

Voices from the Community



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SUAAHARA
Building Strong & Smart Families



Roshani Chaudhary from Bardaghat, Nawalparashi with her children and mother-in-law, Phiriya Tharu

About Small Celebrations and Big Change

Roshani Chaudhary, 21 years, from the Terai plains of Bardaghat, Nawalparashi, was doing her regular chores at home where she lives with her husband and grandmother-in law, when the members of the village health mothers' group arrived with local gifts. Four months pregnant at the time, Roshani was happily surprised. They had come to congratulate her on her pregnancy and to share their experiences so that Roshani could deliver and raise a healthy baby. Such gatherings in Nepal traditionally happened during the eighth month with foods like 'Dahi Chyura' (beaten rice and yoghurt). However, unlike the traditional event, women visited Roshani on her fourth month with local gifts of a crate of eggs, locally grown vegetables and hygiene related supplies. Her family also received advice on health and nutrition including the importance of regular antenatal check-ups, eating extra meals and family support during the crucial period of pregnancy.

Roshani's grandmother-in-law, Phiriya Tharu, was listening attentively to the mothers who had shown up at her house. Phiriya reflected, "In our time, eating fruits was thought to make the child too big inside the womb, resulting in difficult labour." She continued, "egg was thought to cause severe gastritis and meat to swell breasts, making breastfeeding difficult." Listening to the village mothers surprised Phiriya. Her queries and misconceptions were discussed and she was convinced to reconsider her views. The potential harm of the previous practices dawned on Phiriya and she resolved to do things differently for her daughter-in-law.



Mina Biswakarma with her children in Sankhuwasabha



As a part or key life event celebration, a female community health volunteer hands local gifts to a mother

Mina Biswakarma from the mountainous village of Chainpur, Sankhuwasabha shared a similar story of how she was impacted by these key life events. "For her first six months, I did not feed my daughter anything else but my own milk. I did not even give her water," reflects Mina. When Mina's daughter reached her sixth month, she was selected for key life celebration and was showered with local gifts, and an 'Aamako Maya' (token of love from mother) certificate. She was also reminded of the importance of complementary feeding after six months and preparing nutritious porridge for her daughter by her neighbors during the celebration. Mina says, "After receiving such a special honor, it made me realize that what I was doing was the right thing and others noticed my actions. I became motivated to work even harder to make sure my daughter has a healthy upbringing. Now neighbors and relatives congratulate me on receiving this honor, and ask me how they can be honored too." Mina in turn tells them about the importance of breastfeeding and healthy eating habits, and the importance of complementary food for the child after the first 6 months.

The USAID-funded Suaahara program has taken the traditional rituals used to celebrate key occasions in a woman's life – pregnancy, childbirth, and baby's sixth month feeding ceremony – and adapted them to key life event celebrations that help instill practices around improved health, water, hygiene and sanitation and nutrition for mothers and babies. Health mothers' groups across Nepal are celebrating these key events which have become a platform for focused discussion on health

and nutrition requirements during the thousand days. Suaahara monitoring data shows, more than 24,252 key life event celebrations have been held.

Women who participate in the community events are more likely to know that they should give more food or breastmilk to their children when they are sick, wash hands before feeding children, feed a child eggs after 6 months of age, and feed children meat after 6 months of age. They were more likely to practice exclusive breastfeeding and feed a child dark leafy greens in the past 24 hours. They were also more likely to have received support from their husband or other family member for routine work traditionally relegated to wives/mothers.

The celebrations have shown remarkable success with many groups taking initiative to celebrate key life events and felicitate mothers even outside of the Suaahara mandate. Shreejana Aama Samuha is one such mothers' group in Gaidakot of Nawalparasi district. "In this area the mothers face severe prejudices regarding health and nutrition," says Shreejana Neupane, secretary of the group. "Celebrating key life events and communicating health and nutrition messages is seen to have a positive effect on the families' practices, which is why we decided to continue it." Eleven members from this group contribute money monthly to buy gifts for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers in their village. To date, the group has showered 32 women with gifts and reinforced healthy practices

Jalbire of Sindhupalchok, Brahmayani Loan and Savings Cooperative has taken it one step further

by institutionalizing it. Starting on April 11, 2015 the Cooperative began awarding mothers immediately after the birth of a child with a Matri-Shishu Bachat piggy bank with NPR 150 (\$1.5) inside.

During the award ceremony they also take gifts of locally produced foods like eggs, vegetables and beans to encourage breastfeeding mothers to eat well. "We decided to continue this tradition initiated by Suaahara because it is special and also beneficial for our community members," says Narayan Kaji Shrestha, a manager of the cooperative, "and for us, our members are increasing with this celebration." Since April, the Cooperative has awarded 12 mothers; among them is Sitamaya Shrestha of Shimle.

Sitamaya was awarded after a few days of delivering her baby. "I received nutritious foods, a piggy bank for saving money, and mothers who came to award me taught me the importance of exclusive breastfeeding for six months, one additional meal for pregnancy and two additional meal for lactating women, postnatal checkups and vaccination." She continues, "After I was given these messages in front of all the community members, I knew I had to fulfill them and so did my family. I did with the support of my family, and my second child seems much healthier than my first one."

A simple event of celebrating woman's key life with positive health and nutrition messages has been instrumental in changing practices. Key life event reinforces behaviors and throughout Nepal hundreds of families are seen to change their age-old ways, breaking food taboos and reversing practices that led to the malnutrition of mothers and children. Families have begun to support their daughters and daughters-in-law for better health and nutrition. The fact that communities are replicating this event and taking ownership itself speaks volumes as to how successful and effective such small celebrations have been in reinforcing good health and nutritional behaviors in all corners of Nepal.



Pavitra B.K. with her family in her newly built temporary shelter after the earthquake

Turning to the Aama on Airwaves During Emergency

When an earthquake of magnitude 7.8 struck on April 25, 2015, Sindhupalchok was one of the hardest hit districts in Nepal. With her house destroyed and two little children aged 7 and 3 to care for, Pavitra BK, 32 years, a resident of Fulpingkot, Sindhupalchok, had a lot of things to worry about that day. But the thing that worried her most was the baby inside her. She was two months pregnant with her third child.

Pavitra feared that the earthquake, aftershocks and continuous rocking might harm her baby. She had heard from many people that babies born after an earthquake like this are either born disabled or sick and that in many cases women experienced miscarriage. Pavitra was a teacher but having no one to turn to for information, she was scared.

Before the earthquake, Pavitra used to regularly listen to Bhanchhin Aama, a radio program for 1000 days (from conception to 2 years after birth) mothers and families initiated by the USAID integrated nutrition project, Suaahara. It taught mothers like Pavitra about best practices in raising healthy children. She occasionally participated in the radio program by calling in her questions to the radio show and received guidance in return. However, after the earthquake everything was in a state of disarray and everyone was confused. There was no electricity, houses were damaged, and Pavitra, like many, couldn't even charge her mobile phone or make calls because the network was down. In Pavitra's mind, she was certain she could turn to one thing – her radio, most importantly a program – the Bhanchhin Aama – her only sources of information for 1000 days women like her.

Miraculously, Pavitra was able to salvage her radio from the rubble, but it had stopped functioning. On the third day after the earthquake, amidst the constant aftershocks, she walked an hour to the nearest market to get a new radio. "I wanted to know what was going on, not just here but all over Nepal and I wanted guidance," Pavitra says. On May 12, there was another massive earthquake. Pavitra's newly bought radio was destroyed and yet again Pavitra took the hour long journey to purchase a new radio.

It was about two weeks after the earthquake that Pavitra finally heard on the Bhanchhin Aama program that unborn babies are not affected by the earthquake. Pavitra's question was raised

by mothers across Nepal who were just as worried as Pavitra. The experts from the Bhanchhin Aama program answered mothers' queries on air and reassured them, telling them not to worry for the baby's health. Pavitra's baby would be ok; she heaved a sigh of relief. Today, she is the mother of a healthy 3-month-old boy, Rabindra.

At that time, Suaahara did not anticipate these calls, expecting earthquake victims to be more worried about basic things like food and shelter. However, soon the distressed calls of women from all over these districts began to arrive at Bhanchhin Aama. It was clear that the regular listeners of Bhanchhin Aama program, which included mothers and their families, were eager to hear from Bhanchhin Aama about issues related to pregnancy and small children during their difficult time.

Parvati Dhungana, 50 years, of Batase, Sindhupalchok, was one of them. With little food available at home, she was worried about what to feed her little granddaughter, 3-year-old Sumitra. On the third day after the earthquake when the electricity was restored in her village, she turned to Bhanchhin Aama. She quickly made a call to raise her concern.

Due to a barrage of questions like these, Bhanchhin Aama created special episodes, twice a week each for 15 minutes, in the earthquake-affected districts of Sindupalchok, Gorkha, Rasuwa, Nuwakot, Lamjung, Dolkha, Syangja, Parwat, Palpa and Nawalparashi. For those who did not have access to radio in the community staff members provided the answers from different contact points created during emergency. Bhanchhin Aama's special episodes proved to be a lifeline for worried mothers like Pavitra and Parvati.

Women had questions not just about maternal and child health, but even simple questions like, "Where should we go now? What can we do now? Our life is destroyed, what hope is there? When will the earthquake stop?" Krishna Pariyar from Kathmandu asked if the bottled water she was buying needed to be chlorinated, and how much water purifier she should use in a jar of water. Fulmaya Nagarkoti simply shared her fear, and said that the situation after the earthquake



Parvati Dhungana from Batase, Sindhupalchowk smiles with determination as she rebuilds her life after earthquake

is dire and she did not know what to do. With a significant number of questions related to mental health and emotional well-being coming in from the listeners, the special episodes covered issues like psychological problems, epidemics, menstruation, water purification, and other disaster related issues. This divergence into disaster related topics proved highly effective, as menstruation was one of the topics that elicited the highest response.

Eventually, women returned to asking normal

questions about motherhood, and the special episodes were discontinued. During the time of crisis, the radio program Bhanchhin Aama became not just a source of information but a lifeline to some women. The very fact that many mothers and families turned to the Bhanchhin Aama program with their questions and to seek advice during the time of a great disaster demonstrates how integrated and trusted the program is within the community. Like Parvati and Pavitra, many women felt reassured through a common voice on the radio, many were able to eliminate misconceptions about the earthquake, and plenty others were able to use experts' opinions to make the best of their circumstance and improve their lives during the disaster.



Parvati Chand, a grandmother from Baitadi is standing up for the health and nutrition of her daughter-in-law during the 1000 day period

Aama (Ideal Mother) from Bhanchhin Aama Comes to Life Across Nepal

Imagine, after hours of painful labor and childbirth, to be considered untouchable and left to fend for yourself! This is what happened with Heera Kumari, 65, from a remote village of the hilly Sindupalchok district. "There was no one, tired and hungry after giving birth, I had to get up, beat the husk off of the rice grain, and cook some rice," says Heera. Heera's is a common story at a time when post-birth women were considered impure and untouchable.

"I gave birth in the jungle by myself, cut the umbilical cord using my farming tool, and wrapped the baby in my lungi. I was not allowed to eat meat and dairy products for weeks after giving birth and had to look after myself and my baby alone," shares Parvati Chand, another grandmother from Far Western district of Baitadi. Even though the situation for women has changed, such stories of struggle were and still continue to be all too common across rural Nepal. Many grandmothers have held on to such age old traditions even today. "I refused to touch my daughter-in-law after she gave birth. I would put my grandson on the floor so that she could pick him up without touching me. That's what my mother-in-law did to me too," shares Krishna Kumari Subedi, 66, a grandmother from Syangja. Generation after generation, mothers-in-law have served as the direct source of information for child feeding and rearing practices as well as pregnancy care. When their daughters-in-law become pregnant, they typically pass on their previous experiences and knowledge, which inherently is filled with hardships.

The USAID Suaahara Programs' Bhanchhin Aama radio series is helping break this tradition by having a special focus on mothers in law. The drama features a likeable ideal mother-in-law character who provides advice and guidance to promote best practices during the golden 1,000 days (period from conception through a child's second birthday).

The impact of Bhanchhin Aama radio program is felt across homes in Nepal. Listeners, especially

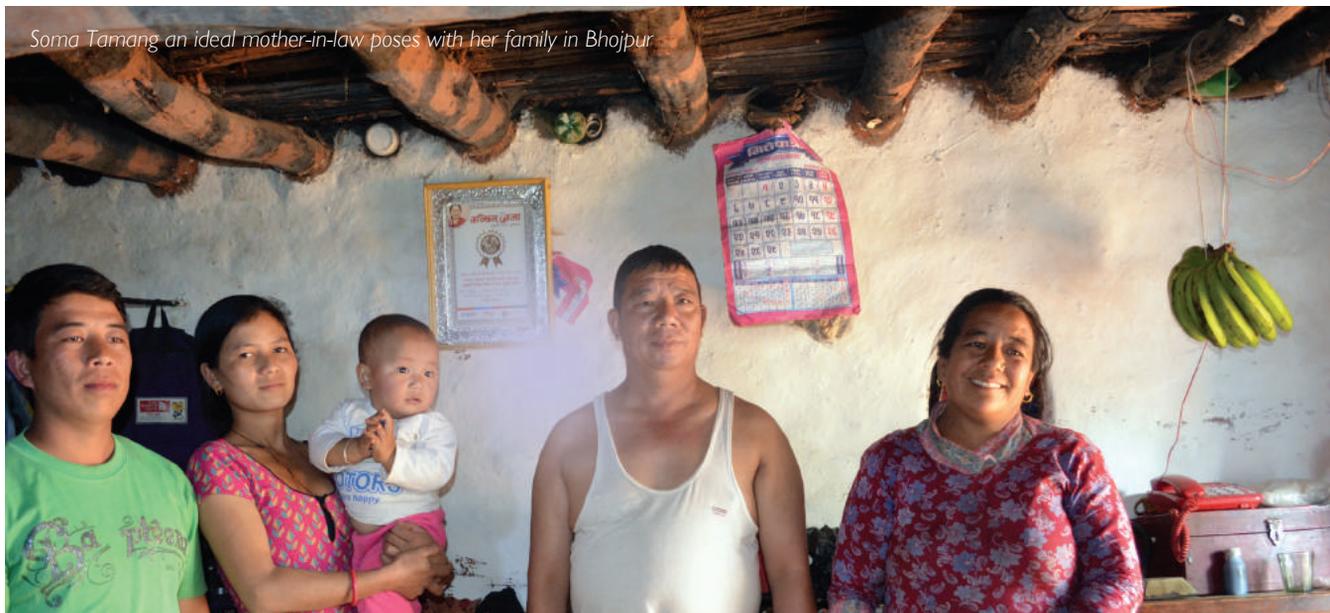
mothers-in-law, are tuning into the program, mimicking the characters, and changing longstanding family practices. Through the radio show, Heera Kumari is learning new things about essential nutrition and hygiene practices from Bhanchhin Aama radio program and applying the same at home. "I make sure that my daughter-in-law has enough rest and eats diversified nutritious food during pregnancy," shares Heera. She is also sharing her new found knowledge with other grandmothers and mothers in her community.

Parvati Chand started learning about the different ways she could support her daughter-in-law and grandchild. She gave her nutritious foods during pregnancy and after birth, ignoring old traditions she once practiced. She helps feed her grandson when his mother is sick or busy with work.

Krishna Kumari is also a changed grandmother today. In fact, she has not only bent age-old habits and traditions at home to help her daughters-in-law, but is propagating the same to others. "It is not right that we continue to practice customs that are harmful. We need to change and break these barriers and create a supportive environment at home," adds Krishna Kumari.

Many mothers-in-law shared how they were impacted by the radio program. Soma Tamang, a grandmother from Bhojpur municipality ward no 5, also regularly listens to the radio program with her son and daughter-in-law, Sushma. "My son told Sushma and I about the program and said 'Listen carefully to this show about mother-in-law and daughter-in-law,'" Soma said. Soma was quickly addicted to the entertaining drama. By listening to the radio, Soma learned how to take care of Sushma during pregnancy, feed her grandchild, and create a healthy supportive environment for the family. Her one-year-old grandson is now active and strong, and rarely falls ill like other children. "Other grandmothers are not like me in our village. So, when I see other grandmothers in the field, I tell them, 'we should not repeat what happened to us because we were once daughters-in-law too.'" Soma stated.

Soma Tamang an ideal mother-in-law poses with her family in Bhojpur



Bhanchhin Aama radio program and community level discussion groups inspire these influential older women to help share with communities the new, more effective knowledge and practices. Lal Kumari Rai, from citizen awareness center whose grandchildren are all older than two years, listens to Bhanchhin Aama to increase her knowledge, and most importantly, help her community thrive. "Before, I only had two chickens. After I learned the importance of eggs for children, I decided to raise five chickens and dedicated three of them for children in our village. I let families know that I was selling eggs at my home if they were ever in need." Lal Kumari conveyed.

Lal Kumari also inspires her village. "I saw two children who were malnourished in my own village. I quickly advised their families about proper child feeding practices. Once their children grew

bigger and healthier, they said, 'You were right. Your advice really benefitted my child. You are just like Mana Aama from that radio program Bhanchhin Aama.' When they said that, I was so ecstatic!" Lal Kumari voiced.

Lal Kumari began convincing others in her village to listen to Bhanchhin Aama. "I told Tara, Krishna Kumari, and a neighbor's daughter-in-law to listen. I explained to them how important the radio program was for our village. I even told them that if they cannot listen, everything is in the comic book we received at the Citizen Awareness Center (CAC). If we listen to the radio and read the book, the messages will be clear and easy to retain. After my explanation, Tara, Krishna Kumari, and others were convinced and agreed to listen," says Lal Kumari.

All these mothers-in-law are seen as role models in their community partly because of their association with Bhanchhin Aama radio program. They are bending traditions at home and paving the way for easier and healthier practices for the young mothers and giving families in their community improved advice on how to raise their children.

Kalpana Bhujel and her mother-in-law are happy to be recognized as an ideal family



A Simple Recognition Inspiring Families and Communities to Adopt Healthy Practices

Kalpana Bhujel of Thakle, Lamjung, ran breathlessly home, happy to share some delightful news with her husband. “We are awarded as an ideal family,” shared Kalpana excitedly showing off the certificate she had received. Kalpana, the mother of one-year-old twins then, had raised healthy babies and received the award for an ‘ideal family. This was a matter honor and pride for the entire family.

Kalpana had been invited to an award ceremony where friends, neighbors and community members had gathered. In front of the village stakeholders from health facility, village development committee, health mothers' group, and female community health volunteers, Kalpana's family was awarded as an 'Ideal family'. Kalpana and her family were awarded because they had practiced at least five out of Suaahara's seven key behaviors for improved water, hygiene and sanitation and nutrition. Her family had paid special attention to hygiene, washing their hands with soap and water before cooking and feeding the babies, raised chicken for eggs and putting the chicken away in pens so that they do not soil the children's play area and given the children nutritious and diverse home-made food. They divided household chores equally and took turns looking after the children. Community members commended the family for these and other steps like exclusive breastfeeding, timely introduction of nutritious complementary food to the babies, use of latrine, and establishment of a kitchen garden.

Examining the soap, towels, and other items that Kalpana had brought along with the award, her husband who works in the Indian army said, "I am going to take this towel with me as a reminder of this award and the efforts put in by the family for our children's health." Even Kalpana's mother in law, Suryakumari, was ecstatic. "Our children are so well raised and healthy, tall and sharp for their age! Everyone can see this," she remarked.

Even after the award ceremony praises and admiration kept flowing in for the family. "We felt

validated for doing the right thing," shares Kalpana's husband, "and after the award I feel respected more than ever and better regarded in the community." The family was now sought out by mothers and mothers-in-law for advice around child care and healthy practices. "Of course there are others who want to win this prestigious award and raise their children like ours – healthy," says Suryakumari. "They come and ask me what I feed my grandchildren and how I keep them so healthy and happy all the time!" Both Kalpana and her mother-in-law are happy to help other mothers. They are now the resource persons in their community. Families look up to them and strive to become like them.

The USAID-funded integrated nutrition program, Suaahara, started awarding families as 'Ideal Family', to create role models in the community. Kalpana and her family strived hard to change their practices as the children were growing up.



Sunita Pariyar, a role model and a resource person in her community, Lamjung

Sunita Pariyar, 23, of Besishahar, is another ideal family awardee. She also gets a lot of questions about healthy practices and childcare. Sunita comes from a Dalit (so called untouchable caste) family, but after the award her status in the community rose. She had the spotlight on her, turning her into a role model and a resource person. It added a sense of responsibility as well. "I was so proud of the award," says Sunita. "Now that I am awarded, people are watching me. I must not let the award down. I must continue to serve as an example for others in the community." Sunita became more committed to maintaining healthy behavioral practices after receiving the award.



Madan Prasad Chaulagain from Lamjung is happy to help his wife in household chores

Suaahara has awarded and celebrated a total of 8,710 Ideal families and among them 1,251 families were from disadvantaged group (DAG) household families across Nepal. These families have emerged as role models in their communities, aspiring others to become like them – breaking taboos and making changes in traditional practices to raise healthy children. There are thousands of stories of what these ideal family members have done to challenge taboos. A few examples are mentioned here. Madan Prasad Chaulagain of Lamjung, who washed his wife's clothes and did all the household chores, set an example about men doing household work. Santamaya Gurung from Syangja, whose husband did most of the heavy lifting, collecting drinking water for the home, appreciates her husband's help that allowed her rest during pregnancy and childbirth. Chetana

Dahal from Sankhuwasabha, who had started feeding her first child regular food from 3 months onwards, exclusively breastfed her second child for six months. With support from her family, she established a vegetable garden to provide nutritious food for her children, encouraging healthy practices in her community. Bhola and Soma Tamang from Bhojpur provided sufficient support to their daughter-in-law for healthy pregnancy and childbirth and are now role models for other in-laws. These are only a few examples.

Many ideal families are breaking long established taboos about pregnancy and childbirth, going out of their way to improve their practices and give the best care to the thousand-day mothers. The obvious positive results of their behavior change have made them resource persons in the community. They are being watched and emulated by their friends, neighbors, relatives, and other members of the community. Slowly, the practices around childcare are shifting for the better, through precedents and positive examples in the community.



Manuri Mahar from Bajhang sends in her query to Hello Bhanchhin Aama Phone-in radio program

Improving Maternal and Child Nutrition Through Radio Waves

Manuri Mahar from Bajhang was worried when her sister Jayanti gave birth prematurely. Her baby boy, Himal, weighed only 1.8 Kilogram (kg) at birth and the local doctors were concerned about his survival. Usually babies, who weigh less than 2 kgs, need specialized neonatal care but given the rural setting and poor facility, Manuri's nephew was sent home soon after birth.

Jayanti was inexperienced, so Manuri took it upon herself to help her sister. A regular listener of the Bhanchhin Aama program, Manuri decided to call the program for advice. “On the show, an expert doctor advised me to keep the baby warm and close to a human chest, skin-to-skin, for as long as possible each day,” says Manuri. This message was a godsend to Manuri. She held her nephew close to her chest each day and advised her sister to exclusively breastfeed for six months.

Jayanti’s mother-in-law was a traditional woman. She believed that if new mothers ate meat and fish, it would make the baby cry and cause diarrhea and malnutrition. “But from listening to the radio show, I knew that was wrong,” says Manuri. “I knew that as a new mother, Jayanti needed a nutritious diet, especially since she was not producing enough breastmilk.” Manuri told Jayanti’s mother-in-law that the doctor had advised Jayanti to eat more protein, including meat, fish and eggs. Jayanti’s mother-in-law was apprehensive at first, but when she saw that Jayanti’s health improved and she started producing more breast milk, her doubts vanished. She now happily cooks meat and fish for Jayanti and Himal, who has grown into a healthy baby boy.

In the remote district of Baitadi, mother-in-law Parvati Devi Chand grew up with the belief that pregnant and breastfeeding mothers should avoid foods like green vegetables, fruits, eggs, and meat – everything that actually is essential to a mother’s health. “After listening to Bhanchhin Aama, I realized that these foods are actually nutritious,”

says a surprised Parvati. “When experts in the radio say so, it must be true. I started giving them to my daughter-in-law”. Now Parvati is a proud grandmother of a healthy boy

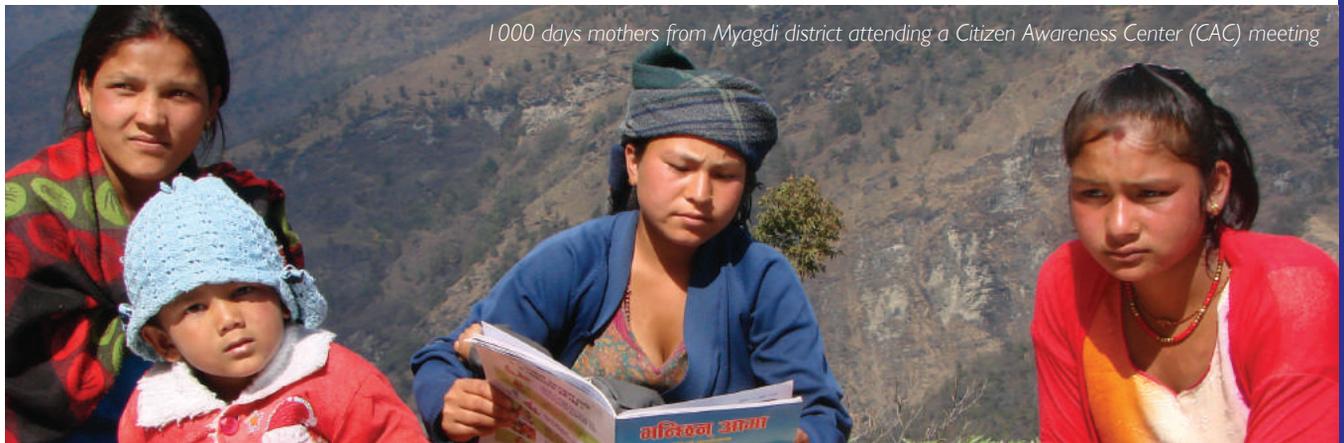


Parvati Devi Chand feeds her grandson an egg, Baitadi

These two stories show how the radio program Bhanchhin Aama was instrumental in saving Baby Himal's life in Bajhang and helping Parvati support her daughter-in-law. Due to Nepal's geography and infrastructure, radio is the only means of mass communication available to many women like Manuri and Parvati. Many villages in these remote areas lack proper roads, newspapers do not reach them and many do not know how to read. Only a handful can afford television sets. Bhanchhin Aama's reassuring and knowledgeable presence provides a public platform for mothers to support each other. New mothers ask questions and experienced mothers call in to give the answers and support.



Pabita Yadav listening to Bhanchhin Aama radio program through her mobile phone in a group meeting in Nawalparasi



1000 days mothers from Myagdi district attending a Citizen Awareness Center (CAC) meeting

The Bhanchhin Aama radio program was broadcast in three different languages, Nepali, Doteli and Awadhi and included a drama/magazine and a call in portion. The program has been very popular. Some have fallen in love with the characters in the drama and have been moved to take action inspired by them. In one instance, Pabita Yadav, of Sanahi village in Nawalparasi requested her husband and in-laws to build a toilet for the family, after hearing her favorite character do the same in the radio program. Also, the call-in program received an average of 1600 calls each week from mothers seeking advice on caring for their families and on how to have better practices at home.

According to Suaahara Annual Outcome Monitoring Data 2015 in initial 20 districts, 28% of women heard the radio program. Four out of every five people who listened to the program reported taking an appropriate action related to maternal, infant and young child nutrition and more than half discussed the issues with their friends and families.

The Annual Outcome Monitoring Data shows that those who listened to the radio program were more likely to know that they should give more food or breastmilk to their children when they are sick, wash hands before feeding children, feed a child eggs after 6 months of age, and feed children meat after 6 months of age. They were more likely to practice exclusive breastfeeding and feed a child dark leafy greens in the past 24 hours. And, they were also more likely to have received support from their husband or other family member for routine work traditionally relegated to wives/mothers.

Mothers all over Nepal are listening to the program and have responded enthusiastically. The program is popular indeed and the commitment by the local FMs to air it free of charge demonstrates this fact. Beyond this, various testimonies of mothers around Nepal verifies that Bhanchhin Aama has been able to create change in terms of instituting improved health practices.



Radio distributed to mothers through VDC block grant in remote Kafalseri village in the far west

भण्डिन आमा

समयमै स्वस्थ शुरुवात





Photo Credit: Suaahara Program/JHUCCP

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