

Female Friendly Spaces in post-earthquake Nepal

Organisations

Aura Freedom International and Apeiron

Country

Nepal

Length of programme

June 2015 – Feb 2016

Supported by

Global Affairs, Government of Canada

Project summary

Informed by discussions with community members, Aura Freedom and local partner Apeiron designed a Female Friendly Spaces (FFS) project in post-earthquake Nepal. These FFS provided a safe space where displaced women and girls could report violence, seek services, and attend educational workshops. The creation of the FFS has increased awareness of women's rights and the dangers of gender-based violence and child marriage among entire communities. This case study focuses on the FFS project, which ended in February 2016. However, Aura Freedom and Apeiron continue to address child marriage via their new project called Outreach which is being implemented in Dhading, Nepal.

What were the anticipated outcomes as identified in the *Girls Not Brides* Theory of Change?

- Girls are increasingly aware of their rights.
- Girls have the opportunity to develop solidarity with one another through peer groups and collective action.
- Alternative economic and social roles for girls and women exist and are valued.
- Increased access of married and unmarried girls to health, education, economic, and legal support.

What were the key activities of the project?

Aura Freedom and Apeiron worked to empower women and girls by facilitating daily education and awareness sessions on various topics including human rights, and by providing access to health and legal services. Activities took place in the ten FFS structures built in displacement camps throughout the Kathmandu Valley and the Districts of Rasuwa and Dhading. Sessions were designed to promote awareness of gender inequality and, ultimately, decrease gender-based violence (GBV) and child marriage at a time when families were facing increased hardship and instability and girls were at an increased risk of being married as children.

Daily awareness sessions

These sessions represented the main focus of the FFS project. They were aimed at educating women and girls on their human and legal rights, and addressed topics such as violence against women, gender equality, reproductive and sexual health, and harmful cultural practices, including child marriage. The sessions had a strong emphasis on the importance of keeping girls in school as a key strategy to prevent child marriage. They also discussed the harmful consequences of child marriage for girls, their families and communities. This contributed to a shift in attitudes regarding the practice and as a result of their participation, young women reported that they were determined to do things differently for their daughters.

Daily literacy classes

Literacy classes provided an opportunity to receive basic education at a time when access to services was limited. Classes were taught by a local woman trained in traditional literacy methods and played a significant role in the recognition of these women and girls' human rights, especially for young mothers who had been forced to drop out of school. Simply learning how to write their names and addresses – which ultimately enabled them to complete their own vital registration and identification documents – fostered an incredible sense of accomplishment and increased their self-confidence.

Referral services

Women and girls were able to receive information on various health and legal services and get referrals to the appropriate services when necessary. Survivors of violence and abuse could also seek out one-to-one or group trauma counselling in the FFS, facilitated by trained members of staff who were recruited locally for this purpose.

Vital registration

Supporting women and girls to obtain legal documentation was also provided. This included birth and marriage certificates, property and citizenship documents, and personal identification documents. In gaining possession of these, girls and women felt a sense of empowerment and independence, allowing them to register for school or training courses, receive government support, claim ownership of their land, access labour markets and open bank accounts – all crucial steps in preventing child marriage and supporting married girls and women to live fulfilling and empowered lives.

GBV watch groups

Each FFS formed a GBV watch group composed of community members who received appropriate training on how to keep their community safe and free from violence. The groups, many of whom had several young female members, acted as advocates for women and girls. Women and girls could also disclose incidences of GBV and receive appropriate support and referrals. This supportive presence created a strong sense of sisterhood and camaraderie in the displacement camps.

Has the programme been evaluated?

Yes. The FFS project has been evaluated both internally and externally. Aura Freedom's internal evaluation demonstrated enormous impact, with data showing a significant increase in knowledge of GBV and human rights. It also showed a positive shift in attitudes towards gender equality in both males and females. Respondents condemned violence and defined health, education, and employment as key for women and girls, all of which are closely related to child marriage.

Here's a snapshot of some results after 5 months of operation:

WOMEN (259 females aged 11-72)

- **100%** of females surveyed can identify 3 forms of GBV, versus 12% before the project.
- **99%** know who to contact if they have experienced physical or sexual violence, versus 25% before the project.
- **97%** believe violence against women (VAW) is never acceptable, versus 5% before the project.
- **94%** believe education for girls is very important, versus 49% before the project.
- **100%** believe health for girls and women is very important, versus 62% before the project.
- **92%** believe employment for women is very important, versus 57% before the project.
- **88%** feel their ideas are valued, versus 68% before the project.

MEN (148 males aged 13-60)

- **98%** of males surveyed can identify 3 forms of GBV, versus 39% before the project
- **93%** believe VAW is never acceptable, versus 9% before the project.
- **64%** believe rapists are responsible for rape, versus 17% before the project.
- **89%** believe education for girls is very important, versus 68% before the project.
- **100%** believe health for girls and women is very important, versus 51% before the project.
- **72%** believe employment for women is very important, versus 27% before the project.

Despite the fact that the FFS targeted females only, the ripple effects are undeniable. Women and girls shared knowledge and experience from the FFS sessions with their families. Simply by being indirectly exposed to the information shared in the FFS, the men in these communities gained a better understanding of issues related to gender inequality, including the fact that women have the same human rights as everyone else.

An external evaluation will be available in 2017.

What were the challenges in implementing the project and how were they overcome?

Given the severity of the earthquake and the widespread physical damage that it caused, it was difficult for some to comprehend the need for daily education and awareness raising sessions rather than bags of rice or blankets. There was some confusion and apprehension therefore in the early stages of the project.

However, in post-disaster settings, violence against women, human trafficking, and child marriage all increase drastically, which leads to a large range of harmful consequences for women and girls. Aura Freedom and Apeiron persevered with their plan and, despite initial hesitation, communities were quick

to realise just how crucial and powerful the FFS and its educational activities were for the well-being and prosperity of girls and women.

What factors are important to the success of the programme?

The cornerstone of this project has been awareness and information dissemination. Women and girls in these communities had always endured the burden of deeply rooted social norms sustaining gender inequality. As a result, they were simply unaware they had a choice. By simply informing them of their fundamental human rights, they were empowered to make their own choices and were able to take ownership of their lives.

Furthermore, men were indirectly exposed to this information and witnessed how their wives, sisters and daughters felt increasingly empowered. They realised that, not only were women entitled to human rights, but that everyone within the community could benefit when these were respected.

What pieces of advice would you give other civil society organisations considering implementing a similar programme?

- **Listen to what beneficiaries have to say** – no one knows better about their needs or concerns than they do.
- **Be flexible with project implementation** – unforeseen circumstances happen and it is important to be able to adapt to these changes.
- **Think long-term** – ending child marriage is not achieved with “Band-Aid” solutions. Sustainability is a crucial factor in project planning.

For more information about the Female Friendly Spaces project watch a [short video](#) by Aura Freedom’s Founder, Marissa Kokkoros and take a look the [photo essay](#) featuring photographs from the project as captured by Canadian photographer, Mandy Glinsbockel.

Find out more about the work of Aura Freedom International by visiting their [website](#).