

# Stories of Change under Women's Right Program- 2023



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In Pictures: Apsara Rai engaging in various activities.

## Breaking the Silence, Transforming Adversity into Empowerment with Women's Group Engagement

Apsara Rai, 35, is not only the breadwinner for her family, but also a symbol of strength and empowerment in Makwanpur. Five years ago, she was trapped in an unhealthy marriage when her husband abruptly abandoned her and remarried, leaving her financially insecure and vulnerable to raise her two children.

ActionAid and Makwanpur Mahila Samuha launched the Women Rights Programme II- Sammunati Project, organising a women's group in her ward. Apsara, who was first skeptical, finally became a participant, releasing her potential via training in women's rights, advocacy, leadership, and business skills.

Apsara developed the confidence to file many complaints against her abusive spouse after receiving legal literacy and leadership training. Throughout the legal proceedings, the organisation and its members provided moral and financial assistance.

Her tenacity enabled her to become the first woman in her community to get divorce from an abusive relationship. Apsara's bravery shattered the quiet and drew the attention of the community towards her business with full support.

Apsara is currently the owner of a Rs. 200,000 net worth grocery store, standing with her strength and endurance. She saves Rs. 5,000 every month and puts it in the bank, transforming herself into an empowered survivor.



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# Case Story

## A Journey of Resilience and Empowerment



*In Picture: Ranju Devi Shah preparing food at her stall.*

Meet Ranju Devi Shah, a 29-year-old mother of two sons and a daughter from Ranigunj-7, Parsa. Her husband, a tractor mechanic, faced societal pressure, compelling her to abandon her spice-selling venture, plunging her family into economic turmoil.

Undeterred by gossip and criticism, Ranju discovered solace and strength in the Sagar Women's Group, initiated by the Divya Yuva Club in Pokhariya Municipality. Through regular meetings, she found solidarity among women in Ranigunj grappling with economic hardships.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated their situation, leaving Ranju's family without income. Despite the challenges, she revived her spice-selling business during the lockdown. Realizing the need for sustainable income and inspired by the women's group discussions, she took a courageous step.

Defying societal norms, Ranju decided to start her own small snack shop with seed money from a program. Initially met with resistance, she persisted, and with her husband's eventual support, they started the venture with a loan. The journey was tough, earning Rs. 400 to Rs. 500 daily initially, but gradually, their small business thrived.

As the lockdown eased, her snack shop continued to prosper, now earning Rs. 1000 daily. Ranju's story exemplifies determination, proving that women can overcome adversity and rebuild their lives. Empowered by the Divya Yuva Club, she plans to strengthen her business further, transforming challenges into opportunities for herself and her family. Ranju Devi Shah embodies resilience, courage, and the transformative power of women's empowerment.



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## A Journey from Silence to Empowerment

In the most marginalized side of Madi Nagarpalika, Chitwan district, Anita (Name Changed), aged 45, emerged as a beacon of strength and resilience, breaking free from the shackles of silence through the transformative Women's Right Program. Living amidst pervasive violence, Anita's story is not merely about survival; it is a powerful narrative of empowerment. Despite facing physical disability, she chose not to blame her fate or limit her strength but instead became stronger in the face of adversity.



Madi, the only municipality in the Bagmati Province directly connected to India, faces a high risk of human-wildlife conflict due to its open border and dense forest surroundings. This marks it as a crime zone, putting women and children at heightened risk. Some cases reach the local police station but do not progress to the district level.

Anita's journey began in an environment scarred by physical and verbal abuse from her husband, who, fueled by societal expectations, subjected her to relentless suffering. She carried the layered burden of conforming to the community's desire for a male heir, facing mockery and bullying due to her disability, and bearing four children—three daughters and a son—against all odds.

The turning point came when Anita's husband, working abroad, returned, bringing with him an intensified wave of abuse. Anita's refusal to endure the violence any longer marked the beginning of her courageous resistance. Initially, Anita tolerated the violence, thinking this was a woman supposed to do to keep family together, and kept it to herself. When the abuse escalated to a horrifying level, she could no longer endure the abuse. In a brave move, she ran to her neighbor's house (an active member women's group) and filed a complaint at the local police station. Unfortunately, the police released her husband within 2-3 days, worsening the situation.

Faced with increasing challenges, Anita was encouraged to join the women's group facilitated by social mobilizers, engaging in various activities. These interactions helped build her trust, and the group members promised to assist her in seeking justice. As part of the group activities, Anita was informed about available legal mechanisms and support systems. She also got several opportunities to participate in vocational skill enhancement training such as start and improving your business, financial literacy so she could start something of her own for earning without relying on their spouse,

Empowered by this knowledge and with the support of the group, she decided to re-file the case against her husband. This time, the police took more decisive action, and her husband was detained for an extended period, almost a year. During his custody, he not only learned about the legal consequences of his actions but also underwent a transformation, ceasing to violate her and even assisting with household chores.

Facilitated by women's rights activists and the Chitwan Sakriya Women's Foundation, they played a pivotal role in Anita's journey towards justice. Breaking the chains of silence, she says, *"I am vocal and brave now, I would like to thank all the activists and the organization who supported me legally and financially in the process for my livelihood and re-establishment in society."*

Anita's story is not just one of survival; it is a demonstration of the strength within survivors. Her resilience echoes the power of reclaiming one's narrative, standing tall as an empowered woman who not only survived but thrived in the face of adversity. In her journey from silence to empowerment, Anita has become a source of inspiration for others, illustrating the transformative potential inherent in every survivor. Today, she stands tall, reflecting on her courageous act that liberated her from violence and serves as a beacon of hope for those on a similar path to empowerment.





## Breaking Chains: Triumph over Violence and Embracing Dignity

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In the village of Pakhahamainpur Rural Municipality, Parsa, Maya's (name changed), aged 35, unfolds a powerful testament to resilience, courage, and the transformative impact of the Women Rights Programme (WRP-1).

Maya's journey began with the birth of her children, marking the onset of mental and physical torture from her husband. Despite the torment, societal norms and fear held her captive. Even though her family and neighbors were aware of the abuse, a prevailing culture of silence and intimidation prevented anyone from intervening.

The formation of a Women Rights Forum in her village, facilitated by the WRP, offered Maya a glimmer of hope. Despite initial attempts within the village to resolve her case, the forum's efforts proved insufficient. Previous attempts at reconciliation through local leaders and panchayats (a group of local leaders in the village) had failed, leading her to register her case with the District Women's Rights Forum (DWRF) and Women's Cell at the Police Station. This ultimately provided the support she needed to live independently with her two children.

The support Maya received was instrumental in obtaining her citizenship and marriage certificates, enabling her to claim her husband's inheritance properties.

Today, Maya cultivates an 11 katha land, ensuring the livelihood and well-being of her two children. Her daughter, aged 15, and son, aged 12, witness a mother who has not only escaped violence but has also embraced her newfound freedom with unwavering strength.

Reflecting on her journey, Maya expresses gratitude for the unwavering support of the women's rights forum, networks, and Divya Yuva Club, emphasizing how their backing helped her obtain legal rights to her property and get justice of living a life free from violence. She proudly says, "Now, I am free from the violence. I wish all women like me get such supporting mechanisms at the right time because I suffered for a long time, but I wish others don't have to. All we need is to muster our courage and seek help from the local police authority."

Maya's story serves as an inspiring narrative of triumph over adversity, a reminder that through collective efforts and unwavering determination, women can break free from the chains of violence, reclaim their dignity, and build a future filled with hope and empowerment.





# Case Story

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## EMPOWERING BUS DRIVERS AND CO-DRIVERS TO END HARASSMENT AND SEXUAL ABUSE IN PUBLIC VEHICLE



Madi, a municipality nestled in the Chitwan District of Nepal, has witnessed a remarkable transformation in its public transportation system. Home to a population of around 50,000, Madi is enveloped in the serene beauty of a valley surrounded by lush jungles, with the Chitwan National Park to the north and the Indian border to the south. Situated merely 40 km away from Bharatpur city, residents of Madi embark on a daily journey for employment, education, shopping, and healthcare.

The daily commute, primarily facilitated by approximately 35 public vehicles, presented a longstanding challenge. These buses, though vital for the community's mobility, had become breeding grounds for harassment and violence, especially towards women and girls. Despite numerous awareness programs in the past, the situation remained unchanged, and incidents often went unreported.

Enter ActionAid and Chitwan Sakriya Women Foundation (CSWF) with joint Women's Rights Programme-II, making a pathway for a transformative shift. Santosh Ghimire, aged 36, a driver, reflects on his journey, stating, "used to ignore if anyone harassed girls and women on my bus. I felt it was normal and never thought to interfere. But after knowing and realizing that this too is violence and it's also my duty to stop harassment on the bus, now I not only stop these activities but also help women and girls to report the case."

CSWF strategically identified bus drivers and conductors as key influencers in the bus environment, recognizing their pivotal role in effecting change. Employing the COM – B (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation-Behavior) model, the foundation conducted a thorough diagnosis, addressing challenges and obstacles faced by these individuals and tailoring intervention plans to their needs. Through education, training, environmental restructuring, incentivization, and persuasion, the program initiated a comprehensive approach that targeted not just the behavior of individuals but the entire ecosystem.

The impact of these interventions has been profound. Drivers and conductors now approach their duties with a heightened sense of responsibility, actively adhering to transportation rules and guidelines. Incidents are reported promptly to the police, unpleasant language is discouraged, and seats within the buses are reserved for the comfort and safety of women. A Safety Audit in Madi led to collaborative efforts with the local government, resulting in the installation of streetlights in insecure areas.

Moreover, CSWF's collaboration with the police, local government, and youth volunteers has led to the formation of a steering committee that monitors public buses regularly. The initiative has extended to involve local authorities and the installation of CCTV cameras in four public buses. Educational materials contribute to raising awareness, making the initiative more inclusive.

This inspiring story not only showcases the positive change in Madi's public transportation but also underscores the broader societal shift towards ensuring the safety and security of women and girls. It serves as a testament to the power of community engagement, education, and collaboration in creating lasting change in the fabric of a community.



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## JOURNEY TO FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

Meet Prabhawati Devi Bin, a 38-year-old woman from Bindawasini Rural Municipality-5 Velaha-Parsa, who defies societal norms and is driving positive change. Emerging from a conservative community, Prabhawati encountered obstacles preventing her involvement in women's groups and agencies. Despite the societal expectations that confined girls to domestic roles, Prabhawati attended group meetings in secret, motivated by a commitment to spare others from the challenges her own daughters faced.

Despite facing familial challenges and societal expectations, Prabhawati's passion and dedication caught the attention of Divya Yuva Club (DYC). Impressed by her eagerness to learn, DYC employees visited her home and persuaded her family to support her participation in women's groups for knowledge and skill enhancement. Now an active member of Sansari Mai Women's Group, Prabhawati has undergone various training programs, boosting her confidence to advocate for women's rights.

Previously hesitant to voice her opinions due to fear and societal constraints, Prabhawati now stands tall, fully aware of her fundamental rights as a woman. Traditionally confined to household chores and lacking formal education or skills, women like Prabhawati saw a positive change with the project's initiatives, which offered business planning, skill development, and material support.

Determined to achieve financial empowerment, Prabhawati started a small grocery shop with initial support from the organization. Building on her learned skills, she ventured into vegetable farming during the lockdown, cultivating cauliflower and expanding to other seasonal vegetables. Beginning with a modest 6,805 ft<sup>2</sup> (5 katha) plot, Prabhawati's farming venture expanded to 13,610 ft<sup>2</sup> (10 katha), and now she oversees a thriving 17,693 ft<sup>2</sup> (13 katha) farm on lease. With support from her group and the program, she received a boring set for irrigation, a water pump motor, and pipe, streamlining and enhancing the cultivation process.

Today, Prabhawati earns Rs. 12,000 to Rs. 20,000 monthly from vegetable farming, supplementing her income from the grocery shop. Her husband, a daily wage earner, now fully supports her endeavors, relieving the family's financial strain. In a household where both Prabhawati and her husband share domestic responsibilities, her role goes beyond traditional boundaries. Prabhawati's opinions carry weight, influencing decisions not only within her family but also in the broader community, where her insights are sought for various development initiatives.

Prabhawati's journey illustrates the transformative power of education, skill-building, and economic empowerment, demonstrating that even in traditional settings, women can overcome barriers, contribute to their households, and earn the recognition they deserve.





## Changing the norms: Standing for rights: Sandhya's aspiration



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Sandhya Kumari Ram, a bright grade 11 student, from Ranigunj-7, Pokhariya Municipality in Parsa, who stands as a hope of change and resilience, setting an example in her community. Her story illustrates the immediate and lasting positive impact that understanding, and trust can bring to an individual, family, and community. Sandhya actively participated in legal, psychological, and life skills-based awareness sessions provided by Divya Yuva Club under a women's rights program.

In a culture where girls often face the burden of early marriages, Sandhya's journey defies societal norms. Confronting the possibility of marriage before her grade eight exam, Sandhya grappled with societal expectations and familial pressures. Determined to shape her own destiny, she found strength and empowerment in girls' group sessions and her mother's involvement in a women's group from the same project.

Undaunted by the hushed acceptance of child marriage, Sandhya summoned the courage to challenge her fate. Despite initial resistance from her father, she, alongside her mother, sought refuge in women's and men's group discussions. Armed with knowledge about the dangers of child marriage, Sandhya emphasized its illegality and the heightened risk of gender-based violence, drawing on her sister's challenging experience.

Her advocacy yielded results. "Continuing my education is my top priority," she asserted, leaving her father with little room for disagreement. Despite sacrificing a year of schooling, Sandhya emerged triumphant. Today, she stands tall as a symbol of inspiration for other girls and boys in her school and community.

As a girl from a Dalit community, often facing societal disadvantages, Sandhya reflects on the power of individual agency to drive change. Her journey prompts reflection on the collective impact if every young person raises their voice against harmful practices like child marriage. Sandhya's pursuit of justice transcends her personal narrative, sparking hope for a future where traditions evolve in favor of equality and empowerment.





## **BREAKING STEREOTYPES, BUILDING HOUSES OF DREAM**

Living in the hub of Kalika-7, Chitwan, Susmita Tamang, aged 33, is a shining example of courage and resilience, emerging from the shadows of societal expectations to rewrite her narrative. As a target participant in the Women's Rights Program, Susmita's transformation stands as evidence of the power of empowerment.

Once confined to the constraints of traditional gender roles, Susmita found herself lacking the confidence to venture beyond the familiar. The outer world seemed like uncharted territory, and every step outside her comfort zone required careful consideration. However, her journey took a transformative turn when she joined women's groups, where she encountered a community of confident women challenging stereotypes and embracing their potential.

Empowered by knowledge gained from women's leadership training, rights-based sessions, and orientation programs, Susmita was determined to break free from the shackles of gender-defined limitations. Disregarding societal norms, she embarked on a six-month house-building training course, defying the prejudiced opinions that questioned a woman's place in such roles.

As a certified mason (house builder), Susmita courageously ventured into a domain traditionally dominated by men. Despite facing ridicule and bullying from her community, Susmita turned negativity into fuel for her determination. Her resilience was rewarded when she passed the certification exam conducted by the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT).

Today, Susmita not only stands proudly as a certified mason but also as a symbol of empowerment for women in Kalika-7. Her monthly earnings of up to Rs. 25,000 not only contribute to her financial independence but also serve as a beacon of inspiration for others in her community. She has been teaching and transferring her skills to several people, including women in the community.

Susmita Tamang's story is a powerful testament to the transformative impact of breaking gender stereotypes. Through her journey, she signifies the rise of modern women, challenging traditional norms and proving that every woman has the potential to excel beyond predefined roles.





## Face of Unsung Heroes

Nestled within Malahi, a community marked by natural adversities, economic struggles, crime, India border dispute, resides Santaresa Sahni (Mahato), a tenacious 47-year-old woman from Malahi-3 village. As a mother to three daughters and one son, Santaresa's narrative unfolds as a testament to empowerment and advocacy.

Embracing active involvement in women's groups and diverse training initiatives, Santaresa discerned a profound correlation between women's participation in politics and the resolution of pressing issues. Recognizing that political engagement is pivotal for amplifying women's voices, accessing local resources, and ensuring meaningful participation, she felt compelled to step into the realm of politics.

Fueled by determination and a genuine interest in effecting change, Santaresa secured a ticket as a deputy mayor contender from a prominent political party during the local elections. Despite the absence of victory, her unwavering commitment persisted. Santaresa remains an active participant in various community committees, including School Management Committees (SMCs), parents' associations, and intermediate committees.

Undeterred by the electoral outcome, Santaresa continued to play a pivotal role in her party's election campaign, even representing them as a proportional member candidate in the proportional elections. Her commitment reached new heights as she traveled to the capital city of Nepal, engaging in negotiation meetings with party members.

Santaresa Sahni (Mahato) embodies the spirit of resilience and determination, proving that the pursuit of positive change knows no bounds. Her journey stands as an inspiration, echoing the belief that women's active engagement in politics is not merely a choice but a powerful catalyst for transformative societal progress.





# Case Story

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## Men who transformed toxic masculinity into positive strength.

*"In the past, I avoided doing things around the house because people in my neighborhood thought it made me less of a man. They believed a real man had to be tough, rude, and only work outside. It used to bother me, but now I don't hesitate to support my wife. We're a team, and you know what? It has brought a lot of peace and happiness to my family."- Kiran Thi, President, Bhimphedi men's group in Bhimphedi-2, Makwanpur.*



*"I used to spend my entire day playing cards, doing nothing productive, and always yelling and screaming at my wife with foul language. I neither understood nor helped ease my wife's pain. There was a playhouse nearby where I used to spend hours playing cards, losing both time and money. It was an addiction for me, and I always used to lose, which led to constant anger, and I let it out by yelling at my wife for no reason. I also had a tendency to send my child to look after the animals (shepherding) instead of doing it myself, as I was supposed to. During that time, my son could have done other things like reading or school homework if I had been a good father. The men's group and social mobilizer made me realize this. It's been two or three years since I stopped playing cards extensively and started supporting my wife's involvement in women's groups, even though I was initially against it and tried to stop her. Now, I realize that the more she goes outside, the wiser she becomes. She has started showing an interest in business and income-generating activities, guiding me to do the same so that together we can earn more and do better. I am able to understand her better, and she understands me too. I am trying to be a better man, letting go of unwanted ego and controlling anger. We are now both calmer and more composed, learning together. Better late than never, I guess." - Chaina Rai, Member, Sayapatri Men's Group, Manahari-7, Makwanpur*

*"I used to taunt my wife about her involvement in the women's group, something I didn't like earlier. I thought that without the sound of women's bangles in the kitchen, the food wouldn't taste good. I always expected my wife to bring food for me, following the tradition from my forefathers. Women were supposed to serve food, and men were there to make money. We preferred to go hungry rather than serve ourselves. Men were not supposed to work in the kitchen or do household chores; that's how we were brought up and taught. After joining the men's group, myself and other men in the community realized our upbringing and the things we were taught were not right. It makes a significant difference when we share household work with our spouses. We need to teach our sons the same and let our daughters spread their wings. I am glad other men in my community are learning from our group. Initially, it was challenging, but now we feel the change in the air because who wouldn't want happiness and prosperity in the family."- Humuman Mahato, President, Karmashil Men's Group, Madi, Chitwan.*





## A JOURNEY OF REDEMPTION: TRANSFORMING LIVES THROUGH AWARENESS

Dipesh Paudel, 20, lives in Kalyanpur Madi-6, Chitwan, and his tale is one of self-realization and development. Dipesh, previously a carefree youngster renowned for his pranks, admits to mocking ladies in public. He and his buddies thought such behaviour was common at school, oblivious of its insidiousness.

Dipesh enjoyed taunting as a teenager without realising the danger. After joining a youth group and learning about violence against women and girls, he realised his prior acts were serious. He recognises the necessity for awareness and self-control throughout adolescence after reflecting on his behaviour.

"Our acts were stupid. We normalised destructive behaviour in my teens. I acknowledge that teasing females appeared harmless, but we were mistaken "Dipesh admits. He acknowledges that lack of awareness, education, and legal repercussions contributes to such brutality.

Dipesh, who has two sisters, understands the problems they may have encountered owing to males who normalise violence as a sign of masculinity. He is saddened by the thought that his sisters may have undergone violence without speaking up.

Dipesh vows to end violence out of remorse and responsibility. He now educates his friends about the legal consequences of violence and the significance of reporting occurrences to seek justice. Dipesh wants to educate people to stop crime.

Dipesh now speaks out against violence against women and girls in his search for forgiveness. He wants a future where everyone knows the law, creating a peaceful, safe, and secure society.



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## WRP II- “SAMMUNATI”

The Women’s Rights Program (WRP) Phase II, known as "Sammunati," was a project by ActionAid International Nepal, funded by Irish Aid. The program aimed to make women and girls safer and more secure while improving their economic well-being in three districts of Nepal—Chitwan, Parsa, and Makwanpur. This phase started in 2017 and concluded in 2022. The program specifically focused on helping women and girls who are often left out or marginalized. It was implemented in 20 different wards, including municipalities, rural municipalities, and a sub-metropolitan city of three districts in partnership with three local organizations working for women’s rights, playing a crucial role in bringing about transformation. It also partnered with several networks and forums at the federal level, and one of the strategic partners for the program was the National Campaign for Women’s Rights, previously known as the National Women's Rights Forum. Over the past five years, the program has **directly supported 1690 women and girls** feel safer and more empowered. Additionally, it **involved 692 men and boys as allies** to reduce violence and discrimination, supported four organizations advocating for women’s rights, and **established 40 women’s groups, 20 men’s supporting groups, and 12 adolescent groups**. The program **managed 734 cases of GBV** (reporting, referral, and access to just) as well as **reached 401 duty bearers** involved in the justice system and service mechanisms, including public service.

## WRP III- “SAMRIDDHI”

Building on the success of Phase II, ActionAid International Nepal introduces the transformative Women’s Rights Programme-III (WRP III), spanning from 2023 to 2027 and funded by Irish Aid. Operating in a total of 8 wards across two municipalities in Makwanpur and Chitwan, alongside federal initiatives in Nepal.

WRP III focuses on three outcomes:

- a) **Gender-Based Violence Reduction:** Advocating for rights, legal remedies, and justice to reshape policies and enhance safety for women and girls.
- b) **Resilient Livelihoods:** Boosting incomes, offering safer livelihoods, and promoting economic inclusion for marginalized women.
- c) **Climate Resilience:** Equipping women and youth with climate knowledge, encouraging advocacy for climate justice.

Cross-cutting initiatives prioritize:

- A. **Empowering Women's Organizations:** Leading movements against violence, promoting women’s rights, amplifying issues, and policy changes.
- B. **Engaging Men and Boys:** Supporting prevention of gender-based violence and promoting safety and equal opportunities.
- C. **Fostering Supportive Policies:** Ensuring inclusivity, reflecting women's needs, and implementing gender-sensitive policies.

**Target Group:** Survivors of violence and marginalized (*Laborers, Dalit and indigenous group, displaced, low economic status*) women and girls, aiming for a secure environment with economic stability.

**Engagement Approach:** The program actively involves system actors, including men, boys, duty bearers, service providers, and other relevant stakeholders.