

Our stories, our voices:

STORYTELLING TO UNDERSTAND SOCIAL NORM CHANGE





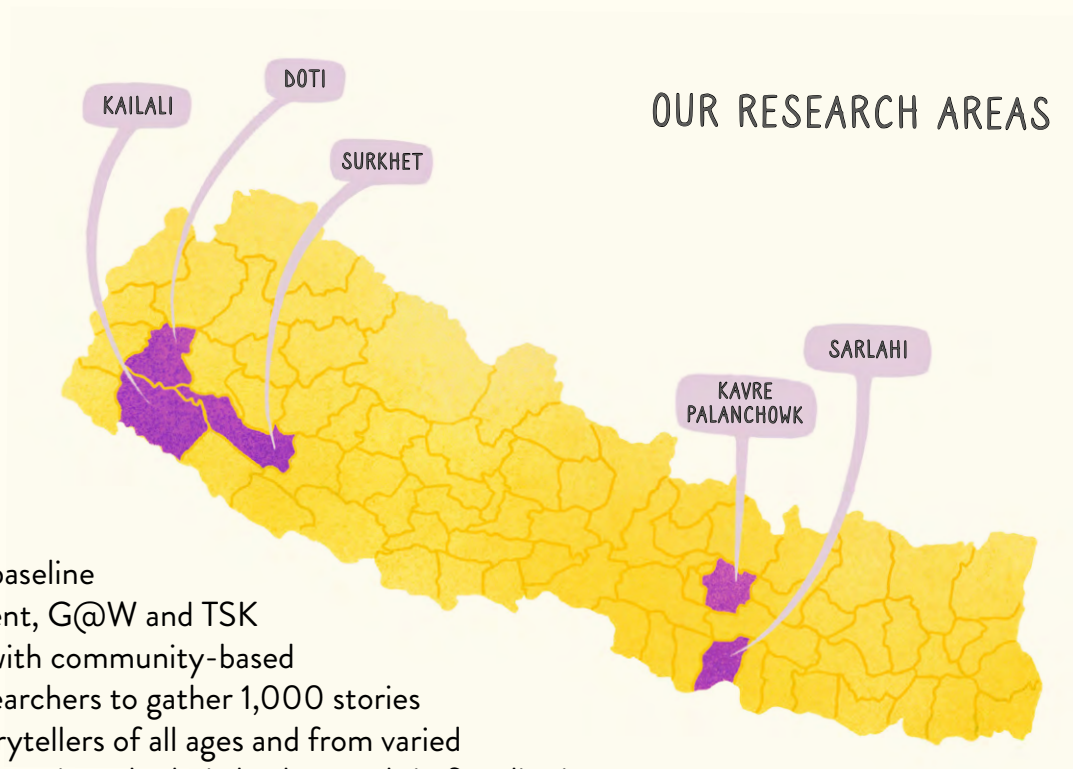
Introduction

What is in a story? How can stories help us understand changes in our lives and communities? Gender at Work (G@W) partnered with The Story Kitchen (TSK) to undertake research as part of *Hamro Sahakarya* (Our Collective Action), an initiative by UN Women Nepal and the Government of Finland to promote social norm change. Using storytelling as an entry point to inform research, programming and action, the five-year initiative aims to understand pathways and factors that lead to changes in social norms, which in turn can influence transformative shifts towards gender equality and social inclusion.

Hamro Sahakarya has three components: **research** to understand the factors that enable or hinder social norm change processes, community-based **programme interventions** to shift social norms and evidence-based **advocacy** to influence the policy and programming landscape. G@W, the research lead, in partnership with TSK, a pioneering storytelling organisation based in Nepal, conducted a baseline assessment between May and September 2022 to understand how harmful social norms affect gender equality and social inclusion goals in Nepal. Stories, prompted with open-ended questions, allowed storytellers to reflect on specific incidents related to harmful social norms and helped identify moments that were most significant to them.

Storytelling as a novel research methodology

People have always told stories. Storytelling can be empowering, enabling women and girls to own their narratives. When integrated into a research process, storytelling can enable the research participants to become those who interpret the significance of various moments and analyse change in their communities. The *Hamro Sahakarya* programme comprises a longitudinal research process that integrates storytelling to test and track identifiable change pathways, which influence discriminatory and gendered social norms. The learning is used to inform social norm change research, programming and policymaking.



For the baseline assessment, G@W and TSK worked with community-based peer researchers to gather 1,000 stories from storytellers of all ages and from varied socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds in five districts of Nepal. The storytelling and story-writing method used in this research is guided by narrative therapy principles that centre people as meaning makers and the experts of their own lives. The storytellers were primarily women and girls. The stories were collected through a participatory and feminist research process, with the goal of exploring how women, girls and community members described the current situation related to various social practices as well as their own change experiences. The mass storytelling data was aggregated, using quantifiable markers that identified patterns and trends in what makes social norm change possible.



To learn in brief about the storytelling research process, please click [this link](#). To learn in brief about the norms as narrated by storytellers, the actions that lead to changes in social norms and the patterns that have been tracked through the baseline research process, stay on this page.

What do the stories tell us?



The stories contain many emotions, themes and experiences about existing norms, which were shared as lived experiences by women, girls and men. The stories touched on harmful cultural practices that lead to gender discrimination, such as child marriage, *chhaupadi* (the practice of isolating women and girls during menstruation), dowry, domestic violence, witchcraft as well as discrimination based on caste and disability. Many stories described permanent and transformative changes in individuals, relationships and communities. Storytellers had different feelings about their stories, with many expressing fear, anxiety, isolation, sadness and helplessness and others associating their stories with self-confidence, self-respect, happiness and hope.

Deeply rooted harmful social norms with gendered impacts continue to exist across the five districts covered in the baseline. In spite of legal advances, women and girls are rarely able to use the law to protect themselves from discriminatory practices. Practices such as *chhaupadi* and witchcraft are still prevalent due to superstition.



31-40-year-old female from Brahmin / Chhetri community, Doti district



They say that if we drink milk and curd, cattle will be ruined, [and] if we work inside the house, the gods will be angry, insects and cockroaches will attack the house and older people will fall ill. Saying this, they neither give us nutritious food nor a secure place to sleep. They have done injustice to us in the name of gods and goddesses.

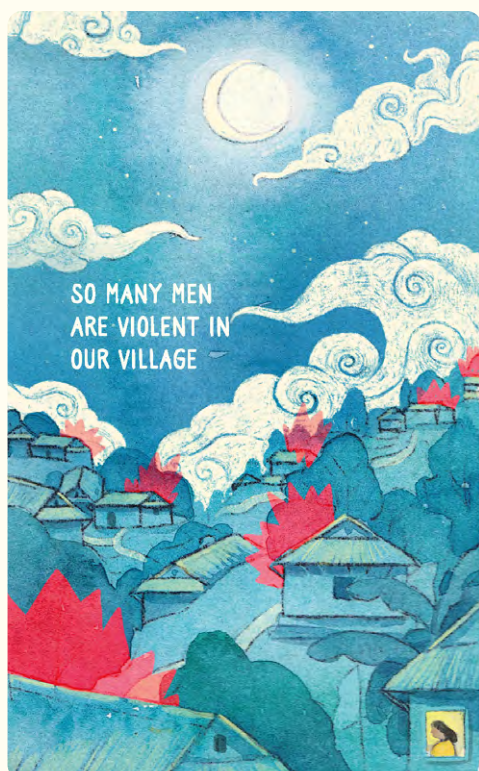
Norms are perpetuated due to entrenched beliefs in families and communities, with elders often acting as gatekeepers. Intergenerational and gender imbalances make it hard for those who suffer discrimination to challenge social norms. When intersecting with caste, the vulnerability is further compounded, leading to dehumanising and humiliating experiences. Formal and informal institutions combine forces to ensure the continuation of harmful practices.

We are Dalits and face many forms of discrimination. One day, during our community Jatra festival preparations, a non-Dalit yelled at my brother-in-law, asking how he could touch him in the head and called him a Dalit. This person and my brother-in-law got into a heated argument over it. The next day, this person and his non-Dalit friends went to my brother-in-law's, beat him up and threatened my sister-in-law. We decided to file a complaint with the police, and my sister-in-law agreed to testify. After hearing this, the attacker threatened that she should be prepared to leave the village if she provided a testimonial. My sister-in-law refused to report the incident to the police. We (Dalits) do not have access to justice. They (authorities) either do not take such complaints seriously or are unable to punish the guilty because they hold positions of authority.



41-50-year-old female from Dalit community, Doti district

Poverty is an undeniable factor in perpetuating practices like child marriage and dowry. Traditional and modern values are in contradiction with older people seeing access to social media seen as promoting a permissive culture among the young. In contrast, younger people viewing it as an opportunity for freedom from traditional values. Domestic violence prevalence continues to be high and strongly associated with alcoholism, son preference, dowry demands and the inability of women and girls to counter the narrative of acceptability and silence that surrounds domestic violence.



Sometimes I wonder what have I done to deserve such treatment. I want to tell everyone and the police everything, but I'm afraid and I don't see the sense in complaining. What can I do now? I've stopped receiving assistance from folks in my neighbourhood. Even though there is a Municipal Office near my house, I lack the confidence to make a complaint against him. I am sick and weary of being subjected to such violence and misery; I want to abandon everything and run away, but I am obligated to stay with him because of my children. When they are old enough, I will contemplate moving away with them to another residence. For the time being, I have no option but to live with him.

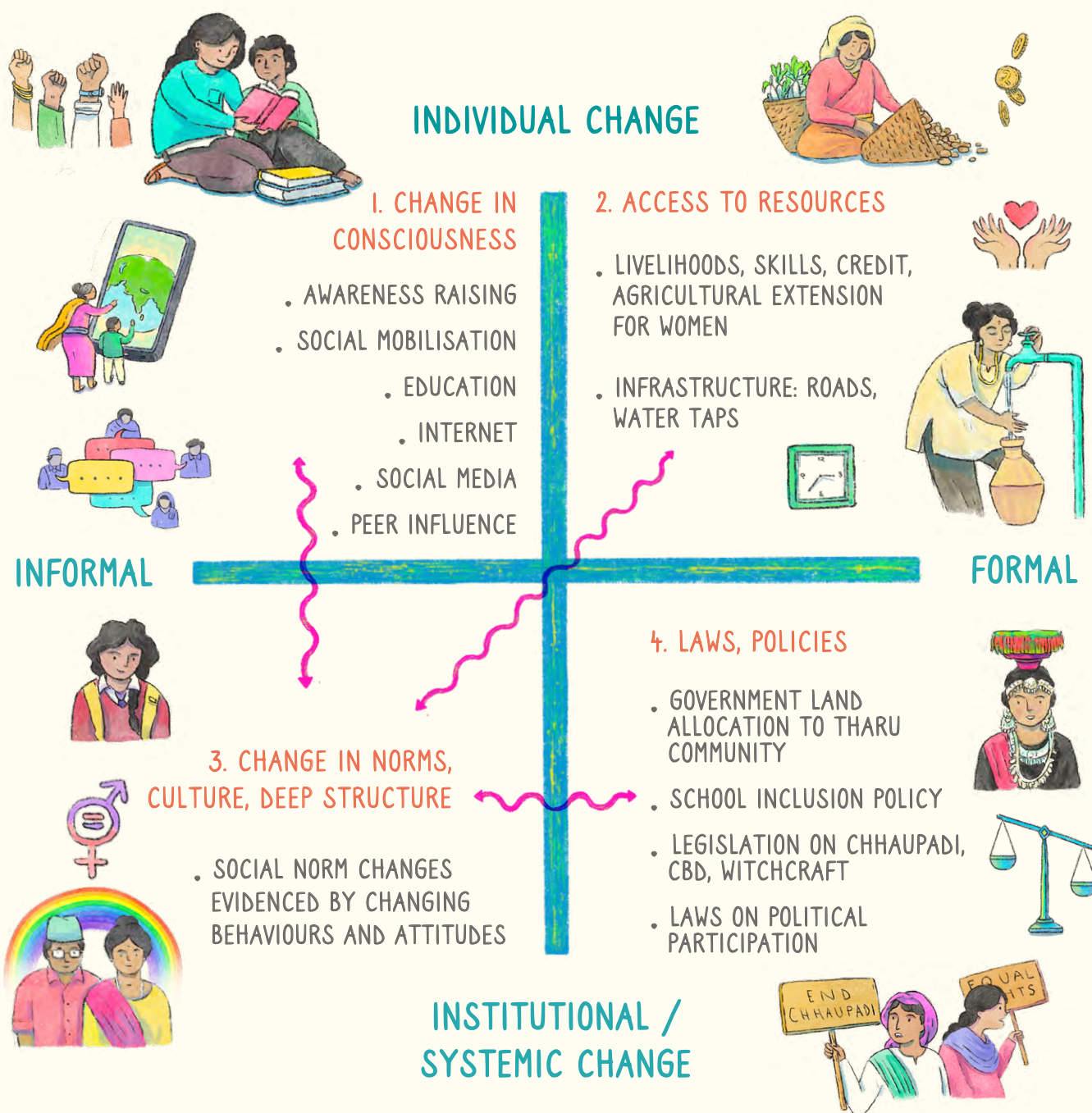


21-30-year-old female from Brahmin / Chhetri community, Doti district

Change is possible!

The patterns identified from the stories were verified in joint sense-making sessions that included community-based peer researchers who were involved in the story gathering, as well as community members and district and national decision makers. The Gender at Work Analytical Framework is a useful tool for understanding how different domains of social life are related and helps to make visible what often remains invisible in each domain, so we can better identify what needs to change, in order for that change to be transformative. The enablers of social norm change, as identified in the stories, have been mapped as signposts in each domain, providing an integrated picture of all the small changes that are needed for transformative shifts in gender equality. These factors or signposts interrupt embedded or resistant social norms and signal a progressive change in a community or wider society.

G@W ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK



One key interrupter was individual consciousness, resulting from education, access to resources and access to health and gender programmes. The most compelling change makers were mothers who did not want their daughters to experience the same discrimination they did while growing up and wanted better futures for them.

I have daughters. I think of educating my daughters and marrying them only at the right age because I don't want them to suffer like me. Now, various trainings and meetings have made me aware. Now, I tell other people in society not to do child marriages.



31-40-year-old female from Dalit community, Doti district

In some instances, younger, educated women storytellers demonstrated agency and an ability to make their own decisions as well as challenge attitudes and behaviours. They expressed impatience with what they see as outdated behaviours and practices.



[Click here to learn how Maya¹ stood up to her abusive father-in-law.](#)



The importance of support networks in questioning and stopping harmful practices was undeniable, as seen in Putali's² story.

This society treats a menstruating woman like an animal; our women have to suffer a lot. After lots of trainings and meetings, people have allowed menstruating women to stay in rooms instead of the chhau goth (menstrual hut) and go near water sources. There has been some change in society. I feel that gradually it will change.



21-30-year-old female from Dalit community, Doti district

^{1,2} The real names of storytellers have been changed to protect their identity.



The storytelling identified the instrumental role of social mobilisation programmes in triggering critical reflection and behaviour change. Overall, the importance of this type of intervention was to name and problematise embedded social norms and challenge attitudes amongst men, boys and power holders while also empowering women and girls to raise their voices and advocate for change.

Beyond such programmatic support, legal measures against harmful social norms and the threat of sanctions did have some impact on issues such as dowry, child marriage and caste-based discrimination. One Dalit storyteller, reflecting on the prevailing attitudes of the police and court system, observed:

Despite the widespread prejudices of local police and courts against Dalits, the efforts of Dalit leaders (to take cases to the High Court) have borne fruit. We do not succeed in all cases filed, but we continue our efforts. We are raising our voices in favour of the discriminated-against Dalit society and this has yielded some positive results.

Yet discussions during community reflection sessions confirmed that changes in behaviour around caste-based discrimination in public domains did not necessarily translate into changed behaviour in private spaces. Similarly, the practice of dowry continues to flourish, even though communities might publicly show an awareness of its illegality.

Looking ahead

The *Hamro Sahakarya* storytelling baseline research project revealed insights and analysis at scale on a range of social norms that affect the daily lives of the storytellers and others like them. Most powerfully, the act of storytelling emerged as a transformative event in the lives of storytellers themselves. In this way, the promise of storytelling as the heart of a transformative programming approach has been excitingly confirmed and has been underway since the beginning of 2022 in Nepal, with support from the Government of Finland and UN Women Nepal. For the full research report, please click this link. To learn more about the research process, click this link.

Hamro Sahakarya: The storytelling initiative (2022-2026) is aimed at improving the lives of women, LGBTIQ+ communities and people with disabilities in Nepal in Sarlahi, Kavre, Surkhet, Kailali and Doti districts (Madhesh, Bagmati, Karnali, and Sudurpaschim provinces).

The initiative is implemented by UN Women Nepal with financial support from the Government of Finland. The research element of the project is led and conducted by Gender at Work, an international knowledge network advancing cultures of equality. The research implementation partner is The Story Kitchen, an organisation driven by the passionate belief that upholding the stories of women can unravel systems of gender oppression and patriarchy that continue to exist in Nepal.

This brief is based on the baseline report authored by Jeremy Holland and Poonam Rishal, which in turn is based on the stories shared by women and girls from the study regions.

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