



Story from the Field

Tipping Point: Digging up the Roots of Child Marriage to Replant the Future

Creating Positive Shifts

It would be the first time she would go up on stage, at a district level event, amidst 200 people, two hours away from her home, sitting in the back seat of a car for the first time in her life, also getting car sick along the way. It would be the first time she would address such a large crowd; the first time applause thudded for her.



One Billion Rising (OBR) is a relatively new concept in Nepal, like in much of the world. If you travel into deep parts of Rupandehi and Kapilvastu and ask the children and adolescents there, *why is February 14th significant*, they will tell you it's because: "It's Valentine's Day!"; "It's Love Day!"; "It's a day where you give flowers to the person you love." This idea has been ingrained in them thanks to the satellite television that is available even in the most rural parts of the area.

But OBR is a campaign still picking pace in Nepal. Rupandehi district in Nepal chose to organize a solidarity rally and an interaction event on the occasion in 2016. This is where Sashikala Yadav had been invited to speak: she was asked to share her experience of being an only child, she was asked to be the voice of her community members and share out to her district the problems that exist in her village and community when it comes to child marriage.

Sashikala was instantly excited at the opportunity and agreed. As the *didis* from Siddhartha Samudayik Samaj (SSS), CARE's partner in Rupandehi, paced around anxiously wondering how she would do and what she would say, Sashikala responded in a firm "I am not nervous," when she was inquired if she was.

And indeed nerves would be the last thing to falter this twelve year old lady's confidence. As

the team got ready to move from Bhairahawa to Rudrapur, around 45-minutes apart, Sashikala and her friends stepped inside the CARE vehicle that would escort them to the event. The group of girls were very eager at the prospect of riding a car for the very first time, for the most of them. However excitement soon wore off as car sickness replaced the energy in the car. It was evident that Sashikala was not feeling too well, and as the team was considering forgoing the event, Sashikala insisted that she would be fine and that she really wanted the opportunity to speak at the event today. After much thought and consideration, the car moved towards Rudrapur- windows rolled down, and very slowly.

As soon as Sashikala stepped out of the car, she was ecstatic. There were so many people there out to mark the OBR, in solidarity. She was intrigued that women, children, and even boys and men could relate to the issue of gender based violence. She was soon invited on stage to share her experience. Sashikala heaved a heavy sigh, and there she was, on stage, the center of attention.



As she stood on stage she recounted numerous stories from her field, she spoke of early marriages and how it is still the norm where she comes from. She opened the eyes of the community members to entrenched patriarchy through her innocent eyes. She spoke of the fact that she is an only-child to her parents. This is something that is almost unheard of in not only most of South Asia, not only most on Nepal, but also in most of Rupandehi and most of her village in Ekala. A few minutes into her experience sharing, other children from across Rupandehi drew inspiration from her – “What she said is very true and relatable,” they expressed with their other friends.

Many days after the event, Sashikala was busy organizing a Knowledge Fair in her district. “I am going to host the event,” she shared. As she rehearsed her lines and worked with an esteemed journalist based in Rupandehi to co-host the event, she was calm and prepared. Finding the time to reflect on her journey, Sashikala shares “It was simply curiosity that drew me to the girls group in the village. I would

see the girls in our village gathering to go to this group and hear them sharing the things they learned from the group. I too wanted to see this group for myself. When I came here, I was able to attend a lot of interesting discussions and the groups soon started playing various games including football and badminton. Although the discussions were informative, the fun we had and have while we play games is the real reason I stuck to coming to this group.”

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- Sashikala Yadav

Sashikala’s innocent and funny comment points towards a deeper problem: many girls and boys are denied a childhood in Nepal. Playing is a far-fetched reality for many, and running around the fields kicking a ball while screaming, laughing and cheering is not a norm. In such a case, CARE Nepal’s Tipping Point project is working to give the children and adolescents here their childhood. The project is challenging negative social norms that have impeded our progress and working to create positive alternatives for the adolescents in the community. CARE is working with Siddhartha Samudayik Samaj (SSS) in Rupandehi to create positive shifts in norms.

One essential learning of the project has been that to foster an environment that allows for adolescent empowerment, having supportive parents is integral. Sashikala is an only-child, and she is proud of it. “The community members looked down on my mother and always told her that she needed to have a son. But my parents have been pillars of strength and support who have always taught me to work towards becoming a somebody so that one day we can together show the community what girls and women are capable of,” Sashikala shares. Sashikala is indeed lucky to be born to parents who support her education, who encourage her to have an opinion, and who invest in her dream. Many girls in her community, however, still struggle to have encouraging parents like Sashikalas. The Tipping Point project, realizing the importance of working with parents so as to create an enabling environment of adolescent girls, designs programs that cater to parents, community members and even religious leaders. Working with the people who have any important say in a girl’s life, the project has been able to create opportunities and alternatives for many like Sashikala.

After Sashikala shares her story and recalls her journey, she returns to rehearse her part to co-host the Knowledge Fair that she and her friends have organized for her district. There is an undeniable spark inside this little twelve year old woman that signals Nepal’s bright future. The applause that thudded for her during the OBR event may have been the first, but shall not be the last.

This story was documented by Ayushma Basnyat , CARE Nepal.