



# Story from the Field

## Tipping Point: Digging up the Roots of Child Marriage to Replant the Future

### When Football Challenges Stereotypes



*Pooja Yadav, independent and mobile, biking to run an errand.*

“Kicking the football for the first time felt really good!,” Pooja Yadav shares with much zeal. This is the first time she has played football in nineteen years of her life. A resident of Bairghat VDC in Rupandehi, Pooja’s parents had arranged for Pooja to wed just last year. In keeping with the social norms of her community, they had arranged for her to marry at such a young age- this was not an uncommon phenomenon for her near and dear ones.

CARE’s Tipping Point Project has been partnering with Siddhartha Samudayik Samaj (SSS) in Rupandehi to allow for positive shifts in social norms that contribute to adolescent

empowerment. It focuses on creating alternatives for the adolescents. Although the Government of Nepal gives legal recognition to marriage only if those getting married are over twenty years of age, the exorbitant demand for dowry if the marriage takes place at a more mature age, control over the girl’s sexuality, and restriction on her mobility are perpetuating child marriage in the region.

The project works with identifying and tackling the root causes of child marriage and facilitates innovative strategies to create alternate paths for adolescent girls. As part of the program strategy, the project has provided scholarships to deserving students with the aim of allowing them to continue education and to stay in school. Pooja Yadav is one such deserving student. Receiving the scholarship enabled her to pursue her educational aspirations. Moreover being a part of the life skills girls group that the project runs in her village, she got an opportunity to be aware of the harms of early marriage. Coming to the group and being a part of the life skills discussions equipped Pooja with the confidence to voice her feeling that she did not want to get married. In fact what she wanted was to pursue higher education and work with a development organization. With much persistence from the project staff and those in

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the girls group, Pooja's parents were convinced that encouraging Pooja to study would be the right thing to do at the time and therefore halted her marriage.

Today Pooja is not only building on her aspiration, but is also developing hobbies. The Tipping Point Project has always sought local and innovative solutions to tackle the social ill that is early marriage. In keeping with this, the project devised football competition as an innovative tool to address issues of control over the mobility of girls. Whereas football is traditionally seen as a sport played by the men, enabling the adolescent girls to engage in the sport went a long way in debunking the commonly held stereotype. The project focuses on breaking the stereotype, on breaking the norm, on creating positive shifts to help adolescents realize their dreams.



***Urmila and her friends show how they wrapped their shawls around their bodies so that they could play football.***

In a nearby VDC in Rupandehi, called Raipur, Urmila Agrahari and her friends are also enjoying this new luxury that is sport. Being able to run, play or even laugh was a far-fetched reality for girls here. However through the life-skills sessions that are being run in their village, not only are they learning about the ills of child marriage but also forming goals in life, playing, and speaking out for adolescent empowerment collectively. Urmila and her friends share that whereas before they thought football was something that only boys played, “now we realize that it is a game for both the sexes. We also realized that football is a lot of fun, and that we are actually good at it!”

Urmila and her friends share how difficult playing football was for them for the first time. “Our shawls kept getting in the way, so we wrapped them around our waist so that we could run faster,” they share. The girls were so eager to have had the opportunity to play that they recall how victorious they were when they beat the opposing team by a six-four score. And despite the fact that their shawls would interfere with their game, they kept at it and claimed to have been very encouraged by the attention and support they received.

With these girls serving to be a role models, more and more people in their community are warming up to the idea of girls playing. Even parents are supporting their daughters to play the sport for they feel reassured that they are in a safe and supportive environment. The stringent social norms that so often suppressed girls and their worth is gradually changing for the better. And with the positive shifts in these deeply embedded norms, the changes may be sustainable and for the long run.

**This story was documented by Ayushma Basnyat , CARE Nepal.**