



Until we are all equal

STORIES OF HOPE

Empowering communities
against human trafficking

A Plan International Nepal campaign

PROTECT

PROTECTION, TRACKING, EDUCATION & TRANSFORMATION

2019-2023

About the publication

This document compiles human interest stories highlighting the initiatives and impacts of Plan International Nepal's PROTECT project, implemented from 2019 to 2023.

The content primarily comprises observational narratives and interviews with key stakeholders.

For comprehensive details regarding the context, project, and approaches, please refer to the last pages following the conclusion of the story section.

All the interviews with survivors were conducted in confidentiality in safe spaces with their full consent. Moreover, interviews with minors including students and youth ambassadors were carried out with prior written consent.

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Youth Ambassadors staging street drama raising awareness about trafficking risks.
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FOREWORD

A journey of our campaign against human trafficking in Nepal

As we pen the final chapter of our PROTECT Project aiming at combating human trafficking, I am filled with a profound sense of gratitude and accomplishment. Plan International Nepal embarked on this journey in 2019 with a singular mission — to uplift, empower, and protect the vulnerable communities in Banke, Sunsari, and Makwanpur districts of Nepal from the risk of human trafficking.

This book stands as a testament to the resilience, strength, and untold stories of the beneficiaries, youth, women, children, and the diverse stakeholders who became an integral part of our initiative. As we flip through the pages, we encounter narratives of triumph over adversity, courage in the face of vulnerability, and the transformative power of collective action.

The journey of this project, spanning from 2019 to 2023, has been a collaborative effort. It's a story of partnerships forged, communities strengthened, and lives positively impacted. The pages of this book echo the voices of those who, at one point, felt voiceless and marginalized.

One of the cornerstones of this project has been the active involvement of our youth, who have not only become aware but have also embraced a profound sense of responsibility toward their communities. The stories of these youth ambassadors resonate throughout this book, showcasing not only their personal growth but also their dedication to raising awareness about the critical

issue of human trafficking. Their continued advocacy efforts stand as a testament to the sustainability of the anti-human trafficking initiatives initiated by this project.

Moreover, our collaborative approach has borne fruit in the form of ownership taken by government stakeholders and other key partners. Their commitment to continuing certain aspects of the project underscore the sustainability of the impact we have made together.

In our commitment to innovation, we deployed advanced digital techniques, such as the Maya Chat Bot, an AI generated tool operated in Facebook messenger, tailoring information to the specific needs of our youth. Recognizing that youth are among the most vulnerable populations concerning trafficking, this innovative approach allowed us to reach and empower those who needed it the most.

Our commitment to combating human trafficking goes beyond the temporal boundaries of this project. It is a commitment woven into the fabric of Plan International Nepal's ongoing efforts to create a world where every child, every woman, and every community can thrive, free from the shackles of exploitation.

To the dedicated teams, local implementing partners, and the resilient communities who embraced change, thank you for being the driving force behind this initiative. As we bid farewell to this project, let us carry forward the lessons learned and the connections forged. Together, we have made a lasting impact, and I am confident that the echoes of our efforts will reverberate through the lives we've touched for years to come.

In solidarity,

**Ram Kishan, Country Director
Plan International Nepal**



Youth Ambassadors meeting to share ideas about their campaign for community awareness.
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Welcome to a compilation of impactful stories emerging from the Plan International Nepal's PROTECT project in Banke, Makwanpur, and Sunsari. This publication shares the project's transformative journey in combating human trafficking, emphasizing the roles of youth ambassadors, communities, educators, parents, and state stakeholders.

These narratives, etched with resilience and community participation, serve as a beacon for both government and non-government entities. The stories encapsulate successful campaigns, inspiring initiatives, and collaborative endeavors. They are a testament to the power of collective action, providing a roadmap for crafting similar campaigns across Nepal.

In these accounts, witness how communities, with their active participation, became instrumental in the project's success. Their engagement and commitment exemplify the potential for grassroots efforts to fortify systems, especially in safeguarding children and youth at risk of trafficking. Let these stories inspire a ripple effect, fostering a Nepal where exploitation finds no ground, and protection becomes a shared responsibility.



STORIES OF HOPE

An AI-generated illustration featuring a woman in a blue sari with gold patterns, seen from behind, standing in a field. In the foreground, several black goats are grazing. The background shows a warm, golden sunset or sunrise over a hilly landscape with mountains. Three birds are flying in the sky. The overall style is painterly and vibrant.

SECOND CHANCES

Stories of survivors reminds us of the horrors of abuse, sexual violence and gross exploitation faced by Nepali girls and women after being trafficked to the red light districts of India. With the help of PROTECT project, survivors have a second chance in life to get back on their feet and reintegrated into their community and family.

Illustration AI-generated using Leonardo AI app illustrating story of a survivor moving on with her life with support of Plan International Nepal's PROTECT project.

Stories of survivors are hard to document because we often find ourselves in a difficult situation asking questions of their ordeals and making them reflect on their experiences. But their real-life stories help us to understand the severity of the problem. This is one such story of a survivor whose name and identity will remain anonymous. For this story, we shall refer to her by the pseudonym 'Samikshya'.

Samikshya was at home with her parents. Despite their financial struggles, they led a content and quiet life. One day, a stranger came to their village, sharing news that he had been sent by Samikshya's elder sister, who was seriously ill. She had asked Samikshya to come to Pune in India to help her.

Samikshya had recently turned 16, and the stranger was remarkably convincing, having all the information about the family. Initially, Samikshya's father resisted sending her with the stranger, but her mother was concerned about their elder daughter, who had no one in India to care for her.

Samikshya then packed her luggage and headed to the Gorakhpur railway station, where her father had dropped her. Little did he know that it would be the last time he would see his daughter, unknowingly putting her in a dangerous situation.

"I remember sitting in the train, but I don't recall how I reached Pune. All I can recollect is finding myself in a room full of young girls, and there were so many rooms like that," recalls Samikshya. She starts breaking down, unable to speak for a while.

We asked if we should stop the interview, but she tells us it's fine, and she wants to finish her story.

Samikshya ended up in a brothel, and she had no clue what it was. She remembers seeing a lot of others like her, many even younger than her. She thought her sister was also there and looked for the stranger, but he had already left. He was a notorious trafficker, according to the girls who spoke with her. She cried and appealed for their help, but they just sat there as they could do nothing for her. It pained them to see her in that situation and reminded them of their own predicament when they were brought there the first time.

"The girls said, 'We don't know your sister, but you have been sold like us.' I cried so much, but I couldn't escape. The brothel owners pushed me into a room, and they shut the door. Since then, I was unable to step the foot outside the door. I could see the daylight only from my window," Samikshya tells us, and she pauses for a long time.

After many years, she met a man who helped her escape, and they got married. But after their daughter was born, he fled, and she had no choice but to join another brothel to make a living as she didn't know her way back home. In this way, she spent 17 years forced to work in the brothel until she became sick. She also suffered from paralysis, and she was no longer of any value to her brothel owner. She found help from a Nepali NGO and was able to return home, which was hardly a home for her anymore.

Both her parents had already died, and she had no income. She found her younger brother who gave her shelter, but he was also living in an impoverished state.

“I was happy sitting home, helping my parents, and grazing the cattle. Even in our poverty situation, I was still a healthy girl and living in peace. This trafficker destroyed my youth, but now I want to work hard to make a better life for my daughter,”

Samikshya, survivor of trafficking

Witnessing selling of innocents

Samikshya worries as she observes young Nepalis in her community freely navigating life, rushing into marriage at a tender age, and leaving their homes in pursuit of a better life.

“Today's girls are much smarter and more educated, but I still worry about how they can get trapped. I have witnessed that when I was in Pune,” says Samikshya. After enduring years of forced labor and entrapment, she witnessed several girls being brought in by traffickers adorned in wedding dresses, only to be sold for prostitution. She vividly recalls instances where girls were betrayed by their own relatives.

On one occasion, a man brought in a minor and abandoned her there. Samikshya discovered that the girl was his niece, raised as his own daughter.

“I remember how she cried for help and looked for her uncle. She reminded me of when I was brought here as a young girl. I recall saying, ‘your uncle is not coming back. You have been sold like us.’”

Samikshya also witnessed the heartbreaking reality of girls being sold by their own brothers, husbands, and various relatives. She had seen it all with her own eyes and remains convinced that girls are still falling victim to trafficking due to the cunning tactics employed by traffickers.

Samikshya harbors a fear that, despite the efforts of NGOs and governments, rescuing trafficked victims already sold into exploitative situations, especially young girls, remains a daunting task. She recounts instances when the Indian police, accompanied by Nepali representatives from NGOs, conducted raids, yet she and the other young girls were cleverly hidden in places they could not be discovered.

“I am home now after 17 years, and I don’t even remember what it was like to be young. My life has changed for the better, but I am still afraid of anyone finding out my real story. I am telling this story because I owe Plan International Nepal for their support, and I trust them,” says Samikshya.

New Beginnings

We then visit her goat farm, where she proudly shows her goats, smiling as she sees them in good health. Her brother played a pivotal role in constructing the farm, sparing her from additional expenses for labor and construction.

Samikshya was one of the key beneficiaries of the PROTECT project, which reached out to her when the team heard about her through reliable sources.

“The project people came to visit me and gave all the support that could help me survive, and I am so happy

to know that there are people who care for me,” says Samikshya.

She was invited to the project office in Makwanpur, where she received their help and advice.

The project provided her training to develop skills in goat rearing, accounting, and business planning. She also received seed money to start her own goat farm.

“When I came back home from India, I didn’t have any documentation to prove I am from Nepal, and it was the project people who helped me,” says Samikshya. Since she didn’t have a marriage certificate or information about her parents, she wasn’t able to get citizenship.

The project team was able to garner support from local government officials.

“Today I have both citizenship and a birth certificate for my daughter, and she can continue her higher studies. I want her to have a good life, and I will protect her,” shares Samikshya, who feels positive about her daughter and herself.

The project also facilitated access to government services, including a disability card that helps her receive a monthly stipend of Rs 6,400 (USD 48).

Reintegration with community support



Reintegrating survivors of trafficking into their communities and families is often challenging, as they still fear being ostracized if their real stories are exposed. Most of the survivors who have been supported by PROTECT project request not to be identified. The project has also ensured confidentiality, even from their own families.

This approach has helped the project earn the trust of survivors, enabling them to move on with their lives and get a second chance. Samikshya is one such example of how she has been able to rebuild her life.

One of the project's cornerstones is the Enterprise Your Life (EYL) training, an initiative aimed at providing income-generation and business planning skills to survivors of human trafficking and gender-based violence. The process involves careful selection, home visits, and baseline surveys to identify candidates for an intensive 8-day residential training.

The project not only equipped survivors with skills but went a step further. It extended a hand, providing seed funds to kickstart the businesses generated from these training sessions. For each survivor, this wasn't just an investment; it was a vote of confidence to begin their new lives.

The participants received a seed fund of between NRs 15,000-40,000 (USD112-300) on a case-by-case basis, helping them to start their individual enterprises. Over 50 survivors have been supported, and they have started various enterprises from tailoring businesses to goat farming, enabling them to embark on their journey to self-sufficiency.

The AI-generated art image does not portray any real person.

The project has empowered survivors through this transformative training, equipping them with the skills necessary for economic independence. Subsequent business skill training further honed their abilities, resulting in the development of viable business plans.

“The project provided me with every support, and now we have a goat farm. My life is better now, and though I have to struggle to make enough money, I feel good that we will be able to have a secure livelihood. I feel like I have been reborn,” says Samikshya.

The project has offered tangible support to survivors, enabling them to set up their businesses effectively. For example, the project provided the survivors, trained as professional tailors, not just with cash for seed funding but also purchased sewing machines, tables, chairs, and the necessary tools needed to start a tailoring enterprise.

These investments from the project have helped create impacts for survivors of domestic violence, such as Rumila (name changed) in Sunsari, once trapped in an abusive marriage, who now runs thriving tea and snack shops. Rumila’s journey from a domestic violence survivor to a small business owner portrays a sign of hope among survivors.

The project’s comprehensive approach extends beyond training and support. It actively engages in advocacy, conducting meetings with local governments to forge links with income generation programs. The aim is to ensure sustained financial support for

From survivor of violence to an entrepreneur

“I am successfully managing a small-scale business in my village, supporting my family through the skills training provided by the PROTECT project. Forced to discontinue my studies, I found myself married to an alcoholic man whose abusive behavior took a toll, and I endured violence from him. I resorted to begging money from my parents, despite their limited means.

I chose to break free. I divorced him, returning home with my son. My parents faced their own challenges and couldn’t offer the support I needed. The nearest employment opportunity for women in my community was in Siliguri, India. Determined to provide a good education for my son, I made the difficult choice to leave him behind with friends and seek work in Siliguri.

But I changed my mind after I enrolled in the project’s 5-day skill development training to enhance my business capacity. My confidence in my business increased. I am confident of my capability to support my son’s education for his bright future through my income from my small business selling tea and snacks in my village. This brings happiness and hope, changing my fortune.”

Rumila, survivor of domestic violence

survivors through grants and opportunities provided by local municipalities.

Bijuli Devi Shah from Sunsari expresses, “This training has provided me with business insights and skills to undertake business on my own. I believe this support will be helpful to improve my economic conditions.”

In Makwanpur, Subrita, a survivor of trafficking, saw her dream of starting a business become a reality through EYL training. This program wasn’t just about imparting skills; it was a journey of rediscovery and empowerment. With newfound determination, she planned to start a tailoring business, not just for herself but to set an example for women in her community.

“I dream of starting my own business has come true. I have planned to start a tailoring business. I will run the business sincerely and set an example for other women in my society. I am very thankful to the Project,” says Subrita.

Reintegration challenges: The ongoing struggle

The project’s advocacy efforts extend into changing societal perceptions, making room for acceptance and support for survivors as they reintegrate into their communities. However, as survivors take their first steps towards independence, reintegration into society and families remains a challenge. Many survivors, who had been trafficked, continue to choose

silence over disclosure. Fearful of ostracization and societal judgment, they live in anonymity.

The project’s success in economically empowering survivors is a beacon of hope, but societal reluctance to accept these survivors remains an obstacle for them. Even as Samikshya and many trafficking survivors envision her goat farming business, she and others like her live in constant fear of their own communities. The fear of disclosure is not just a personal struggle; it’s an indictment of the larger societal apathy towards the survivors’ plight.

A societal shortcoming: the need for sensitivity

As organizations working to fight trafficking and help survivors, the difficult task lies not in their efforts but in the societal fabric that still frowns upon accommodating the narratives of survivors. Despite being victims, these individuals, like Samikshya, fear that revealing their stories will only lead to further isolation.

The reluctance to disclose names and live a quiet life is not a choice but a defense mechanism against a society unready to accept them back. The prevailing sentiment that survivors will tarnish the community’s reputation reflects a profound lack of empathy. It is a collective failure that extends beyond the individual survivor to the very foundations of societal sensitivity.

Rebuilding lives: Helping circus survivor to **transform** into a successful entrepreneur

Rabina (name changed) grew up in an Indian circus. Due to her family's financial circumstances, she was unable to attend school during her childhood. Her father had spent two decades as a dwarf entertainer in the circus. After his untimely demise, she was forced to replace him in the circus, where she had to perform various difficult and life-threatening tricks like bicycle stunts on a rope, gymnastic stunts and so on.

"Even after undertaking various challenging performances, I would earn a meagre income of 400 Nepali Rupees (approx. USD 3) per month. I was risking my my life to support my mother and younger sibling. I wanted," says Rabina.

Unable to bear the hardships faced by Rabina, who was barely 10, her mother escaped from the circus. She took both of her daughters back to their hometown in Nepal. She was able to put Rabina to school. But their lives didn't progress as they faced discrimination in the community due to their past lives of working in the circus.

Rabina got married when she was of age but her hardshio still continued. Her husband worked as a driver but his income was very low. Rabina wanted to help but she lacked education or any training. She then heard about

the Enterprise Your Life (EYL) from a friend, who was also a survivor of circus entertainment. She was offered skill training for business enterprise throug Rural Awareness and Development Organization Nepal (RADO Nepal), local implementing NGO partner of PROTECT.

The training gave her an idea of running business, and also motivated her to start her own shop. The eight-day training session proved effective and she learnt about business planning for a start-up. With the project's guidance, she developed a business plan. She received NRs. 40,000 (USD 300) as a seed fund from the project to begin her grocery selling food items and chatpatey (a famous Nepali street-snack). She started making a gross sale of NRs.5000 (USD 38) per day.

Her husband worked as her partner and they are putting their savings of NRs. 500 (USD 3.8) a day in local co-operative. They have also put their daughter to school.

"The 8-day training program changed my life.I feel economically independent and secure now," says 24-year old Rabina. She adds, "We have a lot of people in our ward who are returnees of circus from India, but fear returning due to lack of financial insecurity," says Rabina.

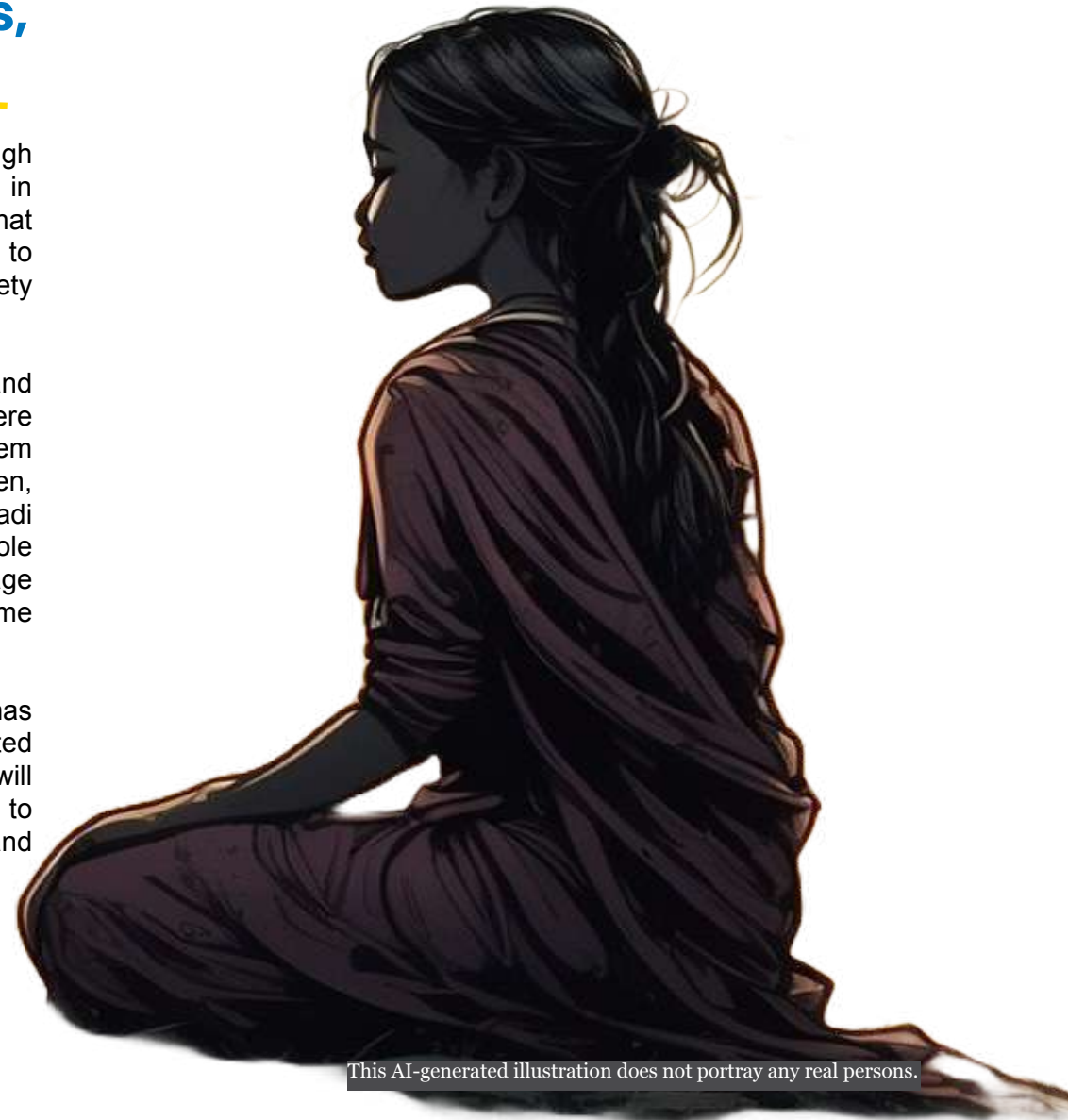
But she believes there is hope for change for survivors to rebuild their lives through the help of PROTECT. She shares examples of her friend and herself starting a good life with the help of the EYL training. They have also become role models for many other women in their community.

Conclusion: breaking chains, mending hearts

As survivors take on their entrepreneurial journeys through projects like PROTECT, the real challenge lies not just in acquiring skills but in dismantling the societal barriers that perpetuate their silence. As survivors like Samikshya try to start new lives, such as her goat farming venture, society must also stand at the crossroads of change.

“For the reintegration of survivors, including women, men, and third gender, it is very important to rebuild their lives. There should be a service center at the municipalities to give them protection,” says Mandira Thapa, former Chief of Women, Children, and Social Inclusion Division of Makwanpur Gadi Municipality. She highlights the significance of the state’s role in sensitizing society about the survivors with the message that they are not criminals, and they didn’t commit any crime or sin.

The project’s success in providing second chances has shown the way for survivors like Samikshya to be reintegrated into their society, and there is hope that communities will continue the campaign started by the PROTECT project to help embrace their stories of resilience, give them hope, and provide redemption..



This AI-generated illustration does not portray any real persons.





I AM AGAINST
TRAFFICKING
#togetherweendchildtrafficking

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बेचबिखनविरुद्धको
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Youth campaigners have emerged as key strength of the PROTECT project
©Plan International Nepal

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YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

Youth mobilization emerged as a key strength throughout the project's implementation. The project successfully nurtured a substantial number of youth ambassadors hailing from diverse backgrounds and experiences. These youth ambassadors evolved into empowered youth leaders in their communities, actively campaigning against human trafficking, unsafe migration, domestic violence, child marriage, and gender discrimination. This empowerment is illustrated by the readiness of community members to approach these youth ambassadors to address incidents of violence, child marriage, trafficking, and child abuse. The project's remarkable feat was in building a vibrant network of youth leaders.



THE YOUNG WARRIORS

Rejina has transformed into a fearless role model like many youth ambassadors
©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

Rejina has faced innumerable death threats for her relentless campaigns against deeply ingrained harmful social practices. Yet, undeterred, she persistently advocates against human trafficking, child marriage, indentured labor, gender-based violence, and all forms of exploitation and violations against children in households, schools, and communities.

In Makwanpur District, Rejina has emerged as a formidable force reshaping the narrative of youth advocacy. A college student pursuing a Bachelor's in Business Studies (BBS), she stands as a powerful figure in the fight against child marriage, trafficking, and violence against women. Rejina's four-year journey as a youth ambassador is a testament to courage, resilience, and an unwavering pursuit of social change.

"I see so many young people marrying young, child labor, victims of online scamming, and I wanted to make a difference and change all the social harms," reflects Rejina, acknowledging the transformative impact of the PROTECT project on her journey from a shy teenager to a fierce campaigner.

Rejina's involvement began in the first cohort of youth ambassadors created by the project, marking the inception of a transformative journey that would redefine her role in the community. "Since the PROTECT project

started, I have been working with them to advocate and as a campaigner," she states, underlining her dedication to the cause.

The project's empowerment training became the cornerstone of Rejina's advocacy. Armed with insights into the intricacies of human trafficking and child marriage, she emerged as a proactive force. "What changes did I bring? What roles did I play?" she reflects, recounting the initial skepticism and threats she faced when addressing the sensitive topic of child marriage. Despite the adversity, Rejina's persistence and the parent education through Plan International Nepal's Social Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) sessions initiated a gradual but significant shift in mindset.

"Mothers, especially, are starting to raise their voice after I educated them," Rejina notes, pointing to the transformative impact of the sessions. What started as resistance within her own family turned into active support. "Now my own parents – mother and father, when they hear about any event of child marriage, they ask me to take action," she shares, illustrating the paradigm shift within her own household.

Rejina's tool for sparking change is the SBCC sessions, where she employs visual storytelling to convey the harsh realities of trafficking.

Video series, Maya and Udaya:

Plan International Nepal's SBCC strategy involves a video series featuring characters 'Maya and Udaya'. This highly informative and entertaining series aims to effectively communicate and influence social norms, fostering positive behavioral change and addressing critical issues in communities. Maya and Udaya serve as relatable figures to engage and educate audiences, contributing to Plan International Nepal's broader mission of promoting positive societal transformation.

Maya Chatbot is an innovative tool using AI technology developed by Plan International Nepal in partnership with Tangible AI. Designed to engage and educate youth, especially those in grade 6 and above, Maya utilizes visual storytelling on messaging platforms to impart crucial information about human trafficking, child marriage, and child labor. This interactive and educational approach allows Maya to play a vital role in empowering young individuals, raising awareness about social issues, and human trafficking.

"One single video show of Maya and Udaya had an immediate impact on the children and other young people like me," she recounts.

Her engagement with youth, especially those in grade 6 and above, showcases her adaptability, using the Maya app on messenger to teach them about trafficking, child marriage, and child labor.

Her transformation into a respected advocate is an example of the project's impact. Rejina's involvement in parent education sessions tackled deep-seated issues like discrimination between sons and daughters and corporal punishment. Parents learned not just to listen but to actively nurture their children.

The journey, however, was not without its perils. Rejina faced threats to her life, especially after conducting impactful positive parenting sessions. Yet, her resolve remained unshaken. Supporting a fellow youth ambassador facing serious threats, Rejina took a group of her peers to protect her and sought police intervention, leading to an apology from the perpetrator.



Youth Ambassador Rejina educating her mother about new trends of trafficking.
©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

The family was forced to stop the marriage of their underage daughter after receiving a warning from the police after Rejina's friend reported the case. The challenges were daunting, including threats of acid attacks, but the community's appreciation and her family's unwavering support strengthened her resolve.

Rejina's influence extends beyond immediate challenges. Youth, once unaware of emergency numbers or the intricacies of trafficking, are now equipped with knowledge. As a youth ambassador, she organized positive parenting sessions, brought villagers to SBCC sessions, and collaborated with the municipality for public awareness campaigns.

Looking ahead, Rejina's commitment to the cause remains unwavering, even as the project concludes. "Even if there are no projects supporting us, we will continue our campaign because there are so many social problems in our communities," she asserts. Her involvement began through the Gaun Palika (rural municipality) child network, and since then, she's been an active participant, proving that even the initial threats couldn't deter her.

Rejina's journey as a youth ambassador reflects a transformation from a concerned college student to a fearless advocate. Her efforts contribute to a community that is more informed, empowered, and resilient against the scourges of child marriage and human trafficking. As Rejina continues to defy the odds, her narrative becomes not just a personal journey but a beacon of hope for communities grappling with social injustices.

400 social warriors



"At its core, the project has harnessed the power of youth, who have proven to be the project's greatest strength, with over 400 dedicated youth ambassadors at the forefront of advocating for social change and combating human trafficking," says Anu Upadhyay, PROTECT's project manager. Over the years, she and her team at Plan International Nepal have witnessed how these young change agents have played a pivotal role in empowering their communities by raising awareness about trafficking issues.

Through the guidance of the project team in all three districts of Banke, Makwanpur and Sunsari, the youth ambassadors have been able to develop their leadership skills through innovative methods such

as organizing drama performances, creating educational videos, and hosting interaction meetings. Their efforts extend to educating both parents and local governments on the pressing issue of trafficking.

These youth ambassadors go beyond community engagement and actively lobby governments to prioritize anti-trafficking activities in their development plans and allocate budgets accordingly. Equipped with knowledge on good governance and government systems, including budgeting and planning, they skillfully ask the right questions to advocate for change.

In collaboration with the police, these youth share critical information regarding individuals at risk of trafficking, assist in bringing survivors for testimony, and contribute to the pursuit of justice against traffickers. This partnership with law enforcement extends to addressing child protection and trafficking issues, as well as engaging communities for education and awareness.

“Empowered youth, particularly those selected as youth ambassadors by PROTECT project, have become invaluable sources of information for the police. Their proactive approach in sharing critical information to protect vulnerable people who are at risk of trafficking and child marriage,” says Sub-Inspector Dilsara Rana Chettri, District Police Office of Banke district.

Banke, as a crucial border area connecting Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces in southwest Nepal and serving as a primary entry point, witnesses a significant influx of women



“There are still many people unaware of the gravity of trafficking. The Youth Ambassadors play a crucial role in disseminating vital information that educates the communities on how to protect themselves from the risks of trafficking.”

Dilsara Rana Chettri, Sub-Inspector of Banke District Police Office.
©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

from districts like Bardia, Nawalparasi, and Chitwan of these two provinces seeking jobs.

The young people are often enticed to travel to Rupadiha, a border area of Banke District in west Nepal, to the south bordering India, extending the reach of traffickers. Additionally, youth from the mid-hills of Karnali Pradesh migrate in search of work, crossing the border to India during school breaks. The promise of education, jobs, and financial gains lures these vulnerable children, often initiating with enticing them to watch a movie, she explains.

Working with non-government organizations has proven immensely helpful for law enforcement for the local police. Given the extensive workload for the police, especially regarding vulnerable children, collaboration with NGOs has been helpful for the police force.



Youth Ambassador Ramesh with his youth peers in Banke.
©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

Youth Ambassadors: Bridging Community

“Project teams actively engage in community-level activities, raising awareness about trafficking through behavioral change initiatives,” says Sub-Inspector Dilsara Rana. She adds how the project has empowered community members, especially the youth who have

been playing a moderating role between the police and the community. Working closely with the police, Ramesh is a 19-year-old youth ambassador and he has been a bridge between the community and the police, and has helped to forge a good relationship between them.

“We have close collaboration with the police. In certain situations, individuals may feel uneasy approaching law enforcement directly, turning to us

for support during precarious circumstances. In such cases, we step in, liaise with the police, communicate the situation, and ensure follow-up to make sure appropriate initiatives have been undertaken,” says Ramesh.

He explains how the youth recognize that they cannot shoulder all responsibilities alone. He explains that once they receive information, their primary duty is to promptly share it with the relevant authorities. They are acting as mediators, navigating between youth ambassadors, the police, and local representatives.

Among several achievements, one of the biggest was when

Rescuing young trafficking survivors

Ramesh and his team of youth ambassadors helped to rescue and bring back a trafficked girl home.

There was a young girl in his neighborhood, facing the harsh reality of her family’s financial struggles. Her parents, grappling with the weight of poverty, believed sending her to work was a solution. However, their daughter found herself ensnared in a perilous situation.

Troubles at home and the lack of awareness about the potential risks of sending her to work created a vulnerable scenario. She missed school exams, and when Ramesh and his friends inquired, her parents attributed her absence to familial conflicts with her younger sister, justifying her employment.

“As youth ambassadors, we encountered numerous cases where parents, perhaps due to their own difficulties or lack of awareness, inadvertently put their children at risk,” says Ramesh.

This particular case took a darker turn when the girl revealed she had been coerced into a form of exploitation, a grim business that led her into abuse.

Faced with a family unwilling to cooperate, they organised intensive search online and sought help from law enforcement but yielded no immediate results. It was when the girl herself reached out to Ramesh, who is well-known and has a big network among the youths, and she narrated her harrowing experience.

Supported by Banke UNESCO and other anti-trafficking NGOs within the PROTECT network, they were able to get support, bringing her back from India and reuniting her family.

“However, recognizing the persisting economic hardships, we facilitated to find a job to support her family. Now, she earns a respectable income, contributing Rs 20,000 (USD150) per month to her family’s welfare while pursuing her bachelor’s studies,” shares Ramesh.

Her story is a stark reminder of the challenging choices individuals, particularly from marginalized communities, face in their pursuit of economic relief. It also underscores the grim reality that, forces individuals with no choice but to take risks of unsafe migration.

A Role Model for the Youth

Ramesh had been an active youth leader since his childhood, starting as a child club member. The turning point came when Banke UNESCO Club, a local partner of PROTECT, invited him for training.

Recalling the experience, Ramesh says, “It was then we understood that children lured for jobs were victims of child trafficking, and their rights were violated.” Empowered with knowledge, Ramesh and his peers embarked on a journey that transcended the boundaries of their community.

He was also among the first cohorts of youth ambassadors created by the project. Over the past 4.5 years, he has gained a good reputation among both the youth and adult members in the local communities, as well as with the local government and police officials.

Street dramas and SBCC videos became their tools of engagement, positively impacting lives.

“Two months after regularly showing these videos to the students, some of them contacted us, saying that they had been at risks of trafficking, and we were successful in rescuing them,” Ramesh proudly shares.

The transformative shift in community attitudes stands out as an example for change. “It feels good to know

that the same people who had been cruel to me are now turning a new leaf, inviting me back, and showing respect as a youth ambassador,” Ramesh reflects. He recalls how they were angered by his intrusion whenever there was a child marriage event or a case of child labor exploitation, among his other campaigns against harmful social practices.

Youth ambassadors also face life-threatening challenges during their campaigns. For example, his own classmate went missing, and her parents turned violent toward him for asking about their daughter, suspecting he had a relationship with her. They had married her off and sent her to India. This posed a double risk for the young girl, being both underage and sent to India. Ramesh challenged them to share her location, fearing that she was not safe.

“I told them about the violation of children’s rights. This was a case of child marriage, and she could be at risk of trafficking. I explained that child marriage is a crime and can also lead to trafficking, especially when she was being taken to India,” he shares. The whole neighborhood became hostile and even assaulted him, but that incident didn’t deter him from continuing his campaign.



Youth Ambassadors empower their peers for action against human trafficking. ©Plan International Nepal

Youth initiative in engaging communities

In emphasizing the pivotal role of youth, Ramesh asserts, “We know the older citizens have knowledge but they may not be able to coordinate, take action and run around to find help. In addition, the youth also have real knowledge.” In an era dominated by technology, he underscores the significance of youth in combating cybercrime and protecting vulnerable individuals from trafficking. Ramesh’s engagement activities extend from the streets to the

digital realm. Drama competitions, street plays, and online campaigns using Maya Chatbot showcase the breadth of their initiatives.

“Even if we are unable to reach everyone in person, we were able to deliver information through online platforms,” Ramesh states, underscoring the importance of adapting to changing times. His impact is tangible, as the community now actively participates in reporting potential issues. “Now if they see any stranger in their neighborhood and find that person suspicious, and is showing a lot of interest in the young people here, and suspect whether this could end up trafficking someone, they call us immediately,” he asserts.

Engaging local government support for youth campaigns

Acknowledging the support from local authorities, municipality, Ramesh emphasizes the importance of their involvement. “Our work has also nurtured a good relation with the government authorities, and people are feeling that they are part of our community now,” he shares. Bridging the gap between the community and local municipalities, their collaboration has helped to bring a change in prioritising child protection issues.

A model resource center is an example of the collaborative efforts initiated by PROTECT between the community and the municipality. Ramesh describes its impact, “With PROTECT’s support, we have one desk, and we have ourselves bought three other desktop computers, and the municipality has given us rooms for the resource centre.”

This resource center, equipped with essential equipment with PROTECT’s support, has not only streamlined their operations but also serves as a platform for youth development. As a leader of a network of youth clubs, Ramesh envisions continuity in their advocacy. His collaboration with the municipality ensures that anti-trafficking campaigns persist beyond the tenure of the PROTECT project.

“The anti-trafficking campaign is necessary and important so that nobody will fall victim to trafficking and not get trapped into any risk,” he articulates.



Birendra survived trafficking and has been empowered as a Youth Ambassador. ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

From a trafficking survivor to an empowered youth ambassador

Birendra’s journey to being youth ambassador is inspiring. He was so close to being trafficked and he had narrowly escaped the traffickers who came in guise of employment agents from India. As his journey across the border advanced, he was feeling quite strange about the whole trip and the men who were escorting him. He suddenly remembered the lessons

he had learnt during the SBCC session that helped him to identify the risk that he was in. He took swift action by using his wits rather than his fear without letting his traffickers suspect that he was fleeing. At some point, they realised that Birendra was running away from their clutches and they started chasing him. He managed to reach the public place where he was safe and then he got into the train India and managed to reach home safely in Nepal.

“I never realised how important the SBCC session would be because I remember not paying full attention way back then during a training organised by the PROTECT project. When the trainers were talking about trafficking, I felt that I am smart and educated and won't be fooled. I was so wrong. But in the corner of my mind, I suddenly remembered one of the key lessons on identifying the risk during that dangerous hour. That is what saved me,” says Birendra.

Youth empowering youth about unsafe migration

Birendra became one of the hundreds of youth ambassadors trained and empowered by the project and he is not shy to talk about how he is a survivor and he wants to share lessons that youth cannot always outsmart their adult members, especially the guardians and the parents. He recalls how his parents had tried so hard to stop him from leaving home and traveling across the border for a job.

“I was so defiant and left without their permission. The educated youth think they are smart and intelligent but we have so much to learn. But empowerment programs, like the SBCC sessions run by PROTECT, can help so many youth like me to identify the risks and also take action,” says Birendra.

A high school graduate and now studying Bachelor's studies, Birendra visited Common Platform for Common Goal (CoCoN), a local implementing partner of PROTECT, and they offered him empowerment training and he worked hard to prove himself to become an active campaigner as a Youth Ambassador.

“I learnt so much about how people become vulnerable to trafficking due to poor knowledge on unsafe migration by crossing the border, and also face risks within our own



The open Nepal-India border are used by traffickers targeting vulnerable people.
©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

country. People are tricked not only by strangers but also by their own relatives and neighbours,” says Birendra.

Birendra is also a private tutor for senior students, and he always allocates one class every week to run special session about the unsafe migration and identifying trafficking risks and taking action if they are in danger. His initiative has inspired students to take initiatives.

“My students have started their own group to share information to their peers about trafficking risks and dangers of crossing the border and many other forms of exploitation,” says Birendra.

Birendra is already in full action as Youth Ambassador and he has taken active role in educating a lot of people, including his friends, who travel to both India and other countries for overseas employment.

He lives close to the Nepal-India border of Sunsari district. Recently, he and his fellow youth ambassador were able to help a minor girl, aged 11 years old, from the risk of being trafficked by an old man. She had fled her home because of the violence at the hands of her stepmother.

Her relatives refused to give her shelter and met a stranger who promised to find her job but she managed to escape. Birendra and her friends have reached out to local NGOs and police to provide her protection and shelter.



Dipendra Pathak, Project Coordinator, RADO, Makwanpur ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

“The project actively lobbied for the recognition of the youth ambassadors’ capabilities in supporting local governments and contributing significantly to social development in their respective wards.”

Dipendra Pathak, Project Coordinator, RADO, Makwanpur

Youth empowerment: community messengers

Youth ambassadors like Birendra continue to play a significant role, demonstrating how the youth are in the driver's seat in the fight against trafficking and the protection of survivors.

“The youth, particularly those in the age group most at risk, are targeted by traffickers. We have also seen an increase in cases of cybercrimes affecting the youth, who are the largest consumers of online platforms. That's why the project strategically focuses on the youth, considering them not only as key beneficiaries but also as the main catalysts against trafficking,” explains Dipendra Pathak, Project Coordinator, Rural Awareness and Development Organization (RADO), a local implementing partner of PROTECT in Makwanpur district.

He emphasizes that training the youth has been a significant milestone for the project. In Makwanpur alone, the project has trained 168 youth ambassadors. They act as conduits for crucial information, serving as messengers within their communities.

Through peer-to-peer education, they disseminate information, raising awareness among their peers, juniors, seniors, and adult community members alike. One of the noteworthy achievements of the project



Youth Ambassadors holding anti-trafficking campaigns through the street dramas. ©Plan International Nepal

is the successful mobilization and empowerment of the youth. “To strengthen the role of the youth ambassadors and further legitimize their roles, the project played a crucial role in endorsing each youth ambassador within their respective municipality wards,” says Dipendra.

This endorsement aims to hold local governments accountable for supporting and enabling youth ambassadors to continue their campaigns effectively. Importantly, the youth ambassadors have played a pivotal role in data collection, providing essential information for government action. In essence, their involvement has been integral to fostering a proactive approach to combating trafficking and ensuring the welfare of vulnerable individuals within their communities.

Boys at high risk too: youth ambassadors are fighting back



Youth Ambassador Sushil actively campaigns against human trafficking in his community ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

Hailing from a poverty-stricken village in Sunsari, college graduate Sushil's journey into advocacy against trafficking is deeply personal. Witnessing his own older brothers fall victim to traffickers ignited his commitment to combat this menace. Inspired by the guidance of SBCC trainers, Sushil assumed the role of a Youth Ambassador.

Initially hesitant to speak in public, the training sessions equipped him with the confidence to address even large audiences, fostering a newfound ability to articulate the dangers of trafficking and advocate for change.

Sushil actively engaged the community by utilizing powerful tools like Maya and Udaya videos, posterage, and sticker campaigns to educate both the youth and their guardians about the perils of trafficking. Employing dramatic performances with friends through street theatres, he amplified awareness, empowering people to learn about deceptive promises of traffickers with the pretense of finding jobs for poor families.

“Even now, strangers come to our village promising good jobs, and people, unaware of the risks, fall into their trap. The traffickers, often locals, collaborate through their big network and transport victims through multiple hands until they reach destinations like Kashmir for forced labor,” says Sushil.

The community has now started to act due to the awareness campaigns that Sushil and his 20 fellow youth ambassadors have organized.



Youth Ambassador Sushil engaging with parents for protecting their children from harmful risks
©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

“Now villagers immediately inform us if they find anyone suspicious of luring boys for jobs in India, and we take prompt action by informing the women’s cells at the police station and the ward office to alert them,” says Sushil.

Sushil recalls that many youths in his village unaware of human trafficking. The topic was often shunned with laughter – a dismissive notion that trafficking only concerned girls and women, not boys or men. It was a prevailing belief that male children were immune to such risks, making it easy for them to leave the village in search of jobs without much concern. The awareness shift came after he started running SBCC

sessions in the village with parents and children, exposing the multifaceted nature of trafficking, including the exploitation of males for labor, payment, and even involvement in activities like horse races, where they were subjected to menial tasks.

Even within his own family, trafficking affected them. “My brothers, leaving the village for what we thought were better opportunities, unexpectedly found themselves trafficked for forced labor in India. They endured three days in a train toilet without food, a harsh reality we never anticipated as they set out,” recalls Sushil.

In his neighborhood, a stark incident unfolded a couple of years before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Girls and boys, taken from the border area of Inruwa, traveled with different individuals, only to be forced into labor in Kashmir. Amid conflict and bombings, they reached out for help, revealing the harsh truth of their trafficking ordeal. Sushil and his fellow youth ambassador, Laxmi, promptly intervened, sharing the information with the police and ward office, leading to their successful rescue.

Yet, the need for continuous awareness efforts remains critical, especially among boys aged 12-13, who, driven by poverty and lack of education and job opportunities, continue to take risks in the hope of finding employment.

Sushil believes that these vulnerable youth require substantial support and targeted training, leveraging SBCC sessions to empower them against trafficking. The anti-trafficking campaign by youth ambassadors needs continuity, especially for those in our community who are still at significant risk due to economic hardships and limited opportunities.

“The struggle against trafficking is ongoing, and we need sustained efforts to protect those who, like my brothers, might become victims in the pursuit of a better life,” says Sushil.

He believes that to give continuity to their campaigns, the government needs to support them by providing resources for their campaigns.



Asha Ram Chaudhary, Ward Chair, works closely with the youth ambassadors. ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

“I commend the fearless dedication of youth ambassadors. Their commitment, irrespective of potential dangers, has left a lasting positive impact on the community,” says Asha Ram Chaudhary, Ward Chairperson in Barachettra of Sunsari district.

Asharam describes how Barachettra is a transit route for traffickers, and the boys are mostly at risk. He shares how the youth ambassadors have helped to prevent many boys from being trafficked for forced labor jobs.

“The project, with youth ambassadors, has shifted community behaviors. Incidents of trafficking and child labor have been addressed,” says Asha Ram.

Youth empowered on governance systems

“Initially, we had 20 ambassadors, and although many pursued higher studies, several from the initial cohort continue to contribute, and we’ve brought in new ambassadors to sustain the effort. Witnessing their transformation has been remarkable,” says Manju Thapa, Community Mobiliser of CoCoN in Barachettra. She has closely worked with the youth ambassadors, and she had noticed how they were previously hesitant to speak out, and after she and her team from the PROTECT project started training them, they learned to articulate their agenda.

The training sessions expanded their understanding of government structures, roles, and responsibilities, forging connections with specific officials in various government departments. Armed with this knowledge, they effectively lobbied for budget allocation and planning for anti-trafficking initiatives, earning respect from senior government officials.

One significant impact has been their enhanced understanding of the state system and direct access to government support and services it provides. In moments of harassment or potential danger, they know which emergency line or hotline to call for immediate assistance. This newfound knowledge has instilled confidence and a sense of security among them, proving the project’s empowerment through knowledge-building.



“The transformation in the behavior of these youth is notable. Initially, they embodied the typical indifference of young people, often shy and awkward in conversation,” she recalls. However, the Youth Ambassadorship Program has catalyzed a positive change.

Even when faced with dismissal and discouragement from ward officials who questioned their priorities, these youth persevered. Their collective approach to ward offices garnered attention, and the same officials who once dismissed them now acknowledge their newfound confidence.

These young advocates have evolved from being hesitant individuals to assertive voices, impressing ward officials who

now find themselves on the receiving end of demands for support. The once hesitant youth have become formidable and effective lobbyists, and demanding information, resources and action from the local governments to strengthen their campaign against trafficking issues, says Manju.

Sanish and his peer youth ambassadors in Makwanpur have been playing influential roles in their municipality wards of Makwanpur. “Now, when issues concerning children, women, and youth arise, ward offices proactively reach out to us,” says Sanish, adding that, initially, municipal representatives and



Youth ambassador Sanish actively lobbies for government’s attention to trafficking issues. ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

officials autonomously handled budget planning and development initiatives related to youth development.

“However, our influence has grown, and they now routinely consult with us, seeking our input on various matters,” explains Sanish. The budgets allocated to these issues have significantly increased, an evidence of the impact of their consistent pressure and effective lobbying efforts.

Lobbying & advocacy efforts

Sanish and his peers collaborate closely with local government officials and representatives. Regular interaction programs and meetings serve as platforms to discuss and strategize ways to enhance the protection and empowerment of children, youth, and women.

“Despite initial indifference, we persisted in our efforts to engage them. Gradually, the government officials recognized the importance of our cause,” says Sanish. A lot has changed and the youth are now active participants in policy-making and implementation, fostering a collaborative working relationship.

The budgeting priorities have also been shifting. Traditionally in the government system, municipal and ward budgets were primarily earmarked for road infrastructure and building constructions. However, their concerted efforts have prompted a shift. To



combat trafficking, budgets are now allocated specifically for anti-trafficking initiatives, complemented by the formulation of relevant policies, says Sanish.

Sanish recalls how working alone doesn't get notice. He was initially faced with both indifference and poor attention from officials regarding trafficking issues, and then he adopted a collaborative approach. "Recognizing that a single youth ambassador may not capture their attention, we worked collectively," says Sanish.

Through persistent communication and outreach efforts, Sanish's group organized interaction programs on trafficking,

stressing the necessity of the state involvement. "Over time, our perseverance paid off, and officials became more engaged, prioritizing our cause over other commitments. Their increased enthusiasm now reflects a shared commitment to collaborative efforts," explains Sanish.

A journey towards becoming youth leaders in anti-trafficking campaigning

Sanish's journey against trafficking began when he encountered the PROTECT project. He continues to play a crucial role in raising awareness and preventing trafficking in his community for the last 4.5 years. He recalls that initially he had little knowledge about trafficking. The project provided him with empowerment training, equipping him with the necessary knowledge to become an effective campaigner.

Immediately after training, Sanish began sharing information with his friends and neighbors, despite their initial lack of interest. Undeterred, he gathered a team of youth ambassadors to educate the community about trafficking.

Their focus extended beyond mere awareness, encompassing issues like forced labor, child exploitation, child marriage, and gender-based violence. Sanish utilized SBCC (Social and Behavior Change Communication) tools like Maya and Udaya videos to effectively communicate the severity of trafficking. Despite initial skepticism in the community, persistence and the engaging nature of these animated stories led to a notable shift in attitudes.

Continuity of campaigns by youth role models



Youth taking part in SBCC session.
©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

“The community has started to not only acknowledge problems but actively sought participation in our campaigns,” says Sanish, who feels no fear when it comes to fighting back against the perpetrators involved in human trafficking and harmful social practices. Every piece of information about child marriage or children’s exploitation reaches him through his network of informers, who are mostly his peers and also concerned guardians.

One of the significant achievements of his community empowerment was preventing a busload of children, aged 14-15, from being taken to work in a garment factory. He contacted the police who immediately got

into action and rescued the children, reuniting them with their families.

Sanish’s journey was not without challenges. Initially ignored and talked down to, he encountered resistance, especially in rescuing a child from exploitative conditions. Despite discouragements, he persisted, recognizing the need for safe houses and counseling for parents. Sanish’s work has empowered him to operate at both community and policy levels.

Sanish wants to continue campaigning and inspiring more youth to join in their cause. The Youth Resource Centre, established with the help of the PROTECT project, has turned into a hub for local youth to interact, get internet access to use online informational resources like Maya Chatbot.

Sanish also regularly shows Maya and Udaya videos. Leveraging technology, they continue to educate youth about trafficking using informational videos. Sanish is determined to sustain these efforts, emphasizing the importance of community involvement.

Hima, a 17-year-old student from Banke currently studying in class 10, has not only been empowered by the PROTECT project but has also transformed into an SBCC facilitator. Hima’s journey from a student attending sessions to becoming a facilitator exemplifies the impact youth ambassadors can have on their communities.



Youth ambassador Hima conducting SBCC session to empower her peers ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

Transforming youth to become SBCC facilitators

Hima shares her story, “When I attended the SBCC session, I was inspired by the teacher who was educating us about human trafficking. Today, I am running SBCC sessions for other students, spreading awareness about the risks of trafficking, and empowering them to identify and mitigate

these risks. It’s a journey of transformation from a learner to a teacher.”

One powerful incident fueled Hima’s commitment. A girl in her community, facing forced marriage and a potential end to her education, sought help from Hima. Undeterred by threats from the girl’s family, Hima reported the incident to the ward office, emphasizing the importance of preventing child marriage. This courageous act marked the beginning of Hima’s mission to share her knowledge with other children in the community.

Reflecting on her changed behavior, particularly in the realm of social media, Hima emphasizes the importance of saying no to enticing offers.



Youth Ambassador Hima has enhanced her skills as a facilitator through SBCC training ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

“If anyone tries to lure me with promises of a good job, I firmly decline. I understand the value of education and that I can stand on my own feet after completing my studies. Empowered with this knowledge, I educate others, urging them not to trust strangers online and report any harassment to the ward office or call the police.”

Hima is not satisfied being the only one empowered. She wants to empower more youth. This is why she wanted to become a facilitator, and she has conducted SBCC sessions for 25 students, both girls and boys. The behavioral changes she observed in them showcase the effectiveness of education in empowering youth to identify and combat risks. “They have learned to identify risky situations and potential

threats, especially while traveling. This knowledge has given them the confidence to resist exploitation and stay vigilant.”

Sharing a challenging yet impactful incident, Hima recalls intervening in a case of child marriage in her ward. Despite facing opposition and being labeled as a meddler, she persistently warned the girl’s mother about the risks associated with early marriage. When the mother refused to listen, Hima took the courageous step of involving the police, resulting in the prevention of the child marriage. Hima’s perseverance, even in the face of adversity, highlights the strength and determination youth ambassadors bring to their communities.

As youth ambassadors like Hima continue to emerge as SBCC facilitators, the PROTECT project’s impact extends far beyond awareness. It fosters a generation of informed and empowered individuals who are not only vigilant against trafficking but are actively involved in transforming their communities for the better.

Giving continuity to PROTECT’s campaign

In the heart of community-driven activism against human trafficking stands Juna, a resilient and determined youth ambassador whose dedication to the cause has transformed both her life and the lives of those around her.

“Before, we were few and actively fought against human trafficking, but now we are 60 strong, working together with a unified goal to stop child marriage.”



Juna’s personal transformation is evident. She shares, “Before this project trained me, I always stayed at home and hardly went outside. Now, I can travel and speak with confidence. I got the chance to participate in many training sessions and various interaction activities. The PROTECT project inspired me to showcase my talents and skills.”

Taking leadership to another level

The impacts of the project on Juna are profound. She can now run SBCC sessions independently, a skill she acquired after participating in the project’s activities. “After I became an ambassador, I used to go with senior girls during campaigns and SBCC sessions. Initially, I couldn’t do this on my own. Now, I feel happy thinking that I can organize these activities independently,” she says with pride.

Juna's outreach extends to households and villages, where she organizes SBCC activities to raise awareness about human trafficking. "I have organized street dramas, distributed pamphlets, stuck posters, and conducted awareness programs, orientations, and rallies. The community has shown appreciation for my work, and I feel personal satisfaction in making a difference," she shares.

Championing against child marriage, Juna has faced challenges. "When I invited people, most of them didn't come, but I still organized the activities. It was frustrating, but I persisted. I have seen changes in them."

The strength of unity among the youth ambassadors has been a game-changer. Juna notes, "We have a strong group of youth campaigners helping to strengthen our voices and that makes easier for us to work together. We call the police and local government to stop child marriage."

Lobbying for government budget support has been a significant achievement for Juna and her fellow ambassadors. "Before we became ambassadors, we didn't know about the government budget. Now, we have lobbied for funds to help in our awareness campaigns against human trafficking. We received funds from the municipality and support for the resource center. The ward chair interacts with us, offering support."


In the face of adversity, Juna and her fellow ambassadors are undeterred. Their collective efforts have not only



raised awareness about human trafficking but also influenced policy and budget decisions at the local level. Juna shares a particularly challenging incident,

"There was a child marriage situation, and our youth ambassador friend had tried to stop it just a day before the wedding. The family suspected it was the youth ambassador since she has been organizing activities against child marriage and threatened her. She called for help, and we went at night to talk to the family."

As Juna continues her work, she stands as a testament to the transformative power of youth-led initiatives in building resilient communities. The PROTECT project is on a state of closure, but its legacy lives on through individuals like Juna, who are shaping a brighter, safer future for their communities.



Sticks and Stones facilitator, Sabita Timilsina is a school teacher in Makwanpur District. Since she took the training on how to use Sticks and Stones manual, she has become more passionate about teaching to make her classroom more engaging. ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

3

STICKS & STONES

One of the key strengths of the PROTECT project lies in its successful school interventions, particularly through the introduction of the “Sticks and Stones” training manual in schools. Rooted in broader initiatives that empower children with knowledge and agency to comprehend and assert their rights, Plan International introduced “Sticks & Stones” as a valuable resource, widely utilized across the globe.

This innovative tool is crafted to amplify and cultivate children’s active participation in their own protection. The Sticks and Stones manuals were introduced in upper primary schools, where teachers underwent training through the PROTECT project. These trained educators have evolved into empowered facilitators, employing the Sticks and Stones training manual in classrooms with a protective perspective that is applicable to diverse settings.

The manual offers a rich array of practical activities, tailored for various age groups, equipping children with the skills to recognize risks and safeguard themselves. Furthermore, the Sticks & Stones approach emphasizes collaborative efforts with children’s groups, engaging them in developing more effective strategies for prevention and protection. The overarching goal is to position children at the forefront of initiatives to eradicate violence.

This methodology has effectively transformed teachers into knowledgeable facilitators capable of delivering training to students on identifying risks such as violence, sexual abuse, and trafficking. Students, in turn, are empowered to be self-reliant in mitigating risks by understanding how to take steps, including informing their parents, teachers, and other responsible community members, to protect and safeguard themselves.

TEACH THEM YOUNG



Students are becoming empowered to voice against sexual abuse, exploitation and identifying risks of trafficking at early age through the help of teachers who have been trained by the project using the Sticks and Stones training manual.

Rejina has been an outspoken student against all forms of abuse after attending Sticks and Stones session. ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

Jaya Nepal, a school teacher from Makwanpur has become an advocate of using the Sticks and Stones manual that he is lobbying to mainstream into the main school curriculum. He shares, “There was no such resource like Sticks and Stones manual before. After the PROTECT project started, the Sticks and Stones program was introduced in our school.”

Teachers like Jaya who have been trained how to use the Sticks and Stones manual have started calling it a ‘program’. As a health teacher, Jaya found immediate resonance with the program, witnessing a profound shift in student behavior.

“Students started speaking up. The Sticks and Stones manual has helped us to bring change among students.,” he emphasizes.



Jaya Nepal believes Sticks and Stones manual is essential to change behaviours of teachers. ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

Since teachers were trained on how to use the Sticks and Stones manual and facilitate the lessons in the classrooms, the students have begun addressing issues themselves, demonstrating increased awareness about topics such as inappropriate touch, unwarranted stares, and trafficking. Jaya observes, “They can also identify which teacher is misbehaving.”

New attitudes, new culture of openness among students

Beyond protection, using Sticks and Stones manual has helped the teachers to create a platform for running creative activities in the classrooms to unearth hidden talents, fostering an environment where students feel emboldened to showcase their creative talents to communicate their views and thoughts. The program transcends traditional academic boundaries, providing students with an avenue to express their aspirations and ambitions.

Initiating conversations about violence, misbehavior, and discrimination, Jaya noticed a cultural shift among students. “When I first started the Sticks and Stones sessions, they shared that they never experienced violence. But once we started running these sessions, children opened up and realized that they had experienced all forms of violence and abuse.” The program sparked a transformation in their behavior, making them aware of various forms of violence against them.

Behavioral change among teachers

Jaya shares that the teachers using Sticks and Stones training manual has changed also the behaviours of the teachers. Recognizing the program's impact, Jaya and fellow teachers advocate for the continuation of running classes with the Sticks and Stones manual, even demanding its integration into the school curriculum.

Teachers, inspired by the tools provided by the Sticks and Stones manual, are increasingly involved in student protection. Jaya recounts a heartening tale: One student told him that her parents don't want her to continue studies. We went with a team of teachers to her house and told the parents that if they can't afford, then we will buy the books and pens and pay fees for her." The manual has transformed teachers into real-life guardians, ensuring students feel safe and protected.

Reflecting on the training of teachers in effective use of the Sticks and Stones manual, Jaya notes a significant shift in teacher perspectives. "The program has not only transformed our teaching styles but has bridged the gap between teachers and students, creating a culture of openness and understanding."

According to Jaya, Sticks and Stones is a "100 percent necessary teaching resource and tool." For Jaya, ensuring the continuity of using Sticks and Stones manual is paramount. He envisions allocating dedicated class time for the program. He recognizes the need for ongoing training,

emphasizing the importance of building agency in children for their self-protection.

He says that now local representatives and parents are also sharing seeing the positive changes in children's behavior. Jaya actively engages with parents, emphasizing the importance of attending Sticks and Stones sessions, fostering a collaborative approach to student well-being.

Empowering students to speak up against abuses

Rejina, a 14-year-old student, has found her voice and confidence after attending the classes of teachers using the Sticks and Stones manual. Her journey reflects the significant impact their new style of teaching has on students, empowering them with knowledge and instilling the courage to speak up.

Rejina enthusiastically shares, "I was able to learn something new, and I gained the confidence to speak up. I liked this program very much." The newfound confidence she speaks of is a testament to the program's ability to unlock the potential within students, fostering self-assurance and communication skills.

Sticks and Stones manual goes beyond traditional academic subjects, offering Rejina and her peers insights into critical issues. Rejina mentions, "After taking class with our teacher who used the Sticks and Stones manual, I learned about gender-based violence and trafficking, violence against women, discrimination between daughters and sons."



Rejina and peers share views about the positive impact of sticks & stones on both teachers and students. ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

A key lesson Rejina has learnt is the importance of gender equality. “Both are equal, and I also taught this to my friends,” she proudly declares. Sticks and Stones becomes a catalyst for positive change as Rejina shares her knowledge to friends, emphasizing, “Not to talk with unknown persons, and even our own relatives are not to be trusted.” The program equips students with a critical lens, fostering a sense of discernment to navigate complex social dynamics.

In her home, Rejina confronts societal norms and practices, stating, “At home, there is also discrimination, like daughters are sent to government school, and sons are sent to private school. Daughters are married off early.”

Teachers have started saying that Sticks and Stones manual has helped them to empower students and a catalyst for breaking down stereotypes, prompting students like Rejina to challenge ages old traditional beliefs and promote equality within her own family.

Rejina’s awareness extends to the insidious issue of trafficking. She educates her peers about the risks, cautioning, “There is trafficking of women, but children are also sold. Children are soft and easily manipulated.” The program has been arming students with the knowledge to recognize and resist potential dangers.

Reflecting on her own past, Rejina shares, “Before I attended the teacher’s class who used Sticks and Stones manual, I didn’t know about identifying gender-based violence and trafficking. I learned so much about the unknown things.” Rejina’s newfound awareness doesn’t stop with herself. She actively shares her learnings at home, breaking the silence surrounding domestic issues. “Before, I used to keep so quiet even when my parents used to hit me,” Rejina admits.

Rejina’s advocacy extends to her friends, urging them to be cautious. “Before, my friends used to mix with a lot of unknown persons, but after I taught them about what I learned from Sticks and Stones and that there would be misbehavior even from your close people.”

Impactful project interventions in schools



Schools using Sticks and Stones manual are using creative teaching methods for students ©Plan International Nepal

Among PROTECT's impactful interventions within the project, the "Sticks and Stones" initiative stands out as an educational tool designed to engage children actively in their own protection. Tailored to the local context and addressing contemporary trafficking issues, this training was strategically implemented in selected schools and municipalities to ensure a targeted approach.

Dedicated Teachers of Trainers (ToT) underwent rigorous training in the use of Sticks and Stones manual. These trained teachers, empowered with knowledge and commitment, then became facilitators, providing invaluable lessons to students aged 10-18. Sticks and Stones manuals were distributed to teachers, serving as practical guides for classroom implementation.

The initiative expanded in Year-2, with ToTs in each district, benefiting approximately 1600 students annually. This ripple effect continued into Year-3, amplifying impact as more teachers started empowering students to become more aware of self-protection.

By year-4 more teachers were provided with refresher training, with a total of 119 teachers completed Stick and Stones ToT, and 8,260 children across three districts participated in and completed the program and has been making impacts.

For example in Banke, the impact of Sticks and Stones sessions extended beyond the classroom, with schools establishing their own child clubs. These clubs, driven by the intent to build capacities and mobilize students, became agents of change within the school community. Empowered with skills and knowledge, they conducted Sticks and Stones sessions, fostering a safe and inclusive environment.

Sumitra Neupane, Principal of Jana Gyan Jyoti Secondary School, Banke says: "Sticks and Stones sessions had a significant impact on students. As a result, the school

decided to replicate these sessions as part of our extracurricular activities, recognizing the importance of addressing bullying and discrimination, abuse, and harassment.”

Seema Oli, ToT teacher, Nepal Rastra Secondary School, Banke, shares that her school developed a form to identify students who may have been at high risk of human trafficking. “This proactive approach aimed to assess and support students who may be vulnerable to such dangers, emphasizing the school’s commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of their students,” says Seema.

Sashi, a dedicated teacher with 23 years of experience, shared how she had witnessed the behavioural change among students. Having facilitated Sticks and Stones sessions, she emphasized the program’s contextual relevance, breaking down protection mechanisms in an engaging and informative manner.

Govinda Bhandari, a secondary teacher and Sticks and Stones trainer, observed a significant behavioral shift among students. “The program heightened awareness about good and bad touch, empowering students to vocalize concerns and resist uncomfortable situations,” he said.

Ukesh, 16-year-old student shares how he and his friends found some topics quite uncomfortable during the Sticks and Stones sessions, about the discussions of ‘bad touch’ which refers to sexual misconduct. But soon, they realised that this conversation was necessary for their own protection.



“I make it a point to share the knowledge I’ve gained with my junior peers, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness and safety. Sticks and Stones has been instrumental in changing our perspectives,” says Ukesh. His commitment goes beyond personal understanding; he became the president of the child club.

“I’ve come to understand that human trafficking often starts with someone trying to exploit your vulnerabilities. Before, I used to be hesitant and afraid to speak up, but now, I’ve gained the confidence to express myself. My behavior has transformed—I am more open to helping others,” he explains.

Students shared their experiences about how teachers have imparted invaluable lessons, and the stories shared in the sessions, particularly those about self-protection, have left a lasting impact.

The program delves into contemporary issues, including the risks associated with social media. Ukesh emphasizes the importance of blocking explicit content and reporting inappropriate behavior. He encourages parents to actively monitor their children's online activities, recognizing the potential dangers.

Ukesh shares, "I genuinely appreciate the Sticks and Stones class. It equips us with the knowledge to stay safe and empowers us to share this awareness with others. I believe if such sessions run with Sticks and Stones manual is introduced in other schools, more children can benefit. Initially, students might find these discussions challenging, but awareness is the key to ensuring the safety of our children."

Ukesh sheds light on the prevalence of online harassment among young students and recounts his own experience of being added by strangers on social media. Drawing from his Sticks and Stones class, he stood up against inappropriate behavior and actively encourages his peers to attend the program for empowerment.

"Sticks and Stones teaches us to be cautious on social media, not to interact with strangers who may try to trap us. I've encountered situations where friends sought help



Students have attending Sticks and Stones session have started to openly share about abuse and misconduct. ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

against online harassment, and I've shared what I learned from Sticks and Stones to empower them."

In addition to addressing online risks, Ukesh is actively involved in educating youth about the dangers of drug use. His efforts extend to breaking down social barriers, as he shares, "I never used to interact with girls before, but now, thanks to Sticks and Stones, I engage with them in the classroom. The most effective aspect of Sticks and Stones, in my opinion, is that it provides us with knowledge that makes us capable and empowered."

How teachers utilise sticks and stones manual

As an educator, Sabita Timilsina, strongly advocates for the incorporation of Sticks and Stones into the mainstream curriculum. She explains that while social science education touches on critical topics, the program stands out by providing practical skills for self-protection, addressing the need for a holistic approach to children's safety education.

“The program extends beyond traditional teaching methods, incorporating short dramas and videos to engage students. The impact is evident in the newfound confidence of students who were once hesitant to speak up. They now actively engage in conversations and demonstrate leadership skills, a testament to the positive change brought about by Sticks and Stones,” says Sabita who teaches at Shree Manakamana Secondary School of Makwanpur.

Sabita acknowledges the sensitivity required when addressing delicate issues such as sexual abuse. Sticks and Stones has equipped teachers to navigate these uncomfortable conversations, utilizing videos as a valuable tool to convey messages effectively.

“While addressing topics like trafficking is relatively easier, discussing sexual abuse requires sensitivity. The program has equipped us to explain these issues in a way that students can comprehend. Videos are



particularly useful in conveying messages when explaining becomes uncomfortable,” explains Sabita.

The primary objective of Sticks and Stones is to empower students by helping them identify and recognize their own problems. The program aims to equip them with the information and knowledge needed to address these issues.

“As an educator, my focus is on fostering an environment where students can identify their problems and take informed action. This emphasis on self-empowerment led me to initiate Sticks and Stones sessions,” says Sabita.

Teachers are provided with a comprehensive guidebook that spans 16 sessions, primarily focused on keeping students safe. We encourage creative methods for

expressing problems, such as writing and art. The sessions delve into potential risks, ways to identify and avoid these risks, and steps for self-protection.

Sabita uses creative ways of teaching her students during her class using Sticks and Stones manual. She organized short dramas, utilizing available kits and videos, to educate students on topics like misbehavior, sexual harassment, and child labor. Students were encouraged to discover instances of child labor in the market. These creative activities help reinforce the lessons from Sticks and Stones.

Growing interest among teachers and students

Her 17-year-old student, who has a similar name 'Sabita,' recalls how her school continued running Sticks and Stones sessions even during the COVID-19 pandemic and she recalls also receiving support from the municipality. During disaster situation, children can be vulnerable and the program was needed to ensure a safe environment for children through the sessions that could help them to protect themselves from any risks."

The continuation of Sticks and Stones in schools is vital, says Sabita who lives in an area where vulnerabilities and risks are high especially for children living with marginalised families. Students like Sabita, who comes from marginalised community, shares how the Sticks and Stones manual is bringing behavioural change especially on raising awareness of the risks of unsafe migration.



Sabita has been educating junior students to cautiously use social media, and helped them to identify the risks of online scamming.
©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

"A lot of young people often get lured through social media and we have been educating the young villagers not to get trapped through social media communication," says Sabita, who has been cautioning her school mates about being vigilant while using social media."

She emphasizes the need to educate others about the lures of quitting school for seemingly lucrative jobs, urging them to stay focused on education and be cautious of strangers offering gifts or employment opportunities. Inspired by her senior student who encouraged her to attend Sticks and Stones session, Sabita actively engages with younger children, advising them on the importance of education and the perils of unsafe working environments.





Engaging with local communities was at the heart of the PROTECT project
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4

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY SYSTEM

At the core of the PROTECT project lies a holistic approach that recognizes the complex nature of child trafficking, acknowledging that a single entity cannot work alone. The initiative has embarked on a transformative journey, actively engaging all key stakeholders to strengthen the community system against human trafficking. This comprehensive and holistic multi-layered, multi-sectoral strategy has proven to be the heartbeat of the project, fostering collaboration among diverse groups.



COLLECTIVE FRONT

PROTECT has been also engaging one of the most significant stakeholders: the parents and caretakers in its anti-trafficking campaign. The parents together with law enforcement, border counselors, youth, NGOs, police and state are creating a new culture of unity against human trafficking.

Gita Poudel is leader of Parents' Group in Koshi Municipality of Sunsari, where she is helping to educate and raise awareness how to prevent trafficking risks through good parenting. ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

Gita Paudel believes that the parents play the most significant role in preventing trafficking, as children are most at risk. Since attending PROTECT's SBCC session, she feels empowered and has been on the frontline, sharing information and educating fellow parents on how they should play active roles in being more vigilant about their children, especially because they live close to the Nepal-India border in Koshi Rural Municipality of Sunsari district, located in the south of east Nepal.

Empowering parents to combat trafficking

Gita, also a member of the Local Coordination Committee against Human Trafficking (LCCHT), representing all other parents, plays a crucial role in advocating for parental concerns and community welfare.

Before the initiation of the project, Gita, like many others, lacked comprehensive information about the nuances of human trafficking. "The project brought about a significant shift in awareness, broadening the understanding that human trafficking extends beyond gender stereotypes, affecting both girls and boys. It shed light on the grim reality that false promises of employment can lead individuals to be sold, not only abroad but within their own country," says Gita.

She explains how the project's SBCC helped empower her with new confidence, enabling her to educate other

parents. The SBCC has been meticulously tailored to educate and empower local communities. Through targeted communication strategies, project's SBCC aims to bring about positive behavioral changes by addressing social norms, attitudes, and knowledge gaps related to human trafficking. The initiative recognizes the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in delivering key messages, ensuring that the content resonates with the specific needs and contexts of the communities.

The PROTECT project has engaged 780 parents, accounting for about 90% females, who have been empowered as a strong unit. These parents now have their own anti-trafficking groups in all 13 municipalities of the three districts of Banke, Makwanpur, and Sunsari, where they are increasing their role at the ward levels.

"Now, I use this knowledge to educate other parents in our community, empowering them with critical information to recognize the dangers of trafficking, especially the animated videos that have helped communicate with the parents more clearly," says Gita.

Engaging with parents' groups in three wards of Sunsari district, Gita, along with 30 members, actively discusses issues such as violence against women, child trafficking, and the importance of education. Her counseling efforts extend to parents, emphasizing the significance of prioritizing children's education, underlining that an educated child is better equipped to avoid potential risks.

Taking a proactive stance in educating children about the dangers of talking to strangers and the necessity of cautious behavior, Gita's efforts extend beyond her own family. Working in areas with marginalized families, she observes positive changes in behavior. Despite the underreporting of trafficking cases in her community, Gita recognizes the vulnerability of those forced to migrate for jobs, both within and outside Nepal.

Acknowledging the inherent risks in travel, especially across borders, Gita actively promotes safe migration. Her counseling efforts extend beyond those seeking employment, encompassing individuals with legitimate job offers, reinforcing the importance of remaining vigilant.

Gita emphasizes the role of parents as key guardians, urging them to constantly monitor their children's behavior and activities. She highlights the need to understand a child's state, needs, and activities, advocating for active parenting to prevent children from straying down the wrong path.

Recognizing the daily cross-border movement, Gita underscores the importance of cooperation between Nepal and India's police forces. She actively communicates with a group of mothers, focusing on online safety awareness to ensure that parents stay updated on potential risks.

Consistently advocating for parental responsibility, Gita stresses that constant monitoring of children's behavior and activities is crucial. By sharing her experience, she illustrates how the project has transformed her into a vigilant parent, actively involved in ensuring her child's safety.



Parents' group engage with booth staff at the border, sharing information about people at risk of being trafficked. ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

Acting as a counselor, Gita engages with individuals migrating for jobs, irrespective of their education level. Her efforts extend to promoting awareness about online safety, especially among women. Collaborating with Information and Assistance Booth staff, Gita envisions further initiatives to counsel parents effectively.

Border information & assistance booths

Balkumari BK, a dedicated counselor and social mobilizer, plays a crucial role in the Information and Assistance Booth, established by Plan International Nepal in partnership with Common Platform for Common Goal (CoCoN) as part of the PROTECT project. The booth is a pivotal element in the

project's strategy to strengthen the community system against trafficking. Situated close to the Nepal-India border in the Koshi Rural Municipality, the booth serves not as a means of controlling border crossings but as a proactive effort to ensure safe migration and protect vulnerable individuals from falling prey to trafficking.

"If we didn't have the booth, we wouldn't be able to make inquiries to anyone crossing the border. We wouldn't have the authority to stop people and ask questions. Because of our desk, we have a new-found confidence. We have knowledge about who to ask, what to ask," emphasizes Balkumari, underscoring the significance of the booth in safeguarding potential trafficking victims.

Utilizing SBCC sessions, Balkumari extends the knowledge gained at the booth to the local community. These sessions serve as a wake-up call, enlightening community members about the various forms of trafficking beyond the stereotypical narratives. "We have also conveyed the same information to the people in the community where I organized SBCC sessions. And they were quite surprised to find so many forms of trafficking," says Balkumari, illustrating the impact of community education.

Balkumari's experiences underscore the vital role the booth plays in rescuing vulnerable migrants. Through counseling efforts, she has identified and assisted numerous individuals, particularly women and girls, preventing them from falling victim to deceptive job agents and potential traffickers. "I have been working here for four years. Due to this Informaiton and



Balkumari provided SBCC sessions to empower local communities to share information about risks of unsafe migration
©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

Assistance Booth, we have helped to rescue so many women and girls especially," she shares.

Reflecting on the impact of PROTECT's support at the border, Balkumari acknowledges the transformation from an open and vulnerable border to a more secure environment. "Four years ago, there was nothing here. It was open border and we didn't know who crossed the border, and was so easy for the traffickers," she recalls. Engaging in SBCC sessions and counseling at the booth has garnered support from various stakeholders, including the municipality, Nepal Police, Armed Police Force, and the local community.



Counselors at the borders play significant roles in identifying vulnerable people at Bhantabari border in Sunsari © Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

Educating border communities about safe migration

Balkumari emphasizes that girls and women, particularly those from hill regions, are at higher risk. The booth's counseling efforts extend beyond its physical confines, reaching out to the community through videos and orientation sessions, enlightening parents and potential migrants about the nuances of trafficking, and removing misconceptions. "The girls are more at risk and they come

from the hills like Gulmi, Dang, and they come without realizing the risks,” says Balkumari. She explains that border checking is not intended to harass but to save vulnerable individuals, especially girls from the hills. Through vigilant observation, they can identify those at risk and intervene effectively. Beyond the booth, Balkumari actively engages with the community, working closely with youth ambassadors, child rights activists, and parents’ groups to spread awareness and empower them against trafficking.

“The Information and Assistance Booth is also on standby. When we are not here, there are Nepal police also who are constantly watching,” she notes.



The small pockets of the border areas, like Bhandabari, are also used as transit by the traffickers ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

The community, once unaware of human trafficking, has now been equipped with new knowledge through PROTECT’s initiatives.

The information and assistance booths, which were supported by PROTECT at the border areas of Bhandabari of Sunsari and Jamunaha of Banke districts, have played pivotal roles in promoting safe migration and educating on the risks associated with unsafe migration.

Over 13,000 people supported with information

This border initiative is a core part of the broader effort to strengthen systems through collaboration between state and non-state actors to prevent the risks of trafficking for Nepalis migrating to India and other countries.

Since 2019, they have successfully intercepted over 800 people from trafficking situations, including children, women and men at high risk of exploitation. A total of 13,211 people, including an estimated 2,300 under age of 18 years old, crossing the border to India, had access to information from the project-supported information and assistance booths.

Her colleague Mohammad Pahlad Aalam has worked side by side and together, they have been able to rescue 174 girls and women in Bhandabari border area alone. “I feel proud this is very meaningful work,” says

Mohammad, although he feels that the work is not without risks as the traffickers have a big network and they might also be constantly watching them.

Despite potential risks, he remains dedicated to the cause, stating that they have support and protection from Nepal police.

Acknowledging the vital support from the police, especially the Armed Police Force (APF), Pahlad emphasizes their swift actions and coordination. Engaging with the Sashtra Seema Bal (SSB) through project-organized sessions has transformed their approach, making them more cooperative and attentive to border-related issues.

Cross border collaboration with Indian police and NGOs

The project also helped in facilitating effective coordination between Nepal and India's border security force known as 'Sashtra Seema Bal (SSB)' at the Nepal-India border areas, and also with Indian NGOs, resulting in collaborating for rescue missions of survivors, especially young women and children.

"In Sunsari, the Indian police were so impressed with our work at the border that they requested to provide training to their personnel how to identify risks of trafficking," says Hemanta Raj Paudel, program coordinator of CoCoN, Plan International Nepal's local implementing NGO partner in Sunsari.

Hemanta's team went as resource persons through the project to Birpur three times and gave training and orientation to the chief of their various Ilaka (area) battalions of India about human trafficking and smuggling, and how Nepalis and Indians can coordinate to prevent cross border human trafficking and unsafe migration.

"This was very effective coordination initiated by the project," says Hemanta, who adds that the transnational coordination is so important given that both the border areas are open and quite large, and it will be challenging for Nepalis to control traffickers alone.

Sunsari, for example, is considered a trafficking hotspot, shares a 62.5 km long border with India. Sunsari's vulnerability is also because it is closely linked to other neighboring districts through its highway, and is a major transit for the hill districts, from where most people migrate to India during the off agricultural seasons.

One of the critical missions and impacts of their coordination was during the lockdown, rescuing 41 women from a potential trafficking scenario orchestrated by an Indian gang.

"They said their household financial conditions were bad and so getting rupees two lakhs (USD 1,500) for just two hours of sitting during the rituals was good money. They shared all the information, and we found they didn't know anything," Balkumari recounts, highlighting the effectiveness of cross-border cooperation in combating trafficking.

All women were rescued by India's SSB and were brought to Nepal and handed over to Nepal Police who were safely returned home with help of Plan International Nepal's partner NGOs along with other organisations. Nepal police took action and apprehended two, leading to the identification of six others involved in trafficking from Saptari. "This operation brought a deep sense of satisfaction," recalls Balkumari.



Tika Sharma has over 16 years of experience working as counselor at the border. ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

Promoting safe migration

Traffickers continue to use different tactics to lure people with promises of jobs and other economic opportunities but Tika Sharma, Counselor, Border Information and Assistance Booth run by NGO Saathi

in Banke, has become a veteran in identifying people who might be at risk of being trapped while crossing the Jamunaha border in Banke.

"Due to large border in Banke, people think it is easy to cross the border, which has a large area, all which are so open. Most people use this border. Before, people used to pass from here very easily carrying bags and use to travel in groups. Now, people only carry one purse and wear nice clothes and travel solo and not in a group," explains Tika.

Working with Saathi, the project's local partner in Banke district, Tika has been working at the border for 16 years, identifying traffickers and vulnerable individuals. Since 2005, she's been on the ground, and with the support of the PROTECT project in the last 4.5 years, she continues this work.

Engaging with community makes border monitoring more effective

"The PROTECT project has been helping by supporting in our work at the information and counseling booth at the border." But she emphasises that working in the border alone is not enough, stating, "We need to also work closely with the local community because a lot of young people often travel through the border."



The open Nepal-India border area in Banke district is used by thousands of people everyday. PROTECT's local implementing partner Saathi has played key role in preventing trafficking through its information and counseling services. ©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

Tika's role extends beyond the booth; her involvement in community engagement has significantly contributed to fostering an information-sharing culture. The relationship with community has been crucial in her efforts to combat human trafficking. Tika and her team receive invaluable information from residents about individuals planning to cross the border into India.

"Local people, having developed a sense of ownership over the border monitoring process, proactively alert us to suspicious activities. This collective effort is instrumental in identifying potential risks and preventing human trafficking," says Tika.

The risks that migrants take in pursuit of better international prospects

"The reality of unsafe migration and the perilous risks that people put themselves in pursuit of job opportunities abroad is a grim and pressing concern," says Tika. Her experiences at the border reveal a stark picture of young women who, often unaware of the gravity of the situation, willingly subject themselves to potential harm. In the quest for better employment prospects, these women place their trust in individuals who promise lucrative jobs.

Learning from different cases, Tika says that these so-called opportunities are often orchestrated by traffickers who not only deceive them but also provide

instructions on how to navigate checkpoints without arousing suspicion. She shared an example of a young woman who had hidden her passport beneath her garment, using a sanitary pad as a cover. It took Tika's astute observation and intervention to uncover this desperate attempt to deceive border authorities.

The stories don't end at the border. Tika recounted the case of a 21-year-old woman bound for Kuwait. Refusing to communicate, she relied on the woman's friend to convey information. She was enticed by the promise of a lucrative job. Tika and her team counseled her who understood the risks and agreed to return home.

Compounding this issue is the fact that many Nepalis view Indian airports as more lenient than those in Nepal. This misperception leads them to cross the border and use Indian airports for international travel. The traffickers, preying on this belief, exploit the porous borders and varied modes of transportation between Nepal and India.

Border monitoring needs to be scaled up with similar projects

The enormity of the challenge faced by Tika and her team becomes even more apparent considering the lack of regular training opportunities. Traffickers continually evolve their strategies, making it imperative for border counselors to stay abreast of the latest tactics.

Despite these hurdles, Tika remains steadfast in her commitment to protect vulnerable women and children from falling prey to human traffickers, highlighting the urgent need for increased awareness, resources, and training to address this complex issue at its roots. The extensive border poses a logistical challenge for a single organization to cover effectively.

“There are over 1,000 daily border crossers, and collaborative efforts are necessary. The project’s support became crucial in countering these maneuvers. By staying updated on trafficking tactics, the project supports NGOs like Saathi to maintain effective monitoring despite traffickers’ attempts.

The collaboration between Saathi and the PROTECT project is synergistic, combining experience with resources for robust border monitoring and counseling. This model not only addresses current challenges but also establishes a foundation for adapting to trafficking’s dynamic nature, ensuring a resilient approach to safeguard vulnerable individuals along the border.

Supporting government efforts through local partnerships

Deputy Mayor Anita Devi Yadav of Koshi Rural Municipality shared her personal journey of awakening to the realities of trafficking. Before the project, there was no specific program focused on combating trafficking in her municipality.

“The PROTECT project brought attention to the issue, leading to the creation of information and assistance

booth at Bhanabari and actively participating the youth ambassadors,” says the deputy mayor.

Reflecting on the project’s significance, Deputy Mayor Anita Devi Yadav remarked, “If the project had not come, we would never pay attention to this issue of trafficking.” She added that the project intervention facilitated the reformation of local level coordination committee against human trafficking (LCCHT), paving the way for a strategic framework to combat trafficking.

The LCCHT is a government structure but was not functional. After the project started, the officials were given capacity building training and support in their meetings. These initiatives have helped to make the LCCHT structures more functional. The committee officials are now holding regular meetings and identifying cases of trafficking.

Deputy Mayor Anita acknowledged the project’s impact, stating, “Such a project makes a difference. The project continuously follows up for performance and activities of LCCHT.” The project’s emphasis on sustained engagement and follow-ups highlights its commitment to ensuring that local efforts against trafficking remain robust.

In all three districts, where the project was implemented, the municipalities highlight the importance of collaboration between NGOs and the government in the fight against trafficking. For example, in Gadi of Makwanpur district, the project played a crucial role in initiating data collection, making the LCCHT more effective. In Koshi Rural Municipality of Sunsari, the Information and Assistance Booth established at the border continued its operations, and



Anita Devi Yadav, Deputy Mayor believes that projects like PROTECT have a big role in gearing government attention.
©Plan International Nepal/Naresh Newar

awareness campaigns were sustained, showcasing the importance of post-project continuity.

In Banke district, the state and non-state border duty bearers have been capacitated and sensitised. “We conducted regular meetings, doing orientations and in India, we have been able to rescue children and supported in reintegrating them in their families,” says Santosh Pulami, Project Officer of Plan International Nepal in Banke.

He adds there were cases of missing children in India and the project had collaborated with the government for rescue missions. “Time and again we

were facilitating cross border meetings in both Nepal and India. The cross-border coordination has helped to build good rapport with police and organisations in India. This has helped us in identifying those missing Nepali children rescued from various places in India with the help of our Indian counterparts,” said Santosh.

Promoting government ownership on trafficking issues

Government official Mandira Thapa, former Chief of Women, Children and Social Inclusion Division of Makwanpur Gadi Municipality reiterated, “The project was so active in reactivating LCCHT and one of its significant milestones has been to initiate data collection.”

This emphasizes the project’s success in empowering local governments to take ownership of anti-trafficking efforts. She explains the project has proven to be a catalyst for change, actively engaging local governments and communities in the fight against trafficking.

By reshaping priorities, fostering collaboration, and ensuring post-project continuity, the project has laid the groundwork for sustainable, community-led efforts to combat trafficking in Nepal. As Deputy Mayor Anita Devi Yadav aptly puts it, “The impact of the project has been good, and the rescue of these women are exemplary.”

5

CONCLUSION: THE CAMPAIGN CONTINUES

The 5-year PROTECT project concludes in 2023, successfully achieving its objectives despite the hurdles posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. During these years, the project made significant strides in supporting government, civil society organisations and communities in combating human trafficking, child trafficking, and unsafe migration in India and Nepal.

Lessons learned emphasize the importance of engaging various community layers, collaborating with local governments, maintaining consistent coordination, focusing on multifaceted approaches, strengthening local capacities, and emphasizing behavioral change communication. The project's continuity efforts aim to empower local communities, strengthen anti-trafficking campaigns, and inspire positive change across the region, especially in high-risk districts.

In a concerted effort, the project strategically involved communities, guardians, local governments, information and assistance booths, anti-trafficking networks (LCCHT), law enforcement institutions (police), NGOs, and youth leaders.

Plan International Nepal's inclusive, multi-layered and holistic approach recognizes the interconnectedness of these stakeholders in creating a robust defense against child trafficking. Each entity plays a crucial role in the collective fight against trafficking. Families and children, as primary units, are empowered through increased awareness of the risks and consequences of child trafficking. Youth, as dynamic agents of change, lead social media campaigns that serve as powerful tools to raise awareness in the broader community.

Crucially, young people are equipped with training in self-protective behaviors, empowering them to navigate potential trafficking risks. Parents and caregivers actively participate, taking tangible steps to shield their children and encouraging them to safeguard themselves and their peers. The community fabric is strengthened through social safety nets and structures, acting as preventive measures, facilitating access to services, and supporting the reintegration of survivors.

Community-based anti-trafficking committees are a core in this collaborative effort. Strengthened and equipped, they develop action plans to respond to trafficking threats and facilitate the reintegration of survivors. The project extends its influence to the local government level, advocating for program and budget allocations to ensure sustained prevention and response efforts.

At the borders, the information and assistance booths have played a major role in promoting safe migration. Through targeted training programs, they are equipped with the skills to recognize and respond to suspected trafficking situations. The project extends its impact beyond borders, implementing cross-border interaction plans that involve both governmental and non-governmental actors.

Effective collaboration with NGO partners: key to the project's success

In essence, the PROTECT project believes in the power of collective action. By involving all key stakeholders and adopting a holistic, multi-layered, and multi-sectoral approach, the project has created a tapestry of collaboration that weaves through communities, governments, and institutions.

"I believe that the project has made a positive impact and has also laid the foundation for a sustainable, community-driven defense against human trafficking," says Anugya Mishra, PROTECT Project Officer, Banke. She believes that at the heart of the project's success is the strategic partnership with numerous NGOs, like Saathi, RADO, CoCoN and Banke UNESCO Club who have helped to turn the tide against human trafficking through shared knowledge, regular meetings and coordination, and a collective commitment to safeguarding vulnerable lives.

Value of collective work: a blueprint for future

The three districts of Banke, Makwanpur and Sunsari, where the project was implemented, are considered hotspots for trafficking, and presented a complex challenge that no single organization could fully address. Santosh underscores the significance of collaboration: “It is impossible for one organization to cover all the areas, and its presence cannot be everywhere.”

In response to this reality, in Banke for example, the project took a crucial step by creating a loose forum, a common ground where 8-9 organizations working against trafficking could come together, share information, and exchange ideas.

The collaborative forum became more than just a meeting ground; it became a lifeline for those at risk. Santosh narrates a powerful example of this joint effort: “An exemplary collaborative effort occurred when Plan International Nepal, Saathi, Banke UNESCO Club, and Shakti Samuha joined forces to rescue two minor girls, aged 13 and 16.” Tricked into believing they were headed to Jhapa, the girls found themselves in Nepalgunj, slated for a perilous journey to India. The loose forum, acting as a rapid response team, sprang into action.

The perpetrator had fled, leaving the minors stranded in a hotel in Nepalgunj for 3-4 days. The intricacies of legal action were daunting for the girls, unaware of their destination. Here, the strength of collaboration became apparent. Santosh details the intervention: “We were contacted by our loose

“The project had laid the foundation for a sustainable, community-driven defense against human trafficking.”

Santosh Pulami, Project Officer,
PROTECT

forum and went to find the perpetrator, but he had already fled. The minors also didn’t want to take legal action. They didn’t know where they were traveling to.” In a swift and coordinated move, the NGOs contacted the girls’ families, facilitated their return to their villages, and ensured their safe reunion.

The success of this collaborative rescue mission echoes the sentiment that when organizations unite against trafficking, they become a formidable force. Santosh Pulami emphasizes, “We share our information and ideas,” highlighting the collective wisdom harnessed through collaborative efforts. It’s not just about rescuing victims; it’s about a shared commitment to prevent trafficking, dismantle the networks, and empower communities.

The collaborative initiatives by the PROTECT Project, underscore the indispensable role of NGO partnerships in the fight against trafficking. Banke’s loose forum has become a blueprint for success of partnership of organisations working for a common cause.

Hemanta Raj Paudel, CoCoN’s Program Coordinator in Sunsari district, highlights on the project’s effectiveness due to

its priority on engaging children and parents, creating ownership through empowerment and awareness activities, explaining that the community engagement as a whole has been the cornerstone of its success.

Paudel affirms, “Even after there is no project, their engagement that the project has made possible can help to create ownership so that the campaign against trafficking will continue in the long run.” This approach ensures that the fight against trafficking becomes ingrained in the community’s consciousness, extending far beyond the life of the project.

As the project neared completion, every youth ambassador had crafted an action plan, illustrating that their commitment endures. “The presence of the youth ambassadors and their active involvement is a vivid example of the work of the project continuing as a campaign to stop trafficking,” emphasizes Paudel. This ongoing commitment and active involvement form a sustainable system, ensuring the legacy of the project lives on.

Call for action: NGOs to sustain PROTECT’s campaign

It is imperative for NGOs to continue the anti-trafficking campaign with the similar holistic approach to sustain the momentum. Organizations combating trafficking play a crucial role in advocating for sustained government action. “We have to keep on reminding

the local government for action against trafficking as they have a lot of other priorities also,” says Binita RC, Project Coordinator of Banke UNESCO Club, local implementing NGO partner of PROTECT.

Given that the local governments have competing priorities, consistent engagement from NGOs is necessary to ensure that the fight against trafficking remains on the agenda. “Officials have a lot of other priorities but it is our role to remind them to continue their work against trafficking,” she asserts.

The fight against trafficking extends beyond the conventional narrative. “Traffickers are not only targeting children but also women and men,” she states. NGOs must advocate for comprehensive, inclusive strategies that address the multifaceted nature of trafficking. The call is for continuous efforts to form and sustain Local Coordination Committee Against Human Trafficking (LCCHT) in every municipality wards , collaborating with the police and ensuring functionality.

To keep the issue of trafficking in the spotlight, NGOs need to engage in relentless lobbying. “We should have a committee that is functional. This is a very serious issue, and we have to work together and we should ensure to create an anti-trafficking committee in each ward,” she emphasizes. The campaign against trafficking requires a persistent, coordinated effort to capture and maintain the attention of local governments.



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Youth Ambassadors are committed to continue the anti-trafficking campaign even after the project ends ©Plan International Nepal

Highlighting the urgency of action, emphasizes that traffickers are steps ahead, exploiting gaps in awareness. “Even if we can save one person, this will be a gift for the person’s life,” she expresses. NGOs must collaborate with local governments to establish committees at the ward level, keeping records of those migrating and organizing regular meetings. The responsibility, according to Binita, lies with the local representatives.

PROTECT project: sustainability at its core

Anu Upadhyay, the project lead and manager of PROTECT, reflects on the journey that unfolded across the districts of Banke, Makwanpur, and Sunsari. The project, designed with sustainability at its core, aimed not only at achieving immediate objectives but also at establishing enduring mechanisms to combat trafficking.

“We didn’t just focus on implementation of our project to achieve the three key objectives but also planned how to sustain these activities to continue the campaign against trafficking,” says Anu.

From the project’s inception, a strategic alliance with municipalities became the bedrock of continuity. The emphasis on community engagement, supported by local governments, has already yielded tangible commitments. Municipalities, recognizing the impact of PROTECT, have allocated resources to sustain LCCHT activities.

Anu emphasizes, “The youth ambassadors are continuing their work with the same vigour and passion in raising their voices to educate and change behaviours in the communities to stop human trafficking and other harmful social practices against children and women.”

Their unwavering commitment to community education and behavioral change showcases a passion that transcends the project’s timeline. The municipalities, acknowledging their pivotal role, have pledged to continue collaborating with these ambassadors, recognizing them as empowered youth leaders.

“During the conclusion of our project, their behavioural change has been evident in the way they are now in action to join the anti-trafficking campaign directly or indirectly by becoming concerned citizens, informing police not just after incidents have occurred but also before the incidents of violence and trafficking,” says Anu.

The heart of sustainability beats in the transformed behaviors of the identified beneficiaries. Their evolution into proactive community members, actively participating in the fight against trafficking, speaks volumes about the project’s lasting impact. The shift towards community-led campaigns is evidenced by increased information sharing between community members and the police, creating a mutually beneficial environment.

6

THE PROTECT

Plan International Nepal's campaign against human

PROJECT

n trafficking

PROTECTION, TRACKING, EDUCATION & TRANSFORMATION (PROTECT)

PROTECT initiated in 2019 with the support of Plan International USA in both India and Nepal, was a comprehensive initiative aimed at addressing human trafficking, child trafficking, and unsafe migration. Implemented across 13 municipalities in three districts – Sunsari, Banke, and Makwanpur – the project adopted a multisectoral approach, engaging various stakeholders and working in different layers of the community.

OBJECTIVES

- I. Children and families can identify risks, conditions and consequences of child trafficking, actively take steps to protect themselves, report cases of trafficked children and support the reintegration of survivors and access to services.
- II. Community social safety nets and structures are strengthened to prevent child trafficking, facilitate access to services, and support reintegration through child-friendly and participatory methods.
- III. Both state and non-state actors have increased capacity to respond to child trafficking, safely repatriate survivors, and facilitate their reintegration.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Community Empowerment: The project focused on engaging children, parents, and caretakers in the community. The project aimed to help them identify the risks associated with human trafficking, empower them with the knowledge to mitigate these risks, and encourage them to report trafficking incidents. Community engagement was at the heart of this objective.



Youth Ambassadors played a key role in changing behaviours in their community through the Plan International Nepal's SBCC sessions ©Plan International Nepal

Survivor Reintegration: The project aimed to facilitate the reintegration of trafficking survivors. This was achieved through capacity-building training and support in skill development, helping survivors start businesses.

Strengthening Local Governance: The project helped in enhancing local government and community structures. This involved collaborating with municipalities, police administrations, and cross-border coordination. While the project primarily focused on community-level interventions, it also supported local governments in influencing policies related to anti-trafficking efforts.

Youth Engagement: The project effectively mobilized youth, cultivating a significant number of youth ambassadors. These empowered young leaders played a crucial role in campaigning against human trafficking, unsafe migration, and various social issues, such as domestic violence, child marriage, and gender discrimination.

Social Behavioral Change Communication: SBCC is a key component of the project. It included eye-catching public displays, well-designed posters and pamphlets, and educational videos. These materials aimed to educate the community, particularly children, on the risks of trafficking and abuse, empowering them to take action.

Border Intervention: Border areas with high outflows of migrants to India were identified as key intervention points. Information and assistance booth centers were established at these locations, staffed by trained counselors who monitored individuals vulnerable to trafficking and provided assistance.



Youth Ambassadors promoting Maya and Udaya, key characters in PROTECT'S SBCC campaign ©Plan

Activating Anti-Trafficking Committees: The project successfully reactivated and reformed local anti-trafficking committees (LCCHT). Regular meetings were facilitated to help these committees develop strategies, allocate budgets, and become active in all 13 municipalities.

Sustainable Initiatives: Beyond achieving its objectives, the project focused on sustaining its activities through continued community engagement with the support of local governments.

School Interventions: The project trained mid-school teachers to identify risks related to child protection and trafficking. This training empowered teachers to educate their students about protecting themselves from violence and abuse.

SBCC STRATEGY: A comprehensive approach

In the pursuit of combating human trafficking, Plan International Nepal recognizes that mere awareness is insufficient; action is imperative to drive behavioral change. The Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) strategy within the project was meticulously designed to move beyond awareness, engaging communities, state entities, and youth campaigners collaboratively.

Crafting key messages for impact

Developed through extensive consultations with stakeholders, partners, and government officials, the strategy incorporates innovative methods and character-based messaging for coherence. Built upon the social-ecological model, the strategy places children and young people as primary audiences, extending its reach to families, communities, and government agencies with six messaging themes. Adopting a strategic approach—Inform, Engage, Respond—the strategy introduces various programs like community activation, safety-first initiatives, and counter-influencing through different media.

Implementing SBCC for lasting impact

The execution of SBCC was pivotal, aiming not only to raise awareness but also to build consciousness and facilitate the transformation of existing norms and behaviors. SBCC sessions were organized to enhance understanding, guide effective measures, empower youth, and facilitate awareness of trafficking problems.

Holistic Approach to Combat Trafficking

Recognizing the complexity of trafficking, Plan International Nepal's SBCC strategy engages various levels of influence, adhering to the socio-ecological model. It focuses on individual influence, family and interpersonal levels, community engagement, and society at large. Core programs such as the Safety First Program, Strengthening State Actors Program, and Community Activation Program work together to empower stakeholders to take action against trafficking.

Key Outcomes and Outputs

The key outcomes of SBCC included the ability of people to identify trafficking risks and trends, active participation of families and communities in awareness activities, and well-informed state-level actors engaging in community awareness. The outputs ranged from online safety programs to community activation initiatives, all contributing to a multifaceted, dynamic approach to combat trafficking effectively.

Target audience for behavioral change

The SBCC strategy emphasizes a methodological process to trigger behavioral change within the community. It addresses information gaps, actively engages participants, and encourages timely and correct responses to trafficking situations. The primary audience comprises vulnerable groups directly at risk of trafficking, particularly 12-17 years and 18-24 years young people, with influencers including family members, community stakeholders, and state actors.

Lead characters and diverse communication channels

SBCC videos played a key role in gearing the attention of especially the young people. Maya, Udaya, Didi, Adakshya Jyu, Rajat, and Police Dai serve as the lead characters, representing different perspectives and contributing to the SBCC's gender-transformative approach. Diverse communication channels, including short videos, mural graffitis, theatre for development, radio drama, online media, street drama, and an animation series in Nepali as well as different regional languages, provided a comprehensive and engaging approach to educate and raise awareness about trafficking-related risks..

Shaping Understanding and Empowering Communities

Analysis of data from engaged participants demonstrated a notable positive shift in understanding and response. Increased awareness, improved emergency response awareness, and a shift in community mindset are among the observed outcomes. The SBCC strategy empowers communities, fostering positive changes in understanding, awareness, and active participation, leading to impactful outcomes in targeted districts.

Community engagement and impact assessment

Implementing partners, child clubs, youth groups, and state-level actors played crucial roles in SBCC strategy implementation. Community involvement was fostered

through various programs, and impact assessment reveals increased awareness, educational penetration, and a broadened understanding of trafficking.

Utilizing AI technology to raise awareness about trafficking risks: Maya Chatbot

In a groundbreaking collaboration between Plan International and Tangible AI, the PROTECT project introduced the Maya chatbot, harnessing AI technology to engage and empower young Nepalis in the fight against trafficking. Deployed through Facebook Messenger, Maya became a vital component to scale and supplement the PROTECT outreach program, making the topic of trafficking accessible and engaging.

Maya's Impactful Features: The Maya chatbot, operational between 2020 and 2023 in four distinct phases, engaged over 22,000 users. This AI-driven initiative aimed to provide key information about trafficking, unsafe migration, and online safety to Nepali youth. Maya went beyond conventional approaches, offering concise information modules, quizzes, choose-your-own-adventure stories, and videos to effectively educate and inspire its users.

Accessibility Through Facebook Messenger: Given the popularity of Facebook Messenger among Nepali citizens, especially the youth, Maya was strategically implemented on this platform. Users accessed Maya through Facebook page - [maya.to.protect](https://www.facebook.com/maya.to.protect), promoting awareness and conversation initiation. Additional methods included users sharing a link on their Facebook profile and targeted Facebook advertisements.

Structured Communication and User Interaction: Maya's messages have pre-planned scripts, with users presented button options to make choices, creating an interactive and engaging experience. Users can also type responses, allowing for a more dynamic interaction. The Maya team utilized Natural Language Understanding (NLU) technology, enabling the chatbot to understand and respond to users' open-ended messages effectively.

Content Evolution and User Engagement: As Maya's content and audience expanded, the number of completed content units surged from 33 in 2020 to an impressive 3,894 in 2023. Users demonstrated a keen interest in general awareness-raising information and safety tips, especially in the "Trafficking" module.

Understanding User Intent Through NLU: Maya's advanced Natural Language Understanding (NLU) technology allowed it to comprehend the topics users mentioned in their text messages. The system support responses to 60 topics or intents in natural language text messages, covering small talk, FAQs, and other conversational tasks. This capability enabled Maya to tailor its responses to user goals effectively.

Empowering Nepali Youth: Maya chatbot has been successful in engaging over 22,000 users and receiving positive feedback underscores the power of AI-driven solutions in raising awareness about critical issues like human trafficking.

(Literature and data source for Maya AI Chatbot: 'Raising Awareness of Human Trafficking in Nepal through an AI Chatbot' written by Greg Thompson; Edited by Maria Dyshel and Hobson)

नमस्ते ! म हूँ माया ।

मानव बेचबिखन र ओसारपसारका बारेमा जान्न हामी सँग कुरा गरौं ।
मेसेन्जरमा टाईप गर्नुहोस् . . .

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Context: human trafficking in Nepal

Grave Issue: Human trafficking is a grave violation of human rights and a pressing global issue that transcends borders and affects people from diverse backgrounds. It is a multifaceted and pervasive issue that extends beyond the stereotype of girls and women sold into brothels. It encompasses various forms of exploitation and affects people of all genders, ages, and backgrounds.

National Context: In Nepal, human trafficking is not confined to any one specific form and affects a wide spectrum of the population. Human trafficking in Nepal involves multiple forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, forced marriage, and organ trafficking.

Unsafe Migration: Many individuals, driven by the hope of better opportunities, engage in unsafe migration, often facilitated by traffickers. These migrants, including men and children, are vulnerable to exploitation during their journeys and upon arrival at their destinations. A significant portion of human trafficking in Nepal occurs in the context of unsafe migration. Many Nepali individuals, often driven by economic hardship, seek opportunities abroad, making them vulnerable to trafficking during their journeys and in destination countries.

International Dimensions: Human trafficking is a global problem that transcends national borders. Traffickers often exploit the vulnerability of migrants seeking employment opportunities abroad. Cross-border trafficking between

Nepal and neighboring countries, particularly India, is a major concern. Nepali men, women, and children are at risk of exploitation, including sex trafficking, labor exploitation in various sectors, and forced marriages.

Economic Factors: Labor exploitation is a significant facet of human trafficking, and it can be linked to global supply chains. In industries like agriculture and manufacturing, unscrupulous employers may exploit workers' vulnerability and lack of legal protections.

Gender and Age Diversity: While women and girls are commonly targeted for sexual exploitation, men and boys can also fall victim to forced labor. Additionally, children may be subjected to various forms of trafficking, including child soldiering, child labor, and forced begging.

Online Vulnerabilities: In Nepal, as in many other countries, young people who use digital platforms are increasingly at risk of being trafficked online. Traffickers may exploit their online presence, making them susceptible to deception and recruitment through social media and communication apps.

Deceptive Recruitment: Nepali youth may be targeted with deceptive job offers or opportunities through online platforms, leading to their exploitation in various forms, including labor trafficking, forced marriages, and sexual exploitation.



Until we are all equal

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