

JULY 2017

# SUCCESS STORY

## Community-based Supporters: Persistence and a Personal Touch Pay Off in Nepal



Shila explains condom negotiation skills to a female sex worker by using the wheel game

Photo Credit: LINKAGES Nepal/  
FHI 360 Nepal

### Soni's Story

As she was working in a hotel as a sex worker, 18-year-old Soni\* was approached by Shila Pant, a community-based supporter with the Child and Women Empowerment Society (CWES). CWES is an implementing partner of LINKAGES Nepal, which since October 2016 has been providing a continuum of HIV prevention, care, treatment, and support services to female sex workers (FSWs), men who have sex with men, male sex workers, and transgender people. Nepal has a concentrated HIV epidemic, meaning that HIV infection is primarily found among these key populations rather than the general population.

**Trying to motivate Soni to get tested for HIV, Shila told her, “Knowing whether you are infected will help you confirm your health status and get enrolled in treatment in case you are positive.” After several meetings, they went together to Naulo Ghumti, a health clinic supported by LINKAGES Nepal. Soni tested positive.**

She was then referred for antiretroviral therapy as part of Nepal's recent initiation of Test and Start and is currently doing well on treatment. As for Shila, she continues to help Soni and others through her perseverance in providing key populations with information on HIV testing, treatment, prevention, and positive prevention, using a one-on-one approach and a personal touch.

### Progress under LINKAGES

In the first six months of LINKAGES Nepal, from October 2016 through March 2017, the project reached 75 percent of the estimated population of FSWs through prevention outreach (29,092 people reached), compared with 20 percent of the population in the preceding six months. Fifty percent of those reached under LINKAGES (14,593 FSWs) were tested for HIV, with 0.29 percent (43) diagnosed HIV positive. Among FSWs who were identified as living with HIV but who had not been in care or treatment, an additional 59 were enrolled in care and an additional 21 in treatment.

\* Pseudonym

### A Pivotal Role

Community-based supporters have been instrumental in the project's initial success. At the start of LINKAGES Nepal, outreach educators from previous projects were trained as community-based supporters. Including Shila, there are currently 172 community-based supporters among the project's 15 implementing partner agencies, most of them hailing from the key population communities in which they work. They aim to improve community outreach by promoting and distributing condoms and encouraging routine HIV and sexually transmitted infection testing. They also actively enroll people testing positive for HIV into treatment, care, and support services. Community-based supporters then help these people remain in care through education on adherence, self-care, and positive prevention, as well as by providing social support. They also continue to provide risk-reduction education for individuals diagnosed as HIV negative to help them remain negative.

Harikala Neupane, a community-based supporter with LINKAGES partner N'SARC, explains, "With the start of LINKAGES Nepal, in addition to providing HIV prevention education and referrals, we are focusing more on testing key populations for HIV. We also meet HIV-positive key populations in the community and remind them to visit the antiretroviral therapy center regularly and use condoms for protection."

### Surmounting the Challenges

However, helping to bring FSWs into the continuum of services has proven challenging. For example, one problem community-based supporters face is finding a place where FSWs are willing to meet; their residences are out of the question for fear of status disclosure to landlords and neighbors. Other women do not turn up for meetings set during phone conversations. And, some FSWs express that they are already aware of how to protect themselves from HIV and thus feel no need to visit the clinic.

LINKAGES has equipped community-based supporters to address these issues by training them both on how to motivate FSWs and on the communication skills necessary for prevention education, referrals, and follow-up. LINKAGES staff also offer supportive supervision and on-site coaching, providing case-by-base guidance to help community-based supporters address challenges through individualized approaches. This supervision and coaching are provided during outreach sessions, individual or group meetings, and clinic-based HIV and sexually transmitted infection testing and counseling.

As the project moves forward, LINKAGES Nepal will further intensify the reach and testing of FSWs by using incentivized volunteer peer mobilizers who will support community-based supporters to identify new hot spots and operate mobile clinics in strategic locations.