

Mother and child care

# In a sparsely populated desert, a helping hand

NGO Baahn Beli works with families where state support is thin

**CHEREE FRANCO**  
KARACHI

A two-room white stucco building with an attractive teal facade squats in the sandy brush about 10km outside of Nagarparkar, a town in the Kroonjar foothills, with ancient Hindu temples and a population of roughly 150,000. Inside, a woman shrouds her face behind a red-fringed dupatta while a lady health attendant takes her blood pressure. When the cuff is removed, the woman slides her white bangles back up her arm. They reach all the way to her shoulder — among the Hindu population, this is how women signify their married status. Two more women crouch on the floor in a corner, waiting for medical attention.

This is the Mother and Child Health Clinic, built by the



**HELPING HAND:** A lady health attendant takes a woman's blood pressure inside the Mother and Child Health Clinic near the town of Nagarparkar. PHOTO: CHEREE FRANCO/EXPRESS

non-government organisation Baahn Beli. It's one of three clinics in a rural area with a dispersed populace and its staff tends to 40 to 50 patients a day. But because the primary source of transportation is donkey cart, many families make the trek to the

clinic only in desperate cases. Life in the Thar Desert is tough — what little water there is, is often polluted by salt or fluoride. The population — two-thirds Hindu and a third Muslim — has more cultural similarities than religious differences. Everyone

practices sustenance farming, lives in straw huts or single-room clay houses and has limited access to education and health care. Many people only receive half of the calories they need each day. But the situation is particularly difficult for women.

“There is too much oppression. Not long ago we couldn't even talk to men, but now things are getting better

Lady health attendant  
**Aneeta Wishandas**

“There is too much oppression. Not long ago we couldn't even talk to men, but now things are getting better,” said Aneeta Wishandas, a lady health attendant and education promoter employed by Baahn Beli. The phrase loosely translates into ‘helping hand’.

“Education is a long shot when you can't even leave your house.”

Wishandas completed her education through the Matric level in her hometown of Mirpurkhas. Now she only sees her family a few days a month but she's proud to be able to serve the rural people around Nagarparkar.

“I love helping poor people and having the power to help change the fate of the unfortunate,” she said. She claims that her teeth and skin have also been affected by polluted water. According to Wishandas, the most prevalent health problems among Nagarparkar's women include malnutrition, anemia, skin, bone and teeth problems caused by toxic water and gastric distress from waterborne parasites. There are also unmet gynaecological needs. Dr Shankar Lal, a member of the Baahn Beli advisory council, estimates that 40% of deliveries in Tharparkar district experience preventable complications.

“Women are facing more problems because there are no female doctors,” he said.

Women also have less access to education. There are 20 schools in Nagarparkar, but none of them offer females an opportunity to continue their studies beyond the primary level. The male-to-female student ratio is 75 to 25.