



FIRST PERSON

From Housewife to Village Chief

Health care worker earns trust, confidence — and votes



Photo: USAID/Virginia Foley

“I am sitting on this chair because of the confidence I got [as a USAID volunteer],” says Sadila village chief Ramshila Singh.

Traditions are strong in Uttar Pradesh, where many women, including Ramshila Singh, never left their homes unless in the company of their mother-in-laws. Already the most populous state in India, Uttar Pradesh is still growing at the rapid rate of 2.3 percent each year.

In 1994, USAID began supporting a project to respond to its rapid population growth, training volunteers to counsel village residents about family planning over 18 months. After conducting a baseline survey, volunteers invited couples to talk about family planning issues, educated them about birth spacing and distributed condoms.

Ramshila persuaded her husband and mother-in-law to allow her to become a volunteer, but like many of the volunteers, she initially didn't know much about contraception. She was so shy that she could hardly talk. But gradually she built relationships and was sought out by female clients to accompany them for reproductive and other health services.

Now Ramshila says she talks to everyone — even to men — and they come to her home for advice. Sometimes they ask who will take on the risk and responsibility if their wives suffer complications due to family planning. “I will,” she says.

Because of her reputation and her strong community relationships, Ramshila was elected *Pradhan* — chief — of her village, defeating even candidates who had bought votes. Her husband is proud of her. “I could never have won that election,” he says.

Will she run again? “Why should I leave my job in the middle?” she asks.