

STORIES OF HOPE

A COMPILATION OF SINGLE WOMEN'S
STORIES IN POST-EARTHQUAKE NEPAL





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WOMEN FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, Single Women Group (WHR)

“No discrimination on the basis of marital status”

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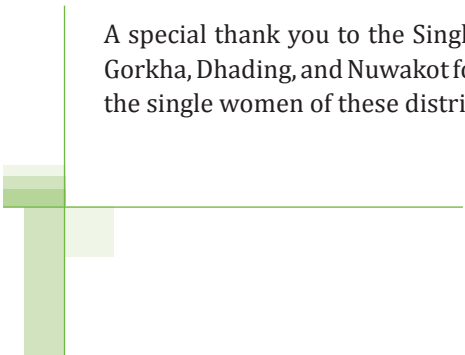
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Women for Human Rights, single women group (WHR)

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Introduction



Earthquake victims waiting in line to receive relief materials in Dhading district.

Traditionally in Nepal, single women have been marginalized by society and stigmatized as unlucky. Single women—which refers to widows (or “bidwha” in Nepali), unmarried women over the age of 35, or women who have divorced or separated from their husbands—suffer on various fronts including financially, emotionally, politically, and socially. These single women, who have been ostracized by their communities, are ironically those who are most in need.

After the earthquake struck Nepal on April 25, 2015, this became even more apparent. Many single women were in the midst of the destruction. Some lost loved ones and many of their homes were damaged or completely destroyed. According to government reports, more than 500,000 women and girls were displaced due to the earthquake leaving them susceptible to other problems such as abuse, disease, trafficking, and sexual harassment. Furthermore, as homes collapsed many household goods, livestock, and food supplies were ruined. During this time of crisis—without a husband for support—single women turned to each other and local organizations for assistance.

“During the time of the earthquake, people panicked—we were all afraid,” said Debaki Paudel, President of the Nuwakot Single Women Group. “But as single women we did not have a husband to console us emotionally. We knew that we had to remain strong for our children and the WHR central office and [Nuwakot] Single Women Group helped us to do so.”



Women who received relief items and services by WHR after the earthquake.

Women for Human Rights, single women group (WHR) has been working to help single women in Nepal since 1994. Today, WHR operates 2,000 Single Women Groups in 73 districts, with more than 100,000 single women members. Therefore, WHR was well positioned to help many of the single women affected by the earthquake. On April 27, WHR began providing emergency relief support in displacement camps that had emerged around the Kathmandu Valley. As part of its early relief efforts, WHR distributed necessity items such as food and blankets.

WHR expanded its efforts to reach single women affected by the earthquake from the district level to the Village Development Committee (VDC) level with immediate relief program. In mid-May, Oxfam approached WHR about collaborating on a project to support single women and women at risk—i.e. women who are elderly, disabled, displaced, injured, leading a female-headed household, or adolescent girls—who were affected by the earthquake. The project evolved into the creation of eight women's centers that could provide single women and women at risk access to counseling, referral services, and public awareness programs. The centers were built in six of the districts most devastated by the earthquake—Nuwakot, Dhading, and Gorkha (which were classified as “severely affected”); and Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur (which were classified as “crisis hit”). One center was established in each of these districts, with the exception of Gorkha where three centers were established due to the extreme devastation near the earthquake's epicenter.

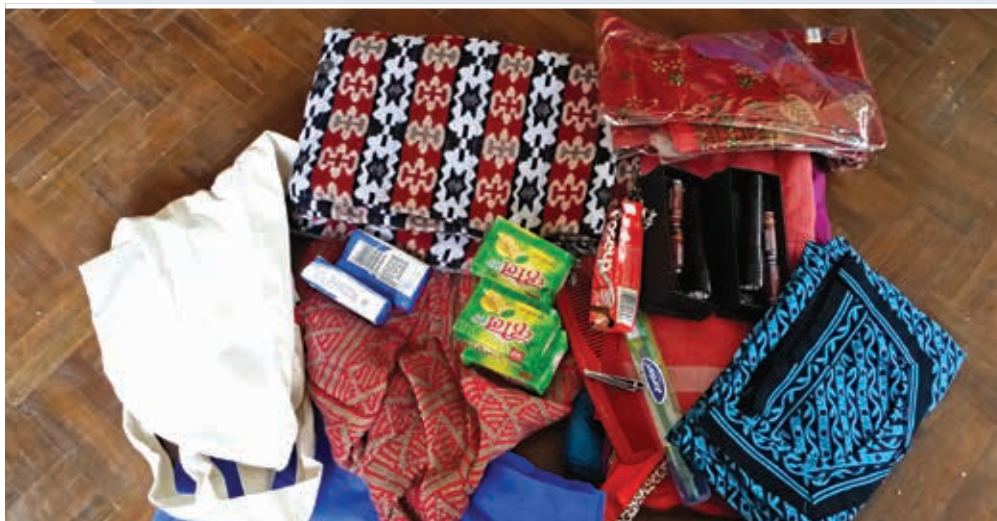
Although the initial purpose of the new WHR women's centers was to provide relief assistance after the earthquake, the centers have begun to play a much larger role in the local communities. They have become a safe space for single women and women with risk to come and share their problems and, for many of these women, it is the only place they feel comfortable to do so. The women's centers also serve as a support for the local Single Women Groups who have empowered single women to share their stories and create a collective voice within society.

"Society used to be against me as a single woman," explained Indra Maya Maharjan, a single woman from the Machhegaun women's center in Kathmandu. "I didn't know who to talk to or where to go. But now, with the help of the center, I have become strong and independent."

The centers offer group and individual counseling and referral services, as well as coordinate the distribution of relief items to single women and their families. At each center, 1,000 dignity kits, 200 blankets, 250 solar lights, 200 bags of stationary for children, 150 pressure cookers, and 200 radios were distributed. The centers also conduct public awareness trainings open to the public, which focus on topics such as legal awareness, gender-based violence, and hygiene and sanitation. These community-inclusive programs have sparked conversation and awareness about the social stigma attached to single women and the challenges that they face. Over the past ten months, the centers have slowly made progress in changing perceptions of single women at the grassroots level and continue to earn the respect of local communities.

"The public awareness programs have been especially effective because single women, men, and married women can participate," said Sannani Silwal, the paracounselor at the Dhading Salyantar women's center. "So when single women share their experiences and how they felt when the community mistreated them, it is a process of self-actualization and realization for the other community members."

Dignity kits distributed by WHR to single women and women at risk after the earthquake.





Dancing as part of group therapy at the WHR Chapagaun Women's Center.

Some of the most common challenges for single women and women at risk across the six districts include issues related to polygamy, domestic violence, health, and legal rights—such as citizenship, property rights, and land rights. One defining feature of almost all of the women who visit the centers is low socioeconomic status. Most of them have had little education and lack outside financial support. Therefore, the two most frequent requests from women at the centers are for livelihood skills training and scholarships for their children's education.

After the earthquake, the women's centers have served as a haven for single women and women at risk in these districts. They have become a place where single women and women at risk can go for services and moral support. For some of the women, the counseling and assistance provided by WHR has become their lifeline and provided a new sense of hope for the future.

The purpose of this book is to document the stories of single women who visited the women's centers after the earthquake. By sharing their stories, we hope to provide a rare and intimate portrait of these women's lives including their personal challenges and aspirations for the future.

Note: The pictures and stories used in this book are taken after the consent of the survivors. Throughout this book, the names of sexual abuse survivors have been changed to help protect their identity.

Lalitpur District Chapagaun Women's Center



Group counseling at the WHR Chapagaun Women's Center.

The Lalitpur WHR District office and women's center was established in the Nepali month of Srawan (July), shortly after the April 25 earthquake. The center occupies a flat located on the main road in Chapagaun in the center of Lalitpur district. The aim is to provide access for single women and women at risk in both the lower and upper Lalitpur areas. The center offers counseling, referral services for mainly legal services, and programs including livelihoods and public awareness trainings. To date, 324 women have visited the center from various parts of the district.

Since its inception, the center has conducted 15 public awareness programs that have primarily focused on issues of gender-based violence and legal rights, as well as more need-specific trainings on self-defense, stress management, and constitutional rights and event registration (i.e. how to obtain a birth, death, or marriage certificate). The Chapagaun center has also partnered with other organizations such as Handicapped International to provide a physiotherapy workshop for women with disabilities, Asmita Women's Publication to host a gender-based violence active participant youth workshop, and Urban Environment Management Society to hold a WASH awareness training at the center. Additionally in November, the center conducted a livelihoods skills training for 92 women funded by the Asia Foundation that included instruction on operating a pull cart, goat and poultry farming, vegetable farming, tailoring, and embroidery.

Individual counseling at the women's center.

The Chapagaun center has four full-time staff. The office is unique because the staff counselor is also a trained lawyer so she can counsel as well as offer legal expertise and help to register a case. The counseling offered by the center is both individual and group counseling and takes place at the center and in people's homes. The group counseling includes innovative activities such as relaxation exercises, singing, and dance therapy.

"They come here to celebrate together," explained Pragya Dahal, the WHR Lalitpur District Focal Person. "One woman even described the center as her 'maiti' [brother's home] because she can come here to share her feelings with others in a safe space."

Many of the cases at the Chapagaun center—including Batuli Nagarkoti and Sanu Maya Shakya—deal with polygamy issues. Consequences of polygamy namely include mistreatment or negligence by in-laws or husbands, and complications with property rights—especially when the woman is the second or third wife. One major challenge for the center has been a language barrier since there is a large Newar population in the area who do not speak Nepali. The Chapagaun Single Women Group President does speak Newari so she translates when she is available. Another timely challenge has been mitigating expectations after the earthquake because many women come to the center expecting relief materials rather than services.

A significant success of the center has been educating single women about the importance of obtaining their citizenship documents, and assisting them in the process to get them. The office also frequently helps women to acquire their Single Women cards from WHR, which offer certain discounts on things such as medical expenses.

Singing as part of group therapy at the center.

Batuli Nagarkoti

Batuli Nagarkoti is a 30-year-old woman who lives in Chapagaun with her 14-year-old daughter, mother-in-law, and two sons from her husband's first marriage. Batuli's husband has remarried and is living with his other wife so she is on her own to support her family. She used to work creating sculptures and statues, but she has recently been doing manual labor working in the fields nearby her home. After her husband remarried he stopped contacting her. Batuli's mother-in-law forced Batuli and her daughter to move out of the house and into the barn, where they lived for two and a half years before WHR intervened. Her story is an example of how polygamy further exacerbates women's problems, particularly a wife's relations with her in-laws once her husband remarries.

Batuli grew up near Chapagaun in a poor family so she did not have any formal education. When she was 14 years old, her current mother-in-law asked Batuli to marry her son as his second wife because his first wife had just eloped and left two young sons—ages three and five years old—who needed a caretaker. In her situation, Batuli saw this as an opportunity so she agreed and married her husband as his second wife.

In the beginning of her marriage, Batuli was in charge of taking care of her husband's two sons. Then after one year, she became pregnant with her first child. At the age of 16, Batuli gave birth to her daughter. 18 months later, her husband left to go abroad and earn money for the family. He stayed abroad for 32 months before coming back to Nepal. Upon his return, he asked Batuli to borrow money for him, so she took out three loans in her own name for 40,000NPR, 30,000NPR, and 40,000NPR. Her husband used the money to buy a car and to fund his plane ticket to travel abroad for work again. He promised Batuli to pay back the loan, but only followed through with the first seven installments.

During her husband's second stint of working abroad, he stopped calling Batuli. Upon returning to Nepal, her husband did not come back to their home in Chapagaun. Instead he moved to Kirtipur and married a third wife, so Batuli's mother-in-law forced her and her



Batuli outside of her home in Chapagaun, Lalitpur.

daughter to move out of the house and into the barn. The barn is small and at the time had goats living in the ground floor, so Batuli and her daughter lived on the second floor.

“There was no cover over the windows, so it was very cold in the winter and the roof leaked when it rained,” said Batuli. “There was no toilet [in the barn] and my mother-in-law did not allow us to use the family toilet, so we had to go outside.”

Last year during the Nepali month Bhadra (August/September), Batuli’s friend Reena told her about WHR. A Single Women Group had recently formed in the area and Reena was president of the group. Upon hearing about WHR, Batuli agreed to visit the office. It was awkward at first for Batuli to talk about her situation. She received individual counseling services from the center, as well as with her brother and other family members. This allowed her to open up and share about her difficulties at home. The WHR staff wrote a letter on her behalf to the women cell in the Chapagaun Police Department. After a few days, the WHR staff followed up with the women cell and they were advised to submit the case to the next police station, which they did. The WHR staff continued to put pressure on the police to address Batuli’s case.

The police escorted the WHR staff to Batuli’s home to speak with her mother-in-law about the mistreatment of Batuli and her daughter. When the police arrived, her mother-in-law denied any wrongdoing. WHR staff and the police asked the mother-in-law to provide a room in her home for Batuli and her daughter, as she had before her son left. The police created a legal document that served as an agreement between the two parties, which stated that the mother-in-law would allow Batuli and her daughter to live in the house. Finally, after two and a half years, Batuli and her daughter moved out of the barn and into the house.



The barn where Batuli and her daughter lived for two and a half years.

The next obstacle was to locate Batuli’s husband. WHR staff helped her to find him in Kirtipur, where he is now living with his third wife. The WHR counselor spoke to him about his responsibility to Batuli and their daughter, and he agreed to pay a monthly allowance of 7000 NPR to help support them. The next day, he visited his mother’s home to ensure

that Batuli and her daughter were able to live inside the house. Despite this initial success, however, her husband has not yet provided the pledged financial support to Batuli and her daughter.

For three months, Batuli and her daughter have been living in her mother-in-law's house again. They share a bedroom and small kitchen, but are not allowed to use the indoor toilet. Batuli said it has been uncomfortable at times, because her mother-in-law does not talk to her. To help Batuli's situation at home, the WHR staff counseled Batuli's mother-in-law—who is also a single woman. Batuli's mother-in-law complained that if her son marries 20 women she cannot keep all of them in her house.

"Before coming to WHR, I had very little knowledge about my rights," said Batuli. "But now, I recognize that I was being victimized and I have enough confidence to tell my story."

Batuli and her daughter's living situation has improved a lot, but she is still concerned about the large amount of debt in her name. She cannot leave the community until the debts are repaid. Batuli has no hopes for her husband, but she has lots of hopes for her daughter who is now studying in Class 7. Today, Batuli is an active participant of the Chapagaun Single Women Group. She has opened an account in the group's credit collective, and recently borrowed 4000 NPR as part of the group's emergency fund to help pay back her debts. She also attended several programs at WHR including the self-defense training and youth participation workshop.



Batuli harvesting vegetables from her garden.

Krishna Maya Nagarkoti

Krishna Maya Nagarkoti is a 39-year-old woman living with a disability. She was paralyzed at birth and has very limited mobility. Krishna never married, so she lives with her parents, brother, and sister-in-law on the top of a hill in rural Chapagaun. She has lived there her entire life. The road is not close by and to get down to the main road from the home one of her family members has to carry her. As a child, Krishna did not go to school because it was too difficult to get there. So while her brothers went to school, Krishna stayed at home to guard her family's goats and cattle.



Krishna Maya at home with her new wheelchair.

Today, the only place that Krishna regularly visits outside the home is a nearby church in Satdobato where she has gone for the past 15 years. When she was 16 year old, Krishna fell seriously ill and the priest from the church came to visit her every week. Now Krishna is the only one in her family who believes in Christianity and she enjoys attending the church when she can.

When the WHR center first opened in Chapagaun, its staff visited Krishna's home and shared with her about the center. They saw that Krishna could only move by dragging her hips and slowly shifting herself along on the ground. The WHR staff then continued to visit her home and counseled both Krishna and her family. Then, through a partnership with Handicapped International, WHR held a physiotherapy day at the center and brought

eleven disabled women from the area, including Krishna. After an assessment, Krishna was given a wheelchair, which has helped with her mobility when travelling outside of home. However, it is still a challenge for Krishna to get to the main road because the road next to her home is not suitable for a wheelchair and her family members are getting too old to carry her.

At church, Krishna learned a technique to weave baskets out of plastic noodle wrappers. The church sells the finished product in Patan and gives her the profit of 300 NPR per basket. So far, she has earned 1500NPR from making baskets and hopes to continue this as a business. Recently, the WHR staff referred Krishna to Oxfam as a recipient for a small grant for earthquake-affected people. If she receives the grant, Krishna can buy the plastic materials that she needs to weave the baskets from home and start a small business.

“Everyone else in my family goes out to earn money, so I want to be able to earn money too so I can buy medicine and clothes for myself,” she explained.

Krishna and her family’s home was severely damaged in the recent earthquake and the entire second story was destroyed. They have created several rooms out of sheet corrugated galvanized iron (CGI) using the allocated stipend from the government for earthquake victims. This is where Krishna now lives with her parents. She is a good cook and often cooks at home for her family and washes their clothes. Krishna has become a member of the Chapagaun Single Women Group and recently received a radio from WHR.

“I love to listen to music on my new radio,” she said. “I want to give many blessings to WHR because it has helped me in so many ways.”

Currently, Krishna holds a government-issued partial disability card that gives her a monthly stipend of 300NPR. With the help of WHR, she has applied to change her card to full disability, which would increase the amount to 1000NPR. In order to process the change she must visit the Women and Children Development Office, which she can now travel to in her new wheelchair.

Sanu Maya Shakya

Sanu Maya Shakya’s story is one of hope, but also of prolonged suffering and pain. She currently lives with her mother in a temporary shelter behind her brother’s home, but even daily activities such as cooking, eating, or breathing are a struggle. Nine years ago, she was diagnosed with a brain tumor and had a brain operation and tracheotomy. Now Sanu Maya is 35 years old and she moves very slowly on her feet, bracing herself against her mother’s arm as she walks. She speaks with a raspy voice out of one corner of her mouth, and her right eye and ear no longer work properly. Because of the tracheotomy, it is difficult for her to breath and she can only eat food in liquid form. Although Sanu Maya is legally married, her mother has been her sole caretaker since the operation.



Sanu Maya and her mother outside of their temporary shelter.

Sanu Maya grew up in Chapagaun with her parents, three brothers, and two sisters. She married at the age of 26 and six months later was diagnosed with a brain tumor. At first after the operation her husband visited frequently and supported her medical expenses. Eventually though, he stopped visiting. Sanu Maya's husband married a second wife and no longer wanted to provide financial support to Sanu Maya.

After leaving the hospital, she had no choice but to move in with her parents. Sanu Maya's brothers, who are traditionally responsible for taking care of her mother and father, did not agree that their parents should take care of Sanu Maya. So instead of supporting their sister and parents, her brothers refused to help. Then six years ago, Sanu Maya's father died.

Up until last April, Sanu Maya and her mother were both living in their own home, but it was completely destroyed in the earthquake. Sanu Maya and her mother were in her sister's home when the earthquake struck. Sanu Maya's brother-in-law had to carry her out of the house and Sanu Maya's mother was hit with a brick on her arm where she still suffers from pain. Upon returning to their home, Sanu Maya and her mother found it had totally collapsed. Sanu Maya's mother had already transferred their house and land into her younger son's name, so after the earthquake they literally had nothing.

The two women had to stay in a tent with other displaced members from the community. Neither of her brothers would agree to give Sanu Maya and her mother a piece of land where they could build a temporary shelter. The staff from WHR heard about this situation from Sanu Maya and spoke directly to her brothers. The youngest son was building a new

home and using the land where Sanu Maya's old house had stood as a storage area for construction materials. He told the WHR staff that his mother and sister could go sleep in the road. Luckily though after some convincing, the older son agreed to provide some land behind his house for his mother and sister to live.

"If you had not been there, we could not have gotten this land," Sanu Maya's mother told WHR staff during a recent visit to their home. "We didn't have anywhere else to go."

Sanu Maya and her mother are still living in the temporary shelter that was built for them by Environment and Public Health Organization (ENPHO). It is made out of CGI along the walls and roof, with a dirt floor. It is very cold in the winter, so they sleep in a room inside the house and stay in the temporary shelter to cook and live during the day. In the future they may try to carpet the shelter to make it warmer. They also do not have their own toilet so they have to use the one in Sanu Maya's brother's house.

Currently, their main source of income is a combination of funds provided by the government to earthquake victims and Sanu Maya's mother's earning from selling cotton threads for worship in Hindu temples. Each thread only sells for 40 NPR, so that does not bring in a lot of money. Sanu Maya has trouble gripping her hands, so she cannot participate in most income-generating activities. Because of her disability, the government provides Sanu Maya a monthly stipend of 300NPR, but that is not enough to meet their basic needs such as food, cooking gas, and medicine.

WHR has provided some financial support to pay for Sanu Maya's medicine and given Sanu Maya and her mother a blanket, torch light, and two dignity kits. During the last visit to their home, Sanu Maya and her mother were both excited because they were wearing the under garments from their dignity kits. The WHR staff continue to visit Sanu Maya's home regularly to provide emotional support and counseling for Sanu Maya and her mother.

"I feel good when someone comes to visit and I can share my story with them," said Sanu Maya.

Another major benefit that Sanu Maya has received from WHR was her participation in a physiotherapy day workshop at the center hosted by Handicapped International. She attended the workshop and learned some physical therapy exercises to do with her hands to strengthen her grip. She continues to do these exercises daily at her home.

In spite of all their difficulties, Sanu Maya and her mother continue to endure. Their story exemplifies the strength of a mother's love for her daughter. Sanu Maya's struggle is threefold: she is a single woman, she is disabled, and now she is a victim of the earthquake. For the future, Sanu Maya and her mother have high expectations from WHR and hope to get support to help cover Sanu Maya's medicine and medical expenses.

Bhaktapur District Naya Thimi Women's Center



Group counseling at the women's center in Bhaktapur.

After the earthquake last year, the Bhaktapur WHR office shifted from Sano Thimi to Naya Thimi. The new location, which opened on July 15, is in a flat that is more centralized and accessible right near the main road and includes a meeting room and office. Single women and women at risk from the area come to the office for counseling and referral services. For elderly women and those with disabilities—such as Bhawani Shrestha and Sita Bista—WHR staff visit the women in their homes to ensure that they also have access to services.

So far, 233 women have used the center's referral services, 456 have used the counseling services, and more than 700 have attended the various public awareness programs. The vast majority of referrals were for health services, and others were for legal services and counseling. To date, the center has hosted 17 public awareness programs—exceeding its initial target of 15—in different parts of the district. Most of the programs focus on legal awareness and gender-based violence, but the center has also had programs on WASH and sanitation, and first aid.

"After the past ten months, we [WHR] are now recognized in the Bhaktapur district—everyone knows our work," said WHR support staff Manisha Shrestha.

WHR staff working at the Bhaktapur women's center.





WHR staff leading a community gender-based violence program.

A few of the underlying problems that single women in Bhaktapur face include issues of polygamy, domestic violence, property and legal rights, and earthquake-related cases. Many of the women affected by the earthquake are still struggling, and getting adequate shelter has consistently been their main concern. The issue of property rights is also common among the single women at the center, often as a concern resulting after their husband's death.

Sushila Lama

Sushila Lama may be a small woman, but her strength and resilience as an individual seems larger than life. For years, at the hands of her husband and family-in-law she suffered from domestic violence—including during and after both of her pregnancies, as well as verbal, mental, and sexual abuse. She was locked in a room for weeks at a time, and if she escaped she was beaten. After years of torture, Sushila finally gained enough courage to leave her husband. Now with the assistance of WHR, Sushila has been empowered to voice her rights and demand financial support for the one thing she wants the most—education for her children. So far she has been successful in this request. But in spite of her newfound bravery, Sushila still lives in fear that one day her husband will find her again.

Sushila grew up in Hetauda, the capital city of Makwanpur district. Since birth, she has suffered from a physical disability that has stunted her growth so she stands about half the height of an average woman. She is now 32 years old and currently rents one room in Bhaktapur where she lives with her sister and two sons—ages 12 and nine. Her story begins more than twelve years ago, when she first moved to Bhaktapur for a job working in a carpet factory.

One night, Sushila and her brother attended a festival near Boudha. There was a huge crowd and they got separated from each other, so she was by herself at night. Her future husband saw her and called to her, “sister come here.” She was afraid of staying out alone, so she obliged. He took her back to his house and locked her in a room. Sushila used to sit in the room all day and cry.

"I was terrified," she remembered. "I thought that I was going to be trafficked or killed. Once in the middle of the night, I tried to escape and ran to a nearby field, but I had nowhere to go."

After eight days Sushila was finally able to leave. Her husband took her to her sister's house, but because she had stayed with him overnight her sister pressured her to marry him. So, not wanting to shame her family, Sushila married him and returned to his home.



Sushila in the room where she lives in Bhaktapur.

After two more months of physical and sexual abuse, Sushila became pregnant. She was only 20 years old. When she was six months pregnant, her husband married a second wife. No one cared for Sushila during her pregnancy. Her husband only gave her rice to eat, so she became weak and would faint often. Even going to the toilet was difficult—she would have to crawl on her arms and legs.

Immediately after the pregnancy, Sushila's husband beat her so badly that she was continually bleeding. Her husband refused to provide Sushila with clean clothes or sanitary pads, so she would have to sit in blood-stained clothes for days or throw away the old clothes. The physical abuse was so intense that Sushila could not even carry her own baby.

Fortunately though, Sushila and her son were able to escape. They went to stay with her mother in Hetauda, but after one year Sushila's husband found her and forcefully brought her back to his home. While she was away, her husband had not paid the rent, so Sushila and her husband were forced to move in with her sister-in-law near Swayambhu.

Soon Sushila became pregnant with her second child. While pregnant, she would have to walk two hours with her son to fetch water every day. Her sister-in-law would often reprimand her for taking too much time and tell her husband that Sushila was seeing other men. Despite being pregnant, her husband would beat her. In addition to fetching water, Sushila was responsible for all other household chores—including cooking, cleaning, and washing the entire family's clothes. She would clean while her sister-in-law sat and watched T.V. Most days she did not finish her work until midnight or later.

Because of all the physical labor, Sushila's baby was not developing properly and she did not feeling well so she stopped doing housework. However, the physical abuse continued.

"One day when my husband was beating me, I went into labor," said Sushila. "I wanted to go to the hospital, but my sister-in-law said I had to stay at home instead because it would save money. No one helped me have the baby. That day I had nothing to eat and was given no clean clothes. The next day, I had to wash all of my clothes by myself."

Shortly after her second baby's birth, Sushila finally found enough courage to leave her husband for good. Once again she returned to Hetauda with her mother. She separated from her husband—although not legally—and she and her sons stayed with her mother for four years. It was difficult in Hetauda to financially support her family and she longed for a better education for her sons. Therefore her uncle helped Sushila, her sons, and her sister to move to Bhaktapur so they could have more employment and educational opportunities.



Sushila outside of her current home.

Sushila first heard about WHR from a member of the local Single Women Group. After hearing about the support that WHR provides to single women, she decided to visit the center. At that time she was not comfortable to share her story and only spoke of her sister's problems. However, after attending a WHR public awareness program on gender-based violence, Sushila realized that she was a victim of domestic violence. After several counseling sessions with WHR staff, Sushila finally gained the confidence to share her story.

Sushila also told the WHR staff that she wanted to divorce her husband but could not because he had all of her legal documents. Sushila's husband works for the Nepalese Army, so WHR staff referred the case to the army barrack central office. The army scheduled a meeting with her husband one week later, but her husband did not come. WHR staff persisted and sent the case to the women fort cell in Bhaktapur. They called her husband and scheduled a second meeting, which he attended. Upon seeing Sushila, he threatened her and asked, "Who is supporting you?"

They met with a legal officer who listened to Sushila's story. Sushila asked for her legal documents to be returned and to receive half of her husband's salary to support her and her two sons. The legal officer determined that she would receive one third of her husband's salary and an additional 1500NPR each month to support her sons' education.

Today, Sushila is grateful for all of the support she has received from WHR.

"I feel enormous relief because I no longer have to pay for my children's education on my own," she said. "Now I feel strong because I have my legal documents and can file for divorce if my husband doesn't continue to pay the financial support."

Sushila is involved in the WHR Single Women Group and regularly attends counseling and activities at the center. She explained that WHR has given her a level of help and emotional support that even her own seven sisters could not provide. She still fears her husband, but is very happy to be free and moving on with her life. Her greatest hope for the future is to provide her children with a quality education, and to receive skills training so she can earn more money for her family. Recently, the WHR staff nominated Sushila to become an Opportunity Fund recipient, which would provide a scholarship to help pay for her sons' education.

Bhawani Shrestha

Bhawani Shrestha's story demonstrates the various layers of complexity for single women in Nepal. Not only is Bhawani a widow, but she also suffers from a mental disability and was displaced from her home during the recent earthquake. Her whole life, Bhawani has rebelled against the cultural expectations of a Hindu woman—she likes to stay out late at night and does not play the traditional role of caregiver or homemaker. These actions have at times ostracized her from her family, but she remains happy with an independent spirit.

Bhawani is now 62 years old and lives in Duwakot. Her daughter helped to share Bhawani's story because her mother has a mental disability and cannot always express herself clearly. When she was young, Bhawani and her husband fell in love and ran away from home to get married. They owned a small hotel together, so they had sufficient income while her husband was alive. They had three children—two daughters and one son—although her husband did most of the caretaking because of her mental condition. Bhawani used to stay out late at night, and when she came home her husband would scold her.

Ten years ago, Bhawani's husband was admitted to the hospital for an asthma attack. After spending 12 days in the hospital, he died. At the time, their oldest daughter was nine years old. Her husband had made his sister promise to take care of their children if anything happened to him. So after his death, the children moved in with their aunt and her seven children and Bhawani lived by herself. Bhawani was always present in her children's lives, but not as the traditional mother figure.

After the earthquake, Bhawani was living with her son and his family in Duwakot. Recently though, she and her son got in a dispute about her unusual activities of staying out late and drinking. As a result, he locked her out of the house and Bhawani moved into her neighbor's cow shed where she is currently residing.

"I would rather live in the cow shed and come and go as I please than live with my son and his rules," explained Bhawani.

The president of Duwakot's Single Women Group lives near Bhawani and heard she was living in a cow shed, so she told Bhawani about WHR and its services. She brought Bhawani



Bhawani at her sister-in-law's home in Duwakot.



Bhawani, her daughter, granddaughter, and sister-in-law.

to a legal awareness training program, where Bhawani learned about the importance of citizenship and having legal documentation. At the time, neither she nor her children had citizenship documents. This was a problem because in order for her daughter to get a marriage certificate, she had to have her birth certificate, which required her mother to have a citizenship card.

Therefore, WHR staff worked with Bhawani and her family to obtain a citizenship card. At first her son was not compliant because he was still upset with his mother, but WHR staff counseled him and he agreed to support his mother's citizenship card. So WHR staff took Bhawani to the district Women and Children Development Office where she received her citizenship card. WHR staff are now helping Bhawani to use the card to apply for the single woman allowance.

After receiving her card, Bhawani travelled to the WHR office in Naya Thimi. She said she was very happy and received clothes, travel expense for her visit, and a blanket from the center. WHR staff have visited Bhawani at home several times now for counseling sessions because it is difficult for her to travel to the office on a regular basis.

"Getting WHR is like getting my mother back," Bhawani said with a huge smile across her face. "I can now share all of my feelings, even ones I could not share with my own children."

Bhawani is not part of the local Single Women Group yet, but is interested to join. For the moment, she continues to stay in her neighbor's cow shed but said that she is content there. She is working doing odd jobs for her neighbors such as washing dishes and washing clothes, and spending time with her daughters and grandchildren when she can.



The neighbor's cow shed where Bhawani is staying.

Sita Bista

Sita Bista is an elderly single woman who has been disabled for the past 40 years. She married early in life and has two daughters. At the age of 28, she was hospitalized for high blood pressure and had an operation that left her paralyzed. Sita's husband married two additional wives, so after her paralysis Sita was no longer welcome in her own home. Sita's sister has been her main caretaker and financial supporter. Two years ago while trying to get around, Sita fell down and broke her hip and she again had to be hospitalized. From this more recent accident and her ongoing medical condition, Sita has a significant amount of medical expenses that she cannot afford. Her husband and his other two wives have offered very little financial help, so Sita and her sister struggle to pay the bills. Sita's sister is also getting older, so caring for Sita is becoming increasingly challenging.



Sita sitting outside of her sister's home in Duwakot.

Most days, Sita Bista sits outside on the balcony of her sister's home in Duwakot overlooking the wheat fields and local schoolyard. She can no longer speak and has very little mobility. Sita's daughter and sister had to share her story, but Sita would nod and smile occasionally. Her sister still takes care of her on a daily basis, and her daughter comes to visit every 20 days to help her bathe. Since her fall two years ago, Sita can no longer move her legs, which makes it difficult to move anywhere—even to the toilet in the next room.

At the young age of 16, Sita was arranged to be married. Shortly after her wedding, Sita gave birth to her first daughter and then a few years later gave birth to her second one. Then at the age of 28, she was hospitalized for high blood pressure. At the time, she was six months pregnant with her third child. The doctors decided that Sita needed an operation, which to this day her sister claims was a mistake. After the operation, Sita was paralyzed and she had lost her baby.

While Sita was in the hospital, her husband decided to marry again—twice. So when Sita left the hospital, her husband and his two new wives did not welcome her back into their home. Due to her condition, Sita could no longer take care of her two daughters so her husband married them off at young ages. Sita's sister took her in and has been a dedicated caretaker ever since.

"I have been taking care of Sita for the past forty years," said Sita's sister. "But now that I am getting older it is getting much harder. And I have helped to pay for her medical bills, but we cannot pay them all."

Two years ago, while trying to move around her home, Sita fell and broke her hip. She was in an extreme amount of pain and had to be hospitalized again. From this visit she incurred a tremendous amount of medical expenses, which Sita and her sister could not afford. Therefore, Sita's family visited her husband's home to ask if he could provide some financial support. His third wife informed Sita's family that she would rather open a shop than help pay for Sita's medical expenses. However, when Sita's family told her husband that as one of his wives she is entitled to part of his property, he agreed to pay her a small amount.

Sita first heard about WHR when a member of the local Single Women Group came to visit her home. The Single Women Group member had to talk to Sita's brother since Sita cannot speak. It became apparent that Sita did not have any citizenship documents or a disability card. Her brother explained that this had been challenging to obtain since Sita's husband had to be involved in the process.



Sita with her daughter and sister.

Sita's brother told the WHR staff, "If you can get the disability card for Sita, then we can say that this is an organization that really works for the people."

It was not easy, but WHR staff worked with the police to ensure that Sita's husband cooperated in the citizenship documentation process. WHR staff took Sita in a taxi from her home to the Women and Children Development Office where they learned that to apply for a disability card, Sita had to have a prescription from the government hospital in Bhaktapur. So WHR staff took Sita to the hospital to get the prescription, and then back again to the office to receive her citizenship and disability cards.

Today, Sita has a red full disability card from the government, which brings in 1000 NPR per month. Although this is still not enough to cover all of her medical expenses, it definitely helps with everyday needs. All of Sita's family members are very happy and say they can see a difference in Sita since she received the cards. Sita does not have a marriage certificate, but because her husband supported her citizenship card she can now claim legal right to his property. The WHR legal officer is planning to assist her in this process.

"I hope that Sita can receive money from her husband's property," said her sister. "It could go towards paying for her medical expenses and for a caretaker in the future."

Kathmandu District Machhegaun Women's Center



Shanti Maharjan working at the Machhegaun center.

The WHR Machhegaun Women's Center is a lively place with many women coming and going. It consists of several rooms that are rented out in the home of Shanti Maharjan, the President of Machhegaun's Single Women Group who also works as the center support staff. She said the center has become a safe space for single women and women at risk in the area.

"Women come every day to share their problems, even on Saturday—my day off," said Shanti laughing. "But I don't mind because as a single woman myself, I understand the women and I am happy to be here for them. I am happy to help my friends."

The main activities at the center are counseling, referrals, case studies of single women, and public awareness trainings. So far approximately 2,000 women have received services or training from the center. It has conducted 15 public awareness trainings, with the main focus of legal awareness and gender-based violence. These programs also touch on subjects such as sexual harassment and human trafficking awareness. Legal issues has been one of the major concerns for the single women in Machhegaun, and many of them require legal assistance but cannot afford the legal or court fees required.

The main worry for women affected by the earthquake in Machhegaun is shelter. Also due to displacement, many joint families are forced to live under one roof, which has created problems such as domestic violence in the case of Sunita Malharjan. Many of the women's homes were completely destroyed so they not only lost their homes, but also household



Group counseling at the Machhegaun center.

goods and food. Therefore immediately after the earthquake, WHR assisted single women and women at risk by distributing relief aid, compensation, and counseling. Many of these women and their families are still struggling financially. They hope for support in the future from WHR in the form of a livelihood skills training so they can provide a sustainable income for their families.

Another major concern among the women is education for their children. “At first it was ten women asking for scholarships for their children, and now it is 25,” Shanti said.

One of the biggest accomplishments at the Machhegaun women’s center has been the Single Women Group. There are 90 women who participate and they are separated into two groups—single women and elderly single women. This helps with communication amongst the group members because they can better relate to other women their own age.

“Through the Single Women Group, the women have become strong and learned how to vocalize themselves,” Shanti beamed. “Society cannot look down on us anymore because of this center.”

Individual counseling at the women’s center.



Kanchhi Sunar

As the one-year anniversary of the April 25 earthquake approaches, Kanchhi Sunar is dreading the upcoming puja ceremony to mourn the death of her only daughter. For Kanchhi, the earthquake was devastating—it killed her daughter and destroyed her home. After the earthquake Kanchhi would cry every day, all day. Now, after receiving counseling and support from WHR, Kanchhi is doing better and is more emotionally stable. She still struggles though, and whenever she thinks of her daughter she begins to cry. Kanchhi and her family are now living in temporary housing made out of CGI that is cold in the winter and wet when it rains. In Kanchhi's case, the earthquake further exacerbated her already existing struggles living as a single woman of the Dalit community.

Kanchhi is a 55 year-old single woman who lives with her two youngest sons and grandchildren in Machhegaun. She has a total of six children—five sons and one daughter. Prior to the earthquake, Kanchhi and her family lived in a house, which was the only thing she owned in the world. Now, after the earthquake, it seems that her life has been turned upside down.

Kanchhi recalled the day of April 25, 2015:

“I had gone to visit Dhulikhel on a pilgrimage. My daughter had called the night before asking how I was. Then, the next day when I was travelling, the earthquake struck. I was terrified for my family's safety, so I returned home as soon as I could. Once I got home, that is when I learned that my daughter had died.”

Kanchhi was in utter shock. Her daughter had been working in Kathmandu at the United World Trade Center and was crushed by one of the pillars as the building collapsed. Her daughter was only twenty two years old. Kanchhi had done everything she could to support her daughter's education. When her husband died, Kanchhi's daughter was just ten years old. It was very difficult for Kanchhi to raise her children alone. Now, the thought of conducting the traditional puja ceremony one year after her daughter's death brings tears to Kanchhi's eyes.



Kanchhi and her granddaughter inside their temporary shelter.

After the earthquake, Shanti Maharjan, WHR support staff and President of the Machhegaun Single Women Group, came to visit Kanchhi at her home. She helped to arrange counseling for Kanchhi that took place at her home and at the center. The counseling helped Kanchhi to cope emotionally with the death of her daughter and to find some hope to continue living. Kanchhi has also joined as a member of the Single Women Group, which has been a huge support to her.



Kanchhi outside of her family's temporary shelter.

"I am relieved to have the support from WHR," said Kanchhi. "After my daughter's death, I could not move. All I did was cry."

Kanchhi's home was also destroyed in the earthquake, so WHR helped to create a temporary shelter for her family. Kanchhi received assistance from the government that also helped to pay for building the temporary shelter. Kanchhi said that she has received a lot of support from WHR, including a dignity kit and solar light, and recently she got a Single Woman Card that will help her to earn a monthly allowance.

Money has been tight at home since the earthquake and her daughter's death. Kanchhi's daughter had been one of the two breadwinners in the family. Now, her older son who works as a security guard is the sole earner for the household. Kanchhi said it was even difficult to come up with the 100 NPR to join the Single Women Group. When she can, Kanchhi works manual labor jobs nearby to earn some money to help support her family.

For the future, Kanchhi said, "I just want shelter, that is all I want for now."

Sunita Maharjan

The earthquake had many indirect effects on the lives of single women, particularly for those whose homes were destroyed. The story of Sunita Maharjan is about how a young single woman and her children were displaced after the earthquake. Sunita's husband had died five years before and her mother-in-law recently passed away. So, with nowhere else to go, they moved in with her father-in-law. Instead of supporting Sunita in this time of need, her father-in-law began to physically abuse and sexually harass her. After her husband's death, none of his land or property was transferred over into Sunita's name. So now, her father-in-law says if she does not cooperate with him then she will get nothing. Despite receiving counseling and gaining confidence as part of the WHR Single Women Group, Sunita still lives in fear of her father-in-law.



Sunita agreed to share her story, but requested that her photo is not included.

Growing up, Sunita had no formal education. Then after getting married, her husband worked for the army so she would stay at home to cook, clean, and raise their three children. However, one day five years ago on the way home from his work with the army, her husband died in an accident. Overnight Sunita's life changed.

Since his death, the combination of having no education and no job skills has made it very difficult for Sunita to support her family. She has two daughters—ages 14 and ten, and one son—age five. During the earthquake, their family home was completely destroyed. WHR found out about Sunita's situation and helped to provide a temporary shelter for Sunita and her children.

"At first we stayed in the shelter, but it was very cold in the winter and could not keep out snakes, which was a danger for my young son" explained Sunita. "So four months ago, we moved in with my father-in-law."

Before her husband died, Sunita's father-in-law had treated her with respect. However, with the absence of her husband and her mother-in-law, Sunita's father-in-law began to physically abuse her. During the day, Sunita's children go to school so she and her father-in-law are often alone in the house. He used to beat Sunita and follow her around making sexual advances, threatening to take away her inheritance if she did not cooperate.

Thankfully, two friends told Sunita about the new WHR center in Machhegaun. She attended a legal awareness and gender-based violence public awareness program and joined the Single Women Group. The WHR staff counseled Sunita and slowly she gained enough strength to share her story. WHR staff filed a complaint with the local police about Sunita's father-in-law. The police said they would help Sunita, but she is afraid to file an official case because her father-in-law threatened to kick her and her children out of the house. With the support of WHR behind her, Sunita told her father-in-law that if anything happens to her or her children she will call the Single Women Group and the police. So far, this has prevented any further physical abuse or sexual harassment.

Whenever she faces a problem now, Sunita walks 15 minutes to the WHR office to talk to Shanti, the support staff. Sunita has built up a lot of confidence and strength from becoming part of WHR and the Single Women Group.

"I have gained hope because of this office," said Sunita. "Because of the Single Women Group, now every woman comes here to share their problems and to get help so it is really nice."

Sunita's main goal is to get a good job so she can educate her children properly. She hopes that WHR will provide skills training so she and other single women in Machhegaun can earn their own livelihood. Sunita does have a marriage certificate that legally entitles her to her husband's property, and WHR has referred her to a lawyer from the center. The problem now, however, is that she cannot afford to pay for the legal fees involved in the court process to claim her property. Hopefully, this will change in the future.



WHR Machhegaun Women's Center, where Sunita often comes for support.

Indra Maya Maharjan

Within the Single Women Group, Indra Maya Maharjan has become a leader to many of the women. She gathers the women from her village and brings them to the WHR public awareness trainings. This leadership quality is something that Indra Maya has demonstrated her whole life. Before the earthquake, she opened up a small shop where she sells tea and noodles. And within her own home since her husband died, she has been the sole breadwinner and caretaker for her two children and elderly parents-in-law. Indra Maya's story is one of resilience and a devoted love to support her family. It is also about the issue of land ownership for single women, and a lack of access to the necessary legal services to transfer land into their names.

Indra Maya was only 26 years old when her husband died of blood cancer. She had moved in with her husband and her in-laws after their wedding. At the time of her husband's death, her son was nine years old and her daughter was an infant. Luckily for Indra Maya, she has good relations with her parents-in-law who used to help around the house and with the children.

Over the past nine years though, her parents-in-law have grown older and are now dependent on her care. Indra Maya is also responsible for her children and runs a small shop in town to support her family. When she first opened the shop, Indra Maya had to take out loans. At first this made sense because business was going well, but after the earthquake she has had very few customers.

"Sometimes I wait an entire day before one customer comes in for a cup of tea," she said. "It has become very difficult to pay my debts. I just want a stable job so I can support my family."

During the earthquake, Indra Maya's family home was destroyed. Indra Maya, her children, and parents-in-law had to live under a temporary tent with 70 other displaced people from the community. While living in this communal shelter, Indra Maya first heard of WHR. The center staff helped Indra Maya to provide a temporary shelter for her family. WHR staff



Indra Maya at the Machhegaun women's center.

also counseled Indra Maya and gave her relief aid. Since then, Indra Maya has become a leader for other single women in her village and she brings them with her to all WHR public awareness events and trainings. Indra Maya is very grateful for the support of WHR and the Single Women Group.



Indra Maya, WHR staff and other single women at the center.

“I can open up here at the center about my problems and it makes me very relieved,” she said. “I can discuss my problems and share my feelings with others.”

After attending a legal awareness training at the center, Indra Maya learned about her own legal rights. Currently, she does not legally own her land because it is still registered in her grandfather-in-law’s name, which has made it difficult to transfer. The main issue now is that Indra Maya cannot pay the legal fees for a lawyer to transfer the land into her name, and she recently heard that brokers sold some of the land without telling her.

Indra Maya said that she could use the money from the land to help fund her children’s education. There is not a higher secondary school in Machhegaun for Class 11 and 12, so to continue their studies her children would have to attend school outside of the area. Her son, who is now in Grade 10, wants to go on to study in Grade 11 and 12, but Indra Maya is afraid she cannot afford it. Her greatest hope for the future is for her children to get a quality education

Gorkha District WHR District Office



After the earthquake, WHR held a community orientation in Gorkha about the new center and its services.

The WHR Gorkha headquarter office is located in the district's capital Gorkha Bazaar. It occupies the top two floors in a large building near the center of town. The office consists of a meeting room, two offices, a storage room (which was also used as a temporary shelter after the earthquake), and a kitchen. The center includes a total of 13 staff members—seven who are Oxfam-supported, five from U.N. Women, and one supported directly by WHR.

The center opened last June, along with three other women's centers located in the Khoplang, Ghairung, and Saurpani VDC's. At first, these three women's centers operated in tents but have now shifted—or in the case of Saurpani will be shifting soon—to new permanent buildings. WHR selected these three VDC's after reviewing a needs survey and coordinating with the district cluster meeting. The three women's centers each have two full-time WHR staff and they provide counseling, referral services, emergency shelter services, and public awareness programs for the local communities.

The Gorkha headquarter office helps to support these VDC centers, and the headquarter staff meet monthly with VDC staff for reporting and planning. To date, the Gorkha main office has conducted 38 public awareness programs that have reached approximately 2,280 people. The programs were conducted in Bunkot, Barpak (at the epicenter of the April earthquake), Laprak, Choprak, Thaple, and Gorkha Municipality. These programs included trainings on legal awareness and human trafficking, gender-based violence, and health and sanitation. The WHR district office also provides counseling and referral services for women in the vicinity.



WHR staff and single women care for a displaced woman at the center.

Gorkha was one of the districts most affected by the earthquake, so many single women were displaced last April and in need of assistance. For four months, the WHR office set up a temporary shelter at the Gorkha Museum—a large, central location in town—where they offered services. Additionally, the WHR office opened up its doors and housed 42 women who slept in the storage room for nearly three months. The WHR office acted as a temporary shelter and provided these displaced women with bedding, first aid, counseling, and food.

Since the earthquake, it has been challenging for the WHR staff because many women still come to the office seeking relief materials instead of counseling or referral services. Some of the foremost concerns for single women in Gorkha include issues of polygamy and property rights, domestic violence, and child marriage. Many women are not initially comfortable to share their stories, so the individual and group counseling helps them to feel more confident.

“Before working here, we never realized that women were facing such problems,” said Kishor Thapa, one of the two males on staff at the Gorkha office. He has been working at WHR since last June. In the future, Kishor suggests the office focus more on livelihoods training because—especially with cases of polygamy—the women’s greatest need is to become financially independent.

WHR staff working at the Gorkha district office.



Gorkha District Khoplang Women's Center



WHR Khoplang staff and single women in front of the new women's center building.

The Khoplang women's center is one of the three new centers located at the Gorkha VDC-level. One week after the earthquake, WHR set up a tent in Khoplang where displaced women and children stayed for one month. Then, the center was established in a room in the nearby VDC building where it has been operating ever since. The center includes one support staff and one paracounselor who help to support the ten to 15 women who visit the center on a daily basis for group and individual counseling and referral services.

So far, an estimated 500 women in Khoplang have benefitted from the center. They come from all of the surrounding areas—the furthest village is about two hours away walking. Goma Koirala, the WHR Khoplang support staff member, said the VDC building is an ideal location for the center because many women come here already so it helps to spread awareness about the center. Also, it is very convenient for legal cases because the women do not have to go far.

"I feel really great being a woman and working for women's rights," said Goma. "For many women, at first they cannot share their problems or talk about their issues, but they build up their confidence and that is the best part."

The Khoplang center has conducted 11 public awareness programs both held at the center as well as in individual villages. WHR is in contact with committees in the nearby communities, which helps to spread awareness about upcoming programs and single women issues. The public awareness trainings have focused on topics including legal

awareness, gender-based violence, and personal hygiene. These programs are open to all community members, which has been critical in the Khoplang VDC because of the entrenched patriarchal society. By including men, women, and children, these public awareness programs are slowly changing the perception of single women in the local communities. They have also helped to gain the trust of single women who are not used to having female-oriented organizations operating in the area.

WHR distributed blankets at the three VDC women's centers in Gorkha district.



There are approximately 100 single women and several elderly women involved in the local Single Women Groups. There are nine groups in Khoplang district separated by location. They are very active with monthly meetings and a collective credit system that allows members to borrow money and then transfer the money to another member in need within a specific deadline.

Some of the major issues that single women in Khoplang face result from cases of polygamy and the recent earthquake. A prevalent concern amongst the single women has been legal documentation. Some of the women lost their citizenship documents in the earthquake and others never had them to begin with. Furthermore, in situations when a woman's husband takes multiple wives it is difficult to get a marriage certificate or proper citizenship documentation. Thus, for various reasons, the Khoplang center has helped support many single women through the legal documentation and citizenship process.

Next month, the Khoplang women's center will shift from the VDC building to its new home next door. Through the support of Oxfam, WHR constructed a new building that consists of office space and a large outdoor covered area to hold public awareness events and activities. The WHR staff are excited to have their own permanent building. In the future, the Khoplang center staff hope to receive more office materials and a computer to help support daily logistics.



WHR holding a public awareness WASH training in Gorkha district.

Jurali Nepali

Jurali Nepali has been through a lot in the past year. Her family's home was destroyed in the April 25 earthquake. Then, one month later, her husband committed suicide. He had previously been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Now, Jurali herself is not in great health so it is difficult to work in the fields and provide for her family. After her husband's death, Jurali was very depressed and used to cry a lot. Slowly, with the help of counseling from WHR, she has now realized that she needs to continue living for the sake of her three children.

Jurali and her husband were married 25 years ago. After four years, she had their first son and later gave birth to a daughter and another son. Jurali's oldest son has completed Class 10 and passed his School Leaving Certificate (SLC), but he could not pay for college so he now helps out around the house. Her other son and daughter are still in school in Class 8 and Class 9.

Jurali is now 50 years old. She is a thin, gaunt woman with a chronic cough, which indicates her sickly health. For income, Jurali and her husband used to work on their neighbor's land farming maize, rice, and dhal. They would then split the crops with the landowner, which was always enough to feed their family. Since her husband's death, it has been challenging because they had depended on him so much for their survival. Furthermore, due to Jurali's poor physical condition she can no longer do hard manual labor to earn money.

Following the earthquake, Jurali and her family had no home so they received a temporary shelter from a Christian organization in the area. They are still living in the shelter, but it is made out of CGI and has high ceilings so it is cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Jurali is also concerned if the shelter will stand up to the strong winds during the monsoon season.

One month after the earthquake, WHR staff



Jurali standing outside of the Khoplang VDC building.

visited Jurali's village and came to her home. They told her about the new women's center and Single Women Group. Since then, she has walked the one-and-a-half hours to the center four times for individual counseling and she has become an active member of the Single Women Group. Jurali said the group's collective credit has been very helpful because she can borrow money in a time of need.

"The counseling has been helpful because I used to cry a lot after my husband died," she said. "It helped me to recognize that I should continue to live for my children. Although I know that I cannot give them a high quality of life, I am committed to provide them with the basic necessities of food, shelter, and education."

Jurali said that after her husband died, people in the community treated her differently. They thought that she was unlucky and if they communicated with her then they would become unlucky too. WHR has helped to break this notion by conducting public awareness programs in the area that are open to the entire community.

"These programs have helped others to understand that they are also like us, single women," Jurali said. "Now, I am slowly being accepted in society. People are beginning to have normal conversations with me again, asking questions like 'Hi, how are you?'"



Jurali smiles as she discusses her involvement in the Single Women Group.

Binda Koirala

Binda Koirala is an elderly woman who lives with her husband in Kol Ghata. They have three children who are now grown and live in Kathmandu. Binda came to WHR for help because there is no other organization in the area working for women or elderly people. The WHR staff explained the importance of legal documentation for citizenship to Binda, who had never heard about it before. The staff then helped her to obtain a citizenship card, from which she now earns a monthly allowance as an elderly citizen. Although this allowance is not a lot, the additional income is significant for Binda and her husband who have been struggling financially. Her story demonstrates the lack of organizations providing services for women in rural Nepal and how WHR is helping to fill this gap in some areas.

Binda is originally from Manakamana, but after getting married she moved into her husband's home in Kol Ghata—about a one-and-a-half hour walk from the Khoplang center. She had her first daughter at the age of 20. Today, Binda and her husband have four children—one son and three daughters—who are all married and live with their own families in Kathmandu.

Although the April 25 earthquake did not completely destroy their home, it damaged most of the house so Binda and her husband now live in one room. They do not have any land, but they sell goat and buffalo milk to earn money. Binda said that her greatest need now is to have enough food—she would simply be happy with that.



Binda outside of the Khoplang women's center.

After the earthquake, staff from WHR came to Binda's home. They spoke to her about the organization and informed her about the importance of obtaining legal documents such as a citizenship card and marriage certificate. Binda had never heard about this before, so she wanted to know how to get the proper documents. The WHR staff assisted her in this process, and she is very happy to have her legal documentation. As an elderly citizen, she is also now receiving a monthly stipend that helps to pay for her and her husband's food and daily expenses.

"There are no other organizations working for women or old people in the area, only one for children," said Binda. "So I am thankful that WHR is here and I am glad to share my story."



Binda stops to reflect while sharing her story.

Monju Maya Sarki

Monju Maya Sarki is a joyful soul who is constantly smiling and cracking jokes. She has a very positive spirit even after all of the hardships she has faced in her life. Monju Maya was married at a young age to her husband who was eight years older. She had their first child at the age of 15. During their marriage, her husband was an alcoholic and he died five years ago at the age of 65. Then, this past year, Monju Maya's home collapsed in the earthquake so she is now living in a temporary shelter with her youngest son. It has been difficult to get assistance during the earthquake recovery process because Monju Maya splits her time between Nepal and India—where her family now lives.



Monju Maya with her grandson.

At the age of 12, Monju Maya was married to a man who was eight years older than her. Then, three years later at the age of 15 she had her first child. Monju Maya is now 60 years old and has four children. Her daughter and two of her sons are married and have moved out of the house with their own families, but her youngest son still lives with her.

Monju Maya and her son earn money by farming and doing agricultural jobs nearby their home. They mainly help with the planting and harvesting of crops. Her son had wanted to go abroad, but did not have enough education because he had only studied until Class 8 due to their financial circumstances.



Monju Maya was all smiles as she described how WHR helped her.

Last year on April 25, Monju Maya was visiting her daughter's home. When she first felt the shaking, she was very scared because she had never experienced an earthquake before. Then, she returned home to find that her home had completely collapsed. Monju Maya and her son built a temporary shelter, where they are still living today. Although they do not have a temporary toilet, so they have to use facilities at their neighbors' houses.

After the earthquake, staff from WHR visited Monju Maya's village and came to speak with her in her home.

"At first I was shy and felt uncomfortable to share my story," she said. "But slowly, I opened up and told them how I had not received any relief assistance from the government because I had been in India and that I did not have any citizenship identification."

WHR staff helped Monju Maya to obtain her citizenship card, which will enable her to get financial earthquake assistance to help her build a new home. Additionally, with her citizenship card WHR has applied for Monju Maya to get the monthly single woman allowance.

The temporary shelter where Monju Maya and her son live is located where their old house once stood. The land is still in her husband's name. Monju Maya would like to transfer the land into her own name, but she cannot afford the legal services to have this done. Therefore, Monju Maya hopes that WHR can help her with this process so one day she can be the legal owner of her land.

Dhading District WHR District Office



The WHR District Office and Women's Center in Dhading Besi.

There are more than 2,300 single women throughout the Dhading district and 75 active Single Women Groups. The WHR district office is located in Dhading Besi and occupies an entire two-story building that is now owned by the district's Single Women Group. The office officially opened in July, and includes an office with a computer and printer, a guest room with three beds, a tailoring room with nine sewing machines, a large meeting hall, and a newly designed children's learning center.

Amongst the WHR district offices, Dhading is unique because it is the largest and only one with sewing machines dedicated for the training of and use by the single women. The Single Women Group in Dhading provides a one-week training on the sewing machines and then gives the women free access to the machines as long as they bring their own materials. This model has not been very successful so far though because many of the women cannot afford to buy their own materials. Next month, WHR will hold another similar training and the staff hope that more women will continue to use the sewing machines.

Bhawani Pathak, who works as the district focal person in the Dhading office, said they are seeing more young women as a result of the earthquake. Immediately after April 25, WHR distributed relief items such as food and blankets. Now, the major problem is that most women

are still living in temporary shelters. Additionally, many of these women face a limited food supply—partially due to the earthquake and partially due to a lack of rain this year.

WHR holding a gender-based violence community awareness program in Dhading.



Similar to the other districts, women often come to the Dhading office for help in the process of obtaining legal documentation such as marriage certificates or citizenship cards. On average, the WHR staff see between ten to 15 women per day. In addition to legal documentation, gender-based violence has been a prevalent issue for single women in the district.

Since its inception, approximately 1500 to 1600 women have received services from the WHR Dhading office. There are three full time staff at the headquarter office, and two staff—one paracounsellor and one support staff—at the Salyantar VDC women’s center. This is the only women’s center at the VDC-level in Dhading and it is approximately a two-and-a-half hour drive from the district office. Bhawani travels to the Salyantar VDC center once or twice a month to help coordinate public awareness programs and the distribution of materials.

WHR Founder Lily Thapa teaching an education awareness program to girls and adolescents in Dhading.



Dhading District Salyantar Women's Center



The new WHR Salyantar Women's Center.

At first, Majgaun was the proposed location for the Dhading women's center because it is centrally located and has an airport and hospital. After further assessment though, WHR found that there were many low-caste communities in need in the Salyantar VDC. Thus, in July the WHR Salyantar Women's Center was established.

It began operating out of a tent at first, and the WHR staff travelled to the surrounding villages to distribute relief materials and provide counseling and referrals. The construction of the new center building was delayed due to the petrol crisis, but was finally completed in January. The building has an office space with a desk, six chairs, and a file cabinet; a toilet facility; and a covered outdoor space to hold meetings and programs. It is centrally located in the VDC, so women only walk one hour at the most to get there from the nearby communities.

"Before establishing the office, we would visit women and counsel them in their homes," said Sannani Silwal, the paracounsellor at Salyantar women's center. "But now that they can come to the office it is much better because many of the women feel more comfortable to share their stories without family members present."

There are two full-time staff at the center—one support staff and one paracounselor. On average, five to seven women visit the center per day, but immediately after the earthquake usually 20 to 25 women would come for counseling and to share their feelings. In addition to single women, some low-income, elderly, and marginalized women also come to the center for assistance.

Most of the women who visit the center have a low economic background and little to no education. In the Salyantar VDC, there is a significant lack of education awareness. The WHR staff described the breakdown of education by caste.

“The higher caste parents generally have more money and value education so they send their children to school, while the lower caste parents do not recognize the importance of education and have their children work instead of attend school,” explained Sannani.

Additionally, for some of the lower castes child marriage has become customary so it is especially difficult for girls to continue their education. Other prevalent concerns among the single women in Salyantar include domestic violence and issues related to polygamy.

Many of the women want skills training because they work in the fields farming and face gender discrimination on a daily basis. In Salyantar, if a woman and a man do the same agricultural work, the woman is only paid 200NPR and the man is paid 500NPR. Therefore, the women view gaining livelihood skills as a way to become independent of this local patriarchal practice.

So far, the center has served an estimated 1,700 to 1,800 women in the area, and has held 15 public awareness programs. The public awareness programs have focused on topics including personal hygiene, legal awareness, and social stigma (i.e. single women,



After the earthquake, WHR staff visiting displaced women and families in Dhading.



WHR staff leading a public awareness program in Dhading.

polygamy, and child marriage). When WHR first began conducting the programs, there were approximately 60 to 65 people in attendance. At first the women were not comfortable to share their problems, but after participating in the programs they found them to be very helpful and told their friends. Now, there is usually between 130 to 140 people present. The inclusiveness of the public awareness programs has allowed for other men and women in the community to hear about the struggles of single women, sparking a sense of self-actualization and change in perception.

One of the biggest challenges in the area has been to debunk the social stigma attached to single women. Traditionally, members of the community consider single women to be unlucky and—particularly for single women above the age of 45—they consider the women as witches. In Salyantar, there are now ten Single Women Groups and approximately 320 members. These local groups as well as the WHR public awareness programs have helped local communities to recognize the social stigma against single women, and slowly begin to change some of the attitudes at the local level.

Saili Kumal

Saili Kumal's story exemplifies how WHR has spread to the wider community at the VDC level. She was married young and has one daughter and four sons. Saili's husband is still alive so she is not a single woman, but she was in desperate need of help. She had sustained injuries during the earthquake that caused discomfort and bleeding months later. She was not comfortable to share this problem with her husband, so she told WHR staff who helped Saili to receive medical treatment that potentially saved her life. She is now one of WHR's biggest supporters and she makes it a point to attend all of the activities and programs at the center.

At the age of 15, Saili Kumal was married to her husband as part of an arranged marriage. Her husband used to drink a lot and would physically abuse her. Although he still drinks today, Saili said there is no longer any domestic violence at home.

Saili is now 45 years old. She and her husband have one daughter and four sons—the youngest of which is 14 years old and he still lives at home. The first four children all studied at school until Class 5, but their youngest son only completed Class 2. He now helps around the house and works alongside his parents doing agricultural manual labor. They do not have their own farmland, so Saili and her family work on her neighbors' land and receive half of the crops.

During the earthquake, Saili was in her home on the second floor when the house collapsed. She was covered by debris and knocked unconscious. After three hours, Saili was rescued but she sustained some serious injuries from the earthquake. For months after, she would have bleeding and cry because of the pain.



Saili inside her family's temporary shelter after the earthquake.

"I was afraid to tell anyone about my condition—not even my husband," said Saili. "So I kept it to myself and continued working in the fields and at home as usual."

Saili's home was destroyed, so her family had to stay under a large tarp with other displaced members of the community. After one month, her family built a temporary shelter out of bamboo and CGI where their old home once stood. It has a dirt floor, two wooden platforms for beds, a small cooking stove made of mud, and bamboo mats for sitting and sleeping. Her husband received the 15,000NPR stipend from the government for earthquake-affected victims, but instead of using the money to rebuild their home, but he used the money for drinking.

After the earthquake, Saili heard that WHR staff were visiting community members in her village and offering services to people in need. She decided to go to the Salyantar women's center and spoke to the counselor about her medical condition. When she came to WHR, she had already been regularly bleeding for three months. The WHR staff recommended that Saili go to the main hospital in Dhading Besi. WHR worked with the local Women Development Committee to cover Saili's travel expenses. Because of her financial situation, WHR staff also helped Saili to get a low-income medical procedure, which required that she have surgery in Bharatpur hospital. In the beginning of January, Saili had an operation that removed her uterus. She is not exactly sure what her injury was, but she feels much better now.



Saili with her youngest son.

"Before coming to WHR, I was very shy and afraid to share my problems," Saili said. "Now I understand the importance of sharing [my problems] with others because if I hadn't gotten the operation I probably would have died."

Today, Saili regularly attends WHR events and public awareness trainings. This is the first time she has ever participated in such activities. She said learning about women's rights has been very insightful. For the future, she plans to continue being involved with WHR and hopes to rebuild her home one day.

Bimala Nepali

Bimala Nepali is a young widow who lives on her own with her three daughters. Her husband died two years ago and at the age of 28, she is struggling to survive. Bimala is lucky though because her own family helps to support her. She works as a seamstress on a sewing machine in her home—although she is not earning enough money to pay for her children's education. Most of Bimala's home was destroyed in the earthquake, so she and her three daughters now live in one room that her brother helped to repair. She hopes to grow her tailoring business in the future so she can bring in more income to support her family.

"I want to give my children a quality education because I never had one," Bimala said. "I do not want my daughters to suffer like I have."



Bimala and her youngest daughter in the room where they live after the earthquake.

Bimala only studied until Class 5 and was married by the age of 15. She wants more for her three daughters—the oldest two now study in Class 5 and Class 4, and the youngest is three years old. Therefore, Bimala works from home so she can sew while taking care of her youngest daughter. For the past four years, Bimala has worked as a seamstress using the sewing machine that her husband bought for her after she completed a two-month training course. Bimala enjoys tailoring, but at the moment does not earn enough money to feed her children, so her family is helping to support her.

Bimala is not originally from Khoplang, but came to the area when she married her husband. Both of her husband's parents had died when he was young, so it was just Bimala, her husband and their children living together. Then, two years ago, Bimala's husband travelled to Kathmandu before leaving to go abroad for work. One night while he was away, Bimala received the news that her husband had eaten his dinner, gone to bed, and died in his sleep. She was devastated. But instead of providing sympathy, Bimala's neighbors said that she was unlucky and that she was responsible for her husband's death.

As a low caste single woman, Bimala began to internalize this notion. "Maybe I'm not good enough," she wondered. "Maybe I am to blame."

At the time of the earthquake, Bimala was in church with her children. When she came home to check on her house, she found that it had almost completely collapsed. There was one room made of brick that had been separate from the house that was still partially standing. Her brother came to visit and helped to repair the room by adding pieces of CGI to the walls and roof. Bimala and her children still live in this one small room, which feels a bit crowded with a bed, chest of clothing, two small tables, a bench, two chairs, and a sewing machine. Her brother also built a temporary shelter nearby that she now uses as a kitchen.



Bimali and her daughter outside their home.

Bimala heard about the Salyantar women's center when WHR staff members came to visit her village. She had been staying at home by herself and not talking with anyone, so she decided to attend a WHR program. There she realized the importance of sharing her problems with others and gained enough confidence to openly tell her story.

"I began to recognize that my neighbors were wrong," said Bimala. "I was not responsible for my husband's death."

Bimala is now very active with WHR and the Single Women Group and always attends all of the activities at the center. She has received relief material from WHR including a dignity kit, blanket, and stationary packages for her children. A huge financial support for Bimali, has been through the WHR staff nominating Bimala as a recipient for a grant from CARE Nepal that will help her to buy another sewing machine and invest in her tailoring business. Then she can use the money she earns to pay for her children's education.



Bimali working on the sewing machine her husband gave her before he died.

"It seems like a small thing, but to me this is really a dream and I am very grateful," she said.

Kamali Kumal

Kamali Kumal is a loving mother and single woman who wants the best for her children. She herself had no education, so she never forced her daughters to work in the fields but instead encouraged them to go to school. Two of her daughters are in Grade 7 and Grade 6, but her middle daughter no longer goes to school. She left home at age 12 to get married and now, two years later, has become a victim of domestic violence. Recently, her husband beat her so badly that she was hospitalized. Kamali was embarrassed to share her daughter's problem publicly, but after the last incident she told WHR about the abuse. The WHR staff helped to file a police report and for the past few months Kamali's daughter is no longer living in fear.



Kamali sitting outside of her home in Salyantar.

Kamali herself married at the age of 16. It was not a love marriage or a traditional arranged marriage because in the Kumal caste they have their own custom. Once the man asks the woman (or girl in most cases) to marry him, then—regardless of her own feelings or her parents'—she has to agree. Eight years ago, Kamali's husband died from tuberculosis. At the time, her youngest daughter was just two years old.

Since then, Kamali has become the sole provider for her family. She has some land where she grows crops, but it is not enough to feed her family. She also works in nearby fields and splits the harvest with the landowner. Kamali's home is made out of mud and brick, and is located in the middle of rice and dhal fields. Luckily, her home was only cracked during the earthquake with no serious damage.

Last June, the Salyantar WHR staff visited Kamali's home to tell her about the new women's center and to offer its services. Kamali's daughter had recently been badly beaten by her husband.

"Up to that point I had not told anyone about my daughter," said Kamali. "I didn't know what to do or how to help her."

Kamali told the WHR staff about her daughter's situation of domestic violence. She said that her daughter's parents-in-law also verbally and mentally abuse her daughter by calling her a witch and saying that she is unlucky. The parents-in-law were not giving Kamali's daughter adequate food, and her brother-in-law would also physically abuse her.



Kamali pauses as she shares her daughter's story.

The WHR staff referred the case to the local police station where they threatened to file a case of child marriage against Kamali's son-in-law if he did not cooperate. He consented to no longer mistreat Kamali's daughter and, so far, he has honored that agreement. Kamali and her daughter have since both received counseling from WHR at their home and in the new center.

"I am not very educated so I do not know how to express myself," said Kamali. "But I am very thankful for the help and I am happy that WHR is in Salyantar."

Kamali now regularly attends WHR programs and has joined the Single Women Group. Her dream for the future is for her other two daughters to get a good education so they do not have to suffer the way she and her other daughter have suffered.

Nuwakot District WHR District Office



WHR holding a gender-based violence awareness program in Tupche.

The WHR Nuwakot District Office is located in Bidur, a bustling city and capital of the district. This is a prime location because of its proximity to public transportation, although many women come from the villages travelling up to three hours to get there. The WHR office in Nuwakot began three years ago in a single room nearby. The women would bring office supplies from home and collectively pay for the office rent. Now since one month after the earthquake, the new office occupies the top floor of a building on the main road and includes a kitchen, office, meeting space, and skills training room.

The office has become a central hub for the single women in Nuwakot. It is a safe space for them to come and share their problems. The office employs two full-time paid staff, but several additional single women also volunteer at the center on a daily basis. On average, ten to 15 women visit the center per day, but some days it can be up to 70 or 80 women. Since its inception, the district office has reached between 4,000 and 5,000 women. The Single Women Group in Bidur is very active and has empowered its members to go beyond WHR and also seek funding from the local Chief District Officer (CDO) for different trainings and events.

Debaki Paudel, President of the Nuwakot Single Women Group, explained that many organizations in the area are working on children's rights and education issues, but it is very rare for an organization to focus only on single women.

"Many single women do not have their citizenship rights and no one else is fighting for them, so it is really important to advocate for them and have a group just for single women," Debaki said. "It is really hard for single women to share their problems because there is such social stigma, so we are very grateful for this center."

Some of the major problems that single women in Nuwakot face include domestic violence, and a medical condition known as a prolapsed uterus. Many of the women in rural Nepal birth their children at home and do not have proper post-natal care. Additionally, they often work doing hard physical labor and lifting heavy items, which can further stretch their muscles. Therefore, there are women young and old in Nuwakot who are suffering from a prolapsed uterus—when the ligaments and muscles holding up the uterus are weakened so the uterus drops. Some of the women have been using a bangle to keep their uterus in place. This medical condition requires an operation to fix, which the women cannot afford.

WHR Paracounselor Laxmi Phuyel speaks with a single woman in the Bidur office.



Due to the earthquake, many single women who were already struggling financially and emotionally are now displaced and/or lost family members. Many of their homes were destroyed, which was an incredible hardship without a husband or family to help them rebuild. Debaki also pointed out that during the earthquake it was a very scary time, but the single women did not have a husband to help as emotional support and they had to stay strong for their children. Thus, the Single Women Group in Nuwakot has helped to fill this emotional void.



WHR staff and Single Women Group members help distribute relief materials in Tupche.

Before WHR and the Single Women Group came to Nuwakot, a woman could only wear white after her husband died and society blamed her for his death. Now, the women understand that their husband's death is not their fault and that they can still wear red if they choose. Most importantly, the Single Women Group and WHR in Nuwakot gave a voice to the single women, who traditionally were alone in their homes without any support. They have become empowered and slowly helped to change societal perceptions about single women in the district.

Nuwakot District Tupche Women's Center



The new WHR Tupche Women's Center and the tent where it first began operations.

After the earthquake, WHR spoke with the CDO and found that no other organizations were operating in Tupche VDC. So they decided to open a women's center there. It began operating out of a tent until the new center could be constructed one month later. The center is a small office building with a large covered space out front where women can meet and hold programs. The center has one full-time support staff who lives in Tupche nearby and one paracounselor from the Bidur office who visits the center three days a week.

Approximately five or six women visit the center each day for counseling and walk up to three hours to reach the center. Domestic violence has been one of the most prevalent problems for single women in Tupche, as well as issues related to the earthquake. In addition to single women, some elderly women and women with disabilities also visit the center. WHR is still the only organization in the Tupche area working for women's rights.

WHR Paracounselor Laxmi Phuyel counsels women in Tupche.





WHR hosting a community orientation about the new center and its services.

The center has held public awareness programs at the Tupche site as well as in other villages. The programs have covered issues related to legal awareness, gender-based violence, personal hygiene, and health and sanitation.

“Being a single woman working for single women by helping them with counseling and referrals makes me feel really great and happy,” said Laxmi Phuyal, who serves as paracounselor at the Tupche center said. “I was married myself at the age of 15 and then widowed at the age of 16, so I know what it feels like to be a single woman.”

Parvati Neupani

Parvati Neupani's life has been anything but typical. By the time she was 16 years old, Parvati had already been married twice. Her second husband, who she married out of love, was 24 years her senior. They had three children together who are all now in school. During the earthquake, her four-year-old son was in their house when it collapsed. He was caught under rubble for eight hours until neighbors were able to rescue him. Parvati's husband was not so lucky. He had gone into the home to save his son, but was trapped under the door and killed. After the trauma of losing her husband and her home, Parvati was emotionally numb. She could not care for her children and no longer had a will to live. After many counseling sessions, Parvati is more stable and has found a purpose in life—she is committed to living for her children.

Parvati grew up in Tupche where she attended school until Grade 2. At age 14, she married her first husband who was 14 years older than her. After one year of marriage, he took a second wife and stopped paying attention to Parvati so she left and came back to live with her family. Then, at the age of 16, Parvati fell in love with her second husband and married again. Eventually they had three children—two sons and one daughter—who are now eight, five, and 11 years old.

When the earthquake hit last April, Parvati was in the fields farming and her children and husband were at home. Their two-story home collapsed and her youngest son was stuck inside. Her husband tried to rescue him, but he was trapped underneath the door and died. After eight hours, her son was finally saved by their neighbors.

After her husband's death, Parvati cried incessantly and fell into a deep depression. She could not take care of her children and had severe mental trauma that still affects her today.

"Since my husband died, the hardest thing has been facing all of the mistreatment from the community," said Parvati. "People said that my husband died because I am unlucky and that I was responsible. When some men came to build our shelter after the earthquake, my neighbors said I was having relations with them. Still whenever I speak to a man in public, people say things about me and question my character."

This type of treatment never happened when her husband was alive. In her village, Parvati's family shares a water pump with seven other families. However, after becoming a single woman the community has shunned Parvati from using the tap. Now she has to wake up before all of the other neighbors to fetch water for her family.

Parvati first heard about the new WHR women's center in Tupche when the staff came to visit her home. That initial meeting led to multiple counseling sessions both at Parvati's home and in the new center. Slowly, Parvati came to realize that her husband's death was



Parvati outside of her temporary family home in Tupche.

not her fault but just a matter of circumstance. Parvati joined the Tupche Single Women Group and has gained strength through sharing her experience with other single women.



Parvati and her youngest son, who was rescued from rubble after the earthquake.

“I now understand that I have to live for my children,” she said. “The Single Women Group has helped me to see that I am not the only one suffering—there are other women who have also lost their husbands.”

Parvati’s family helped her to transfer her husband’s home into her name. This allowed her to receive relief assistance from the government that has helped

to pay for her new home under construction. It is not as nice as their home before, but it will be an improvement from the small temporary shelter where they are currently living with CGI siding and a mud floor.

Parvati owns some farmland, so she works with others in the community as part of a parma labor sharing system—she farms her own land six months out of the year and then helps others. Her greatest hope is to live for her children and to help them to become independent. To help continue her children’s education, WHR referred Parvati as a recipient of the Future Flower Fund—an organization that supports the education of children who have lost a parent. So now, she receives 8000NPR annually to help support one of her children’s schooling.

Despite the tragedy of this past year, Parvati’s children are doing surprisingly well. Her 11-year-old daughter has started to help in the kitchen and she is learning how to cook—although she still occasionally burns things. Parvati’s youngest son, who had been trapped during the earthquake, has made a full recovery. And when asked what he wants to be when he grows up, her older son said, “I would like to be a doctor, but what I really want is to make my mother happy.”



Parvati’s three children at their home in Tupche.

Meena Threstha

Meena's entire life has been one of hardship and heartache. Her father died before she was born and her mother ran off with another man, so her aunt and uncle took care of her growing up. When she was 12, Meena began fainting several times a week. At the age of 14 she went to Kathmandu for a medical assessment but her condition was never properly diagnosed and continues to plague her today. Meena married at the age of 20 and had one son and one daughter. Then, after 13 years of marriage, her husband committed suicide by hanging himself in their home. After her husband's death, Meena's father-in-law began to physically abuse her. And on top of everything, Meena's home was destroyed in the recent earthquake so she and her children are now living in a temporary shelter. WHR has helped to provide some relief for Meena and her children, but she is still struggling with a serious medical condition and will continue to need support in the future.



While sharing about her recent struggles, Meena breaks into tears.

From her village, it takes Meena two hours walking and 45 minutes by bus to reach the WHR office in Nuwakot. But she makes this trip because WHR has provided her with support that she desperately needs. Meena is now 35 years old and lives in Gerkhu VDC with her four-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter.

At the age of 20, she married her husband who was 20 years her senior. She moved in with her husband four hours away from her aunt and uncle—the only family she had known. After getting married, Meena said she does not recall being particularly happy or sad because almost immediately she was pregnant with her first child, followed by another three years later.

During their marriage, Meena's husband took out several loans which he was never able to pay off. So now, two years after his death, the debt collectors come to Meena's home asking for payment and taking her possessions. Meena works in the nearby fields farming and doing agricultural manual labor, but her earnings are hardly enough to support her family.

"Since my husband died, it is hard to feed my children two meals a day," Meena said. "At work, I get a meal that I keep safe during the day and bring home with me at night so my children do not go hungry."



Meena and her son at the WHR office in Bidur.

Meena said she has a hard time working because of her medical condition. Beginning at the age of 12, Meena often feels dizzy and passes out. After getting a medical assessment more than 20 years ago, the doctor told Meena that she has a nerve condition and gave her medicine to treat it. However, the medicine has not worked and Meena does not have enough money to visit another doctor.

"Usually I faint about six or seven times a week," said Meena. "Sometimes I can feel it coming on because my feet begin to shake, but I can't always tell when it is going to happen."

About two months ago, Meena was cooking food when she fainted and fell into the fire. Upon visiting the WHR Nuwakot office, the burn on her leg was infected so WHR staff took her to the local hospital for medical treatment. At the same time, her son also had an injury on his knee that was treated.

WHR helped Meena deal with the domestic abuse she has been experiencing from her father-in-law. She first heard about WHR in June from other people in her community, so she decided to travel the three hours to visit the office and share her story. WHR staff counseled Meena and brought her father-in-law to the police station to file a case. He participated in an agreement that said he would no longer physically abuse Meena. Since then, her father-in-law has not mistreated Meena. She feels very relieved that he is no longer beating her, but their relationship is complicated because all of her husband's property is now under his name.

"By sharing my story I now know that other women are also suffering from the same issues, so counseling has been very helpful," Meena said.

Because of the intensity of her case, the second time Meena visited the WHR office the staff brought her to Women's Rehabilitation Center (WOREC) in Bidur for specialized

counseling. It is difficult for the WHR staff to get a hold of Meena because she does not own a mobile phone, so they have to communicate with her by sending messages to her neighbors. Despite this difficulty, Meena remains active with WHR. She recently participated in a livelihoods training on sewing slippers that was held at the WHR office and funded by the Nuwakot CDO.

After the earthquake, Meena's family home was destroyed. She and her children are currently living in a temporary CGI shelter, so her biggest hope for the future is to build a new home. She also wants to get enough money to pay off her husband's loans. So far, Meena is not a Single Women Group member because she cannot afford the 20 NPR joining fee. However, WHR staff have offered to help her cover this amount, so she is looking forward to becoming a member of the local Single Women Group.

Champa Shrestha

Champa Shrestha's husband died seven years ago of HIV/AIDS. Since then she has been the main provider for her family, which has been difficult because she has three children in school. She farms crops on her own land, but it is not sufficient to feed her whole family. After the earthquake, Champa's home was damaged so she and her children are now living in a temporary shelter they built themselves out of local materials. After finding WHR, Champa has received multiple counseling sessions. She is grateful for the much-needed emotional support.



Champa and her two daughters at the WHR district office.

Champa Shrestha and her three children live in Madanpur VDC, about a two-and-a-half hour walk from the WHR Nuwakot office. She is originally from another village about four hours from Madanpur, but since she got married 16 years ago that has been her home.

Champa is now a 35-year-old single woman. Her husband died of HIV/AIDS. He had been working at hotel in Mumbai and fell ill and then, nine months later, he passed away. At the time, Champa's son was two years old. Champa's parents-in-law had already died as well.

"I was overwhelmed with being the only one responsible for my children's wellbeing, education, and family income," she recalled.

Champa has some land where she grows maize, rice, and potatoes, but it is not enough to support her family. She also works in fields nearby her home to earn money and more food. And although Champa's husband died seven years ago, the land has not been transferred over into her name. Champa's brother-in-law insists that the land should only be transferred into her son's name once he turns 16 years old.

In the earthquake last April, Champa's family home was damaged so it is no longer livable. Her family's land is located on a steep slope, which was dangerous to build a home on after the earthquake. Therefore, Champa and her children are now living on her neighbors' land for the time being. They built a temporary shelter out of local materials and recently acquired CGI from Oxfam that will help to reinforce their temporary home.

On a trip to Bidur last September, a lady from Champa's community told her about WHR. Champa visited the office and shared her story with WHR staff. So far, she has had three counseling sessions at the Nuwakot office, which has been extremely beneficial.

"I am happy to know about WHR because before no organization or people helped me in this way," she explained. "More than material items, it is the emotional support that is important to me."

Since September, Champa has attended legal awareness and gender-based violence programs at the WHR office and is learning more about her rights as a single woman. To help support her three children's education, WHR staff referred one of Champa's children to be sponsored by the Future Flower Foundation. She now receives 8000NPR annually to help support their schooling. Champa's dream is to make a new home for her family and to provide her children with a quality education so one day they can live happily on their own.



Champa discusses the challenge of being the only breadwinner since her husband's death.

Acknowledgement



WHR staff carry relief and construction materials to set up the new Tupche women's center.

After the April 25 earthquake last year, the single women of Nepal have sustained various hardships in addition to the already existing challenges within society. Women for Human Rights, single women group (WHR) is dedicated to helping these women and their families. With the support of Oxfam, over the past year we were able to open eight new women's centers in six districts to offer services for single women and woman at risk during this time of need.

We would sincerely like to thank Oxfam for its support in making this dream into a reality. We would also like to thank all of the committed staff and volunteers who have gone above and beyond expectations in the post-earthquake relief and recovery phases to help the single women of Nepal. Lastly, we would like to express our genuine appreciation to all of the single women who agreed to share their stories for this project. They are truly courageous women who have demonstrated such resilience and strength in the face of extreme adversity. We thank them and remain committed to their long-term empowerment.

Dhanyabaad,
Women for Human Rights, Single Women Group

STORIES OF HOPE

A COMPILATION OF SINGLE WOMEN'S STORIES IN POST-EARTHQUAKE NEPAL



WOMEN FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, Single Women Group (WHR)

“No discrimination on the basis of marital status”

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