

# WOMEN MAKING CHOICES

By KAITLIN McVEY



Village women gain and share knowledge about health and reproduction.

**S**hama Parvin squints under the scorching sun as she shields herself with her canary yellow sari. Her voice steadies—decades of memories flood her mind as she describes her abrupt step into adulthood with her marriage to Zakir Hussain at 14. Within a year, Parvin was pregnant with Mida, the first of four children. Propelled into womanhood, she promptly learned to take care of her fam-

*Mida and Shama Parvin at their house in Bihar's Herthu village.*

ily and the home she and Hussain shared in a poor neighborhood in Bihar's Herthu village. Hussain supported his family by selling bags at the railway station. In spite of their meager income, Parvin managed to save a Rs. 15,000 dowry for Mida. When Mida turned 15, her marriage was arranged with a young man in their community and the engagement took place. Parvin was thrilled that she had ensured her daughter's future with a good match.

Shortly after arranging the marriage, Parvin heard about the Parivar Kalyan

Salahkar (family welfare counselor) training on reproductive health offered by the Promoting Change in Reproductive Behavior in Bihar (PRACHAR) Project. The training intrigued Parvin, who had experienced difficult pregnancies and births, which left her in poor health. She wanted to learn more about family planning so that she would be able to help her daughters, as well as other young women in her community.

Her husband resisted initially because of the cultural stigma attached to discussions of sex and reproduction in Indian society. After she was selected as a volun-

teer trainee, Parvin relied on PRACHAR support to inform her husband about the project. As a result, Hussain agreed that Parvin's participation would bring valuable information to both the family and the community.

Over the course of her five-day training, Parvin learned much about reproductive health and family planning. She also got to know about available resources and services. Through PRACHAR, she learned that a woman should not marry before 18 and not have children until 21 for economic, social and health reasons. Parvin understood how early marriage and early pregnancy had affected her physical and economic conditions.

With her new sense of empowerment, Parvin went to Hussain and insisted that Mida's engagement be called off. Despite the risk of losing the dowry, Parvin wanted to protect her daughter from the negative consequences of early marriage and

child bearing. She won Hussain's support to break the engagement by sharing her new knowledge and awareness. "I do not want the difficulty and agony that I faced at such a tender age by bearing children to be experienced by my daughter, so I have broken the marriage and my family is supporting my decision," she says. Even though the groom's family refused to return the dowry, Parvin and Hussain were confident that the loss was more than offset by the opportunities Mida gained to protect her health and continue her schooling.

PRACHAR is one of several programs

instituted by Pathfinder International in India. Since 2001, "PRACHAR in India has sought to change deep-rooted social norms related to fertility and early childbearing. The program strives to bring about major attitude and behavior changes in youths, as well as their parents and influential community members," says W. Sita Shankar, Pathfinder's deputy country representative. Pathfinder spreads its message through "various mediums such as workshops and seminars, public plays and classes." Its India head office is in New Delhi, with local offices and projects throughout the country.

Under the leadership of Daniel E. Pellegrom since 1985, Pathfinder has grown from a U.S.-based, start-up nonprofit to a global organization with an annual budget of more than \$90 million. Pathfinder International operates in more than 20 developing countries.

Pathfinder's three primary objectives are to help arrest the spread of HIV/AIDS,

lives and bodies. In India, there is pressure on young women in many communities to prove their fertility by bearing a child immediately after marriage. PRACHAR has trained more than 450 change agents to train and educate newlyweds, young couples with one child, mothers-in-law, adolescents and rural medical practitioners. An additional 3,000 community volunteers such as Parvin work with the change agents to educate entire communities and promote a social environment that allows women to make their own choices.

An American, Dr. Clarence Gamble, formed The Pathfinder Fund ([www.pathfind.org/](http://www.pathfind.org/)) in 1957. It was a byproduct of Dr. Gamble's work to advocate for and introduce contraception to women and couples during the 1920s in the United States. Dr. Gamble provided the seed grant to start the Cincinnati Maternal Health Clinic in November 1929, and began dispensing information on birth control to women and men. Pathfinder is now based in Watertown, Massachusetts, and is a global nonprofit organization that centers on reproductive health, family planning and HIV/AIDS prevention and care.



KARL GROBEL

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Pathfinder's three primary objectives are to help arrest the spread of HIV/AIDS,

provide care to women suffering complications from unsafe abortions, and influence health policies in the United States and abroad. The organization forges working partnerships with local government and fellow NGOs in delivering reproductive health and family planning information.

"Pathfinder recognized that many NGO partners in Bihar needed orientation and training, not just in [reproductive health and family planning] issues but also in project management, monitoring and administration," says Shankar. It builds "local capacity through classroom orien-

worker community, known as *saathis*) are trained to disseminate information. Mukta has established 104 health service centers which have provided health care services to about 20,500 female and male sex workers since 2004. The project also advocates for their social and economic rights.

According to the Consortium on National Consensus for Medical Abortion in India ([http://www.aiims.edu/aiims/events/Gynaewebsite/ma\\_finalsite/report/1\\_1\\_2.htm](http://www.aiims.edu/aiims/events/Gynaewebsite/ma_finalsite/report/1_1_2.htm)), the mortality is reported to be 7.8 per 1000 random abortions, most of which are illegal. Studies indicate that risk of death is seven times higher for women

who wait until the second trimester for termination of pregnancy. Pathfinder works in five districts of Bihar to improve women's access to safe abortions. Proactive efforts to inform people about unsafe abortions are complemented with increased availability of newer, safer methods of abortion. Pathfinder maintains that "the key to reducing reliance on abortion is providing women with the means to safely control their fertility, through promoting empowerment over their own reproductive behavior and delivering modern family planning services."



PRACHAR NGO TRAINING PARTNER

tation, technical support, field supervision and exposure visits."

In Maharashtra, Pathfinder's Mukta Project works in 65 cities, towns and villages to educate sex workers and their clients about safe sexual behaviors. The goal is to reduce the prevalence and spread of sexually transmitted infections. Mukta works with 12 local NGOs and is part of The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Avahan Initiative, which supports HIV/AIDS prevention work in six Indian states.

Peer educators from within the sex worker community, as well as auto drivers and lodge employees (friends of the sex

worker community, known as *saathis*) are trained to disseminate information. Mukta has established 104 health service centers which have provided health care services to about 20,500 female and male sex workers since 2004. The project also advocates for their social and economic rights.

Shankar says. "Training women as volun-

### Consequences of Early Marriage and Childbearing

- Early marriage disrupts schooling and limits economic opportunity and skill development.
- Early pregnancy and motherhood pose serious health risks for young women.
- Young brides with older husbands are more vulnerable to sexual violence and contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases because they lack autonomy and power, as well as information, education and access to services.
- Early marriage impedes overall national development.

Kaitlin McVey is a writer living in Seattle, Washington.