generation, some went back to school, and they achieved a right to self-determination. They took a step beyond and are themselves supporting each other.

The meeting has started, the young women are full of questions. One young bride has a tailoring shop, other brides go to her to get their sewing done. So is the kurta finished, the blouse has a slight problem on the shoulders... sure, everything will be taken care



of as soon as possible! Another just started a grocery store, what is the price of a half-liter packet of oil, does she have rice flakes chiura? "Ok, you are offering a much better price, I am coming over to get some stuff." To the young woman who has a buffalo, "A family celebration is coming up, do you have yogurt?"

Then comes the serious stuff. At the shops, at the farms, at the homes, conversation, there is a need to save money. If a collective can be up and running, they can pool together all the monies and then give out loans at decent interest rates so the brides can themselves generate capital

to establish and improve their businesses and help those that are in the danger of failing.

Problems are addressed, need for counseling for a specific family, greater learning of gender rights, a husband who is insensitive, a mother in law who is supportive, are brought up and solutions arrived at.

Then after the main discussions are over, the facilitator from SAHAJ smiles goodbyes, but wait! There is talk of another family where a marriage is taking place. A new bride is coming into the community. The women have ideas on how to welcome her, bring her into their

fold, support her in her new community, make sure that her family gives her justice and care.

There is a different feel in the villages now, a coming together of the new and the established. There are actions to take, goals to achieve. There is greater justice for women, especially young women who have left all that they have known to enter a different home, a different family, and a different community. The 80 brides who came into the village wearing bright yellow saris of weddings shine like 80 new suns filled with hope.

## The churi walli

New thinking takes over, improving lives

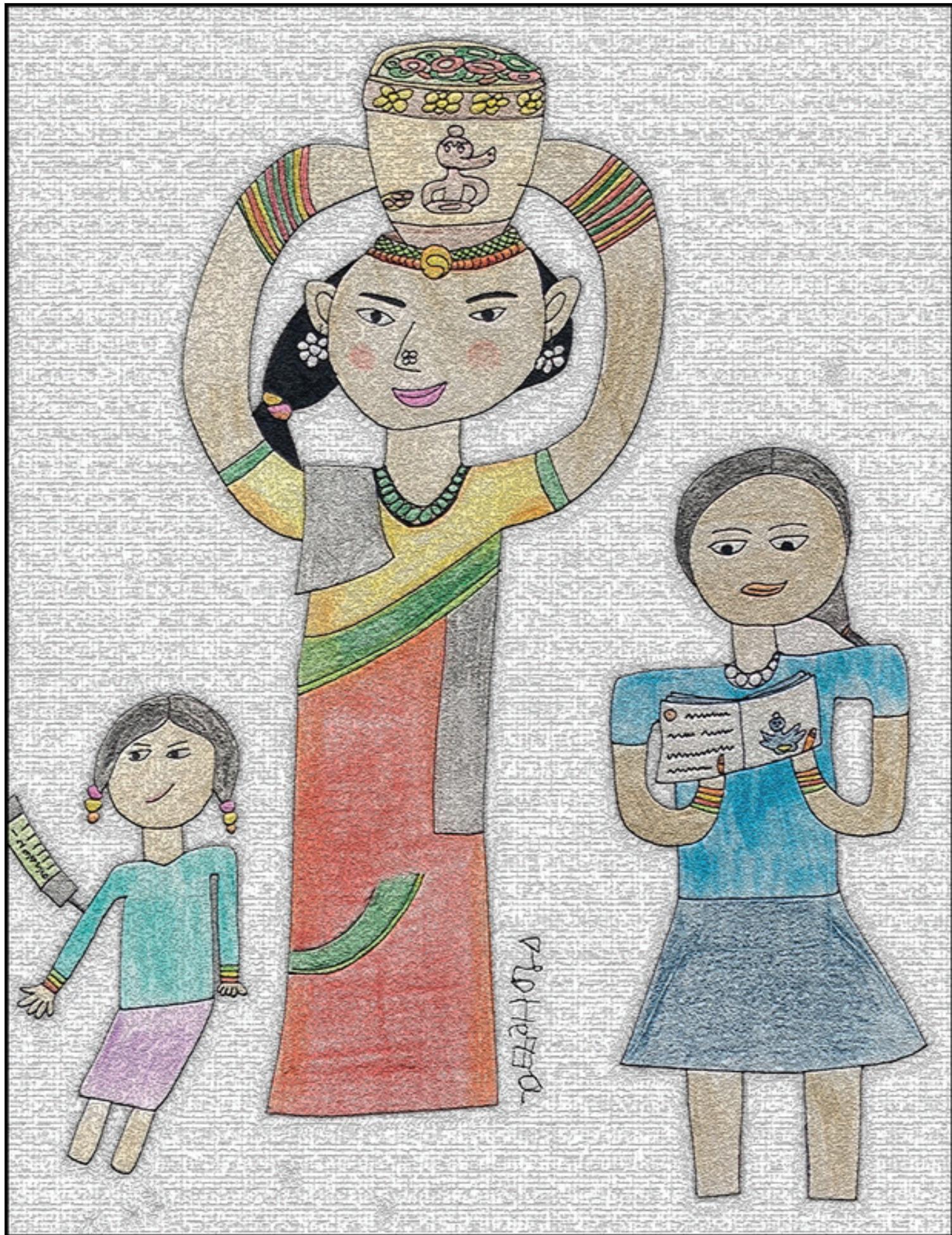
**S**parkles in her eyes, multi-hued. A shine of red, a glint of green, reflections of yellow brightness, light. She holds in her eyes that which fills women and girls with joy.

Every morning after her family members eat and go their ways, she heads out with a basket on her head. The fragility of bangles, mirrors, and colors weighs down upon her head as she walks gracefully (in the past bare footed, now slipper-clad), her spine holding straight, her hips swaying

gently. She is draped today in a dirt yellow sari, the sash turned turban-like to help her hold the basket in place.

As she heads out to the bazaar, her girls have gone the other way, to study, get an education. One had a slight fever and needed medicine, the other had run out of copybooks for college work. They wondered what goodies they would make for snacks when they came back home after studying and made a fuss about what they saw available in the

**Shovawait was born to parents for whom daughters were a burden. She was born at a time when the society accepted child marriage as a normal and grandparents, matchmakers, and parents made nuptial commitments early on, when girls and boys were still infants.**



DEEPIKA

kitchen. They'll have chicken tomorrow, it's Saturday! She reminded them.

The Churi Walli smiles as she settles down, placing her ware before her at the street side. Women and girls walking past look at her basket... the colors, the sparkles take up their eyes and minds. Shovawait, a 55-year-old breadwinner has kept together her family of 17 selling beauty enhancements. She offers happiness, a sense of self-worth, a daydream out of this world.

Shovawait lives in Thulo Ganauria of Suddhodhan Municipality. She was born to parents for whom daughters were a burden. She was born at a time when the society accepted child marriage as a normal and grandparents, matchmakers, and parents make nuptial commitments early on, when girls and boys were still infants.

Families at the time were under constant stress regarding the marriage of their daughters. The sooner the knot was tied, the safer their daughter's future would be and it was not often that the family had a good idea of what their child was getting into physically or mentally. Such was the world Shovawait was born into.

"I sell bangles and cosmetic products, things that make women and girls feel good about themselves. I come from a living immersed in traditional values that sometimes unknowingly I try to impose on

my daughters. For example, I still think with horror about this marriage I'd arranged for my 17-year-old daughter Sasikala!"

"I did not see, I did not see."

But then she did see! A different world. She became

**As she heads out to the bazaar, her girls have gone the other way, to study, get an education. One had a slight fever and needed medicine, the other had run out of copybooks for college work. They wondered what goodies they would make for snacks when they came back home.**

associated with SAHAJ and its mothers' group. Mentors, peers, counselors talked to her, she talked to them. "I had much to do and earning to feed so many people had drained my energy. I had not taken the time to think!"

Women, mothers, sisters, daughters, daughters-in-law, granddaughters: their rights, their health, their education, their financial independence, their wellbeing, their happiness came up in conversations.

During one of the get togethers of the group, a lawyer came to spend time with them and talked to them about the impact of child marriage.

"I was shocked." Shovawait saw herself and her daughter in a different light. She saw her daughter as a victim and herself as the person hurting her. At 17, her "piece of heart" was still a child, she realized. She saw herself about to put her daughter at high risk both physical harm and neglect. Early pregnancy would have long-term health effects and she would probably never finish her education, become financially able.

The mother and daughter talked, "I'd like to complete my education," said Sasikala when she learned of the questions SAHAJ had put in her mother's mind.

"I was so happy to hear her say that," Shovawait remembers. Her eyes tear up as she thinks of how close her daughter came to a life that she would perhaps never control. "Now, I tell everyone to tell their daughters to study, get a job, learn something that makes them financially able."

Tonight Shovawait will count the money she has earned over the day, she will think how fortunate she wants her daughters to be, how she will take care of them and their futures so they can take care of themselves forever.

## Critics comment on the work of Pallav Ranjan

Nepal is conspicuous with contributions by the anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista, the climber Tenzing Norgay, the Kathmandu-based journalists Kanak Dixit and Deepak Thapa, the tourist-guide Shanker Lamichhane, the poet Pallav Ranjan and the development-specialist Harka Gurung.

- Satis Shroff, Universitätsklinikum Akademie für Medizinische Berufe

...highly readable, notable and worthy of praise.

- Professor Michael James Hutt, University of London, Chair, Center of South Asian Studies

...a new contribution to the field of Nepalese literature. The writer successfully presents stories of ordinary characters in a very simple and touching manner.

- Govinda Bahadur Malla "Gothale," writer

I call this a fundamental step towards the promotion of constructive social expression and development.

The language, style, and structure uphold the vision that this effort aspires to accomplish.

- Krishna Chandra Singh Pradhan, critic

...exceedingly important considering Nepal's current state of affairs. I thank Mr. Pallav Ranjan for fulfilling this need.

- Diamond Shumshere Rana, novelist

Recognized as a poet and translator in Nepalese society, Mr. Pallav Ranjan's writing stands out as unique in the field of Nepali literature.

- Dr. Chudamani Bandhu, critic

Some of the greatest English writers of the twentieth century have not been native speakers: Joseph Conrad, Rabindranath Tagore, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Chinua Achebe. Perhaps someday Pallav Ranjan will take his place among those whose work so aptly mirrors the international status of English in our time.

- David A. Fleming, Chancellor, St. Mary's University at San Antonio

A harsh and exciting journey... very moving, poignant and revealing...

A magic carpet ride of emotion, of feeling, of honesty.

- T.M. Collins, Chairperson, Queensland Poetry Association

The specialty of this work is that it is as interesting as it is reliable. Its sequence of events, characterization, background, and impact are of unparalleled quality.

-Basudev Tripathi, Nepalese language scholar

The world and our communities suffer conflict, antagonism, and lack of acceptance: this novel takes a stand against these problems. The writer shows skill in portraying a poignant story based on contemporary issues. The presentation of solutions rather than problems makes it important and relevant

Koirala, poet

- Mohan

A successful writer who finds balance and integrates the message effectively with the fine art that is writing not only communicates, but also preserves the dignity of the arts. A good example is successful poet, artist, translator and creative writer, established Pallav Ranjan's drama-creation.

-Bairagi Kaila, scholar, folk traditions

## Critics comment on the work of Vidheha

Vidheha presented Early Creations, a solo exhibition of 80 artwork and an art book at the Nepal Art Council on her 3rd birthday. She has travelled across more than 10 districts of Nepal and performed music and readings at various schools, the Patan Museum and the Nepal Tourism Board. Her artworks have appeared on covers and inside pages of UN Women, German Embassy, GIZ, and Ecpat Luxembourg publications. She has written for Muna, Setopati and other journals and was profiled by Ankur (The Annapurna Post), Junkiri (Nagarik), Fr!day, Muna, Kopila (Kantipur), Ankhijyal, Canvas, and others.

"DELIGHTFUL book by Vidheha Ranjan of Kathmandu, Nepal. A beautiful and insightful collection of poignant observations of her country, art and artists, animals, science, music, and the humanity that surrounds her. What better way to share another culture with your own little ones – from one child to another with "I Like My Life," packed with great stuff!"

- Andrea Petrini, artist

"Vidheha is the youngest person in Nepalese art history to present a full exhibition."

- Ratopati

"An art connoisseur."

- Vidheha front cover story headline in The Annapurna Post, Ankur

"A window into the mind of a developing child, her imagination, her coordination, life events, and her creative ability..."

- Sasha Koirala, Fr!day, ECS

"We recognized a young talent and saw a child developing, becoming curious, and presenting a different type of art. Vidheha surprised everyone as she celebrated her third birthday."

- Laxmi Basnet, Muna

"Vidheha's abilities amaze everyone. She is proficient in art as well as music."

- Kantipur, Kopila

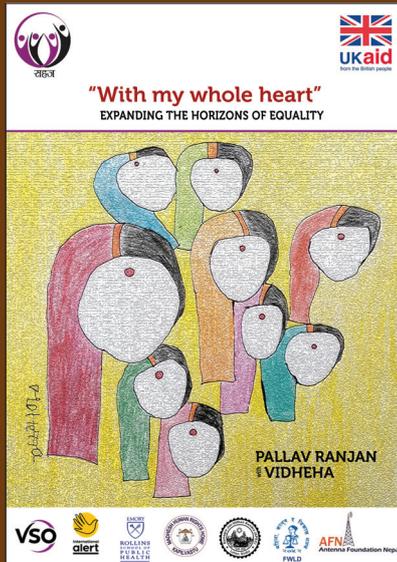
"It is challenging to find a person so young so gifted. Vidheha has broken difficult boundaries."

- Kranti Pandey, Junkiri

"Vidheha's work surprises adults and shows how a learning atmosphere can be created for children."

- Nagarik





## With My Whole Heart Expanding the Horizons of Equality

by Pallav Ranjan  
with Vidheha

Volunteer Services Overseas (VSO)

Spiny Babbler

Ten heart-touching stories were written by Pallav Ranjan with Vidheha and published in various Nepalese newspapers and journals during the height of the Covid pandemic in Nepal. These stories share the observations of a writer who has addressed gender issues over three decades in urban as well as some of the most remote settings of this Himalayan nation.

Volunteer Services Overseas (VSO), International Alert and other partners of the SAHAJ project – supported by the FCDO – helped as the writer researched the issues faced by Nepalese women and girls. These stories provide insight into human costs, challenges, and courage, especially that of women and girls, as security and justice, social norms, and voices across Nepal improve and become clearer.

Pallav's detailed research and observation present genuine and actual situations through exceedingly skillful approaches and techniques. He is very successful in achieving extraordinary standards.... This is the specialty of Pallav's working style, this is an outstanding, magnificent invention.

- Ishwar Ballav  
commenting on Goreto