



REAL PEOPLE | REAL STORIES

## THE CHUNAUTI PROJECT, NEPAL

# A CARE Program to End Child Marriage

My name is Nitu Kumari Paswan. I am 15 years old. My village, Thera Kachuri, is home to about 7,200 people. Most of us are migrant workers, lower caste and Dalit (considered untouchable). People here are poor, vulnerable and socially excluded.

Poverty is a curse for many people living in the southern plains of Nepal. It is also one of the reasons families give their daughters to be married at an early age. Earlier marriages mean lower dowries. I was almost one of those child brides. But CARE changed my fate.

I live with my family in a small cottage made of clay and bamboo. We have no fertile land to farm for ourselves. My mother, Rajal Devi, works on neighbors' farms. She earns a few grains as daily wages. I work with her when I am not in school, so I can help earn income for the family. My mother is 32 years old and first gave birth when she was my age. My older brother, Punit, is 17 and my younger brother, Sujit, is 11.

My father, Nandu, pulls a rickshaw. It is a dangerous job, but he has no other option for work. There is no industry in our village. My father works very hard, but he makes so

little money and has all of us to support. He earns only 150 to 200 Nepalese rupees (about \$1.79 - \$2.38) per day. Five years ago, Sujit became sick. We had no money and nothing to sell to afford the doctor visits and medicine. Our only option was a loan with 60 percent interest. With so little income, the loan became a heavy load for our family.

School is just one more expense. My father was set on marriage for me because he was not able to bear the expenses of my study. We could not afford books, supplies and uniforms for all of us children. Punit was never even enrolled. Everyone in the family is illiterate, except Sujit and me. They cannot even sign their names to a document.

I still remember that particular day in February 2009. It was a busy Tuesday. I was studying as always. My father returned early that day along with elder members of our village. He looked unusually happy and asked me for a glass of water. He told me that he had done something great.

My mother asked him about the good news and he replied "Nitu is getting married within a month!" He told us

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— Nitu Kumari Paswan



about how good the groom's family was to demand very little dowry. He looked thrilled and relieved at the same time, ignoring the disappointment and resentment on my mother's face.

At that time, I was just in sixth grade. My mother knew I wanted to study further and that I was utterly crushed by the news. Just a few days earlier, I had told her how excited I was to pass the 5th grade and move up to the next school building with my friends.

I did not want to get married.

That year CARE launched a project in our village Chunauti: Addressing Child Marriage in Nepal through Behavior Change Communication and Social Mobilization. Chunauti is a Nepali word meaning "challenge." The project challenged the men and women in my village to change the harmful traditional practice of child marriage. The project formed several networks in our village. There was the child marriage eradication committee (CMEC); the child marriage eradication monitoring committee (CMEC); the school-based anti-Gender Based Violence (GBV) forum; and three young girls' clubs. Throughout the networks, Dalit people were represented in the positions of chairperson, vice chairperson, treasurer, secretary and general members. We started to feel dignified and empowered to fight against social malpractices.

The CMEC organizes different types of awareness-raising activities in our village such as rallies, wall paintings, meetings and workshops. Sanjeev Kumar Paswan is a peer

educator in our area. He is very sincere, patient and hard working. He visits homes every day to counsel people about harmful consequences of child marriage and GBV. There are so many visibly negative affects. My mother was married as a young girl and suffered from health problems. Sanjeev inspired me to participate in rallies, workshops and different types of programs in school and the community.

I was at a rally when I was astounded by a familiar voice nearby. It was none other than my father! I turned and saw him holding a microphone and chanting the slogans over and over again. Bal bibaha Kanuni Apradha chhai (Child marriage is legal crime). Bal Bibaha bada karu, sabhya samaj nirman karu (stop child marriage and create a civilized society). Beti ke dahej nai sikchha deiu (Don't give dowry, give education to girls). My eyes filled with tears of happiness.

CMEC chairman Mr. Pawan Mandal is very proactive and he and four other members came to my home and counseled my father about child marriage and its harmful consequences. My father asked many questions of the committee members, like how to continue my education when he can hardly keep his family fed. The men continuously counseled my father and invited him to activities. My father participated and began to change his mind. He stopped pushing for my marriage and agreed to let me continue my education.

I was awarded a scholarship from Chunauti. It means I am one of the very few girls in my community who will be able to continue my studies. My parents, teachers and the CMEC committed to help me continue my education and not force me to marry before I am 18 years old.

The Chunauti project saved my life and I am very glad to be safe from the harm of child marriage. I give a million thanks to CARE. This project has given me a future.



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