

SUCCESS STORY

The People at N'SARC Have Brought Light to My Life

Alisha's story — including the roles of Bharat and Hari in that story — is just one example of how outreach effected through community-based supporters and peer navigators is affecting the lives of LINKAGES Nepal's program beneficiaries, one by one.

Alisha's Story

Alisha* is 24 years old and lives in Banke district, Nepal. Her story is not unusual. She got married at the age of 15, but she and her husband often quarreled. It got so bad that she went to stay with her mother for a while, and no one ever came to take her back. Influenced by her sisters and friends, and because she felt she had no job prospects, she began to do sex work. Because of the dire financial situation of their household, her mother did not discourage her. She remembers, "Sex work was a good source of income — I earned NRs. 1,000 [US\$10] to NRs. 5,000 [US\$50] per day — and I enjoyed my work. Young and beautiful, I was able to attract many clients. I had money and a place to live. However, I eventually had an unplanned pregnancy and gave birth to a baby girl. With a daughter to raise, it was more important than ever that I continue doing sex work to earn money."

Nepal STD and AIDS Research Center (N'SARC)

In due course, Alisha met community-based supporter Bharat Khadka of Nepal STD and AIDS Research Center (N'SARC)— an organization that has been working in HIV prevention, care, treatment, and support with key populations in Banke and Dang districts since 2006. For the past two years, N'SARC has been a local implementing partner of the USAID- and PEPFAR-funded Linkages across the Continuum of HIV Services for Key Populations Affected by HIV (LINKAGES) Nepal project in those same two districts.

N'SARC has 10 community-based supporters who provide members of key populations with information on HIV prevention and sexually transmitted infections and refer them for periodic health check-ups. They reach key population members through one-on-one contact and group education in physical hot spot areas using a variety of strategic behavioral communication materials. N'SARC has also initiated online outreach, primarily through Facebook, to reach key populations active in virtual spaces. Clients who are reached through physical and online outreach efforts and determined to have additional needs are referred to N'SARC-supported clinical services.

With support from LINKAGES, N'SARC also engages a cadre of 17 peer navigators, each of whom serves from 20 to 40 HIV-positive key population individuals. Medication-adherent people living with HIV (PLHIV) themselves, they serve as role models who can clearly convey to other PLHIV how to access HIV-related services and explain why treatment is important. The work of the peer navigators is wide ranging and includes providing facilitated, mostly accompanied, referral to antiretroviral therapy (ART) for KP individuals who are either newly diagnosed HIV positive or previously diagnosed HIV positive but not on treatment. They also provide education and support for adherence and retention, refer and follow up PLHIV for CD4 count and viral load testing, and trace and refer people who have been lost to follow-up.

Alisha's Experience with Bharat

Alisha describes Bharat as showing unwavering commitment when it comes to people at risk of HIV. "Bharat always told me about HIV when he would meet with me, but I never paid much attention. Nonetheless, he never gave up on me, and he regularly gave me information about HIV. Gradually, I started listening to him. I had had sex without a condom many times! Eventually, I asked him if he could help me get an HIV test."

* Pseudonym



N'SARC community supporter Bharat Khadka conducting outreach sessions
Photo credit: LINKAGES Nepal

Bharat took Alisha to N'SARC's clinic in Nepalgunj, Banke to get the test, where she learned that she was HIV positive. He then accompanied her to the ART center so that she could start on ART.

Alisha's story did not end there, however. At times, she still had unprotected sex with her customers, and she ended up conceiving another baby. Bharat helped her find living arrangements at a care shelter for PLHIV, where she stayed until she had her baby. The night she went into labor, he came to the hospital to help.

"Soon after I gave birth," Alisha recounts, "Bharat suggested checking the HIV status of the baby at N'SARC's clinic, as N'SARC provides early infant diagnosis services. Thankfully, my baby's HIV result was negative, but the health worker asked me to return to have my baby retested in 18 months."

Bharat's Own Words

From Bharat's perspective, his efforts are all worth it. "I met Alisha as part of my outreach work. I didn't care whether it was day or night in supporting her. I am happy about helping her because she is a single mother and is HIV positive. I helped her out of humanity, and that is very satisfying for me."

Hari, a Peer Navigator with N'SARC

N'SARC continues to provide Alisha with the support she needs. These days, Hari, a peer navigator who works with Bharat at N'SARC, comes regularly to her home to check on her adherence to ART and her health status, and he reminds her to check her viral load every six months.

"I am very grateful to everyone at N'SARC, especially Bharat, Hari, the medical staff who counseled me, and the organization," says Alisha. "The people at N'SARC have brought light to my life."

Peer Outreach and Navigation in LINKAGES Nepal

Alisha's story — including the roles of Bharat and Hari in that story — is just one example of how outreach effected through community-based supporters and peer navigators is affecting the lives of LINKAGES Nepal's program beneficiaries, one by one. And, collectively, their work and the work of LINKAGES Nepal's other community-based supporters and peer navigators are having a big impact.

From October 2016 through September 2018, LINKAGES Nepal reached 65,017 female sex workers in the 16 project districts of Nepal with information about HIV and sexually transmitted infections. Of these, 57,443 (88 percent) got tested for HIV and 201 (0.35 percent) were diagnosed as HIV positive. Of the female sex workers diagnosed HIV positive, 190 are now on ART. LINKAGES Nepal programming is achieving such success in part because community-based support and peer navigation are fundamental parts of the approach.