



Story from the Field

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

Defying the Ideal

The concept of an “ideal” daughter is something that haunts us girls. An ideal daughter does not speak too much; she obeys her parents; she behaves appropriately. I grew up with this concept. For most of my life, I would do what I was told and never imagined doing the things I wanted to do.

In keeping with this, my parents decided that it was time for me to get married when I was 22 years old. An obedient daughter, I did what I was told. But I was not happy in my marriage. For a long time, I suppressed this unhappiness, thinking about my family’s honor. I often wondered: Why is it the girl who is so often denied an education, denied her dreams, and even denied life sometimes? Why is it the girl who carries the family honor, and why is this inevitably linked to marriage?

I tried to deal with the situation as best I could, but when things got out of hand, I decided to take action. I stepped out of my unhappy marriage. Very soon, I found myself working for adolescent empowerment, and today I am working as a monitoring and evaluation officer with local NGO *Siddhartha Samudayik Samaj*, which is partnering with CARE Nepal for a project called the Tipping Point. The Tipping Point project came to our district in August 2013 and works to address the underlying causes of child marriage in my district, Rupandehi, as well as a neighboring district, Kapilvastu.

The appeal of this project for me is not just professional, but also personal. As someone who got married at a young age and as someone with very limited access to information about the potential harm of early marriage, the alternatives I may have in life besides marriage and as someone bound by the concept of an “ideal daughter,” I succumbed to societal expectations placed on girls. However, when I get to interact with young girls and boys in the adolescent groups that the Tipping Point project has set up, and see them relish the opportunities we helped create for them, I am overjoyed. I often reflect upon the fact that had I had such exposure to knowledge, my life would have unfolded differently.

The focus of the Tipping Point project is very much on changing social norms and promoting positive alternatives for young girls and boys in our communities. As such, in the work that I do, I not only work with adolescent girls but also adolescent boys, parents, religious leaders and local governments. The program seeks to engage with all those people, who very often make decisions for the girls on their behalf. We believe in holistic



In February 2016, Dhana Kurmari Chaudhary Tharu, 26, takes part in 1 Billion Rising, a global movement to end rape and sexual violence against women

approaches to changing social norms for the better. Trying to engage in the local community and to convince them that a practice that we have practiced for so long – namely child marriage – is a social ill is quite an ordeal.

Standing up for what is right

Very recently, in the village of Tenuhawa, the locals decided to marry an underage girl and boy. The girl's family was eager to get her married: "She is too dark, and may not find a husband later on," they said. Our research shows that parents often feel pressure to get their daughters married early, when the demand for the dowry is much lower, and getting her married young is also a good way to exert control over her sexuality.

The Tipping Point project focuses on bringing to light positive alternatives, so that marriage is not the only option for young girls, or even boys. But, in the process of trying to advocate for this and against the child marriage, a local government official called the police to report this case. This inevitably meant that the police stopped a marriage as it was taking place, which sparked a huge backlash against our project. The locals became very angry and stopped the adolescent sessions on life skills that had been running in this village.

My teammates and I worked day in and day out to help resolve this problem. We met with many local leaders, government bodies and local community leaders. When we saw the young girls and boys from the community, they would often ask us. "When will the sessions resume?" But things looked bleak, as the community members were still enraged. We thought the issue may never get resolved, when a young girl named Sushila Yadav emerged as our guardian angel. In a community where many were silenced, Sushila stepped up and spoke up. She comes from a prominent family in the village, so she was able to get people to listen.

As I saw her lobby for our cause, I felt a mix of emotions: I was proud of her, I admired her bravery, and I respected her as a person. I reflected upon how an "ideal daughter" is much more than someone who merely obeys others. An ideal daughter also is someone who stands up for what is right. An ideal daughter also is an ideal human being. Today, we have resumed the life skills sessions for adolescents in Tenuhawa.

We encounter many difficulties on a daily basis where we work, but I believe that things are gradually changing. For all the difficult work we do, every time someone like Sushila emerges as a role model, it gives us the strength to continue and lets us know that we are doing an OK job in empowering our future. It lets us know that we are doing an OK job in redefining "ideal."

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This story was documented by Ayushma Basnyat, CARE Nepal.