

Getting the Message Across

Nepal Safer Motherhood Project

Issue Sheet 9

The Challenge

Addressing behaviour change and communicating safe motherhood messages is a critical element of safe motherhood work, and NSMP has used a number of approaches to reach women and their families in communities across Nepal. The challenges posed by the country's rich cultural diversity and ethnic mix are exacerbated by the difficulties of travelling in mountainous terrain and during the monsoon season, and the recent escalation of the armed conflict. Many communities live in remote situations under harsh conditions, where simply growing and earning enough to survive takes all their time and energy. Under such circumstances, people may have fewer opportunities to access information and be less open to change. Throughout Nepal the cultural norm



is a patriarchal extended family structure, within which the status of women, particularly young newly married women, is very low. Women's health receives little attention, and reproductive health issues are generally not discussed openly.

Key Issues

Behaviour change, as opposed to simple information dissemination, is a lengthy process, which includes a series of recognised stages that only begin with the acquisition of knowledge. Many other factors and events may also influence people in making a decision to change established practices and behaviours, and it is therefore important to sustain behaviour change activities for a number of years, and remain sensitive to other influences.

Although essential messages about the need for behavioural changes related to pregnancy and childbirth apply to all communities, the ways of reaching people need to be tailored to the specific cultural context and knowledge of different ethnic groups and geographical areas. A wide range of dissemination media is needed, partly to ensure effective coverage of all strata of society, and also because reinforcement of the same messages through different media is more likely to bring about real and lasting behaviour change. The involvement of multiple stakeholders is important at both local and national level, to maximise opportunities for collaboration in spreading the word and to make the best use of available resources. Within this diversity, essential messages must remain consistent.



Achievements and Lessons Learned

NSMP played a central role in the development of a National Safe Motherhood Information Education Communication / Behaviour Change Communication Strategy (2002-07), collaborating with government and NGO/donor partners, particularly the USAID Maternal and Neonatal Health Programme. SUMATA (meaning Care, Share and Prepare in Nepali language) was jointly developed as the strategy implementation initiative, with a wide range of materials and methods, encompassing mass media, such as radio and TV programmes, local activities, such as street theatre, and printed materials, including posters and flipcharts. NSMP has also produced an additional three videos on safe motherhood issues. These materials have been used by partners to disseminate key messages at community level at public events, such as rallies and competitions.

Based on the strategy, NSMP supported local partners in project districts in the development of district specific communication plans for safe motherhood. The local knowledge base of partners has been used to adapt the nationally produced materials to reflect local cultural norms, such as dress and language. A weekly radio magazine called "Aama" (Mother) is broadcast from two regional and one FM radio station, based on the themes of the national strategy,



highlighting local issues and promoting locally available obstetric services. Listeners are invited to send in queries, which are answered on air by local safe motherhood experts.

NSMP and partners have also worked with local government offices, such as the district education and public health offices, to develop non-formal education materials focusing on safe motherhood issues. The classes provide an excellent forum for women to discuss issues openly and share experiences and ideas, raising their awareness in a non-threatening environment. Similarly work with local health workers and mothers' groups and mother-in-law/ daughter-in-law gatherings has proved very successful in opening up discussions, leading to questioning of traditionally accepted but harmful behaviour and practices.

Results from monitoring exercises and anecdotal information from local staff indicate that intra-family communications are improving, and mothers-in-law and husbands are providing more support for pregnant and newly delivered women in the family. The use of a range of media appears to have been effective in raising awareness and promoting behaviour change in communities. However, it is important to acknowledge the multiplier effect of initiatives by different agencies, so that changes cannot be attributed to one specific activity or intervention, or to the efforts of one agency only.

Questions Remaining

The enormity of the task of reaching all sectors of society and building on initial achievements means that much remains to be done, and it will be important to ensure the momentum for change is maintained. Since behaviour change is a slow process, the current messages need to be sustained, in different forms, for at least a further three to four years. It will also be important to build on the start made by mass media initiatives, through geographical expansion of followup activities to widen the reach and increase the understanding of messages, and to make links with wider reproductive health issues, such as safe abortion and newborn health.

NSMP experience shows that localising materials, taking into account language and customs, immeasurably increases their effectiveness, and this requires more input from different stakeholders. Local and national levellinkages also need to be maintained and further developed, to ensure that safe motherhood



is on everyone's agenda. Most importantly, behaviour change activities must be in line with service availability.

The Nepal Safer Motherhood Project (NSMP) was initiated in 1997 as a collaboration between the Nepal Ministry of Health and the UK Department for International Development (DFID).