



2013 HUMAN INTEREST STORY CONTEST

CELEBRATE YOUR VOICE



Deadline: November 1, 2013

E-mail for information:

HumanInterestStory@care.org

Examples of Previous Winners: Video, Photography and Written Stories

VIDEO CONTEST:

2012: 1st Place (\$1,000): A.A.M. Shafeer, CARE Sri Lanka
(Video not yet edited – click [here](#) to view raw footage)



2010: Strengthening the Dairy Value Chain,
Akram Ali, CARE Bangladesh

[Click here to view edited video](#)



2011: Transforming Dairy Management & Improving Women's Lives

Akram Ali, CARE Bangladesh

[Click here to view edited video](#)



PHOTO CONTEST: 2012 Winners

1st Place (\$700): Niandou Ibrahim, CARE Niger



2nd Place (\$500): Melora Palmer, CARE Haiti



3rd Place (\$350): Chu Xuan Canh, CARE Vietnam



WRITTEN STORY CONTEST

GRAND PRIZE (\$1,500): CARE Helps Rania Overcome the Odds

by Iman Al-Sharie, CARE Yemen

When Rania was five months old, a hungry street cat ate the fingers off her right hand. The local veterinarian, the closest thing they had to a doctor in her village, cut off the rest. She is now 23 years old; having no memory of ever being able to use both hands, Rania has had to learn to get by with only one.



Sadly, Rania’s tragedy did not end with the street cat. When she finished sixth grade, the community pressured her father to take her out of school, “she may bring shame to her family... she may fall in love with her teacher,” Rania recalls them saying. Her community believed that if a girl is educated, she will no longer respect her family’s wishes and will rebel against them. Women suffer marginalization throughout rural Yemen. Their lives are limited to fetching water, and taking care of goats and farms. Finally, they are married – usually in their teens – to serve their husbands and their families.

Rania’s father bowed to traditions and societal pressure, and took her out of school. Rania insisted, however: crying, kissing her father’s hands and knees, and begging him and her brothers to allow her to go back to school. Eventually, he agreed, and she became the only girl still in school. The other girls in the village – now married and out of school – teased her because the teacher would not even look at her because of her amputated hand. They also made fun of Rania’s marriage prospects, “no one will marry an amputee, that’s why she hasn’t gotten married... she will end up an old maid.” Even her Arabic teacher teased her. She could not stand silent, and reacted by writing poetry satirizing him. The harassment she faced, along with her poetic quips, led to low grades on her final exams. After all she had been through, it was understandable that she would develop severe depression after receiving her exam results. Her father decided to take her to Sana’a for psychiatric treatment.

While in Sana’a, Rania learned of a charitable sewing institute, and decided to enroll. But she continued to face the same discrimination in her sewing class. Her teacher never believed there was a point to her being in the class, and treated her accordingly. Because of the treatment she faced, Rania decided to withdraw, both from the institute and from society. Her depression began to take control of her life.

Her father returned to their village, but Rania decided to stay in Sana'a and live with her uncle in Bani Hewat. Bani Hewat is one of the largest Muhamasheen communities in Sana'a, a traditionally disadvantaged and discriminated against socioeconomic group. Though Rania would still be teased in the capital, it was nothing compared to the collective bullying she faced in her hometown. It would also be an opportunity to enroll in a private college. This would not be easy, "I could not register in the public university due to my low grades in secondary school, so I wanted to register in the costly private education. But my father was not able to pay the fees."

With little hope in sight, Rania happened to hear about one of CARE's projects, "I heard from girls in my neighborhood about a program to improve youth conditions. I took permission from my father and registered," one of her cousins told her. Muhamasheen generally inherit and work in specific menial jobs that are looked down upon by the community, such as garbage collectors. The project, *Perspectives for Muhamasheen Children and Youth*, provides training opportunities for Muhamasheen youth in areas like nursing, mechanics, and sewing, in addition to psychosocial support. Rania was hesitant to join the class at first, fearing she would face the same discrimination she always faced. She soon came to the conclusion that she had nothing to lose, and decided to enroll.

In the beginning, her sewing teacher – intentionally or not – showed preference to the other students. She did not believe that Rania would benefit from the class, having only one hand. But this time Rania decided to challenge her teacher, and prove that she could sew as well as any of the other students. "Rania is a clever girl," her trainer recalls, "she said she would design and tailor a dress if I showed her how to just once... and she did!" After that day, Rania's trainer showed her the respect and admiration she deserved. Her classmates started to seek her advice. "Rania is a lovely and kind person. She is a supportive classmate, and takes the time to teach us. She is outstanding in sewing – better than us. She likes to learn," one of her classmates describes. CARE's project had offered her hope: Rania began to gain confidence in herself. She was able to start managing her depression.

Today, it is clear that Rania has been able to overcome her physical, psychological, and socioeconomic disadvantages. Upon completing her training, she and her classmates started a sewing cooperative using some materials from CARE. Rania prepares dresses to sell in her hometown, which was once so cruel to her. She registered in the national institute for administrative sciences, and is now a level one student. With her new source of income, she is saving up for university. Her dream is that one day her village will recognize that women, just like men, have an essential role to play in society; and that women's education is essential, not only for them, but for society as a whole. Sahar, Rania's cousin, best summarizes her vision, "Rania frequently says that she wishes that society can recognize the importance of education... but that first, women themselves need to recognize this."

FIRST PLACE, CLIMATE CHANGE (\$500):

Transforming Homes and Improving Lives in the Fight against Climate Change

by Eleanor Swindon, CARE Peru

The small mountain community of Chamisería sits in the middle of the Shullcas River sub-basin in the central Andes of Peru. Less than 12 miles up the river rises the most important glacier in the region, Huaytapallana – a formidable snowcapped mountain reaching more than 18,000 feet above sea level at its peak. Its glacial lagoons supply water to half a million people living in the rural and urban areas of the sub-basin.



However, like many glaciers in the tropical Andes experiencing the impacts of climate change, Huaytapallana is suffering accelerated retreat which will lead to its ultimate disappearance by 2050. In addition to rising temperatures, the Shullcas River basin is experiencing decreased rainfall, also as a result of climate change.

For 44-year-old Dora Leon, a local farmer, and her family, this is a big problem. Dora and her husband Armando depend on the water from the Shullcas River and rainfall in the wet season to irrigate subsistence crops that feed their family all year round – potatoes, broad beans, corn and other native Andean plants – as well as pastures to feed their 13 cows and sheep. Growing the majority of what they eat allows them to save money in produce and use the earnings generated from cattle farming to pay for the health and education of their eight children, as well as buy the products they can't grow for themselves. However the impacts of climate change are increasingly visible in daily rural life and taking their toll on the livelihood of the Leon family.

"We have heavy rain, frost, floods, drought ... sometimes there's a lot of rain, sometimes there's little," Dora says as she nurses her six-month old baby on her back under a colorful Andean handspun blanket. "We're worried about the situation of Huaytapallana. The river has changed a lot, before it came up to the bank but now it's low."

Dora has lived all her life in Chamisería during which time she has observed how the change in climate has affected the health of her crops as well as her children.

"This year pests have attacked most of our crops. And now the children get sick more often – colds, fever, cough, stomach ache. It wasn't like that before."

The vulnerability of the habitants of the Shullcas basin to the impacts of climate change and the glacial retreat of Huaytapallana caught the attention of the scientific and environment community of the Andes and led to the initiation of CARE's Adaptation to the Impact of Rapid Glacier Retreat in the Tropical Andes (PRAA) project. Since 2009, the Shullcas basin has been one of two sites in Peru for the execution

of the PRAA project, which involves the implementation of adaptation measures such as reforestation, protection of native grasslands and improved irrigation systems. CARE has also been working with the families living in the sub-basin to educate them in themes of climate change and assist in the implementation of sustainable development activities.

"Last year we had workshops with CARE," says Dora. "They tell us that, from here on, there's not going to be much water. That's why we're planting pine trees – in pine there's water."

Looking around the rustic surrounds of Dora's two-story, mud-brick house, we observe the outcomes of the capacity building workshops run by CARE in conjunction with AGRORURAL, an agency of Peru's Ministry of Agriculture. On the wall is a handmade poster titled "Family Plan," listing all the adaptation activities planned for 2011 that were implemented with the help of CARE technicians and engineers: the construction of eco-friendly wood stoves, eco-toilets, compost wells, cages for breeding small animals and a vegetable garden for family consumption.

"Before there was always a lot of smoke in the kitchen," Dora explains, "now with the new stove there's none so it's not polluting our health, especially the children. We save about four to five loads of firewood each month, so we're not cutting down as many trees."

"We have a compost heap for the organic rubbish from the kitchen and the farm," Dora continues, "which we use as fertilizer for the garden ... broccoli, spinach, lettuce, carrots, cabbage; we didn't have these things before."

While Dora speaks positively about the improvements made to their home to help make their practices more sustainable in the face of climate change, she recognizes the challenges ahead, especially regarding the need for continued support from the government and non-government organizations.

"If we had enough support, we wouldn't need to be asking CARE for help improving our living conditions," she says. During the whole interview Dora is bobbing up and down with a rhythmic jiggle, trying to calm the unsettled baby on her back: a load symbolic of the weight upon a woman trying to rise above the challenges of a changing climate and a changing world.

FIRST PLACE, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (\$500):

No More Child Brides

by Sumaira Khalid, CARE Pakistan

How does a wedding day look like to a five year old, especially if it is *her* wedding day?

Ameena was visibly trembling with fear. Her face had lost its color and she couldn't hear or comprehend what was going on. The hordes of people gathering around her and their excited chatter was pushing her into an abyss where she could only hear her heart beating wildly. It was her wedding day.



“Teju, why are *you* here?” The question coming from a man of Ameena’s family rendered me speechless at first.

I was standing in Ameena’s one-room, mud-walled house with the men of her family. The air, thick with humidity, excitement and nervous anxiety, was becoming difficult to breathe. I can’t say I was any less terrified than little Ameena. She stood in line of being sacrificed to the generations-old tradition of being given in marriage to a boy double or even three times her age. I, on the other hand, stood defiantly in the path of this tradition being reinforced today. If you ask anyone from the village who has been a witness to the account of events in my family life, you’d be sure to get a surprised reaction.

I had seen it all happen before. Silently.

The look Ameena had in her eyes was exactly the same as my own little girl when she was that age and was being given in marriage to a boy double her age.

I couldn’t stop my daughter from being given away like that, so how come I found the courage to do it now, after 25 years? I am not an educated, urban woman. I have never even set foot inside a school. But life teaches you what a classroom doesn’t.

My daughter, Jhoomri, was five years old when my family ran into financial troubles. In order to get quick money, my husband announced that he would give our daughter away to the one who could pay off his financial needs. Since the tradition of early marriages is quite common in our culture, no one really saw any harm in it. We had all become accustomed to being bound in these traditions and never felt the need to think otherwise.

When Jhoomri was being given in marriage, my maternal instincts urged me to stop it from happening – but in a land where men are seated on *charpoy*¹ and women sit on the floor by their feet, how much space do you think we get to voice a distinct opinion?

So Jhoomri got married. At an age when she didn’t even know the difference between getting married and not getting married, at an age when she couldn’t even articulate a question asking about such a difference, at an age when she should only have been concerned with playing. After the ceremony her parents-in-law left her with us, saying she was far too young to help around with the house chores so they would come back for her when she was of a suitable age.

That day never came.

My daughter, as she grew into adolescence, would be teased by her friends about her “husband” and the poor thing would blush and get dreamy-eyed. As she grew older, these playful questions morphed into full blown taunts of why she was left “unwanted” like a ragged doll, how come her husband or his family who had promised to come back and take her away never even saw her again? By now, her father, the person entrusted by God to take care of her and treat her as a blessing, the same person who had emotionally crippled her forever was dead. I was left to become a silent spectator to Jhoomri’s misery. I could have stopped those morbid thoughts from paralyzing her slowly but I didn’t. I was the product of these traditions and was at that point numb to react.

¹ A bedstead of woven webbing, usually made from jute, stretched on a wooden frame on four legs. It is commonly used to sit and sleep on.

I took up my late husband's job on working in the fields of a big village landlord and soon enlisted my other children to work on the fields too. A large number of the village community is dependent on their income from working on the fields of some big land lord. This is the distinction that defines our life and existence. Landless and land owners. Landless masses work on the fields of the few land owners. The land owners are wealthy, send their kids abroad for vacation, have mansions in the big city of Karachi and cherish their daughters. The landless are in debt, can't send their children to school and end up marrying their daughters early for money.

My youngest daughter has begun to attract suitors to the door too. The two boys are also married. But all these developments, considered as moments of joy in one's life, have failed to bring up my spirits. All I can see is Jhoomri and how her life, her happiness, has slipped away from her hands. Slowly she has descended into a state of denial that has impaired all her cognitive abilities. It has been 25 years since she was labeled the child bride, and today she has been labeled as a demented person.

Sometimes I feel I might never have found the courage or the words to describe my daughter's distress had it not been for the CARE gender and human rights training in which I participated. For the past year and a half, I have been working in a five-member road maintenance team formed under CARE's Community Infrastructure Improvement Project. This project has enlisted hundreds of other destitute women like me. I have even heard that this project is spread across dozens of villages in nine districts across the country.

Working on maintaining the earthen roads with the road maintenance team also earns me good money every two weeks. The project has a few trainings that are mandatory for us to attend. At first, I had thought it will just be a bunch of women sitting together and talking – so no harm in attending – but I never expected to come out revisiting so many events in my life and how my instincts on women and children rights had been so accurate.

Realizing that my own disposition had been corroborated by the lessons of the gender and human rights training, I took the brave step to Ameena's door the day I heard the commotion in the village. As I took one stride after the other, my resolve became more and more strengthened. When I talked to the men of her family, the supreme decision-makers of her life, I felt my hands shake and my knees tremble.

I glanced in Ameena's direction. Those fearful eyes reminded me of the agony Jhoomri has lived through the past 25 years. With renewed valor, I fought for Ameena's rights. Standing in that small mud-walled courtyard I championed the cause of women's rights, how we are as important for a community as men, how our lives are as meaningful as those of men, how by making such decisions based on complete ignorance of civilized cultures, religious knowledge and common sense, we ruin a girl's life forever.

The example of my poor daughter's life is a lesson for the decision makers of any girl's future. What has my daughter earned in the last two decades except shame and guilt? All of that is ill placed. The burden of bearing her miseries should be on the shoulders of those who, 25 years ago, rejoiced in that ill-fated ceremony. But she is the only one who continues to suffer. No one else but her can feel the pain of being rejected and left to wonder about her inferiority.

Honestly, I never believed I could make those men part from their decision to marry Ameena off. Perhaps I never realized my own strength to defend someone. It wasn't me who prevented Ameena

from being sacrificed like a lamb, it was Jhoomri's resilience. It was all her strength that channeled out of me that day.

When I tell Jhoomri now that she saved someone's life, that she has become the symbol of bravery and resilience for all girls, she just looks up at me and smiles that innocent smile of hers. Other women from the village tell me I'm just being silly. They say she doesn't have a clue what I'm telling her. She's gone too far along in her demented state of mind.

But I don't agree.

Jhoomri understands very well what she has accomplished. Her smile tells me she knows.

FIRST PLACE, EDUCATION (\$500): I Forgot Being One-Eyed

By Lida Akbari, CARE Afghanistan

A day when I was at grade 8, my classmates drew illustration of a girl on the blackboard and wrote my name on the top of the picture, when I entered the class, all of them laughed on me. This kind of humiliations caused me to discontinue my education and forced me to leave the school.



My name is Zulaikha, born in 1967 in Nauwarid village, Charhr Bolak district of Balkh province. Balkh is a northern province of Afghanistan bordering Republic Uzbekistan. Charbolack is a backward district of the province.

There is no electricity at all. Lack of drinking water is a big problem for the residents of the district. Daily men women and children are bringing water from a long distance. Lack of health facilities and poor economy of the people are other problems. Formal schools are far away from most of the villages in a distance of more than three kilometers.

My father was chief of the community and was a clever man. He was also blind from one eye like me; therefore he was aware of my problems and feelings. He was teaching me and was trying his best for me to get more knowledge. He had taught me the meaning of Human (*Insan* in Dari) to have love, sympathy, tolerance and serve for the people and help them. He told me the best to serving is helping needy people. He didn't let anyone to disturb me, he was always my supporter. He was saying you are my identity we two are deprived from one eye and we both are the same.

My father had two wives; his first wife had four children: one daughter and three sons. My mother had seven children: three daughters and four sons. When I was three years old my mother died. . Unfortunately when I was seven years old my father was died too. After that my agonies started and everyone was calling me one eyed girl, therefore, I didn't want to play with other children. Even they were calling my brothers and sisters that they are brothers and sisters' of a blind girl, so they also want to be away from me and didn't want to play with me. When I joined school, the students were beating and were disturbing me. Every day I was coming home with tears. None of my classmates wanted to be my friend; they didn't play with me and felt ashamed to be my friend.

Everyone was going to school and coming back with their friend and classmates, but I didn't have anyone to accompany me on the school way. When I was shopping something from market the shopkeepers were also laughing on me.

When I lost my father, my grandmother was the only one who was helping me, with whom I could share my sorrows , but she was very old and couldn't defend me and prevent others not to disturb me. She became sick and I didn't have enough money for her treatment and finally she was died as well. Her death was a big lost for me, after that I didn't have anyone to share my feelings and my sorrows with. The only friend of mine, were the books I was barrowing from some relative, studying them and was passing time.

When I become young, based on all sufferings, agonies and tortures which I receive from the society, I decided not to marry in all my life, because being disabled in this society is the symbol of suffering and vulnerability. Women are the most affected part of the insecurity, wars and disasters. I was aware if someone comes from the boy's family for proposing (in Afghanistan most of the marriages are arranged marriage) when they see that the girls is blind from one eye the will run away. No one will ask a disabled girl for marriage.

Until 31 years of my age, no one proposed me and asked for marriage, while all my sisters got married. I was under humiliation of my relatives, neighbors and the community and was escaping from the society. Finally my brother wanted to marry a girl in Sholgara district of Balkh province. The girl had a brother who had physiological problem, the girls' family and my brother decided to exchange me with the girl, the girl should marry my brother and I will marry the boy with mental problem. No one was ready to marry with that boy, but I was forcibly married him. Now we have three children, two daughters Tamana 12 and Arzoo 7 and a son Omid 5. From the beginning of my marriage I had problem with my in-laws, even they didn't call my children by their names, they called my children as son/daughter of on one eyed. My in-laws recognized me as a lazy and bad woman not as their other family member. Based on this situation, my children didn't like me instead they liked their aunts and father.

A day I heard from the elders of the village that an international organization called CARE wants to start literacy and community based primary education activities in the village. They informed me that CARE want to hire literacy teachers from the community through an exam. I noted the date and the place for the exam; I was very happy and optimistic to be selected as a teacher,

because I knew there are a few literate women in our village. I share my desire with my husband at the beginning he laughed on me and said No one will select a one eye blind woman as a teacher. I stressed more and more, finally my husband agreed and I participated in the exam and a few days back I found my name on the list as selected teacher, I realized that there was transparency in selection process of the organization, they didn't considered my blind eye and my appearance jugged based on qualification . That time was the happiest moment of my life.

Now it is more than two months that I have started my job as a literacy teacher. CARE pays monthly salary to the teacher, providing teaching materials and capacity building training for the teachers. I have 33 students consisted of women and girls of the village, now I'm witness of more changes in feeling and perception of the people and the whole community regarding me.

No one disturbs me anymore instead they respect me, I'm no longer one eyed, now they call me teacher Zulaikha. I want to tell the community and prove them that, I'm not blind, because I can read and write and teach other to do so, blind are those who can't read and write. Before those who were feel shame to set and walk with me and invite me in their ceremonies, now they are knocking my door and invite me to participate in their gatherings. From other side they learn in the classes about respecting others and more positive lessons which improves their behaviors.

My husband was jobless and we lived in poverty, when I got the salary of the first month, I gave him some money who buys fruits and sells the fruits on a cart, from one side he makes money and from other side he found a job which caused improvement in his health. I see big changes in my life and in the family environment, for which I tribute to CARE and especially from BEACAN project of CARE education program.

The changes in my life can be counted as follows:

- I prove that disability is not inability
- Respect from family and community
- Regret from others
- Love from my children
- Decreasing mental problem of my husband
- Work opportunity for my husband
- Giving courage to other disabled people
- Power to struggle against hardships and problems
- Job
- Capacity building opportunities through workshops and trainings
- Get freed from marginalization and escaping from society

Thanks CARE to give me the opportunity to prove that disability is not inability, open the door of hope for all other disabled women. No I forgot my disability; I can make bright the dark heart of others.

FIRST PLACE, EMERGENCY (\$500): A Chance to Heal

by Ahmad Hennawi, CARE West Bank Gaza

My name is Israa' Salman Al-Rehel. I am 10 years old and I live with my family of eight in Beit Lahia in the Gaza Strip. Since I was four, I have had a hard time seeing and must use prescription glasses. I was self-conscious of my eye problems and all of the other children in the kindergarten teased me.

Just a few years after discovering my eye problems, the war broke out in Gaza on January 27th 2008. I remember the fighting. We were all sitting on the floor in the dark. I was scared and listening to the shelling outside. Suddenly the war planes bombed our neighbor's house. Everyone was panicking and ran into the streets screaming and trying to help the survivors. I couldn't stop screaming and crying in fear. I didn't want to die.

My mother, Na'eema, who was pregnant and about to give birth, gathered all of us together and sent us with my grandmother to find shelter in a nearby school. The classrooms in the school were full of people hiding from the bombs. There was no electricity and very little food and water. The sound of the bombs kept shaking the walls, and then suddenly one of them hit the school. I remember the explosions lighting up the dark classrooms in the middle of the night.

Smoke and fire were everywhere and people were running in a panic, shouting that the bombs were full of chemicals. I felt pain in my eyes and couldn't see anything. I kept searching for family, and I found my grandma but she couldn't see either. I don't really remember what happened after that, I just remember waking up in the hospital and both I and my grandma lost our most of our eyesight.

They released us from the hospital because it was full and there were many more injured people. That's when I found out that my cousin Dina was killed in the bombing.

My mom told me that, after the school had been shelled, she ran to look for us but nobody was there and the school was full of blood. She cried and prayed for our safety until she found us at the hospital. That night was the last night of the three-week bombing of Gaza, and then after that Israeli army withdrew. The next day we went back to our house. It was badly damaged, but I was so happy the war was over. I also got to see my new little sister Nema for the first time, as my mother had given birth during the war. I couldn't wait to see my friends from school and check that they were okay.

As life around us slowly returned to normal, I went back to school. But I just didn't feel like my old self and always seemed to be fighting with everyone. I also began wetting my bed at night. My teachers and the school principal complained to my mother and told her that I was lying, stealing and causing trouble at school, that my grades were poor. My mother was shocked by my behavior because usually I was so calm and polite at home. She found it hard to believe my teachers until she opened up my school bag



and found things that I'd stolen from my schoolmates. She was so angry. I remember her crying and saying that she felt like she had lost control of me and that it depressed her to see me that way.

She took me to the hospital to see if I was suffering from any health problems. They told her I was physically healthy besides my eyes but that I was suffering from psychological issues created by the war. Even though the war had ended, I still felt scared most of the time. I kept remembering the horrible sites after the bomb fell - the body parts of the children collected in plastic bags. My mother didn't know what to do with me.

Just when my mother had nearly lost hope, she saw an advertisement for CARE's *Eye to the Future* project, which focuses on improving the behavior of children traumatized by the war. They enrolled me in the program and together my mother and I discussed with the mentors all the problems I was facing. In the first month I didn't want to take part in the activities because I was too shy to talk to the other children. Sometimes I wouldn't show up to the activities because I was scared that the mentors would see my bad behavior and tell my mother. But the mentors spent a lot of time finding out who I was, helped to teach me right from wrong and to be more positive about life.

I began participating more and they encouraged me every day. When I saw how much the mentors really cared about me, I made sure to attend every session; sometimes I would even get up early and arrive before the starting time!

I am proud that I became a special and distinguished participant in the program. I still keep the badge I was given and wear it with pride. The teachers tell the other children that they should join the program so they can be like me. Thanks to CARE and the *Eye to the Future* program, my mother says I have finally begun to heal from the trauma I experienced in the war. I am confident in my skills and talents and play with other children now.

While my poor eyesight still upsets me, I hope that one day I can have an operation to fix my eyes and then I will be able to see everything. I hope that my grandma can also have the operation because her eyes are so beautiful. When I grow up I want to be a doctor so that I can help people if there is another war. I wish to live in safety and hope that there won't be another war here.

FIRST PLACE, FOOD SECURITY: Our Rice, Our Life

by Sim Tiv, CARE Cambodia

Chrong Poeng is the poorest woman in Kambak village. She is 40 years old and from the Kroeung ethnic minority group.

Until 1998, Chrong used to earn a living growing rice; she followed the traditional method of her ancestors by using a stick to make holes. Growing rice in this way made her family -- her husband and five children -- face chronic food insecurity for many months throughout the year. In 2000, she and her husband cleared one hectare (2.4 acres) of land in preparation to farm, but soon afterward her husband became sick and died -- just six months after the birth of their fifth child. His death left her to care for five children under the age of 10.



“I tried very hard to collect firewood, search for food, carry water, grow rice, cook food for my children, protect my rice from being attacked by animals, work on my farm and take care of my children – all alone. Besides working on my farm, I also grew soybeans, collected cashews and grew rice for other villagers in exchange for money to run my household and food for my family. I used some of the money I earned through these activities to buy medicine and clothes for my children. But my children had no chance to go to school and were illiterate.” Chrong explained.

And so each year she faced food shortages from June to December. During that time she tried to catch fish in nearby streams or ponds, collect vegetables including leafy greens, wild potatoes, manioc tubers, bamboo shoots and bananas from the forest, and borrowed rice from her neighbors for her children to eat. She constructed her house on her own by collecting small tree branches and other natural materials. She used tree bark to make walls and tree leaves to make the roof with help from her nephew.

But as the local population grew, natural resources, forest produce and wildlife decreased. As her children grew older, they needed more food to eat and clothes to wear. Chrong was struggling more than ever before.

In 2010, CARE saw the difficulties that Chrong and many of her neighbors were facing and started the Cambodian Highland Integrated Food Security project (CHiFS). CARE provided technical support for growing rice, beans and other vegetables, as well as providing materials for storing the community’s rice harvest and seeds.

Chrong was selected by CARE staff to participate in the project. She learned improved rice growing techniques, such as soaking rice seed overnight, and also ways to ameliorate the soil. Her eldest child plowed soil and kept it for 18 days to make the weeds decay, which helped fertilize the soil and give time for the seedlings to be transplanted. She used two to three rice stalks for each hill. She cleared weeds from the rice farm and made a dam to keep water in the paddy. When it was time for harvest, Chrong got a yield of 80 per cent, which translated to 1,000 kilograms (2,204 pounds) of rice.

Beside this work, she also maintained a vegetable garden at home so that she could have fresh produce for her family. In addition, she also began to grow soybeans and cashew trees on another hectare of land. With the income she was making from more crops and better harvests, she was able to purchase two more hectares of land.

“I earned \$1,000 from my harvest of rice and soybean. The Kroeung people believe that the family who has enough rice to consume throughout the year has a rice spirit staying with them. In addition, I have spare time to grow vegetables such as morning glory, spinach, long bean, *luffa* gourds and pumpkin,” she said.

With a little help from CARE, Chrong’s situation improved and now she and her family have enough food to eat to be healthy. The Kroeung people believe that having enough food to eat each day is better than having a luxury car, gold, money, diamond or a fancy house.

She didn’t need to work for food anymore. With the experience she has gained, she can now grow crops with good quality seeds and store rice securely for her family. She can afford clothes for her children, was able to buy books and has enough money to send all five of her children to school. Her oldest son has now become a literacy teacher in a nearby village.

Poeng is an excellent role model for other ethnic minority women.

FIRST PLACE, MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH (\$500): Saving Durga

by Jaspreet Mahal, CARE India

“Babita! You are going to be a mother soon!” As these words echoed in me I felt a sense of fear. It was difficult for a 20-year-old to imagine what being a mother was like.

I had only been married for five months, and already in my fourth month of pregnancy. My mother-in law assured me that I would always be valued only *if* it turned out to be a boy child. I shuddered at the thought if I had a girl.

With 10 mouths to feed (my husband had six younger siblings and our parents living with us) and only two hands at work, it was difficult for me to stay home during the pregnancy. The whole day usually passed working in the fields to make sure everyone had enough to eat.

As my eighth month of pregnancy set in, I came to my mother’s home as the first child is always born there. She lives in a small sleepy village called Nagahar in India. But it turned out to be a boon for me.

Within two days, I had someone to come and see me. She was a petite woman with dark, kind eyes. Introducing herself as Malti, a volunteer health worker in the village, she started asking me about my pregnancy. A little worried with the details, she convinced me to come to the sub-center next Wednesday. I received an injection to save me and my child from infection. As she checked me, she asked me to go to the hospital for a complete check up with a doctor because she noticed something was not normal. I brushed aside her remarks as useless.



Malti came again and asked me to at least prepare to deliver at the primary health center where they had 24-hour delivery facilities. We told her OK, but decided to do it on our own.

About two weeks before my ninth month of pregnancy, in the wee hours one morning, I had severe pains. My mother tried to ease them out with hot compresses – intuitively, I asked her to also call Malti. No one arrived in time; my baby was stillborn. As I still screamed in pain, Malti arrived and quickly arranged for a transport to the hospital. She was scared something might happen to me.

As we (my mother, me and Malti) settled in the car, I delivered another baby boy, but he was also stillborn. My body and mind were losing their senses now. Finally we reached the hospital and I was transferred to the labor room. After another 10 minutes, I delivered the third time. The events had horrified me; losing two babies within a span of few hours! I was almost half dead when they placed my tiny daughter in my arms. Seeing her tender face and fragile body, I forgot my pain. I named her 'Durga' after the goddess of strength. Just then, I saw the worried face of Malti as she said, "She is just 1,500 grams (3.3 pounds)."

Malti strictly told my mother not to feed anything other than mother's milk to the baby. As I put her to my breast, Durga opened her mouth but was unable to hold my nipple. Perhaps she was too weak even to feed. After few tries at it, I got impatient. I asked my mother to get infant milk from outside.' Hearing this, Malti stopped in her tracks. She asked my mother to bring a clean *katori* (small round vessel) and a *chamach* (spoon). She also arranged for some warm water. Then, she asked me to wash my breast with warm water thoroughly. In spite of protests from my mother, Malti asked me to express my own milk into the *katori*. She showed me how to hold my breast and express the milk from back to front. We all were amazed by the amount of milk that collected in that small *katori*. Malti then asked my mother to sit back comfortably and hold the baby. She then showed her how to feed the baby with *katori* and *chamach*.

I saw a lady with a white apron smile at Malti. Soon after that, we returned home.

The next day, Malti came again. She asked about my health and observed the baby. She checked Durga's cord and told me not to bathe her for at least a week. After that, she asked me if I was feeding the baby anything other than my own milk. I shook my head vehemently and assured her that I was doing just as she had told me to do. Malti then gave me one of her warmest smiles; she had won me over.

"Who was that lady with the apron in the hospital?" I asked her. "Her name is Seema, and she is a staff member from CARE, an organization that works with mothers and children. Apart from her other work, she ensures that all the babies born in the hospital are only breastfed and nothing else! She even takes me o task if I don't ensure that" laughed Malti.

As we had returned from the hospital my mother decided to give Durga a bath on the third day. I was skeptical about it, but my protests fell on deaf ears. Durga felt warmer than usual that evening. She did not breastfeed well either. Alarmed, I immediately carried her to Malti's home, who quickly checked the baby's temperature. She had developed a fever.

Looking grim, Malti asked me to do skin to skin care. She demonstrated it for me. I had to open the front of my blouse and place the baby between my breasts, with only her head and feet covered. Malti then wrapped us together; Durga and me with a cloth. I stayed with her that night. After midnight, the baby began to cry. Malti asked me to put her to my breast and, surprisingly, she began to feed. Early next

morning, Malti again checked her temperature, which had come down to normal. It was the scariest night of my life; I did not want to lose her now.

The next day, Malti visited me with another kind-looking lady. She introduced herself as Sarita, a facilitator from CARE. "I met someone else from CARE earlier" I told her. She explained to me that CARE was working at the hospital as well as in the field.

"Your baby girl is a survivor, but still very weak." she told me. As she explained me how to take care of my baby through skin to skin care and breastfeeding, she also invited me to attend a meeting at the sub-center next week.

It was a meeting for all local health volunteers. As Sarita showed a video on breastfeeding, I started wondering if I was feeding my baby well.

Just then little Durga started crying. In order to pacify her, I put her to my breast. This time, I was careful to notice whether she was feeding well or not. I tried to see if the signs of correct latching applied to my little darling. Everyone in the group also gave me encouraging nods. I was filled with so much warmth for that I almost cried as I asked "Are all of you so caring in CARE?"

Today Durga is one month old. Malti weighed her last week and she turned out to be 2,600 grams (5.7 pounds). My baby has a new lease of life; all thanks to our health system staff and CARE team who made a huge impact on my life.