

NATURAL LEADERS' SELF - MOBILIZATION CHANGES SITUATION ON SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS

INTRODUCTION

Lack of awareness in communities, especially amongst marginalized women and adolescent girls, has rendered the condition of sexual and reproductive health in Nepal's rural areas. Marginalized women and adolescent girls are unaware that they are entitled to sexual and reproductive health rights as much as any other human rights, and they do not have the agency to claim those rights. Thus, there is a huge need for building awareness, and developing agency of marginalized women and adolescent girls to improve the condition of sexual and reproductive health in rural areas.

One of the ways of raising awareness on SRHR and empowering women and adolescent girls to claim their rights is through social mobilization. Social mobilization enables women and girls to engage with local governments to hold them accountable for the services they provide.

Therefore, Ipas Nepal used social mobilization approach in Nepal's remote areas – Arghakhanchi, Palpa, Rolpa, Achham, Bajura, Doti and Dadeldhura districts – for progressive SRHR situation. Under social mobilization, Ipas Nepal first trained highly-motivated women and adolescent girls from

marginalized communities on SRHR including safe abortion and family planning services. Then, these trained women and girls voluntarily mobilized in communities to develop agency of women and girls, make informed choices on family planning, increase health service -seeking behavior and access safe abortion services. Ipas Nepal called these women and adolescent girls, natural leaders.

- Natural leaders change the situation of women and adolescent girls' right to sexual and reproductive health.
- Natural leaders advocate with evidence for women and girl's right to sexual and reproductive health.
- Natural leaders have reached out more women and girls in communities with messages on sexual and reproductive health rights.
- Each natural leader making five friends for self-mobilization on women and girl's rights has multiplier effects.
- Natural leaders strengthening relations within family and community

"Previously, I didn't have any knowledge about safe abortion, gender and power dynamics. After getting selected as NL, I got an opportunity to participate in the basic training on SRHR and then only I have somehow knowledge about SRH interventions and the services"

Jharana Sunar, NL Pandini RM, Arghakhanchi.

One year later, Ipas Nepal commissioned an independent qualitative study to assess the effects of the mobilization of natural leaders. The study was conducted between September and November of the year 2021. The ongoing COVID-19 infections limited the resources and the study timeframe.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The study found the following as the main achievements of voluntary mobilization of natural leaders:

Natural leaders change the situation of sexual and reproductive health rights

Natural Leaders mobilized in communities reached out to more than 36,718 women and adolescent girls in Arghakhanchi, Palpa, Rolpa, Achham, Bajura, Doti and Dadeldhura districts in a year. They held 2256 community sessions, discussed issues of SRHR, gender-based violence and climate justice, and provided information about national policies and legal provisions of SRHR. As a result, Natural Leaders succeeded in stopping child marriages, reducing unsafe abortion, and increasing safe abortion and the use of contraceptives.

Natural Leaders also built the agency of community women and adolescent girls to raise their voices against infringing rights to SRHR. Women and girls are no more weaklings but social power wielders to reckon with: they have waged movements for sexual and reproductive health rights.

Local governments, health facilities, and community groups recognize natural leaders as important community entities and invite them to their programs.

Natural Leaders also succeeded in changing the communities' traditional mind set and behavior. Now, for communities, abortion is no more 'sinful' or 'evil'. More and more women and adolescent girls seek safe abortion services.

Natural leaders increase evidence-based advocacy

Natural leaders proactively advocated for sexual and reproductive health rights and the implementation of safe abortion policies with local governments and health facilities. Their advocacy is always backed up by evidence in the field. They demanded that local governments must formulate activities with a budget for safe abortion services and the empowerment of women and girls. They demanded that health facilities fill vacant positions that affect the SRHR of women and adolescent girls.

They also advocated against child marriage and gender-based violence, and for improving harmful social norms and family member power relations with evidence drawn from communities. As a result, child marriages have stopped in project areas, gender-based violence has decreased, and unsafe abortion practices have reduced significantly.

Natural leaders increase outreach

Impressed by the results, Natural Leaders have created on sexual and reproductive health, local governments and nearby communities request natural leaders to facilitate and support their people, especially women and adolescent girls in raising awareness on safe abortion and family planning services. Natural Leaders have helped local governments increase their outreach on sexual and reproductive health.

Five-friend approach to social mobilization creates multiplier effects

Each Natural Leader has made five friends to transfer knowledge and skills they gained from different training and workshops on SRHR. Now, these friends conduct themselves as extended Natural Leaders. This approach has spread messages on sexual and reproductive health rights and safe abortion services exponentially to communities and empowered them to seek sexual and reproductive health and safe abortion services. Natural Leaders and their friends seize every space and opportunity to communicate SRHR messages to women and girls, including public taps and wells, forests, homes and cultural event venues.

Friends of Natural Leaders have also supported community women and adolescent girls in taking safe abortion services, reducing the cases of unsafe abortion and improving their behavior in seeking safe abortion and family planning services.

Natural leaders strengthen relations within family and community

Natural Leaders contributed significantly to changing the relations among diverse individuals, families and community groups, promoting trust and harmony in families and the community. Now, women and adolescent girls, including Natural Leaders, discuss issues of SRHR with their husbands, family members, and friends. The behavior of mothers-in-law towards their daughters and daughters-in-law changed in a positive way because of the authentic information on government policy on SRHR and legal provisions regarding gender-based violence, discrimination and unsafe sexual behavior and abortion passed down to them. Now, family members and the community have changed their mindset regarding abortion and are supportive to women and girls needing a safe abortion.

WAY FORWARD: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Capacity enhancement of natural leaders

Most of the Natural Leaders are confident enough to deliver messages on sexual and reproductive health like: safe abortion and family planning services, and gender-based violence to communities. However, Natural Leaders can be made more effective if they are provided skills and training on leadership, constituency building, and advocacy skills occasionally.

Empower natural leaders to conduct issue-based campaigns and social movements

Natural Leaders have created awareness of women and adolescent girls on SRHR. This awareness needs to be translated into actions and changed behaviors. Thus, Natural Leaders and women and adolescent girls should be empowered to conduct rights-based social movements and hold service providers accountable for SRH services in communities.

Strengthen the five-friend social mobilization approach to spread awareness wider

Each Natural Leader making five other women and adolescent girls as their friends to exponentially raise awareness in communities for safe abortion, family planning services and actions against GBV has been very effective. There is a need to expand this approach to all program areas to create momentum on sexual and reproductive health rights.

Strengthen engagement of natural leaders in local level planning processes

There is a need for strengthening the engagement of natural leaders in the local -level planning processes so that they can intervene at the right time with local governments for budget allocation for sexual and reproductive health issues.

Joint program monitoring

Programs on sexual and reproductive health must be jointly monitored with Natural Leaders. This provides the

program staff to coach natural leaders at the site with evidence. The joint monitoring and feedback system will not only increase the effectiveness of the programs but also build mutual accountability of all the stakeholders, including natural leaders for the sustainability of project activities.

CONCLUSION

Ipas Nepal's effort in creating Natural Leaders, self-motivated women and adolescent girls from marginalized communities, to inform and advocate locally on sexual and reproductive health rights is worth emulating. Natural Leaders can bring about huge changes in the situation of SRHR of rural women and girls, improve their agency and hence become change-makers themselves. The Natural Leaders who voluntarily mobilized in Arghakhanchi, Palpa, Rolpa, Achham, Bajura, Doti and Dadeldhura districts, reduced unsafe abortion significantly. Each making five friends and transferring knowledge, these natural leaders reached out to 36,718 women and young girls conducting 2256 sessions with messages on sexual and reproductive health rights within a year. With evidence-based advocacy, these natural leaders succeeded in securing funds from local governments for health facilities to provide safe abortion services.

References

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