

## Religious Leaders Workshop November 28th and 29th



A two-day workshop was organized by CARE's Tipping Point Project to engage religious leaders and to allow them to be advocates for adolescent girls' empowerment. The Tipping Point project works to address the underlying causes of child marriage in Nepal's Rupandehi and Kapilvastu districts. The project was based upon intensive research using Community Participatory Analysis, and echoes the fact that an adolescent girls' family and community members play an integral role contributing to her empowerment. The project therefore believes in the need to change the social norms of the community members to allow for lasting change.

It is with this theme that the two day religious leaders workshop was organized in Rupandehi and brought in religious leaders from Rupandehi and Kapilvastu who the project is engaging with, as well as other influential religious leaders in the community. The project was guided by four main objectives- to create a common understanding of the project among the religious leaders, to engage and mobilize the religious leaders for adolescent empowerment, to allow for a district to a national level linkage to be formed among the religious leaders, and to celebrate the positive practices by the religious leaders in the community that contributed to adolescent empowerment.

The workshop was co-facilitated by Siddhartha Samudayik Samaj (SSS) from Rupandehi and Dalit Social Development Center (DSDC) from Kapilvastu and National Inter-Religious Network (NRIN) from Kathmandu, with CARE supporting the workshop. The event began with an introduction through a game that concluded by giving the message that we all contribute to a society's growth collectively when we work together and in harmony towards a common cause. The workshop then allowed for the religious leaders to be oriented with the project activities thus far and why the project seeks to work with them. The two days also gave space for the religious leaders primarily from Islam and Hindu religions to come together and to discuss the challenges they face in their work with adolescents and why child marriage was so prevalent in their communities. When the religious leaders were given a space where they could brainstorm the top challenges they felt in working to tackle the social norms relating to child marriage, they listed lack of education as the top cause, followed by social shunning against them and their profession thereby hurting their livelihood. Religious leaders from some area identified that if

they did not comply with the societies expectations, the community members would resort to getting another religious leader from a nearby village and still following through the illegal marriage.

The two days allowed for the religious leaders to reflect upon their work, upon societal expectations, and upon the social ills that they were allowing for or struggling to stand up against. The two days also allowed religious leaders to see that they were united in their struggles and therefore they could stand united in their search for solutions across the two districts and even nationally. The session facilitated by NRIN allowed the religious leaders to learn of challenges that religious leaders face throughout Nepal. It gave the opportunity to showcase that despite hurdles, religious leaders were committed to various endeavors of empowerment for adolescents. In keeping with seeking collective solutions, the Tipping Point Project and NIRIN together created a loose forum of the religious leaders. This network was set up as an independent body in both Rupandehi and Kapilvastu districts, and the religious leaders were given space to identify their executive committee amongst themselves and also to form a three-month action plan. This step is a strong way to stand collaboratively to engage and mobilize the religious leaders from different faiths towards adolescent empowerment. The loose forum was well received by the religious leaders, and they have committed to holding a meeting within the next three months to give a more concrete shape to this forum.

The workshop had been organized with four crucial objectives. After the workshop, the religious leaders had a better idea of how the project has been and will be engaging with them. The religious leaders saw themselves as empowered bodies in the society, on par with doctors or engineers, who contributed much to the direction a society took. With the formation of the loose network, the workshop also gave the religious leaders to not be project dependent and thereby ensure their networks sustainability. At the end of the workshop, the religious leaders were felicitated with shawls for their good work and for being advocates in the society for adolescent empowerment. The two-day event was a productive first step towards engaging with the religious leaders and has paved the way for more cooperation and ownership from them for adolescent empowerment.