The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. So far more than 4 million people all around the world have been infected by the virus. It is more devastating that more than 2 hundred thousand people have lost their lives. The outbreak has created worry and panic among the general population which is increasing day by day.

In Nepal, so far there are 121 persons infected by COVID-19, however no death is reported yet. On March 20, Prime Minister of Nepal addressed people where he announced many restrictions to prevent spread of COVID-19 which later turned into a national lockdown.

In this context, KOSHISH has initiated emergency psycho-social support for people who are affected and are vulnerable to crisis in response to COVID-19 pandemic. As an immediate response, KOSHISH has been carrying out follow up of persons with mental health issues and psycho-social disability and also providing free tele-counseling and psychological first aid services to the general people who are in need through existing human resources. KOSHISH has been informing the general public about the services that we have provided through Public Service Announcement from the radio which has reach far and wide across Nepal and developed and disseminated Information, Education and Communication materials regarding COVID through social platforms. Likewise, these information has been shared in various clusters that KOSHISH is part of as well.

From the inception of lockdown, 559 persons received various psycho-social support services including psychological first aid (PFA), tele-counseling, psycho-education, follow up and referral. Some of the highlights from the tele-mental health and psychosocial support services were that, 27% lack adequate information regarding COVID-19 and safety measures related with it, 22% need immediate relief support, 3% have relapsed their mental health condition, 12% have requested for immediate supply of psychotropic drugs, 1% need emergency health service, 29% concern about mental health and psychosocial wellbeing and 6% concern about psychosocial issues.

KOSHISH has developed a guideline for online and tele-counseling, grief counseling, phone follow-up and suicide prevention and is providing these services in line with it. KOSHISH has also translated documents published by WHO to Nepali and shared among its network of government and non government organizations. The documents are related to coping with stress on COVID-19 pandemic, addressing social stigma, helping children to cope with stress and mental health and psycho-social consideration during COVID-19 outbreak.

As the numbers are increasing day by day, KOSHISH is looking forward to reach out to many more people in provision of it’s services.

Mental health and psychosocial impact of COVID-19 : A Survey from KOSHISH

What might be the implications of COVID-19 on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing?

To understand the mental health and psycho-social impact of COVID-19 and lock-down on people living in vulnerable condition including persons with disabilities, KOSHISH is conducting two surveys at the same time. The surveys are related with assessment of Psycho-social impact of COVID-19 Outbreak and Lock-down among general population and Mental Health and Psycho-social Well-being of Persons with Disabilities in Times of COVID-19 Outbreak and Lock-down.

The results and recommendations from these surveys will create baseline and generate evidences for future interventions and advocacy to scale-up mental health, psycho-social support and counseling for people living in vulnerable condition, including persons with disabilities. KOSHISH aims to promote psycho-social well-being and provide support in areas which are considered as red zone for COVID-19 infection by the government of Nepal through existing local network of National Federation of Disabled-Nepal.

Moreover, KOSHISH is planning to scale-up psycho-social rehabilitation service for referral cases of persons with severe and profound mental health condition and psycho-social disability. KOSHISH is also exploring for collaboration with like-minded organizations to work in both psycho-social support and specialized mental health services.

Highlights from the Services

- 22% Need immediate relief support
- 3% Relapsed mental health condition
- 27% Lack adequate information on COVID-19 and safety measures
- 1% Need emergency health service
- 12% Need psychotropic medication
- 29% Concern about mental health and psychosocial wellbeing
- 6% Concern about psychosocial issues
Interaction Program on Suicide Prevention

An interaction program on "National Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan" from the perspective of suicide prevention was organized by KOSHISH, National Mental Health Self-Help Organization with the organizations working in the field of Suicide Prevention at Entrance Café, Bakhundol on 18th March, 2020.

The main objective of the program was to collect suggestions and recommendations on the current draft of National Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan prepared by the government to make the document more focused in terms of strategy and issues of suicide prevention. Mr. Madan Bhatt, Executive Director of Health Foundation Nepal, Mr. Sandesh Dhakal, Senior Psychologist of Tribhuvan University, Dr. Kamal Gautam, Executive Director, Mr. Pitambar Koirala, Senior Program Chief, and Senior Project Coordinator Ms. Parvati Shrestha of TPO Nepal, President of TSOP Mr. Narendra Thagunna, Mr. Bishnu Prajapati from CMC and Advocate Sharmila Parajuli and Mr. Binaya Pandey from KOSHISH were present in the program.

The program was facilitated by Dr. Kamal Gautam by highlighting preliminary result of National Mental Health Survey. According to the Survey conducted with 1647 participants, 13% of the population had suicidal ideation and 20% of children have mental health problems. Almost 80% of the mental health problems starts before age 18 and among the 10 leading cause of disability, 4 are associated with mental health problems. The presentation was followed by discussion where, one of the participants Mr. Madan Bhatt, shared “measures should be taken to strengthen Tele-Mental Health and hotline services in mental health domain/services to expand and facilitate access to mental health services.”

Similarly, Sandesh Dhakal, a senior psychologist from Tribhuvan University, said that suicidal thoughts and ideation are the result of the interaction between an individual and the society rather than the shortcomings of the individual alone. He also stressed that the focal Ministry to look after the issue should be Ministry of Health and Population rather than Ministry of Home and affairs. It stigmatizes people and this is also a reason why suicide is considered as a crime despite being caused due to the mental health conditions.

Pitambar Koirala, from TPO Nepal, shared that while talking about suicide, it is only associated with awareness. However, there is not much talk about awareness including quality services, so it seems that there should be programs to take this issue forward with the participation of multi-stakeholders.

At the end of the program, all the participants stressed on the need to bring special programs for suicide prevention and awareness and to include them in the forthcoming National mental health strategy and action plan with priority.

Psychological First Aid provided to construction workers

The construction workers at Palungtar municipality of Gorkha district, arrived from different part of country had been severely affected by the sudden lockdown. Along with accommodation and health problems, they began to have psychological issues. They were found to have fear about contagious virus, being deserted at the work place, anxiety about extended lockdown and food expenses.

As soon as the state of laborers was made known to Palungtar Municipality, health division in collaboration with KOSHISH provided psychosocial support. Psychologist Saraswati Mishra, from KOSHISH provided psychological first aid (PFA) to the 17 workers to address their fear, anxiety and dilemma. The program was facilitated by Community Psychosocial Worker Bipin Ghimire, who further provided information and contact details of local bodies working for relief in the emergency. Along with the assurance of free health service by municipality and instruction of deputy Mayor, Pampha Basel to the construction contractor to bear expenses of the laborers food without cutting of wages, the workers were relieved. One of the worker Pradip Rai stated, now he can be relaxed and want to thank KOSHISH and municipality.

Medication suported for the persons in need at Tanahun

KOSHISH with support of CBM provided the emergency psychotropic medicines to Shuklagandaki Municipality and Bandipur Rural Municipality of Tanahun district to distribute for about 30 persons with mental health issues who have finished stock of their regular medicine. The municipalities coordinated with KOSHISH for requirement of medicine for the people living with mental health issues in those area. KOSHISH had sent PSA message about COVID-19 to Shuklagandaki municipality and and broadcast the message through local FM stations. Mr. Damodar Regmi, representative of a disabled people's organization, RECED, coordinated in the process of distributing the medicines. “In this difficult situation, this issue was completely blown away from our mind but I would like to thank KOSHISH for supporting the medicines for those people living with mental health issues and reminded us about how important it is in this situation.” said Mr. Regmi.
KOSHISH conducted two different interaction programs on the role of local level in the promotion of mental health and psychosocial disability. A total of 62 people including local people's representatives, employees of health, education and women's branches of the concerned municipalities, representatives of health organizations and other stakeholders were present in the programs held in Dudholi Municipality of Sindhuli and Gorkha Municipality of Gorkha on February 28 and March 10, 2020 respectively. The programs were organized with the objective of sensitizing the people's representatives about the mental health problems and the rights of persons with psychosocial disabilities and to motivate the stakeholders to include mental and psychosocial support programs in the policies, programs and plans of the municipality.

The program held at the meeting hall of Dudholi Municipality was presided by Mr. Ghanshyam Raut, Chairperson of Dudholi Municipality and the program organized at Gorkha Municipality was chaired by Mr. Rajaram Pant, Chairperson of Gorkha Municipality. The current state of mental health and the efforts being made in its management were presented in the programs. The program was facilitated by Social Worker Manju Chhetri and Psychologist Deepak Neupane of KOSHISH.

During the interaction session, Chairperson Mr. Ghanshyam Raut and Vice Chairperson, Ms. Balkumari Adhikari of Dudholi Municipality requested KOSHISH to provide the list of persons with mental health problems in Dudholi Municipality and committed to make all possible efforts as per their need and assured that they shall immediately arrange free medicines at the health branch of the municipality for them. Gobinda Prasad Pahadi, Chairman of Ward no. 9, emphasized the need for establishing a support system for people with psychosocial disabilities, and pointed out that the disability identity cards should be easily accessible to those with severe mental health problems.

Chairperson of Gorkha Municipality Rajaram Pant shared the idea of joining hands with KOSHISH in the upcoming programs for the rights of people with mental health problems. Likewise, Ishwori Regmi, head of health department of the municipality, said that they have been providing 6 types of psychotropic drugs to the people and will provide additional medicines in the coming days at free of cost. Binod Dawadi, doctor at Gorkha Hospital, proposed to appoint a psychiatrist to the hospital as the mental health problems are very sensitive issues.

**Interaction Program on the Rights of Persons with Mental Health Condition**

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**Number of people increased to get mental health OPD service**

KOSHISH has provided two events of mental health OPD service for the persons with mental health and psychosocial issues at Palungtar Municipality and Siranchowk Rural Municipality of Gorkha district on 15th March, 2020. Psychiatrist Dr. Barsha Shrestha facilitated the OPD where 40 persons were registered in the two events of OPD service. The number of persons have been significantly increased to receive mental health OPD service with the implementation of Inclusive Community Mental Health Program in Gorkha.

**3 received Disability ID Card**

The staff member of KOSHISH has been able to facilitate persons with psychosocial disability to receive Disability ID Card from Siranchowk Rural Municipality. During the month of March, 3 persons including 2 women from Harmi, Jaubari and Gankhu of Siranchowk received red and blue catagory of disability id card. The Community Psychosocial Worker of KOSHISH Mr. Jagadish Dhakal reported that there has been ongoing coordination with all ward offices of Siranchowk Rural Municipality to facilitate for identification of the persons and distribution of disability id cards.
KOSHISH conducted a discussion program on the inclusion of mental health in general health with the Ministry of Health and Population on 24th March, 2020.

Dr. Roshan Pokhrel, Director General of the Ministry of Health and Population, Spokesperson Mahendra Shrestha, various physicians working in the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division, Health Services Department, Directors working in various Divisions under the Ministry of Health and Population and other staff were present in the program.

The main objective of this program was to find ways to provide mental health services through the existing health services and to motivate all the bodies of the Ministry of Health to give importance to the services including mental health treatment.

Matrika Devkota, Founder Chairperson and Executive Director of KOSHISH, opined that mental health services should be started in at least one of the hospitals in each state by providing manpower including psychiatrists, social workers and psychologists. He added that more than 50% of mental health problems can start under the age of 14 years in Nepal, all should work together to change the negative attitude towards mental health by expanding integrated and multi-sectoral mental health services.

Mahendra Shrestha, spokesperson of the Ministry of Health and Population, said that after two or three years at least one hospital in all 753 local levels should start providing mental / psychosocial health care as primary health care services so that common problems can be addressed at local level.

Director General of the Ministry of Health and Population Roshan Pokhrel said that rather than psychiatrists, people who claim as psychiatrists are providing counseling and are prescribing medicine. One cannot be psychiatrist or consultant by going through 3 months of training on psychology. We need to set the criteria which helps us to differentiate who can provide counseling and who can be called consultant. He emphasized that if a person wants clinical treatment, the specialist should give him medicine. After that, he should seek other services as well, if necessary. Similarly, all the participants in the program stressed on the need to extend mental health services to all levels.

Meeting to collect suggestions on the draft of mental health strategy

KOSHISH conducted a meeting to collect suggestions on the draft mental health strategy prepared by the Ministry of Health and Population, Government of Nepal on 27th January, 2020. The meeting was attended by staff from the KOSHISH and experts working in the field of mental health. The meeting decided to review the draft and work on the suggestions with special focus on prevention and promotion measures in addition to overall service provisions and submit the suggestions to the Ministry of Health and Population.

Capacity building training to staffs members working in field office

With the objective of enhancing social mobilization and advocacy skills of KOSHISH's staffs involved in the implementation of inclusive community mental health program, 6 days capacity building training was conducted at Besishahar, Lamjung from 27th February to 3rd March, 2020. Total 14 staffs including Community Psychosocial Workers (CPSW), Psychologists, Project Coordinator and Finance Officer participated the training. The training was focused on mental health and psychosocial support, social mobilization and advocacy. The Project Coordinator Mr. Dipak Neupane facilitated the session on social mobilization where the introduction of mental health and psychosocial wellbeing, causes of mental health issues, identification of psychosocial issues, how to stay healthy and making available of the support services were discussed. Similarly, Disability Rights Activist Mr. Tikaram Poudel and Planning Officer of Besishahar Municipality Mr. Megendra Pokharel facilitated the sessions on disability rights and advocacy. Illustrating about the difficulties faced by persons with disabilities, Mr. Poudel discussed about the need of improvements on the certain provisions related with rights and entitlements of the persons with disabilities. Mr. Pokharel elucidated about the process of formulation of annual action plan and budget in local levels. He also discussed about the importance of planning to achieve the intended results in the project.
Kalika Mother's Group of Udipur, Besishahar of Lamjung district conducted a Women Empowerment and Leadership Development training where KOSHISH was requested to take over a session to provide knowledge on mental wellbeing, mental health and psychosocial issues and suicide prevention on 19th February, 2020. The Project Coordinator/ Psychologist Mr. Dipak Neupane and Psychologist Mr. Piyush Gautam presented in the training to facilitate the requested session. Total 67 women members of Kalika Mother’s Group participated in the training. The methodology was verbal presentation and discussion followed by role play and practical. The participants shared that they feel this training was very important and useful for them and also need further trainings so that they could gain more knowledge to contribute for community awareness.

At the end of the session, the participants were unanimously agreed on that the suicide can be prevented, as before the training they thought that the suicide is a destiny of a person which cannot be changed.

With the aim of supporting the most marginalized people, especially women living with mental health issues by providing them with mental health treatment and rehabilitation services, KOSHISH in partnership with Mennonite Central Committee has implemented the transit care service in Lalitpur. The 3 years of the project was started on April 2017 and the cycle has been completed on April, 2019.

The project has impacted positively on the life of many beneficiaries as well as people in their communities. The community people are sensitized and aware about mental health problems which has contribute to reduce the stigma related with mental health. While following up on participants, the outreach workers found that most of the participants are treated well and supported by their family members and community people. One of the participants said, "My family’s perspective about me has changed; now they take care of my personal hygiene, respect me, and treat me as an equal."

Livelihood support has also helped the participants to be independent and make some income for themselves. All the participants who were provided goats are able to take good care of them. They all are engaged in rearing goats and earning an income from the sale of those goats. They have also been able to increase the number from the goats given. One of the participants shared, "I received not only goats but a means for living my life independently without seeking other people’s help."

The local government stakeholders of the area of reintegrated beneficiaries have become more positive to the issues of mental health and psychosocial disability after rounds of lobbying and advocacy meetings. It was in those meetings with government stakeholders, KOSHISH sought and received their commitment to work for the rights of the people with mental health problems and psychosocial disabilities. Through its intervention KOSHISH has been able to bring about a gradual change in the perspectives of the community people and the key stakeholders and garner their support for issues related to mental health.

The achievement from the project has shown in the figures below.
I am Devaki Devi Chaudhary. I live in Udaypur with my five children. My children are my world. Twelve years back, two of my daughters started experiencing mental health conditions which crashed my world and my family scattered. I sought help from traditional healers but everything went in vain. Unwillingly, I was obligated to lock my daughters in a room where I used to tie my younger daughter’s leg with a rope; imagine what might have gone through a mother’s heart. After many dark years, I got to know about KOSHISH from my neighbor. After few assessment, KOSHISH started treatment of my daughters in Transit Care Services Center. Initially, I had no trust on the treatment and I hesitated to send my daughters to the Center. Eventually, having no recourse I sent my daughters to the KOSHISH Center. KOSHISH staffs used to communicate with me about my daughter's health on regular basis which helped me to overcome my hesitation and lack of trust toward KOSHISH.

My daughters spent four months in transit care Center and their mental health condition improved. I cried with happiness, looking at their transformation in mere four months. They were no more the same miserable girls. They look happy and different. My elder daughter is recovering faster than my younger one but I am more positive towards their recovery now. My elder daughter supports me in every household works and vegetable farming. She takes care of the home in my absence. Whereas, I am relieved that my younger daughter can at least take care of herself now. My daughters are living examples for everyone in the community who once thought that my daughters are burden. This was all possible with the effort of my neighbor and KOSHISH. I will always be grateful to them.