International Women’s Day 2014
On equal grounds: Engaging women for progress

Today is yet another time to reflect on over a century of progress in bringing women increasingly away from the margins and into the realm of equality. Globally and in Nepal, efforts are underway to celebrate the extraordinary efforts of ordinary women who have shown the courage and determination to pave the way for others to follow. The theme for this year’s 104th International Women’s Day is one of realization – that “Equality for women is progress for all”. Equality begins with engagement which means bringing women out from the sidelines of development and engaging them in central roles. In the past year, United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Saath-Saath Project (SSP) has done just that – engage the tremendous capacity of the women who have supported the implementation of the project’s diverse activities and shown remarkable leadership in steering their organizations toward stellar performance.

Empowering Nepal’s Female Community Health Volunteers
Twenty five years since its initiation, Female Community Health Volunteers (FCHVs) in Nepal have become the backbone of the country’s overall health system in improving community participation and to expand health education and outreach services to families throughout the country. Understanding the importance of FCHVs in providing health-related messages to the community, SSP initiated FCHV roll out program in its four districts with high migrant laborer population; namely Bara, Kapilvastu, Nawalparasi and Palpa; for encouraging use of family planning (FP) methods use among the migrant couples. For this the project partnered with local District Public Health Offices in the districts to train and mobilized FCHVs in the respective districts.

SSP's efforts assisted to mobilize FCHVs and mothers groups to provide integrated FP and HIV-related information and referrals for FP services in the four districts. Between August and December 2013, FCHVs provided information and education on dual method use (condom and another FP method) to 4,297 spouses of migrants in Palpa and 9,732 in Kapilvastu. Similarly, they helped provide information and education on healthy timing and spacing (HTSP) to 5,510 spouses of migrants in Palpa and 11,780 in Kapilvastu.

Reaching Nepali women through an integrated program providing FP and HIV services
Under SSP, a key approach has been the integration of FP services into existing HIV services for key population. The project has successfully managed to provide both these services from the same site, a feat done for the first time in Nepal. As the project is working directly with female sex workers and spouse of male migrants, women are at the forefront of promoting their own health and wellbeing. Between August 2013-January 2014, of the total individuals reached with HIV prevention and FP promotion activities, 40% were women. In the same period, 54% of people receiving HIV counseling and testing services and 56% of those examined for STI were women. Likewise 54% of people living with HIV receiving palliative care under SSP were women. Out of the 8,616 people who participated in various capacity building activities, 69% were women. Provision of FP information, counseling and services has empowered women through promotion of informed reproductive choice and rights and thus ultimately their health.

Community Action Center Nepal (CAC-Nepal)
Tulasa Lata Amatya, the Executive Director at CAC-Nepal, a local NGO partner of SSP, has been with the organization for 20 years. She has led efforts with FSWs to enable them for negotiating condoms, partner reduction, seeking care and treatment, preventing gender based violence, linking them to different organizations based on their needs like education, skills development, and advocacy against gender violence. She is proud to lead such an organization which has successfully empowered women. She feels that “Many things need to be addressed for the development of women and for bringing new women leaders in Nepal. First is women’s education. Second is to provide trainings on areas like skill based and if possible provide exposure visits for learning opportunity where they can get exposed and have wider vision. And third, the need of male involvement to fight for gender equity, which will not be possible if we could not take them along. Only then women would be empowered and get equity in job, family and community, and in political decision making.”
Increasing the participation of women in key roles
SSP continued its efforts to promote equitable participation by encouraging increased recruitment of qualified and competent female staff within SSP’s central office and among its implementing agencies. Under SSP, 80% of total local NGO partner staff implementing HIV prevention and FP promotion are women; 55% of EIHS staff are women, 56% of the team members for CHBC are women; and 29% of Project Coordinator, 43% of Admin/Finance staff and 46% of MIS staff are women. Among these local partners, 42% of the organizations are led by women and 52% of executive board members are women. Also all (364) peer educators are women and 98% of radio listeners group (RLG) facilitators are also women.

Voices from the helm: The journey of organizations led by women
Jagriti Mahila Maha Sangh (JMMS)
JMMS was established in 2006 with assistance from USAID–funded ASHA Project (2006-2011) as a woman led national network for female sex workers (FSWs) and works to enable FSWs to address sexual and reproductive health and other pressing issues affecting their lives. The network operates through multiple community based organizations (CBOs) in 21 districts of Nepal to deliver quality services on HIV and reproductive health, improve access and utilization of those services, and prevent or mitigate gender based violence. Under SSP, JMMS continues its remarkable work as a national network partner wherein staffs from its CBOs have been mobilized as peer educators working alongside other NGO partners to provide HIV prevention and FP promotion services. These peer educators have been crucial in reaching new FSWs, contribute to generating demand and increasing uptake of FP and HIV-related services provided by SSP. Through SSP’s assistance, JMMS has also conducted various need-based trainings on critical areas such as advocacy and leadership, public speaking, documentation and report writing, and sexual and reproductive health for members of its board and CBOs. JMMS has also conducted trainings on reducing stigma and discrimination for the community and the CBOs. Says a leading member of JMMS, “Before joining JMMS, I was in isolation and socially and economically deprived. However, today though different programs in JMMS through SSP, I am more confident and independent which has helped me to act as a leader in the society and help other women with similar problems. Being one of those female leaders, I appreciate efforts and works done by all the women leaders. The role of these women leaders is significant in the development sector because they are the ones who are actively working for the rights of women and their empowerment.”

Child and Women Empowerment Society
Child and Women Empowerment Society or CWES was established in 1999 by a group of social and legal experts with the common goal of mitigating violence against women in Nepali society. With support from different donors including USAID-funded projects, we have been able to ensure that the rights of women, which include advocacy, livelihood support, and capacity building, are realized. We have implemented several programs on HIV, women and child health. We work in coordination with government and non-government organizations and various national women’s forum. Such coordination has assisted to provide legal support to women. Female participation in development sector has increased a lot but still there is a gap in women holding decision making positions. Women can contribute significantly in development sector if provided with more decision making roles. Without women’s participation, development work cannot be sustainable.”

Ms. Indra Kumari Adhikari, Chairperson
CWES (SSP local NGO partner)
Pictures from IWD 2014 program in Kathmandu