On an overcast day, as Nepal emerges from winter and stretches towards spring, Rajesh Didiya leads a group of fifteen young girls and boys through a choreographed dance.

Rajesh is the president of Recovering Nepal, a community organization working with young people who use drugs.

The group stops frequently to catch their breath, and Rajesh seizes these opportunities to reiterate the lyrics of the song they dance to: “take responsibility” the song urges, “make this your best life”.

This is Dance4Life, part of UNICEF’s Rupantaran program which aims to develop adolescent’s skills and help them become social agents for change in their families and communities, while empowering them to realize their rights.

Between July 2013 and September 2014, more than 2,700 adolescents across Nepal participated in Dance4Life, leading to increased awareness of HIV, confidence and life skills to empower young people to protect themselves and those around them. Dance4Life utilises the medium of music and dance to deliver behaviour change communication to young people in a way that is engaging and interesting.

At Recovering Nepal you will find a dedicated and highly motivated team of peer educators. These peer educators are responsible for reaching people in the community who use drugs and encouraging them to visit the organization and participate in Rupantaran.

“I enjoy working in the field. I feel a responsibility to friends and peers, so I try hard to encourage them to visit us at Recovering Nepal and benefit from the services” explains Sunil, a young peer educator.

Recovering Nepal is a national network of people who use drugs (PWUD) and drug service organizations. Recovering Nepal provides HIV and harm reduction information to build the capacity of people living with HIV/AIDS and those who use drugs.

UNICEF Nepal provides support to Recovering Nepal through the Rupantaran program (which means ‘transformation’ in Nepali).

Rupantaran provides comprehensive social and financial skills for adolescents, including modules on self-awareness, gender and social inclusion, civic engagement and reproductive and sexual health.
Most of the peer educators are young, which helps them to build rapport with the young people they reach out in the community. They work voluntarily and are motivated by their desire to help others recover from drug use.

“I can apply the skills I teach to young people who use drugs to my own life which helps me with my own recovery. I have a better relationship with my parents now from the skills I have gained talking to others about their family relationships” says Sunil. “I’m also better at saying no to peer pressure and temptation”.

Rajesh Didiya is himself a recovering drug user and knows first hand about the challenges of turning your life around.

“It is difficult to shed the label of being a drug user” he says. Those that try to return to their communities are sometimes met with resistance. “They say, ‘you used to take drugs, you used to steal from us’ which makes it hard to fit back in”.

Rajesh has a unique way of thinking about the road to recovery. "We like to say that this is the beginning of a courageous life”. At Recovering Nepal, young people recovering from drug use are given the chance to embark on a courageous life in the company of friends and peers who provide support every step of the way.

Shyam’s story

Shyam Shrestra is in his early 20s and lives in the city of Bhaktapur, Nepal.

Shyam first started using drugs about five years ago when he was in the 9th grade after being introduced to drugs by some school friends.

“At first my drug use was out of interest. It then became habitual and I found it hard to stop.”

Shyam managed to conceal his drug use from his family for about two years until he developed an abscess in his leg that required medical treatment.

His father took Shyam to hospital and urged him to visit Recovering Nepal once he was released. That was two years ago and Shyam has been coming to Recovering Nepal ever since.

The services provided by Recovering Nepal mean a lot to Shyam.

“Outside, I have no friends. The community doesn’t want to know me. Even though I am no longer using drugs, no one will talk to me. It is so difficult to shed the label of drug user.”

Shyam spends most of his time at Recovery Nepal, attending meeting and relishing the social side and interaction.

“Even though I no longer use drugs, I still feel really misunderstood. Here at least there are people who can relate to my experiences. I feel more comfortable around friends. I feel like I’m learning the skills to build new relationships.”

Shyam, a shy and soft spoken young man, at the mention of the new friends he has made at Recovering Nepal, starts to smile.
Among the winding backstreets of outer Kathmandu lies Jangriti Mahila Maha Sangh, (JMMS) which translates to the Federation of Female Sex Workers. JMMS is a community-based organization working with adolescent girls engaged in or commercially exploited by the sex industry in Nepal.

"Ever since I was young, I’ve had strong views about the role and status of women in society. I’ve always planned on working somewhere I could help other women improve their lives”, says Rashita, a 20-year old peer educator at JMMS.

Rashita is a peer educator at JMMS whose job it is to deliver training and education programs to young girls engaged in sex work. She and her colleagues work hard to encourage those in the sex industry to visit JMMS and participate in their activities.

"At first, the girls we met really needed to be encouraged to visit. “They would wonder what the incentive was. We were not offering money or food and were reluctant to spend time away from work and miss out on potential earnings”.

Peer educators at JMMS work through modules of the Rupantaran program with the girls, addressing a range of issues from HIV and STI prevention, empowerment and self-awareness. At JMMS, the girls know they can speak openly about the challenges of their work. This has helped many manage feelings of stress and isolation.

"I felt so much tension before I started coming here” says one young girl. "I wouldn’t know how to handle it and would just cry at home. Now I can manage my stress better.”

They have also developed a stronger sense of confidence and self-worth.

"I was really shy before, I couldn’t speak. I didn’t have any knowledge of HIV. Now I have learnt new things and am confident” says one young girl.

"Before I felt like I couldn’t do anything about discrimination, about being violated. Now I have confidence to speak up about these things” says another.

This confidence helps the girls to take control over their futures and make positive changes in their lives.

"We help them to set up a bank account and encourage them to save. We give them skills to quit their field of work through income generating activities, educational and economic support” says Rashita, the peer educator.

JMMS provides education and behaviour change communication (BCC) on HIV prevention, testing and treatment as well as psychosocial support to those suffering from violence, neglect, or family drama to young girls engaged in sex work.

UNICEF Nepal provides support to JMMS through the Rupantaran program (which means ‘transformation’ in Nepali).

Rupantaran provides comprehensive social and financial skills for adolescents, including modules on self-awareness, gender and social inclusion, civic engagement and reproductive and sexual health.

Young girls enjoy the Rupantaran program at JMMS in Kathmandu, Nepal.
Sex, stigma and services

For the girls at JMMS, their age makes it difficult for them to get the family planning and reproductive health services they need to protect themselves.

“Because of our age people assume we are unmarried. When we want to buy condoms for example, the shopkeeper will wonder why we need these, and become very judgmental,” explains one of the girls.

“If we go, they will say ‘oh but you looks so young! What happened to you? Why do you need condoms?’ This is the same for HIV testing. ‘Why have you come here?’ They ask us. ‘What have you done?’ It makes us feel scared to go back.”

These are the challenges the girls know they can bring to JMMS and discuss with the peer educators who will work with them to help problem solve and develop the skills to overcome future challenges.

Saraswati’s Story

Saraswati*, 19 years old, moved to Kathmandu from Western Nepal four years ago after completing tenth grade. The daughter of farmers, her rural home offered no opportunities for work or further study. Wanting to continue her education, she made the move to the city.

However, Saraswati was unprepared for how expensive it would be. With no money for school and barely enough to survive, she began searching for a job and eventually found one in a hotel. Once there, a colleague told her about how she could increase her wages. Shortly after, Saraswati began seeing clients in a room she rented from the hotel owner.

Saraswati planned to use her new income to fund college, but the demands of the job left little time for class or study. Eventually she dropped out.

After some time, Saraswati was approached by one of the peer educators who visited her at work and encouraged her to visit JMMS. Initially hesitant, Saraswati eventually went along and has been attending regularly ever since.

“I have changed so much since and learned so many things I started going to JMMS. At the beginning, I thought if I had HIV it means I would die” she says. “Now I’m not scared anymore of diseases. I would rather check; already I have been tested. I don’t want to be ignorant or careless about my health”.

JMMS has also helped Saraswati to prepare for her future. “I have started my savings program. My willpower has increased not to spend my money but rather to save it”.

Saraswati wants to work as a bank officer in the future and has plans to study Management. “I feel confident about what will happen. There will be challenges but I know now that I can overcome them. I’m very proud of myself for that.”