

SAHAJ

15 Stories

Women and Girls of the Terai and
How SAHAJ Contributed to Their Lives

by Pallav Ranjan with Vidheha

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Thanks are due to the VSO team members Rachana Shrestha, Manoj Pandey, Shikha Shrestha, Bikash Koirala, Sunil Sah and Spiny Babbler Knowledge Centre's Bhagwati Sapkota.

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Women and Girls of the Terai and
How SAHAJ Contributed to Their Lives

by Pallav Ranjan
artwork by Vidheha

On the cover, "The Community," pencil color on paper, Vidheha, 11"x17". Black and white line work based on indigenous art themes.

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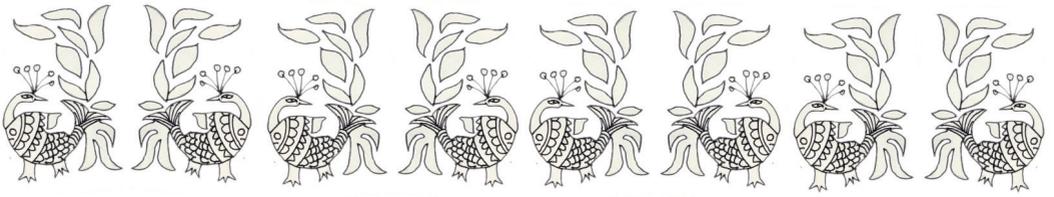
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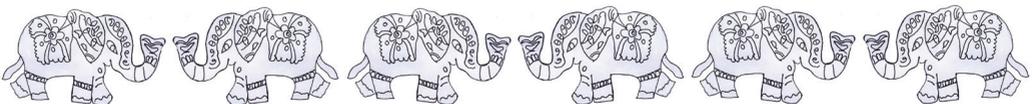
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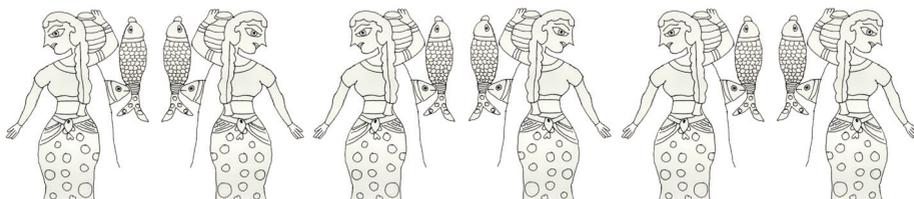
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Opening Words



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.

VSO's Strengthening Access to Holistic, Gender Responsive, and Accountable Justice in Nepal (SAHAJ) aims to reduce vulnerability towards different forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), particularly against women and girls, break the culture of silence around GBV, and increase access to security and justice services.

SAHAJ is a part of UKAID's Integrated Programme for Strengthening Security and Justice (IP-SSJ). It is a consortium project led by Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) with International Alert (IA) and partners: Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD); Antenna

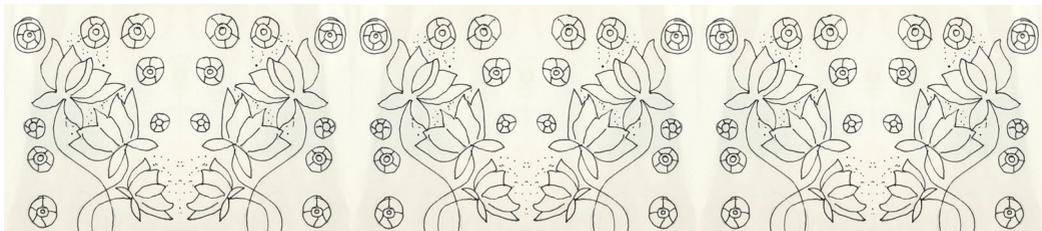
Foundation Nepal (AFN); Emory University; SAMAGRA; and MAHURI Home. The project covers a total of 33 palikas of 13 districts in Province 2 and the Lumbini province.

The project has directly reached 36,606 women/girls, 43,474 men and boys, and more than 3000 justice and security service providers, including Nepal Police.

The case stories in this publication represent initial outcomes of the project. The project team selected these case stories to diffuse the impact of the project and best practices among a broader audience.

Positive transformation through diffusion can create 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.

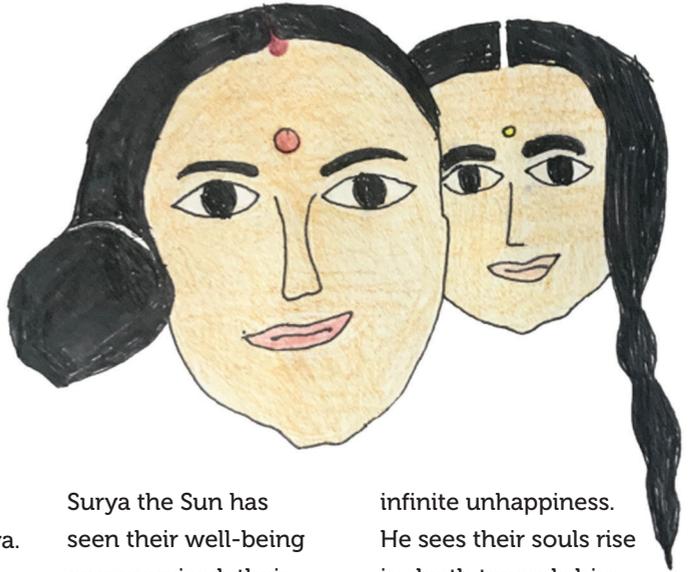
Different approaches were used to establish positive social norms by SAHAJ. Various diffusion components were designed to strengthen coordinated effort in transforming harmful social norms and practices around GBV with specific considerations on breaking the culture of silence and increasing justice-seeking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



My Daughter

Sanju Yadav





The sun rises in Audhati Teen, Kaharwa. The harvest is golden in the fields, the weight of human sweat hangs heavy on the grains. The sky is orange, Surya the Sun looks down gloriously, malevolently.

Behind lush forests, beautiful fields, earthy fragrant air, and sounds of well-fed cattle, he knows of violence, the pain, the fear that envelopes some of these homesteads and its women and girls. He has watched a hundred and more female children's birth greeted with dismay.

Surya the Sun has seen their well-being compromised: their nutrition, clothing, education, health-care, life opportunities taken from them. Thousands of young Newar girls have been married to him to protect them from the ill-will of man.

Each day he watches unwanted daughters live scared lives. Considered economic burdens, he watches as they turn into weeping brides: some of them early on in life before they have entered womanhood. He has seen them beaten, their minds filling up with

infinite unhappiness. He sees their souls rise in death towards him, filled with questions.

"Three sisters (one of whom cannot speak), a brother, grandmother, uncles and aunties, cousins: we used to live together in a joint family. The children would go to school, my father to *lekhandas* work, he helped clients with legal documents. I'd come back home from school and help my mother, who works as a seamstress: measuring cloth, cutting blouses and pants, sewing...."

Sanju is an exceptional student. In the tenth-grade government examinations she achieved a straight A averaging 81%. She says she is the first female member of her clan to study. She'd like to become an "important" person. "I want others to tell my mother that I have become an example to the community. I want her to be proud of me."

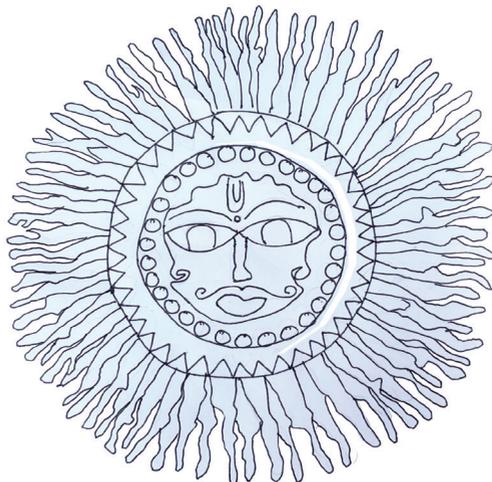
The morning climbs, the sun is white hot in the sky. Beads of sweat form on Sanju's scalp. "My earliest memories? My mother cooking on the fire stove, cleaning floors, washing clothes, being beaten. I remember screeching, my arms flailing before me as they beat her with hands, feet, sticks, anything they could find. I remember being helpless, unable to protect her, my whole body hurting because

of the beating I took when I got in the way.

"We moved away, to the bazaar, away from that house, that village. We moved away so my mother, I, my brothers and sisters could live without fear. Sometimes mother had to go back for rice, lentils, vegetables, and *masala* that grown in the fields. Sometimes, because we did not have enough money and had no food to eat, she would have to go to my father and his family to ask for help. Every time she'd come back black and blue, swollen and beaten.

"Sometimes I went with her, when she had to ask for help. When they began to beat her, I tried to stop them: they'd beat me too. My father beat me too. I and my mother came back weeping, hurting in the body and in mind. I said I'd go to the police, my mother asked me to let it go."

Then Sanju changed. She became a part of *rupantaran*, or change, programme run by SAHAJ. She realized that she should act. She now knew where to go and how to get meaningful help. Things came to a head



All of us worked
day and night
to make our
business a
success. We no
longer needed
my father and his
family's help."

one day. Her mother had gone to the village again in desperation. "I was told they were not sure if she was alive. She was not moving. When we brought her home, I decided I had let things go too far. I reached out to the women's cell of Nepal Police. I reported how they abused us."

Sanju's father and his family were summoned. The severity of the case was placed before everyone. They were made to sign commitments related to financial and other support. They had to

stop physical attacks. "I had saved some money as had my sister: she gets a monthly government allowance because she is specially abled. We started a shop for my mother.

"She could sew!

"SAHAJ gave us training and a seed grant so we could buy a sewing machine and other essentials. We worked day and night to make our business a success. We no longer needed help."

To some, Sanju and her mother Sunita were heroes for standing up and setting an example. Sunita says, "We make a decent income from tailoring. Women in our neighbourhood recognize our good work. My husband lives with us now that I am in a better position and financially independent.

"I ask others who are suffering gender-based violence to raise their voices and seek justice. We have a culture of silence in our communities that we need to break. Nothing is impossible. It is only a matter of taking the first step. In due course, everything falls into its rightful place."

Sanju continues, "SAHAJ has made me believe that if we get good guidance and help, we will overcome all difficulties. I am determined to bring about change and put an end to the culture of silence by helping those who are in pain due to domestic violence."

Surya the Sun hovers on the horizon casting unlimited colors into the evening sky. He is pleased with what Sanju has achieved for herself and her mother.

The Youth

Matrika Yadav





The power of youth will not be denied. They have begun gathering. Some come alone, some in pairs or in small groups and under the huge tree they talk of what youth generally seeks. Change.

The middle-aged watch them, a bit worried, a bit excited. The young people are better educated, better networked and have

Why should it only be the youth that have to listen to the old. We are adamant that the old should also listen to the youth.

some great ideas. The aged, those above sixty, some of them look at the young people talking, drinking tea, planning, with direct animosity. "You are destroying our tradition and culture," they say.

"Yes, but those are your traditions and culture," the youth reply. "They were traditions you followed, now we wish to make our own traditions."

Matrika studies in the tenth grade. "There are 8 to 10 of us who can come together in the neighbourhood when issues come up. At school I am in a class of 25, each of us is ready to help the other if needs be.

"Then there are others outside of

our friendships and schooling who too believe what we believe. So all in all, we are pretty strong," he grins.

"You have to know that the law is on our side. Marriage below the age of 20 is illegal now, violence against women and girls is punishable, dowry is abolished, caste related discrimination is not allowed, the constitution grants everyone equal rights! Maybe it was not like that all the time, now we need to stand our ground and make sure there is no injustice in our homes, in our neighbourhoods, and in our communities."

Matrika was born in a village where people suffer poverty. Violence

and discrimination against women and girls prevailed. "And what is this high caste and low caste? How does someone get to tell another human that looking at them will bring misfortune, that they cannot drink from the same well, that they cannot pray in the same temple, that they cannot enter our homes, that they cannot touch us?"

"I have learned the difference between right and wrong, as have my friends. Maybe the older people, the people who are and were important in

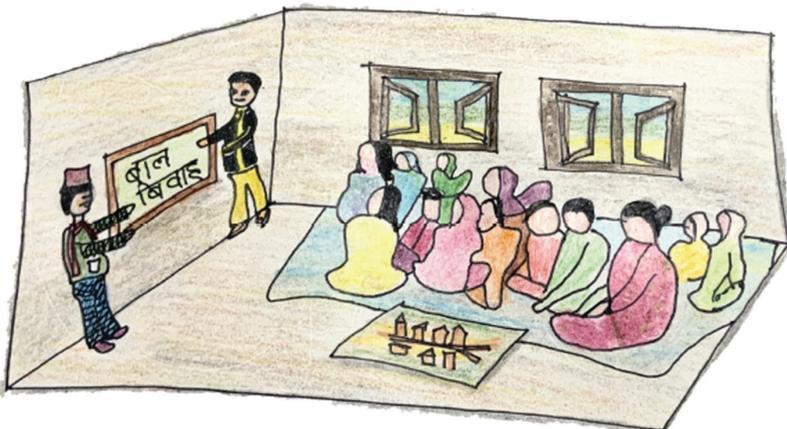
the area do not like it. Why should it only be the youth that have to listen to the old. We are adamant that the old should also listen to the youth.

"If they want to beat their daughters-in-law, their wives, we will go to the police or the local government. If there is no shame in perpetrating crime, there is no shame in bringing it before justice providers."

Matrika and his friends are not here to do nothing. A man who came home drunk every evening and beat

his wife and children was taken to task. His wife was counseled by young men and women. She said, "He is my husband," they retorted, "well, it is not just outsiders who commit crime."

"How do I live with my husband after I set the police on him?" she asked. "They will take action and you had better seek help before your case turns into something else. Instead of reprimands and lectures and manageable action, he may face real criminal law if this continues," they said.



A man came home drunk every evening and beat his wife and children. She said, "He is my husband," we retorted, "it's not just outsiders who commit crime."

She decided to get help. The young people kept her company.

The authorities acted, summoned her husband, warned him, told him of the repercussions, and the abuse stopped.

A 17-year-old girl was to be married in the neighbourhood. The youth visited the families, told of them of the new laws banning marriage of those under 20 and stopped the wedding. There

were other incidents and situations where they intervened including within their own families.

"In my own home, elders did not tolerate those they considered of low caste," Matrika explains. "There were many arguments, some of which were heated, but eventually everyone understood the importance of tolerance, human rights, and equal treatment.

"It is not just me, it is not just my friends, now the neighbourhood comes together. Initially, those of us who attended the SAHAJ *rupantaran*, or change, programme were few. We learned, we shared, we made music and plays and rallies and debates.

"We engaged with other young people in the community.

Then we worked with government and private schools. Now there are many of us." The breeze shifts, the leaves move, the young people that had gathered under the tree are now going home.

Matrika reflects as he walks home. "I think about what we have done, the lives that we have protected, the thoughts that we have changed. Some are still angry with us. They say we are destroying our history, our culture. I disagree. We follow the law, we tell them what the law does and does not allow them to do. That is the way it is.

"I am thankful to the chairman of our local government for giving us time and attention, for listening to us and funding some of our activities.

"We are the youth. We are the change."

The Journalist

Lalita Kumari Sah



“My birth is the reason my mother was banished from the family home. She had given birth to another daughter.”

It’s 2 in the morning and deep black outside. Scratching of rodents, screeching of insects, bird hoots, and the smell of the hay roof and earth-bamboo walls have settled. It’s just us, I and my mom, huddled together, talking in low voices. I ask her “Why? Why did you not throw me away? After all, I was the cause of so much pain to you? You should have thrown me away.”

Tears well up in her eyes, “You, my child,” she says, “You will never know how proud I am of you.”

Lalita was born in a village six kilometers from the Lahan Bazaar in southern Nepal. The village of Kharpechiya

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is predominantly Dalit, those who have been discriminated against as low caste for centuries. She spent her childhood at her *mawal*, her mother’s side of the family. By 5, she was cooking for her grandparents. Youngest of five siblings, she was the one who had to live away from home, grow up too soon.

Her grandmother sent her to school in Tilhut. “Nani believed in education!” Lalita was a great student, coming first in class and with a flair for writing. In grade 6, she was contributing articles to the national children’s insert, “Kopila”.

Both her grandparents had passed away by the time she was in the eighth grade. She returned to her father’s house in Mahadeva. “Home wasn’t exactly a blessing. My father was a *jemindar* landowner and children were

expected to contribute to the upkeep of the land and the crops.

“It was a lot of work even for me who was already used to working.” She made it a habit of attending school every day even if it meant beatings by her father.

In the evenings, she massaged her grandfather’s feet, then the village chief. She listened to the news and current affairs on the radio with him. He would explain politics, administration, and justice.

She understood her writing could make a difference. The first story she published was about the school headmaster and how the school administration and education could improve.

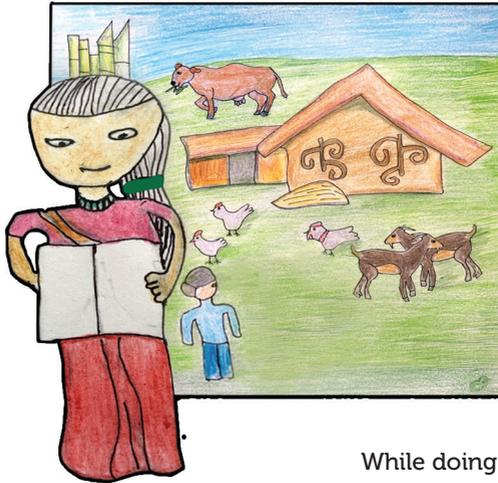
The story published in *Jana Pukar* and *News*

Today resulted in an uproar and tangible changes were made in how the school was run.

By the time she received her School Leaving Certificate, she understood that she would not be allowed to continue her studies. So one sunny day, she climbed over the back wall of the garden and escaped to Rajbiraj, the district centre. "I stayed with an aunt who did not know I'd run away. Editor of *Jana Pukar* helped me settle and got me sporadic writing assignments in the local papers. I was able to rent my own room.

"At home, my father was angry and hurt. He would often scold my mother saying I had run away and disgraced the family. My mother secretly sent me money she had hidden away. Four months later,

somehow, my father found out where I was and came to see me. Winter was on the way and I was cold. I made enough to live on but not enough to buy clothes with. He took me to the bazaar and bought me a sweater, I will never forget that. He said that he was wrong and I should do what I was doing."



Lalita was recognized by newspapers, journals, local government, and civil society organizations. They would invite her to participate

in training sessions and paid her for each attendance. She used this extra money to continue her studies. Organizations such as Madhes Media Mission and SAHAJ trained her to address gender and violence against women and girls and other social issues.

While doing her first-year bachelor's studies, Lalita married. She gave birth to a son and a daughter, started two newspapers, a daily called the *State Voice Dainik*, and a weekly called the *Satya Sanyantra*



Saptahik (which has received government recognition). She became a correspondent for the national *Gorkhapatra* daily and came to Kathmandu to win a Central Committee Membership of the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), defeating her closest rival by 1,800 votes.

She is now doing her master's in communication and law. SAHAJ has named her a champion in the fight against gender-based violence. She has been a part of the programme for almost two years. One

of the women she has helped was married to a policeman and had four children with him. She underwent physical, mental, and verbal abuse and when her husband remarried, things became worse. Her children were taken from her and on 17 May 2020 her brother-in-law beat her and attempted rape.

Lalita found out. Injuries caused by the beatings were severe so Nepal Police and the National Women's Commission were contacted. Her case was featured in the news. A safe house was found for her.

"I'd been waiting for years for the brutality to end. I was rescued by Lalita," she says.

"SAHAJ changed my world," Lalita says. "I try to make positive impact on others' lives, My own family has changed. My husband is a *jemindar*, he has plenty of property, and, traditionally, they don't do a thing around the home. I talked him and said he cannot make me a failure in my own home. Now he helps me out in the kitchen, with the cleaning, and cares for the children.

"I understand my mother better now. When she comes to meet me, we talk for hours about her life, the society and how it has changed, the Terai, the NGO that I run for women, my children and how, we, women, daughters, and sisters, make this world more beautiful."

The Student

Munni Ram



The wheels turn round and around on the mud track of a road, kicking up dust. The land is flat all around, crops are ripening, most houses are built of mud and bamboo with some brick and concrete buildings.

The breeze plays on her face. Heads turn as Munni passes by. "It was not just a riding of the bicycle. It was a challenge. Here I

I, too, was a child bride, but I my husband and my in-laws were supportive so I could finish grade 12.

was, a Dalit woman, moving, studying, working, bringing the community together. I who was told I could not drink from a well, I who was told I could not enter homes (I still can't and don't), I who could not touch people because I would 'befoul' them. Though only in my mid-twenties, I've been on a long journey that weighs heavy on my mind."

The story of Munni Ram: "I was born in Lankasur, a settlement near Rajbiraj district centre. We were the only Dalit family in the area. Rajputs, Mandals, Yadavs and other ethnic groups who were supposedly better than us lived around us.

Some of them would get angry if they saw us in the morning, the sight of us would ruin their day, their work, they said. We were of ill fortune, to be verbally abused, unwanted within the community. Yet my parents brought us up well despite the poverty, the discrimination and the hate.

The other children would wear white and go to boarding schools. I too dreamed of wearing white, going to school. I cried and told my parents I wanted to be like them. My father said there were six children to take care of and he could not send us to school. But I did not listen, I would run away to school and sit in the classroom.



The old headmaster found out but he did not send me away. He met my father and said government schools had seats for Dalit children, he told my father that he should educate his children. I remember his answer, "We don't have enough money for food, how will I buy books and stationery."

Indeed, we ate during the day and slept on empty stomachs at night. A *palhar* of hay that he collected from other farms was our bed. He would spread out a *gomer* of hay

over our bodies to keep us warm. When he went to Kathmandu for work we would forage for the *karmi saag* spinach in other people's fields.

My eldest sister was married in third grade. None of my other sisters and brothers finished their studies as they had to work to take care of, an ailing mother to look after, or teachers beat them for not doing their homework or not doing them properly. I am the only person in my family who has education.

When I reached grade 11, I, too, became an underage bride, but my husband and in-laws are supportive so I could finish grade 12. After my father-in-law passed away due to kidney failure, my husband left to work for a Malaysian supermarket for three years. I was busy raising my children. Now that my husband is back things are better.

I had taken a course on teaching adults so I was able to work. One day at the municipality offices I

I hope to continue my education, after several years of working with SAHAJ, I feel more aware.

saw a vacancy notice. I fit the requirements and applied. I got a job with SAHAJ. I was to help 80 people in my community. I thought this was a great opportunity for me to know the community better. SAHAJ trained me.”

Munni learned about gender-based violence, how to create greater understanding, how to approach the community, and how to network and find solutions.

Her daily visits to various members of the community, particularly the 80 women she was supporting, helped the community recognize her as the go-to person in case of need. She became the face that women and girls identified with in case they faced issues related to discrimination, abuse, or violence.

Munni Ram was involved in establishing SAHAJ’s Family Centered Approach. Seen as proactive and solution oriented, she empowered women and girls who appreciated her contributions.

After being featured on SAHAJ’s web series *“Badlido Kathaharu”* her story reached more than one-and-a-half million viewers, inspiring many.

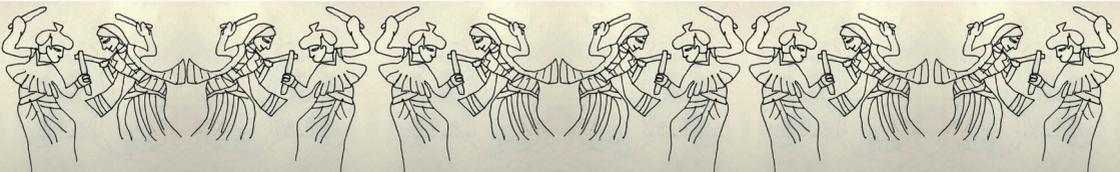
“I am a mother of three children. After coming back from Malaysia, my husband has been working as a painter. We worked hard as a family and saved enough to marry off my sister-in-law. We are saving more so I can join the Bachelor of Education programme. Life has given me hope. SAHAJ has given me and others in the community hope. The community knows me better now. I know my community members better.

After several years with SAHAJ, I feel more aware and capable. I believe that I made a difference in the lives of the 80 people and their families. I hope to get a job and contribute to my family and my children so they never face what I have lived through.

The Dharma Gurus

Mahib Uddin Sekh and Bramananda Tiwari





Kapilbastu District in the southern plains of Nepal rises from 90 to 1500 meters above the sea level. It is home to 600,000 people, most of whom speak the Awadhi language.

Farmers and migrant workers in general, its population is predominantly Hindu though the district's history ties it famously to Buddhism. Kapilbastu has 136

“The greatest challenge we face right now is that of dowry. It is the Shaitan of our communities.”

archaeological sites related to the Gautama Buddha and is a pilgrimage site to those who come from around the world.

A culturally and historically rich place, its people follow diverse religions. Eighteen per cent of its people, or 100,000 of them, are Muslims. The site of Hindu-Muslim violence in 2007 and a religious skirmish in 2017, it is an area that is in the minds of all major Nepalese political parties.

As the Muslim role in Nepalese community is prominent, all parties select candidates that represent the Muslim community during elections.

Mahib Uddin Sekh, a Musliman *dharma guru*, says that the area is home to Hindus, Muslims, indigenous people and other minorities. “In this district, we read the *Gita*, the *Koran*, local religious scriptures, and respect each other. As preachers and leaders, we talk of tolerance and friendship that has been the hallmark of our region despite problems that have been documented.”

Suddhodan Rural Municipality, which Mahib Uddin Sekh calls home has 25 *madrasas* and more than 50 *masjids*. “Many of our people are poor daily wage workers, some have migrated outside Nepal in search

of work. Most of the migrants go to Middle East countries such as United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman as well as to Malaysia and Indonesia.”

Brahmanand Tiwari, 61 years old, is a *purohit* high priest of the Hindu community. Active in religion, he is also a seasoned local politician. He was elected to the local governing body in 1987 and became a *pradhan* chief. “I achieved my school leaving certificate and went into politics because most of the people I knew at the time were politically

involved. This was very good for me because I was learning about social issues and on the ground human problems besides our greatest scriptures. While it is wonderful to learn the ancient lore in the scriptures, political involvement taught me about contemporary issues.

“By the time I became a practicing *purohit*, I had realized that there were many corrections to be made to the religious traditions that are prevalent in our communities.”

Mahib and Brahmanand come

from different religious and cultural groups but have been close friends since childhood.

“Mahib also felt the same way. We felt that we had to have similar messages when we addressed our communities. We chose to work against child marriage and addressed equal treatment of male and female offspring. Our *dharmas* needed to evolve and we, as *dharma gurus*, were in a good position to encourage change.”

Mahib Uddin Sekh adds, “Violence against women and girls was



School data shows in some cases that 60% of the students are female. Daughters-in-law are treated better. "Things can improve, but we are a long way from where we were."

prevalent but we have made inroads. I really like to believe that many are in much better situations now. Muslim women did not come out of homes, our girls were not educated. Now we have women who are professionals and most girls go to school. There are also criminal cases filed when there is gender-based

violence. We have to do better but there is no denying that there has been change."

Mahib was educated in Nepal and continued his *Koran* studies in Delhi. Over time, both became fathers and their families grew. "There is no message in any of the scriptures stating that young people should be married at 12 or 16. We participated in training with SAHAJ and *rupantaran* and learned about health, legal provisions related to women and girls, how to approach gender-based violence, equal rights and opportunities."

Bramanand believes, "The greatest challenge we face right now is that of dowry. It is the *shaitan* that plagues our communities. I estimate that 80% of the weddings take place with an exchange

of dowry despite laws that prohibit such arrangements. Even if our daughters and granddaughters are doctors or engineers, the groom's side still asks for dowry. "We told our people that child marriages have to end, sons and daughters have to be treated equally, gender-based crimes should not be tolerated."

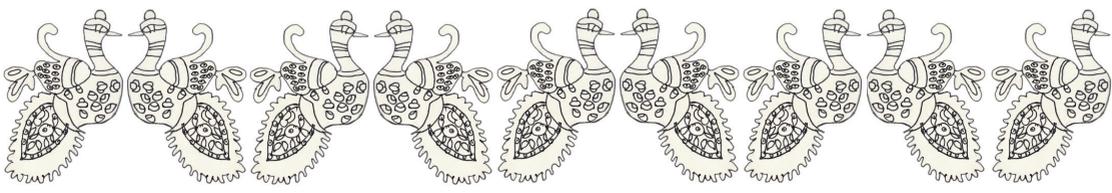
Mahib says, "A father of seven sons and three daughters, I feel equal love for all my children. They are special to me. Both Bramanand and I give *prabachans* talking about the the wellbeing of our people."

Bramananda says, "As *dharma gurus*, we have a voice, people listen to what we say. School data shows in some cases that 60% of the students are female. Things can improve, but we are a long way from where we were."

The Teacher

Rita Yadav





"It was the same thing every day. Again and again and again. From the day I joined the school to the day I would retire, I could see myself doing the same thing perpetually. Get to school, enter the classroom, children stand and a chorus of greetings, turn the book, the same book, and teach the same chapters every year over and over and over again.

I could see the change taking place in his eyes as he thought things over. I could see him confronting his beliefs and realizing they did not make sense.

"I'd watch the children outside the window, running around happily, chatting in pairs and in groups, and I'd yearn to be a part of their life in a more meaningful way. There had to be more to education, something that would bring us closer. Something that would add fun to our lives. Something beyond textbooks.

"When the SAHAJ project came and the school agreed to form a child club, I asked that I be made the moderator of the club. I was sure that the very different things that were being suggested as a part of the club activities would bring me closer to the children and make possible what I had dreamed I would do as a teacher when

I first joined the profession.

"In many ways, I learned and unlearned as we trained on how to form and manage a child club, how to turn members into young leaders, promote child rights and safety, and work for the greater good of the community through children. It was wonderful to keep the learning dynamic action oriented and fun. I was sure that my students would never forget what they had experienced through *rupantaran* change programme.

"Pilathikolaidi, where I teach, is in middle of farmlands in the southern Terai flatlands of Nepal. Eight kilometers from the district headquarters of Rajbiraj, we are



connected to the world by a mud road. A 50 year-old educational institution, my school is among the oldest and historically significant in the area. It has good facilities, runs classes up to grade 12 in the mornings and a college which offers bachelor's degree in the afternoons."

A small group of 25 children became members of the child club, out of the more than 1000 enrolled in the school. Among their first activities was

training. Three schools in the area came together in Rajbiraj to learn about gender violence that affected women and girls in the communities.

"Matrika, a member of our club, was asked during the first training session who washed the bedsheets at home and he replied, 'My mother.'

"'Why not your father, why not you?' he was asked.

"'Because it is her job,'

he replied. But I could see the change taking place in his eyes as he thought things over. I could see him confronting his beliefs and realizing they did not make sense. 'My father can help, so can I,' he said."

The children were invited to make work plans and that resulted in scheduling and planning street plays, public rallies, concerts, art events, debates and more activities and events for the community,

SAHAJ experts helped as needed. Members learned how to involve their friends, lobby for change, make decisions democratically and implement plans in a timely and effective manner.

"A month later, I met Matrika's father. 'Matrika has changed,' he said. 'He helps out at home. He does not discriminate or say this is the work of women. He has also enlisted me to help.'"

Then came bigger news. Matrika's uncle was marrying off his daughters early. Two child marriages were about to take place at home. Matrika stood up against his uncles and aunts, his father and mother, his grandfather.

"So now you own our home," his grandfather commented. But Matrika was adamant,

he would not allow the early illegal marriage of his cousins. He explained health, education, economic, opportunity costs and potential legal repercussions should the marriage take place despite the law. The weddings were canceled.

He found out that his neighbour was about to marry off his underage daughter. He stopped that marriage too. He brought change into his family and led his neighbourhood.

"The Covid pandemic struck, but we did get quite a lot done. Many young people were galvanized, I was galvanized, I learned a lot, we shared laughter, sweat, worries, and rewards.

"We interacted with the police, networked on the phone, learned how to mitigate gender

violence and took action.

"I, too, had to intervene when a student told me her family was about to marry her at the age of 13. I met her mother, she said that they were Dalit and that educated grooms were not available. I was able to persuade her, sharing what I had learned from SAHAJ, to call off the marriage. The young woman is now 18 and studying in twelfth grade.

"I have become more vocal. When duties are given to the teachers, I can now see that the male teachers sit around drinking tea and talking politics while female teachers take up most of the educational workload. Bringing up such issues was only right. These two years have changed me as a person, for the better."

The Entrepreneur

Mira Thakur





As you walk along the sunny streets of Krishnanagar, you may see a tin shed, its roof low, everything inside a bit dark. A woman sits inside: biscuits, odds and ends, greens, reds, and yellows

**In my maiti, or
my mother's
home, my
mother,
brothers, and
their children
worried what
I would do,
where I would
go, how I
would feed
myself and my
children.**

especially targeted towards school-going children surround her. Instant noodles dry and crunchy hang in a row, squiggly this and that are on a rack, candies and sweets, and sour and hot prepackaged food look appetizing.

Tea is for the older people, the workers, the passers by, or the old who take tea and chat on and on and on about how the world is at a fragile state, which political party is doing what, and how simply things could be better.

"Its all good," says Mira Thakur. "I do Rs. 500 worth of business on bad days and up to 1500 on good days.

It's enough money for me and my family. I'm happy."

That hot tin shed feels a lot more habitable when she smiles. "I have no land, this space is given to me to put up my shop temporarily by people who feel kindly towards a widow and her children. These are good people of this earth, of our community. May they be blessed by the gods."

Mira was born in Taulihawa, she received training and help from SAHAJ and through its income generation component opened a tea shop. It did well

until the lockdown. When the tea shop did not do well, Mira put the money she had saved into good use. She invested it in a *kirana pasal*, a shop selling food and other household items.

“The past was so different,” Mira recalls. “I have three sons and two daughters. When my husband passed away, my *maiti* – my mother, brothers, and their children worried what I would do, where I would go, how I would feed myself and

my children. Being poor themselves, they could only do so much for me.”

Married at the age of 12, Mira gave birth to her first daughter at 17. “We did not have enough food. My husband was a barber, we had no land, no animals, he did not make enough money so he took to driving rickshaws. It was hard for us. Then his body started swelling, we were told by the doctor that both his kidneys were bad and it would

take money that we did not have to save him. So he died.

“My family is not educated. I have only completed grade 5. Except for my youngest son who is in grade 7, my other children did not study. Two of them work at a shop and my daughters are now married and have families of their own. This tin hotel and shop feed and clothe us. We can pay interest and capital on the loans I took to marry off my daughters.”



SAHAJ used different approaches to establish positive social norms among communities such as that of Mira Thakur.

Coordinated effort was required to transform harmful social norms around GBV with specific considerations on breaking the culture of silence and

increasing justice-seeking behavior.

The project tackled the root causes of GBV, including social, traditional, economic and other factors and improved the capacity of the system to provide protection and services to the most at-risk women and girls in Nepal through family-centred, school-centred and grassroots-based approaches.

"We were vaguely aware of our rights, but unsure of where we could go for help and how we could help those who were in need. We were afraid, we did not want arguments with our families, neighbours and felt others' problems do not affect us. We were so wrong. These problems have a huge impact on our lives and the lives of our children.

"When we were trained, made action plans, increased awareness, we realized that there was need for action. Selecting opportunities and partnerships helped us grow."

Issues like child marriage and discrimination based on caste declined though gender-based violence, dowry, and other ills were still prevalent. "Discrimination when women and girls are undergoing their periods, restricting them from entering the kitchen, worship rooms, touching others, eating together, accessing other areas of the house, wells and temples continue.

"I am thankful. My life is better. I am glad for my daughters for their lives are better than mine. They married when they were older

and prepared physically and mentally. There is less violence against women and girls than in my time. The police are very responsive when we ask for help. Previously, most of us would not approach the police because we were scared and unhappy with the way they treated us. We did not know that we could approach them at any time we needed help. We did not even know what kind of help we could get from them.

"After learning about different ways to get help, understanding our community, and also learning how to make money, my family is in a better position. Things are better than they used to be before we participated in the *rupantaran*, change, programme organized for us by SAHAJ."

The Dreamer

Alimun Nisha



Someday, she dreams she will be a police woman dressed in the sky and navy blue of the uniform. People in the community will look up to her and her mother as they walk by.

Someday, she dreams she will work for the government and be an important administrator who can make a difference.

In the hope of making herself financially productive as soon as possible, she enrolled herself in the least financially demanding arts college.

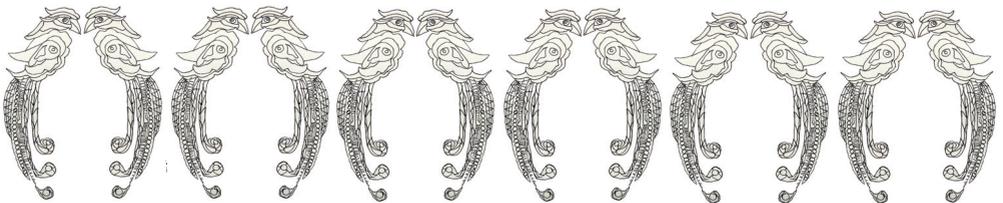
“I really wanted to be a nurse, but that didn’t happen. No matter how hard I worked, no matter how well I did in the Secondary Education Examinations (SEE), nothing made a difference. My straight A’s and among the highest marks in the nation, at 83% average, did not mean anything. Ultimately, my family could not pay for the nursing degree that I wanted to achieve.

“I also wanted to be a teacher. That did not work out well either. I would have to complete my bachelor’s level studies, then I would have to prepare for a teaching license examination. This would be too time consuming and suppose I was not

able to get a job as a teacher?”

What Alimun did not dream of was being married at the age of 16. Her family had found a match for her. The proposed groom was studying engineering. It would be a wonderful tie and the making of her life, they thought, as they prepared for her giving away. As still practiced in the Terai (though illegal according to the laws of Nepal), a dowry was to be exchanged. The groom’s family would get a hefty financial reward from Alimun’s family so their daughter could have a good home and a good husband.

Alimun had other ideas. The school’s child club was a part of



a change or *rupantaran* programme. She had learned about the physical, financial, social, family, psychological problems early marriages cause. She talked to her family. They listened. "I told them that the money that they were spending on the dowry would be better spent on my education."

Her marriage did not take place and she was allowed to continue her education.

"I dream of contributing to my family financially. I would have loved to pursue a commerce degree and study business administration. I am good with numbers."

However, Covid pandemic resulted in economic downturn. Alimun's family could not afford to send



her to study at an expensive school. So Alimun did what she had to do. In the hope of getting the best education that she could get while making herself financially productive as soon as possible, she enrolled herself in the least financially demanding arts college.

"My father, brothers, and sisters work on our land. I help them plant vegetables, mostly eggplants, okra, and others. We make money from what we

sell. We also have good food to eat. Since we do not do business, what we grow and sell pays for our living and education. My two brothers went to Malaysia to work. But it is hard there, one of them is back already without saving much.

"Migrating abroad in search of work costs a lot of money and it's risky as well. Some people die due to accidents, some are unpaid and trapped, some do not have any help when they are ill.

There are 18 members in our joint family. Its 4 am when I get up. The three buffalos, the goats and chicken have to be taken out; milk and eggs collected; the animals fed and watered. I take out a little time to study as well. Then there is work on the farm and in the kitchen. At 10 am, it is time to leave for school.

"We have this simple house, this simple life. My dreams are not that complicated. I

dream of getting good grades, I dream of finding work that pays decently and offers me and my family financial security. I am now in twelfth grade, about to finish high school. I hope to go to college and achieve a bachelor's degree.

"I hope that my family, which again is talking about marriage, lets me pursue my dreams and achieve in life the rights to which every girl, every woman, is entitled to.

"Marriage, dowry, a good family, children, it is something that is on everyone's mind, including mine. I am 18, my dreams tell me that I should finish my education, become financially productive, be an example to the community, then I should marry, not before I can take care of myself, not before I can help people I love.

"The people who are a part of the learning now know that some social norms can be harmful as well as illegal. I am protected from being married until the age of twenty. Social interventions like radio programmes, print material, audio visual material, school club education and the involvement of my family in *rupantaran*, change, approaches has resulted in behavior change in myself, my family, and my community.

"Communities have stopped practices like child marriage. More adolescents are aware of where they can get help if they have need. Not only I, but my friends, younger girls and their brothers and friends can also help if any of us are in need. We are stronger now than we were before. We are more proactive and able."

"I hope that my family, which again is talking about marriage, lets me pursue my dreams and achieve in life the rights to which every girl, every woman, is entitled to."

The Housewife

Renu Ram





"My son is a year old. We live in a joint family with my mother-in-law, father-in-law, sister-in-law and her child. My husband is the second among three brothers.

"There is much to do at home. I cook, wash, clean, and I am thankful to say that everyone helps me with the housework, the women as well as the men in the family. That way, I have been blessed that I have been married into a caring family.

"Both at my parent's place and here at home, we have livestock and a family

farm. I am used to taking care of buffalos, cows, goats, chicken, and pigeons. The farms provide rice, wheat, vegetables and what we don't consume as a family, we sell.

"I started working at the farm from the age of 10. I did not attend a private school but I did well in terms of getting good grades at the government school where I studied. I completed my Secondary Education Examination and went on to government college and achieved a bachelor's degree.

"I must say that I am quite happy with my

life. Our whole family, on my husband's side, attended the counseling sessions of change, or *rupantaran* provided by SAHAJ. We learned about women's rights, how we can help each other, different laws and by-laws related to women, and we appreciate each other all the more because of what we know.

"I am now at my parents' home in Lahan. In some families, women are not allowed to go to their parents' home after marriage. While I could contribute to the housework and farmwork here, it is a

bit of a holiday for me so I am resting. But I am a little distracted because my small business is closed while I am here. I am quite good with my sewing machine and back home, I work as a seamstress.

"I can design, cut, and finish women's clothes and I make a good income from this work. I am worried because my customers miss me and I am losing business. During the offseasons I make about ten thousand a month while during the festive season with Teej, Dasain, Tihar, weddings, I earn fifteen thousand rupees a month or more.

"My parents as well as my husband's family are economically sound. My brothers are well educated and my husband's brothers and family are also well educated. Everyone

works and contributes to housework and is financially productive. This is why, I feel that I must work and also contribute. Being financially independent is important for a woman and her offspring, I think.

"I like to think that I myself am well educated. There was a time I wanted to be a nurse or a doctor so I studied science and completed my intermediate degree as a biology major. Then I went to Biratnagar to sit for nursing college entrance examination. My family was prepared to pay my fees but when we learned that we would have to bribe people 300,000 to 400,000 for a seat in college, I told my father that I did not want to study nursing.

"Becoming a nurse at the time would require a lot of money and

becoming a doctor would cost a lot more, maybe up to eight million rupees. It would be too big a risk for my family to invest such a large amount into my education, I felt. Then once I was educated, I would have to marry my equal in terms of education and profession and the dowry demands would rise dramatically.

"Though I did not study medicine, in the back of my mind, I had hope that I would be able to do something with health and sciences. I put off

The day I finished my final exams, I had run out of excuses not to marry. Within a few days, I was wedded...

I am ready to find the happiness that comes from being a professional who contributes to her children, her husband, her family and to her own life.

my family from giving me away in marriage at every step of the way until I completed my bachelor's degree in biological sciences. But the day I finished my final exams, I had run out of excuses not to marry. Within a few days, I was wedded to my husband who studied commerce and works for a bank.

"After getting married, I felt my life's choices had become limited. I could not go anywhere, I was expected to take care of the home and

give birth to children, sons preferably. I really wanted to be financially productive and independent. I wanted to finish my master's in science degree. I wanted to pass my Public Service Commission exams and have a permanent, secure, public service job.

"I have talked to my parents and my husband and his family about this. After being a part of the SAHAJ learning, I think they have become more receptive to the idea. While I am still not sure what will happen, now that my child is one year old and is growing with the help

of my family members, I feel that I have enjoyed the happiness of being a housewife and I am ready to find the happiness that comes from being a professional who contributes to her children, her husband, her family and to her own life.

"For now, though I am not making use of my knowledge in the sciences much, I am doing what I can. My family has come even closer. Such programmes are very necessary for communities in the Terai where women and girls may not enjoy the same rights I do."



The Survivor

Sunita Kumari Thakur



Even before the age of ten, Sunita would hear conversations of marriage and dowry. By the time she was in her teens, her family had already arrived at a decision, a decision she was not a party to, that she could not intervene in. She had completed her school leaving certificate examinations and though her father worked a salaried job and was kind to her

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and her mother loved her very much, she learned that a 33-year-old had been chosen to be her groom.

She wept in the smoke of the ceremonial *bibah mandap*. Having spent all her life away from the outside world, she was now facing life all alone with strangers. This is not her story in isolation, this was the practice of the time and most girls faced her situation. In some ways she was fortunate for she was educated and her family was capable of paying a dowry.

So it was that she left behind everything and everyone she had known all her life and went into a strange home: a new bride-servant around the home, she was the one

that everyone could blame if anything went wrong. Unfortunately, what she did not know, what her parents did not know, was that the family she had been married into had a history of abusing women.

As she walked her way to court, Sunita was clear that the neighbourhood was not on her side. She pulled her two daughters along. She was frowned upon, stared at, she could hear the words: "bringing shame to her family;" "stepping on and destroying our traditions;" "a mother of daughters;" "she's crossed my path, she's ruined my day;" "the sight of a woman who has not given a son to her family brings misfortune."

She was taking her husband and his family members "known to be honorable" in the neighbourhood to court. The police had been involved, the local government had been involved. "It was shameful how she brought dishonor into the home and the community."

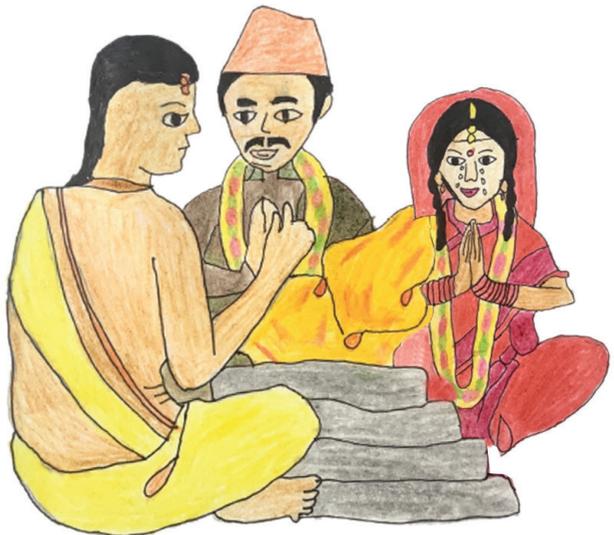
Notwithstanding the fact that her mother-in-law was living in the home of her youngest daughter-in-law's family because she could no longer bear the beatings and the hurt at home; notwithstanding the fact that a sister-in-law had left the house because of the abuse she suffered; notwithstanding the fact that other women in family, too, lived with issues; she was the person to blame.

It had not been so bad in the early days of her marriage. She was young, productive around the home, educated, came from a *jagirey* family that had a job and the influence that comes with it.

When she became pregnant, everyone was excited. A son would be born, they were sure. Every child's birth should be greeted with happiness and joy. When Susan was born, the air was palpable with disappointment and anger.

Her husband changed, her in-laws changed. The love they had for her diminished and when she became pregnant again, the months were filled with fear. What if the second child were also female? What would happen to her, what would happen to the girls? They were not welcome in this household.

Indeed, Sunita gave birth to a second daughter and there was no welcome in her husband's house for



her thereafter. She was beaten, verbally and mentally abused, and financially deprived. No one in the community stood up for her. The women in the family, already oppressed, could not do much to help her. With the community steeped in traditional gender roles, with women in the family there to work, to be subjugated, there was not much support from anywhere.

One day, Sunita left for her parents' home with her daughters and never went back.

So the story changed. Sunita became financially independent. Economic stability meant that their standing in the society improved.

While her parents were welcoming and understood her reasons and pain, the rest of her family wanted her to find a compromise with her husband and go back "home," for she and her children were added burdens.

Instead of compromise, Sunita chose to file for divorce. Susan was growing up and going to school. Over time, she became a member of the child club at the school. The child club was cooperating with SAHAJ and its *rupantaran* or change programme. The programme identified that Susan needed help. She was given psychological support by the programme and learning of her problems, SAHAJ went a step further.

Because Sunita had completed her school leaving certificate examinations, she could start her own

small business. Sunita learned to become a seamstress, received a seed fund and with it she started tailoring and placed a cot in front of the local government and court buildings and sold stationary and food items to people who came for official work.

The story changed. Sunita became financially independent. Economic stability meant that her standing in the society improved. People listened to her when she talked about domestic violence, discrimination, and women's rights. Susan's mental health improved and she turned out to be an outstanding student. Her sister was growing up beyond the shadow of abuse and violence. Sunita is in a better place now. A successful single mother of two amazing girls.

My Family

Babita Kewat





It's evening, darkness is settling in. The fields inundated by the monsoon rains have still not drained completely. The mud road that leads to her home is mostly puddles and slush.

Schools closed due to the Covid pandemic have not reopened and Babita has been home for more than a

"I did not go to school, I cannot read or write," her mother says, "So I did not see any sense in educating Babita.

year now. She is in the ninth grade while her brother, Raghunath, is in the eight grade at the same school. Raghunath does not like to waste time, he has signed up for computer lessons and will be back from the bazaar anytime now. Father is away in Bhairahawa where he works as a bricklayer. He will not be home tonight, he comes home to work the fields, enjoy festivals, and when the family needs him.

"She was a punishment meted out by the heavens for the sins I had committed in my past lives, or so I used to believe. A girl child, that too with muscular

dystrophy," Babita's mother says as Babita goes to set the rice on the stove. Raghunath has arrived, he stands his bicycle, washes his hands and feet on the hand pump and comes inside. He is the one who takes her to school every day on the bicycle because she cannot walk so far. Though he is in grade eight and she is in nine, he is the one who explains homework and the topics to her when she does not understand.

"She was the subject of ridicule at school and in the neighbourhood, the 'lame' one that other children could make fun of safely." Babita comes back. The

family sits together, talking. The food is cooking and Babita's mind is half in the conversation and the other half at the wood stove where the fire may burn the food that is cooking. Her brother loves the food she cooks, "Puri tarkari are deep fried *chappatis* and spicy peas and potatoes. *Ghulghula, sudi, ghojiya, soth...* didi makes amazing food," he says, looking forward to dinner. The aroma of boiling rice wafts into the room.

Khajuria Village is a part of the Maitri Rural Municipality, it is mostly the Dalit people who live in this area. Jahari, Babita's mother, talks about herself, "My parents are from India, Biswanganj near Gorakhpur. I was 16 when I married their father. I have three daughters and a son."

Babita only speaks Awadhi, her mum



speaks a mix of Bhojpuri and Hindi, Raghunath speaks Nepali and understands English.

So far muscular atrophy has not stopped 19-year-old Babita from leading an enriching life. She cooks, washes, cleans, helps take care of the eight goats that her family keeps.

"She cannot wear shoes. Barefoot, or slipper clad, she cannot walk on the rough stony roads and paths around the village. But

around the home she has no problems," her mother says. "I did not go to school, I cannot read or write. So I did not see any sense in educating Babita. They'd only make fun of how she walks and she'd end up feeling bad. At home and in the fields she can be with me. She, her father, sisters, brother and I all work on the fields."

"Our school club became a part of the SAHAJ *rupantaran* programme and my whole family was

invited to be a part of the family centered events. We were invited to the bazaar. On the floors tarpaulins were set. We sat there and listened. There were 48 of us. I heard much about gender, psychological support, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to be a part of this," Babita says.

"But we began to understand our sister more," Raghunath intervenes. "We understood enough to know how a family should work."

"I enjoy taking her to school on my bicycle every day," Raghunath, her brother, comments. "I want her to study as much as she can," Jahari, Babita's mother, adds.

"Yes," says Jahari, "I understood why my daughter had to continue going to school. Why she had to finish high school and get a job and be financially secure. They told us about the income generation component of the programme. We were trained in making a small investment and making a profit. When asked what we wanted to do as a family to generate income, we chose vegetable farming."

"During the cooler months, when we do not plant rice, our fields are not so productive," Raghunath explains. "I and my sisters have enough time to do something. Father and mother help. So we planted eggplants, tomatoes, cabbages and cauliflower. They taught us how to get good seed and how to use fertilizer effectively.

We earned about 20,000 rupees that winter."

"I too go to the fields and help out," Babita says. "We sell about three goats each year and we make Rs. 36,000 or more from them. I feel that I do my best to be a good contributing member of the family."

"I want her to study as much as she can," Jahari adds. "My son and daughters are good. They deserve all that is good in life. May the gods bless them."

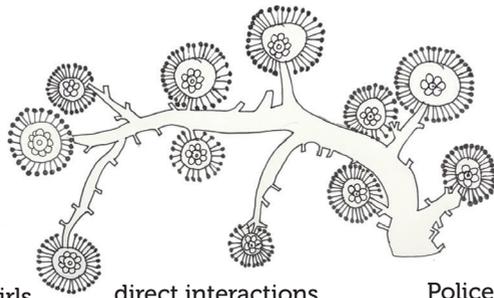
"I enjoy taking her to school on my bicycle every day," Raghunath comments.

"Maybe someday, I will finish my studies, get a job, and be able to take care of my family," says Babita. In the meanwhile, the food is ready and it smells good. It's time to eat.



People and the Police

Communities
Believe



Women and girls afraid of their own families are expected to approach local governments and the police in order to seek help. Even for the educated and the well-traveled, interaction with authorities can be intimidating. Therefore, improvement of how the police are perceived is vital in the campaign to achieve women's rights. SAHAJ used

In places like Jeetpur, people contributed food to the police office when it was beset by the Covid virus.

direct interactions, information transfer, and fun activities that brought communities and the police together in more humane settings.

A positive outlook towards the police led to an increasing number of women and girls reaching out for help. While there were delays related to service, local governments, political parties and representatives of the people contributed to create a better circumstance within which gender-based violence related cases could be addressed immediately and in a result-oriented manner to bring about lasting change for the better.

Police at the grassroots level suffered from negative perceptions due to the decade long Maoist insurgency and, later, the Madhes uprisings. The negativity towards state actors such as government administrators, police and others made it hard to gain the trust of the people.

SAHAJ helped to create positive impressions of the police and highlighted services they provide to the citizenry. Especially women and girls were brought in contact with the police in informal and fun settings at schools, village events, games, and non-confrontational public gatherings.

Police were trained to patrol and involve themselves in conversations and listen to the aspirations of the people. Events such as community score card meetings resulted in the police sharing their limitations in terms of equipment, personnel, budgets and capacity. Humanizing the police played a big role in increasing acceptance of their role and positive outlook within communities. Religious, community, political and other social influencers also contributed to this process.

While there is some way to go still, the atmosphere has improved wherein women, children, youth and senior citizens can come forward and approach local governments, women's cell of Nepal Police, and social workers for help. The number of cases filed with the police has increased.

In places like Jeetpur, people contributed food to the police office when it was beset by the Covid virus and thanked the personnel for putting their lives on the line in

the process of helping women, girls, and the community during the pandemic.

J.P. Karna, sub-inspector at the Simara Area Police Office, was very touched. "I used to think that no matter how much we do, the people find ways to blame the police, never in my career as a policeman had I been thanked like this. I was so happy," he said.

In Jaleshwarnath Municipality a general dispute resulted in religious violence between Hindus and Muslims. SAHAJ



Now children,
youth, legal
systems,
societal
leaders are
turning their
attention to
gender related
abuse.

personnel, Nepal Police personnel, community leaders, religious leaders, other human rights groups and political activists came together to calm the situation down through non-confrontational dialogue. Police involvement in talks, their on-the-ground patrols, and their calming influence gained them the respect of both religious communities.

Citizens and the police are coordinating better in places such as Pyuthan where people were not familiar with

the local police office, its services, and the processes involved when help was needed. Events that brought the people and the police together and door-to-door campaigning by the police helped communities realize that people in uniform were there to help them.

Policing technique and the need to work with the community have been addressed by various legislations in Nepal since the 1950s. Victims are finding it easier to reach out to policewomen in Nepal. Police women's cells as they are oriented and trained to handle sensitive situations. Bijuwar police data shows that the number of people who approached the police has increased. The process of filing complaints has also been improved so that victims are not

traumatized further by the need for an intimidating amount of paperwork when, in some cases, they are not even able to read and write. Police stations, such as in Simara, help out by filling applications for the victims. The station reports that this fiscal year 53 cases have been filed as opposed to 27 last year.

When village elders told 15-year-old Matrika and his friends, "You are stepping on our traditions," they retorted, "They were our traditions but now traditions have changed. Some of these traditions are no longer acceptable to us."

The world has changed over the years. New ideas have flourished, new ways of doing things are spreading and traditions such as dowry, child marriage,

and violence against women and girls, though present, is no longer acceptable either by law or by the society.

When homes, religious and social leaders, and communities stood up against issues such as child labor and open defecation in Nepal, signboards went up declaring whole villages and towns child labor free and open defecation free. Now children, youth, legal systems, societal leaders are turning their attention to gender related abuse.

Religious leaders such as Mahib Uddin Sekh and Bramananda Tiwari are asking if the bride and groom are of age. They refuse to conduct marriage ceremonies if they are not, instead, families listen to preaching of equality and opportunities. It is not only them, in Rajbiraj

and Tilathikoiladi 30 *pandits* and shamans of took part in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious dialogue organized by SAHAJ regarding this and other harmful traditions. All of them are working to bring change in traditions that are harmful and unhelpful.

SAHAJ has brought together an alliance of the media, young people such as Matrika and his school club, individuals, families, and communities to lobby for change at every level. It is no longer women and girls who are the stakeholders to their wellbeing. The constitution of Nepal, multiple laws and by-laws, policies, and regulations specify rights and opportunities. Journalists such as Lalita Kumari Sah, teachers such as Rita Yadav, housewives such as Renu Ram,

brother Raghunath Kewat, justice providers, lawyers, police, psychologists and multiple stakeholders have emerged as gender champions.

At *madrasas* and the *masjids*, in churches and the *mandirs*, at schools and colleges, during social gatherings, the message is going out more often that the silence around gender-based violence needs to end. Child marriages were the norm in places like Rajgadh, Saptari, in the past because the people were not aware of the laws and the harm that the girl child faced.

The local government and the judicial committee reached out to 440 women, men and children. The Community Police Partnership Committee was involved in activities.

Toll free numbers were handed out to the young people and they were asked to call if they heard that a child marriage was about to take place. The District Police Office immediately responded to any calls. Now there are very few child marriages in the area.

“Dowry is the *shaitan* that envelopes our communities,” comments Bramanand Tiwari, a Hindu religious leader. There is a change in behavior among some men and boys. The work of housewives

Because they were going against family and social norms, they first had to convince their family that what they were doing was right.

is no longer taken for granted. Their contribution to the home, children, and other family members, livestock and farm is better appreciated. In Kapilvastu, a housewife Kavritri Nau was recognized for her work by the municipality.

Ram Prasad Poudel says, men, too, should take care of the home, cook and wash, take care of children and household pets and animals as he sweeps the house. After attending SAHAJ activities, his world view has changed. In the past, the men would eat and then children and the women last. Even though meals shared together should be the norm, in some homes, traditions have yet to change. The local government of Triveni Rural Municipality of Rolpa District

was so impressed with how some men were contributing to improve their wives’ lives that it declared multiple men GBV champions.

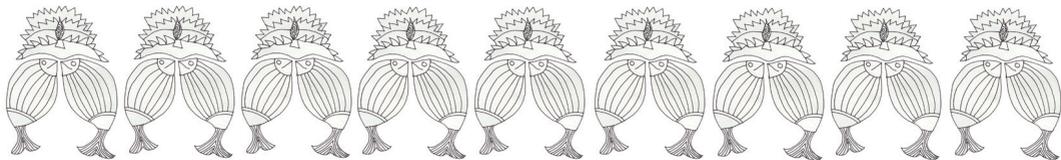
In Rapti, boys are a considered “special” and study and play while the girls of the family take care of household work. After attending a two-day training on life skills for adolescents by SAHAJ, teenage boys realized that they, too, did not help out at home. After getting over the initial shock of seeing their boys doing housework, the families are proud of what they do and appreciate their initiative.

SAHAJ’s interventions generated awareness, brought coalitions together, and made lasting impact on negative norms and ushered in positive change.

Learning Together

Understanding Each Other





There are many changes for a new normal to be established wherein gender-based violence is reduced significantly. Justice and security sectors need to become approachable and the community needs to feel comfortable with them.

SAHAJ measured key indicators signifying equal and equitable justice for women and girls using Community Score Cards. Thirty-three municipalities from thirteen districts were involved from two provinces. More than three thousand individuals were a part of the study through meetings, discussions and sharing.

The community is aware of harmful social norms:

79% of the participating municipalities agreed. Activities organized by the project at the community level helped the people become further aware of harmful norms and values.

Those aware need to act to eradicate harmful social norms. Project plans pointed out action implementation opportunities and partnerships, increased exposure and added experience.

Communities became proactive with reports submitted to the local government and the police on issues such

as child marriage and GBV. Krishna Gyawali, a chief administrative officer, said, "We learned about different types of gender-based violence. We hope to move forward by working with the community to end the harmful social norms."

Community works to transform harmful social norms:

The consensus was that the community needs to take much greater initiative to combat harmful social norms. SAHAJ brought diverse members of the community together with security and justice providers and created an environment in which they could create action plans

and work together. Together, they helped improve security and justice and provided the community ways through which they could make direct impact on reducing and eradicating harmful social norms.

“Overall security and justice, especially for those from the most marginalized sections of the community, can improve through further action,” stressed Anand Shrestha, a judicial committee member. However, social, religious, and cultural barriers were difficult to overcome. Stakeholders believed that while some

change was going on, there had to be more initiative from within communities.

Community needs to feel comfortable with security agencies:

Before SAHAJ activities started, 86% of Terai participants said they were not satisfied with the behavior of the police towards the public. Manish Suman, member of parliament commented, “The people are not convinced that the police will listen to them.”

After collaborative action plans were implemented with

SAHAJ, 44% of the people felt that police behavior was very good. The relationship between the police

Those aware need to act to eradicate harmful social norms. Project plans pointed out action implementation opportunities and partnerships, increased exposure and added experience.



and the community improved and the community and the police were more accepting of each other.

People need to approach the police when there is crime in the community:

People from twelve of thirteen municipalities reported that they were not confident reporting crimes to security and justice providers. The

Sixty-six per cent of municipalities and 75% of police representatives reported that the number of reports filed had increased.

community reported that the police were likely to side with the perpetrators if they were well connected, not many knew how to file complaints and gender issues, political affiliation, social standing, financial limitations, religious norms, and ethnicity came in the way.

Bamdev Poudel, deputy inspector of police, said that, "We want to work closely with the community."

The community helps with crime identification and investigation:

Security and justice providers need help with crime investigation. However, people felt threatened by the perpetrator, were afraid of the police, and feared social repercussions. Most people did not want to spend time in

police stations, with lawyers, or in court.

"Collaboration with SAHAJ opened an opportunity to reach into the community," commented Ganesh BC, in-charge of the police post in Tiram, Pyuthan.

Sixty-six per cent of municipalities and 75% of police representatives reported that the number of reports filed had increased as has cooperation by community members during criminal investigation.

Ward chairperson Dipendra Kumar Yadav said that overall SAHAJ had increased the confidence of the people to reach out to security and justice providers and that there was improvement over the two years that the project was implemented.

Strengthening the Legal System

Training, Equipment, Documentation and Other Support





SAHAJ worked to strengthen legal counseling, improve the referral pathway, improve the attitude of the police, better the performance of justice committees, address anomalies between civil and criminal case related judicial roles, and build awareness

**Article 47
A and B of
the Local
Government
Operation
Act 2074
clearly defines
the judicial
committee
role, responsi-
bilities, and
jurisdiction.**

among the public on who to reach out to.

Technical support was provided to the National Women Commission (NWC). The case of a woman who was overworked, locked inside the home, and not allowed to reach out or receive help was linked to a psychosocial counsellor and a legal counsellor by the helpline who referred her case to the police.

In another case, a husband and his four friends forced a woman to sign documents depriving her of her legal rights to property. The Legal Aid and Consultancy Center, took up her case at the

recommendation of the NWC and her husband and his associates are now in court.

The Referral Pathway Guidelines to Address GBV facilitates administration of justice at the community level. Nepal Police handles criminal cases while civil cases are handled by the judicial committees of local governments.

SAHAJ helped build capacity of the judicial committees, provided equipment, built buildings, helped develop policy documents, and encouraged the formalization of processes.

This tool can support safe houses for women and girls in need as well as facilitate gender-based violence funds made compulsory for local governments.

Traditionally, courts handled both civil and criminal cases. The constitution of Nepal, Good Governance Act, and Good Governance Regulations gave local governments authority to handle civil cases through the judicial committee. Provincial, district and local governments have been learning, training,

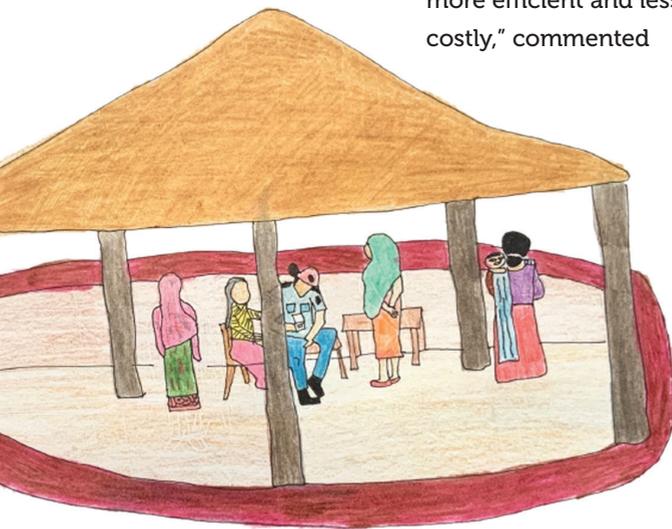
and putting together justice processes all over the country. Article 47 A and B of the Local Government Operation Act 2074 clearly define the judicial committee's role, responsibilities, and jurisdiction.

Shanta Acharya, deputy mayor and coordinator of the judicial committee, and Prakash Khatri, in-charge of an area police office, say SAHAJ helped establish greater coordination between entities delivering justice. "This will make justice faster, more efficient and less costly," commented

deputy mayor of Pyuthan Municipality.

Communities complain that the police are unaware of their responsibilities. Therefore, Nepal Police increased patrols and improved communication, engaged more with rural areas, conducted interactive sessions, stepped up training, and encouraged victims. Those who sought help were taken to a separate room for private consultation.

Though 98 mediators were registered in Kawasoti Municipal Judicial committee, not all of them were active. Minor disputes were referred to the judicial committee for resolution and this created a huge workload. Files were not organized and it took a lot of time for cases to be heard.



Computers and technology provided by SAHAJ helped significantly. The roster of mediators was refreshed, they were trained again, as needed, and activated.

The pressure on the judicial committee decreased as most of the cases were settled by the mediators. Computer systems allowed the cases to be organized and processed. The judicial committee was able to decide which

SAHAJ was implemented at a key time. Judicial committees were being formed or were new. Local governments and the police had to understand each other and their roles.

cases were within its jurisdiction and handled them while referring criminal cases to the police for investigation.

There was confusion between the police and local governments on the nature of cases they would handle. Nepal Police still continued to handle civil cases while judicial committees were handling criminal cases which should be forwarded to Nepal Police to investigate and forward to the courts.

SAHAJ brought the police, the judicial committee and other stakeholders together. Recognizing that judicial committee members were not familiar with legal procedures, most local governments appointed legal advisors to support judicial committees.

This helped improve the timely administration of justice.

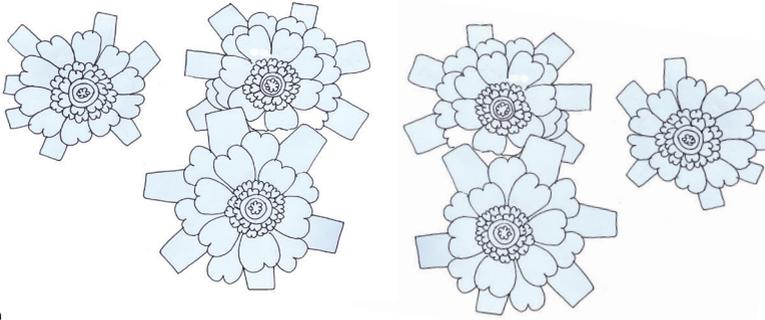
The SAHAJ project was implemented at a key moment in Nepalese law and justice history. Judicial committees were being formed or were new. Local governments and the police had to be brought together so they could understand each other and their roles.

Due to SAHAJ and its activities, training, workshops and seminars justice providers found themselves better prepared to rise up to their roles. Coordination between the police, judicial committees and other stakeholders resulted in awareness that had positive impact in the security, legal and justice sectors.

Psychological Support

Those in need receive help





SAHAJ provided counseling to women and girls in need. Individual, group, or family counselling were used to assist survivors so their situations could improve, behavioral change could take place, coping mechanisms could be instilled, better decision making could be encouraged, and relationships could be optimized.

A 16-year-old girl from the Province 2 was connected to a 25-year-old male. After encouraging her to send him inappropriate photographs, he posted them online. SAHAJ provided psychological support and instilled enough confidence in her to report the case to the police. When the

local police would not register the case, the cybercrime division in Kathmandu registered the case and the crime is under investigation.

When a lesbian couple's relationship was discovered in Rajbiraj, intense violence followed resulting in one girl committing suicide. SAHAJ provided counseling to the survivor and she registered a complaint against the perpetrators. A post-mortem report is awaited.

Fear and distrust of the police, lack of confidence in the justice system, social stigma, fear of retaliation by perpetrators, harmful

social norms and lack of awareness were cited as reasons why victims were not confident and needed psychological help in getting help. They reported that the police were likely to side with the perpetrators if they are well connected, not many knew how to file complaints and gender issues, political affiliation, social standing, financial limitations, religious norms, and ethnicity came in the way.

Group counseling has been found to have impact. A 17-year-old girl from Bodebarsain had lost faith in her parent after she tried to marry her off. After being able to share her problems and fears with a group



of professionals and peers, she is now less anxious and able to cope with the situation.

The belief is that women and girls should remain docile and keep their anger and dissatisfaction under control for the sake of harmony within the family and the society. Women who speak out against their families are believed to be misfits and should show greater patience, acceptance, and tolerate discrimination and violence. Often victims end up believing that they

are at fault for the situations that they are in.

They are taught that their place in the community and honor is all important and talking about their needs, ideas, sexuality, problems and beliefs can be harmful. Women and girls are asked to make psychological, verbal, nutritional, educational, opportunity-based, financial, and physical sacrifices.

With psychological trauma considered a

With psychological trauma considered a social stigma, often issues and trauma were ignored as were the victims.

social stigma, often issues and trauma are ignored as are the victims. Instead of seeking help, it is advised that they be kept secret for the fear that the family will be mocked for having someone needing mental help.

SAHAJ's *rupantaran* program sought out cases where help was required through multiple channels including child clubs at schools. When

outsiders were not welcome to help in the “private” matter of families, family counselling was undertaken to sort out the situation.

Educators and families prefer to handle GBV cases internally rather than address them through the police. Keeping matters private can be considered more important than the mental health of the victims.

The program allowed victims and survivors to speak out in their own voices. Schools where SAHAJ helped

With psychological trauma considered a social stigma, often issues and trauma are ignored as are the victims.

open child clubs were oriented on GBV and psychological help and how those in need should be responded to appropriately by capable people.

Security personnel, justice providers and others often did not have clear guidelines on protecting the privacy of the wronged party, preventing victims from coming to further harm, and psychological support. This resulted in victims and survivors being put at greater risk.

“...women’s experiences of the formal support systems are, at best, unpredictable – and sometimes were found to be obstructive and unhelpful too,” according to *Tracking Cases of Gender-Based Violence in Nepal: Individual, institutional, legal and policy analyses* by the University College

London (UCL) with Centre for Research on Environment, Health and Population Activities (CREHPA).

Through the project’s activities, security and justice providers were able to internalize the experiences that gender and domestic violence victims and survivors go through and behavior changes have taken place for the better.

Indicators related to mutual accountability by community members and security and justice actors resulted in multi-sectoral professionals joining forces with security and justice actors resulting in higher quality services and a greater knowledge base. Services that should be made available to the poor and the marginalized as per provisions of the law were shared.

Critics comment on the work of Vidheha

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.

- *Prof. 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.

- *Mohan Koirala, poet*

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*

Vidheha presented Early Creations, a solo exhibition of 80 artwork 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 work appeared on covers and inside pages of UN Women, German Embassy, GIZ, Ecpat Luxembourg, and VSO publications. She has written for *Muna*, *Setopati* and *The Rising Nepal* and was profiled by *Ankur* (*The Annapurna Post*), *Junkiri* (*Nagarik*), *FrIday*, *Muna*, *Kopila* (*Kantipur*), *Ankhiyal*, *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, FrIday, 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."

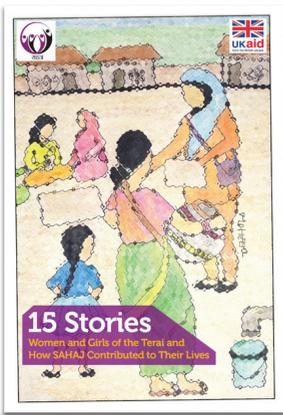
- *Kantipur, Kopila*

"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*



VSO

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15 Stories

Women and Grils of the Terai and
How SAHAJ Contributed to Their Lives

