

## COMMUNITIES DECLARE SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE AFFECTED BY HIV

This year, the occasion of World AIDS Day was observed as Community Action Day, in different village communities. During this time, the different village communities introspected on the question, 'What is more important : life or a notion of honor? What can communities do to encourage people affected by HIV to access services at the right time, without any fear of being disgraced?'

Samraksha recorded different testimonies of people affected by HIV, some who had benefited from the treatment, others who had lost loved ones simply because they feared to take the treatment at the right time. These stories sparked off reflections in the community : Should families deny treatment to an affected member, because they fear dishonor? Should a person be scared to access treatment?

These reflections sparked an overwhelming response from the community, which affirmed the need for the person and family to access treatment, without fear of dishonor, and also the role of the community in ensuring that people are not scared to access treatment.

*Life is more important than anything, people should not feel scared to go for treatment, because others will say something. If they come forward and tell us their problems, we are willing to support them.*

*They don't need money from us, they just need a supportive word or two, why can we not give that to them.*

*People should come out of their own fears and stigma. They should not fear what the society will say. For that, we, as the community have to show them that we will be supportive to them.*

In one village, these reflections happened at a time when the community had just decided to remove a HIV positive woman from her job of making the mid day meal (*bisioota*). The reflections allowed the community to realize that they were not doing the right thing. The Samraksha team also shared stories from other villages, where the communities had reinstated a positive woman into the same job, after realizing their error. The village panchayat leader who had been preparing to go and tell the woman to leave the job, eventually went and told her, 'We know your problems, and we don't want to add to them. Continue coming for this job as long as you are able to. We will not tell you to leave'.