

Case Study: Marni Devi – A Testament to Resilience and Transformation

Introduction:

In rural pockets of Nepal, superstitious beliefs and their ramifications often mar the social fabric, leading to unjust allegations and violence, especially against women. This case study delves into the harrowing experience of Marni Devi, a woman from Simardhai village, who became a victim of superstitious prejudices, and how her life transformed thereafter.

Background:

RCDSC, a prominent non-governmental organization, started its operations focusing on reproductive health and income generation in collaboration with World Neighbours in 2000 AD. Their involvement in the Mahottari district paved the way for establishing authentic savings groups, bridging the gap left by the limited efforts of PACT Nepal. Marni Devi, at the age of 41, emerged as an active participant in one such group in VDC Simardhai.

Challenge:

With her training from RCDSC, Marni Devi ardently advocated for health awareness and spoke against violence on women, a stance that went against the societal norms of that era. Following the unfortunate death of a young boy named Sanjay Sah after attending Marni's son's wedding, Marni was accused of being a witch and using black magic to cause his death. Despite RCDSC's efforts to clear Marni's name by revealing the true cause of Sanjay's death as cholera, the superstitious beliefs of the community members prevailed.

Crucible Moment:

The community, succumbing to their superstitions, invited an exorcist from India to determine Marni Devi's involvement in witchcraft. The situation reached its zenith when, under the shaman's instruction, Marni Devi, along with other women, was made to consume ceremonial food. In a tragic turn of events, Marni was brutally beaten by the villagers, leaving her critically injured.

Response and Intervention:

Despite prior information about the impending ceremony and its possible consequences, the district administration failed to intervene. However, RCDSC took immediate action. Marni Devi, who was at death's door, was rushed to the District Hospital by RCDSC staff. The organization also took on the responsibility of raising their voice against the violence and demanding legal action against those responsible. With RCDSC's fervent advocacy, the case received national attention, leading to the prosecution of 18 individuals, with key culprits serving jail time.

Outcomes:

The aftermath of this tragic incident saw a complete transformation of Simardhai village. Marni Devi, who was once ostracized, emerged as a symbol of strength. She earned respect, became the president of a women's group, and even contested in elections, though she did not win. The village, which was once clouded by superstitions, saw a drastic change in their mindset, especially towards women.

Legacy and Lessons:

Today, Marni Devi is revered not only in her village but also throughout the district. Her story stands as a testament to the power of resilience, community engagement, and the pivotal role that organizations like RCDSC can play in effecting change. The transformation in Simardhai serves as an inspiration for other villages, and RCDSC's work has expanded, with more villages inviting their intervention.

Conclusion:

Marni Devi's story encapsulates the journey from tragic victimhood to triumphant advocacy. The case underscores the importance of community-driven organizations, persistent advocacy, and the indomitable human spirit. In societies where deep-seated beliefs hold sway, change is often slow but not impossible. The eradication of superstition from Simardhai and Marni's transformation from a pariah to a leader is a beacon of hope for many.