

## Persevering Through the Storm

Rama Raut was married at only 14 years old. Once married, she slowly began experiencing frequent periods of illness. At age 17, her illness became considerably worse, and she began to get rashes. Her husband took her to a hospital in India, where she was diagnosed as HIV positive. Upon returning to Nepal, she began receiving ART treatment. In her hometown of Surkhet, She experienced rejection by her community and her own family. Her family would not touch items or food that she had touched and refused to have anything to do with her. At age 18, Rama was widowed when her husband died of AIDS-related complications.

At age 20, she moved to Kathmandu, where she re-married a man who is also living with HIV. At age 22, she became pregnant and gave birth to a healthy son through PMTCT (Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission). However, even in the hospital, she experienced discrimination from both nurses and doctors, who refused to touch or go near her. Both she and her husband worked as laborers, however, her husband has been incarcerated for the past year and is serving an 11-year sentence. She experiences immense challenges with raising two children on her own. Despite working as a laborer during the week, sometimes her children go to bed hungry as she does not make enough money to feed them. At this time, all of the responsibility for the care of her family is on her shoulders. In addition, she has no one to take care of her during her periods of illness and often must go to the hospital alone with no support.

Her son is now 7 years old and attending class 1, and she also has a 3-year-old daughter who attends nursery. She sends her children to boarding school because she dreams of her children gaining an education in order to have more opportunities than she did. Her second husband is from the community of Sindhupalchowk (In Nepali culture, it is customary to say their home is their husband's village). There, she is discriminated against due to her husband's incarceration; even her father-in-law does not want her in the home. She had to constantly worry about her neighbors not discovering her HIV status by seeing her take her medication, or discovering who her friends are – as all of her friends are also living with HIV. Even her children now face discrimination for her status. She shared an incident that occurred when she tried to admit her son into school when one of her neighbors disclosed her and her husband's HIV status to the school and therefore did not accept him as a student.

Rama was suffering from lower abdominal pain and burning sensation at the side of the uterus and weakness for a few weeks. So she went to the hospital for the check up doing a video x-ray and some other tests through which she got to know that she was having appendicitis and doctors suggested doing surgical intervention for treatment. She couldn't afford the expenses of treatment due to her economic condition.

So, Shanti Foundation provided support with her treatment expenses. During the treatment process, Rama and our team had to face a lot of stigma and discrimination because the health service provider doesn't want to provide service because of being HIV infected and continuously refer from one hospital to another. Furthermore, they are compelled to have HIV tests. But finally, with joint effort Rama was access health service and was successfully brought back home.