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# SUCCESS STORY

## Asian Women Living With HIV/AIDS Develop Advocacy Skills

**At a new Asia-Pacific best practices conference, USAID empowers women living with HIV/AIDS**



POLICY Project/Nepal

With POLICY support, members of Sneha Samaj, a newly established women's group in Nepal, attended the conference.

***“This conference helped me build my self-esteem,” said Geeta Sarki of Nepal. “I will use this forum to help other women live positively and help build their self-confidence. I will encourage everybody to be active.”***

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AT THE END OF 2004, almost half the adults living with HIV/AIDS worldwide were women and girls. The steepest increase in the number of cases among females occurred in East Asia, where, according to the 2004 AIDS Epidemic Update published by UNAIDS and WHO, the number rose by 56 percent over the past two years. The First Asia-Pacific Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS Best Practices Conference, held in Pakistan in late 2004, brought together 300 delegates from 25 nations to consider how to address this concern.

Among the delegates were 20 HIV-positive women from Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, and Vietnam, whose participation was sponsored by the POLICY Project, and funded by the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief through the U.S. Agency for International Development. For many of these women, it was the first opportunity to attend such an event. Their presence was of particular significance because, according to Pakistan Minister of Health Nasir Khan, “empowerment of women and girls is the best vaccine.”

Geeta Sarki, who represented the recently established Sneha Samaj nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Nepal that works with women and children infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, commented, “This conference helped me build my self-esteem. I learned about my rights and how to express my voice in front of people. I will use this forum to help other women live positively and help build their self-confidence. I will encourage everybody to be active.”

A woman named Aspara, from the NGO called Friends Help Friends in Nepal, took advantage of the opportunity to advocate with policymakers. “They asked me what I would like to say to my government. I told them that there is no care and support for women and children living with HIV/AIDS in Nepal. We need hospice services, and the government should provide free antiretrovirals and medicines for opportunistic infections.”

Two conference sessions, also supported by the POLICY Project, provided women living with HIV/AIDS with additional skills and tools. The Plenary Session for the Leadership of Positive Women focused on identifying gaps in interventions and policies, along with challenges for scaling up participation of positive women in the region. The Skills Building Workshop for Positive Women aimed to increase the women's effectiveness as advocates for their own needs by influencing programs and policies that prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and reduce stigma and discrimination.