MEASURING SOCIAL NORM CHANGE THROUGH STORYTELLING

BASELINE REPORT

Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

gender at work

the story kitchen
a space to amplify herstory

UN WOMEN

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GoF	Government of Finland
UN Women	The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction and objective

In Nepal, human development outcomes continue to be hampered by gender, caste, ethnic, social and geographical inequalities and exclusion. Gender equality and women's empowerment in turn are intimately linked to social norms, behaviours and harmful cultural practices. Addressing and transforming social norms for gender equitable societies is central to UN Women Nepal's country strategy and programming. Gender equality and social inclusion is also a key impact-level goal of UN Women's partner, the Government of Finland.

With this impact-level focus on gender social norm change, UN Women Nepal and the Government of Finland embarked in June 2021 on a five-year research project centred on longitudinal impact monitoring. The research project aims to understand the pathways of social norm change that can support country strategy and adaptive programming. This report presents the findings of the baseline research.

Methodology

The research adopted a feminist and participatory mass storytelling methodology. This placed the participants, who were mainly women and girls, at the centre of their own storytelling. Over 1,000 stories were collected across five districts in four provinces of Nepal. Within these districts, the research team sampled wards in which UN Women Nepal and its partners are implementing ongoing programmes. Within each ward, storytellers were sampled to capture the experiences of different social and ethnic groups, including women, men, adolescent girls, Dalit groups and people with disabilities.

Individuals told stories about significant (positive or negative) changes in *traditional practices, beliefs, and social norms for women and girls in their communities over the past the five years.* Storytellers were then invited to 'signify' their stories by associating them with types of emotions, behaviours and changes in power relations. In this way, the mass storytelling tool combined the interpretive depth of storytelling with the statistical power of aggregated data to track patterns and trends in social norm behaviours.

Findings

Findings emerged around a key set of harmful cultural practices:

Menstrual isolation – known in some regions as *chhaupadi* – is a harmful cultural practice in which women are considered 'untouchable' and forced to stay in isolated huts during menstruation. Menstrual isolation is now a criminalised practice in Nepal. The research revealed that, despite its illegal status, menstrual isolation is still a widely practiced social norm across local communities. This social norm was found to be resistant to change. It was entrenched by superstitious fear – fuelled in part by traditional healers and priests – and reproduced through intergenerational household relations. Storytellers reported, however, some positive shifts in the practice of menstrual isolation. This was seen especially in a physical shift from the use of dangerously isolated

chau goth (*chhaupadi* huts) to in-home isolation and women being given nutritious milk and curd during menstruation. This positive shift was linked to the behavioural effects of awareness-raising and training programmes that emphasised the health risks attached to *chau goth* isolation.

Caste-based discrimination remains a widely practiced and internalised social norm across communities in Nepal. This social norm is highly resistant to change, entrenched in the public sphere by physical, social, infrastructural and occupational separation. Caste-based discrimination intersects with gender to place fundamental restrictions and harm in the lives and opportunities of Dalit women and girls. Storytellers frequently associated their experiences of caste-based discrimination with feelings of isolation and fear. In a seemingly positive development, the research identified a significant change in public discussion of, and behaviour towards, Dalits. The research also revealed that Dalits have taken action in response to their daily experiences of discrimination. More generally, while discriminatory attitudes in the private sphere remained resistant to change, positive patterns of changing attitudes and behaviours emerged amongst the younger generation. There is a widely articulated desire for change and impatience with what young people see as outdated behaviours. Caste mixing, teacher behaviour and socialisation at school and in friends' houses emerged as important drivers in changing attitudes amongst young people.

Child marriage remains widespread and frequently occurring across all districts. It is closely tied to the importance of maintaining family honour by ensuring the 'purity' of daughters entering marriage. The decision to arrange child marriages for daughters was often reinforced by the perceived need felt by poor households to ease their economic burden by 'marrying off' their daughters at an early age. Storytellers widely associated their experiences of child marriage with negative emotions and the feeling of being punished. A newer phenomenon of teen marriage and eloping was seen by teens as a form of escape but one that often ended in isolation, vulnerability to domestic violence and even tragedy. Strikingly, many storytellers who experienced child marriage and are now mothers resolved to ensure that their daughters did not go through the same experience. The influential role of external programmes in interrupting intergenerational cycles of child marriage was revealed through the storytelling.

Witchcraft superstition emerged as a deeply embedded social norm. Witchcraft accusations are typically levelled against single women from so-called lower-caste backgrounds and reflect entrenched societal power relations. Crucially, this norm is sustained by the behaviour of socially powerful traditional healers and shamans who blame ill health or unexpected deaths on witchcraft. Furthermore, in contrast notably to caste-based discrimination, local people appeared unaware of the illegality of witchcraft accusations, resulting in an absence of any official sanction. Witchcraft accusations are particularly harsh in their impact on teenage girls who are suffering from mental health issues (widely referred to as 'hysteria') and who can easily become labelled and stigmatised as 'witch-possessed.' In a few isolated instances, storytellers involved local authorities in an attempt to push back against witchcraft accusations. As with other superstitions explored by the research, a narrative emerged amongst younger storytellers and during community reflection sessions that education is a key driver of behavioural change.

Disability discrimination is prevalent in communities across all districts. Storytellers relating experiences with disability discrimination overwhelmingly associated their experiences with negative emotions and a sense of being punished or cursed by the gods. The effects of this stigmatisation and shame on mental and physical well-being were revealed to be profound. Emerging stories of people with disabilities speaking out and being active in their community

suggest, nonetheless, that these attitudes and behaviours can be interrupted by actions and narratives that create positive reinforcement.

Domestic violence is a widely prevalent social norm across all districts. Stories portrayed how marriage made women vulnerable and at increased risk of domestic violence at the hands of their husband and in-laws. Storytellers pointed to the negative and permanent effects of domestic violence on their lives. Across many stories that involve husbands abusing their wives, a pattern of associated factors emerged, including the interrelated factors of economic stress, unemployment and alcoholism. Son preference was another significant trigger of domestic violence. The research surfaced little if any emerging evidence of a positive pathway out of domestic violence. Stories of escape from violence, however, signalled the resilience and agency of women survivors and the important role of friends, relatives, authority figures and peer networks.

Dowry emerged in the storytelling research as a widely prevalent and insidious social norm. The research found that dowry was overwhelmingly perceived as damaging to women and girls, as it equated their worth as individuals with the value of their dowry and so reinforced their powerlessness in the households of their in-laws. Despite this, a widespread reluctance emerged amongst storytellers and in participants during community reflection sessions to break this cycle of payments and benefits.

Learning and recommendations

This baseline storytelling research project generated insights and analysis on patterns of behaviour for a range of social norms, affirming discriminatory practices amongst women and girls. The storytelling analysis also signalled a number of important 'signposts' for social norm change. These are processes that interrupt embedded or resistant social norms in ways that signal a progressive change in a community or wider society.

Changes in consciousness

The use of storytelling across contexts revealed the instrumental role of transformative social mobilisation programming in triggering critical reflection and behaviour change. Socialisation and mixing at school challenged widely held social prejudices. More fundamentally, the storytelling revealed patterns of progressive intergenerational shifts in attitudes and behaviours. Young people articulated their frustrations with what they perceived as outdated social norms.

Education for girls was widely valued amongst all the participants for social mobility and expanded life chances. At the same time, education was also widely – and increasingly – valued by mothers as a means of social mobility for their children and route out of powerlessness for their daughters. While son preference remained a strong factor in favouring sons' education, particularly private education, female storytellers overwhelmingly expressed hopes for their daughters' education and alternative life opportunities.

Interconnectedness through the Internet and social media emerged as both an opportunity and a risk. Social media created an opportunity to expose communities to competing attitudes, behaviours and worldviews beyond those that were deeply rooted locally and carefully policed by community gatekeepers, such as elders and religious leaders. At the same time, the increasing use of social media risked a backlash amongst distrustful husbands and parents. Meanwhile, young

people were able to communicate online, leading to eloped marriages that often have sad and even tragic consequences.

Access to resources

Social change – notably through mass economic migration – has brought shocks to communities and households in rural areas. But opportunities have also arisen for female economic empowerment, presenting a signpost for social norm change. The role of outreach programmes in providing resources and agricultural extension support for women was referenced in stories and in community reflection sessions as a contributor to economic empowerment. Meanwhile, investment in community infrastructure – including roads and water taps – has freed up women's time while increasing their access to markets.

Formal laws and policies

Beyond such programmatic support, policies that shift entitlements – such as land entitlements for excluded Tharu communities – emerged as empowering for specific communities and signalled the possibility for social norm change.

Legislative change can prompt behaviour change, if enforced. The storytelling research signalled an awareness of – and possible behaviour shift resulting from – legislative banning of specific social norms and the threat of sanctions. While this is no silver bullet, the legal route is surely an increasingly important tool in disrupting embedded social norms. That said, legislative changes need to be systematically enforced, with important strategic thinking needed around deliberative law-making and enforcement in the context of federalisation.

Conclusions

The Nepal 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 in their communities. Through a mix of in-depth narratives and quantifiable perception-based 'signification' questions, the research surfaced patterns of behaviour that could be analysed and interpreted through a deep-dive review of story content.

Perhaps most powerfully, the act of storytelling itself 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 centred on group reflection and action has been excitingly confirmed and is now underway since the beginning of 2022 in these districts, with funding from the Government of Finland.

Over the next four years, this impact-level social norms research will be repeated as 'midline' and 'endline' data collection. Future methodological design tweaks might include more thematically focussed exploration, allowing programme managers and policymakers to monitor and explore specific social norm patterns and trends across Nepal in greater depth.

1 INTRODUCTION

Addressing and transforming social norms for gender equitable societies is central to UN Women's Nepal country strategy and programming. Gender equality and social inclusion is also a key impact-level goal of UN Women Nepal's partner, the Government of Finland (GoF).

With this impact-level focus on gender social norm change, UN Women Nepal and the GoF embarked in June 2021 on a five-year research project of longitudinal impact monitoring.[1] The research project aims to understand the pathways of social norm change that can support country strategy and adaptive programming. Beginning with a baseline phase of fieldwork from May to July 2022, this project is collecting mass storytelling data to explore qualitative narratives of change. At the same time, quantified elements of data are aggregated to identify social norm patterns and trends. Guided by feminist and participatory principles, the storytelling will in turn prompt processes of individual and collective reflection and action that will be supported through UN Women Nepal's ongoing gender-transformative programming.

The research is being conducted through three cycles of investigation over five years. It is being implemented by a skilled and integrated research team with distinct but complementary roles and responsibilities. The contract for the baseline research is held by Gender at Work, partnering with The Story Kitchen to manage the implementation of the research in Nepal.

This report presents the findings of the baseline research. The report proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we review the research project objective, summarising the problem, the UN Women Nepal's strategic and programmatic response and the case for an impact-level tracking methodology centred on storytelling. In Section 3, we describe the research process and methodology, including its guiding conceptual framework, the research tool, underpinning principles, sampling protocol and ethical considerations. In Section 4, we detail the research findings and analytical insights. In Section 5, we present learning and recommendations. Section 6 briefly concludes.

1 *Measuring social norms change through storytelling in Nepal: Advancing the transformative shift towards gender equality by 2030.*

2 OBJECTIVE

2.1 Problem statement

In Nepal, human development outcomes continue to be hampered by gender, caste, ethnic, social and geographical inequalities and exclusion. Gender equality and women's empowerment in turn are intimately linked to social norms, behaviours and practices.

Social norms are the informal rules that govern behaviour in groups and societies (see **Section 3.1** below). Whilst these norms are deeply embedded in socio-cultural dynamics, power relations and hierarchical social structures, they can nonetheless be shifted through development interventions across a range of sectors and programmes.

Specific to Nepal, there is evidence to demonstrate that women and other excluded groups continue to be subjected to structural challenges in exercising their rights as equal citizens. Structural discrimination emanating from socio-cultural traditions, norms and practices continue to be a root cause of exclusion. Ongoing manifestations of gender inequalities – as discussed in a recent Harmful Practices report[2] – include caste-based discrimination, menstrual restrictions (in some contexts termed *chhaupadi*), child marriage, dowry/dowry-related violence and witchcraft superstitions. The gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on lives and livelihoods is likely to have intensified some of the more harmful behavioural norms reflected in these practices.

2.2 UN Women and GoF strategic and programmatic response

UN Women and the GoF are working in partnership in Nepal to deliver transformative programming that addresses the social norms underpinning these discriminatory and harmful practices. They recognise the importance of taking a holistic approach to tackling structural inequality.

UN Women Nepal's Strategic Note 2018-22[3] acknowledges that human development outcomes in Nepal continue to be slowed by gender, social and geographical exclusion and inequality. The Strategic Note highlights the structural causes of gender inequality and intersectional social exclusion as bound up in social norms. UN Women Nepal pursues transformative change in social norms across its programming areas, namely Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Governance and Women's Economic Empowerment. UN Women Nepal's programme on Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Governance seeks to strengthen women's substantive leadership and participation in governance systems. Its programme on Women's Economic Empowerment seeks to promote women's economic security and rights, with a focus on increasing women's access to decent work

2 See Infographics on HP perceptions_0.pdf (un.org.np).

3 This Strategic Note is available upon request.

and sustainable livelihoods. Furthermore, the Strategic Note underscores the need for programming across the post-conflict, humanitarian and development continuum.

Through its Nepal Country Strategy for Development Cooperation (2021-24), the GoF has demonstrated its ongoing commitment to supporting development in Nepal while advancing its own global strategic commitment to advancing gender equality.[4] The GoF specifically identifies the impact of inequality on Nepal's development, characterising the country's democratic and economic progress as being undermined by unequal access to decision-making, basic services and economic opportunities. Alongside gender-sensitive programming for increased access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and education, the GoF's strategy positions gender equality and social inclusion squarely as a third impact-level goal. Strengthening the status and rights of women and girls, including ensuring that women have better access to high-quality services and autonomy to make decisions and improving measures and services to address violence, remains one of the four priorities of Finland's development cooperation.[5]

2.3 Measuring and understanding impact

Given this strategic and programmatic focus on tackling social norms and ending harmful cultural practices, UN Women Nepal and the GoF both recognised the need to shift towards a better understanding of the impact-level social changes underpinning gender transformation. Working in partnership, they focussed on designing and implementing a longitudinal research project to track, test, adapt and reflect on change pathways for influencing discriminatory social norms.

This impact-level focus in turn required a methodological shift. Traditional methods of monitoring and evaluation are based on quantitative performance measures, using pre-determined indicators. This is often inadequate for measuring and interpreting change that is not automatically 'visible,' such as the deeply structural work required to shift entrenched social norms around gender equality. On the other hand, certain qualitative methods, such as in-depth case studies, lack adequate population coverage to make generalisable claims based on causal inference.

An impact-level focus is not designed to assess or evaluate the contribution of specific development interventions but rather to understand better what has contributed to change and how. The need to understand contribution to impact-level change moves development organisations and partners beyond the 'sphere of control' of programme managers. Contribution to these higher-level changes is part of a complex change process with many external events and influences. Recognising and understanding these complexities means being better able to adapt programming to increase influence by managing risks and responding to new opportunities.

4 See https://finlandabroad.fi/web/npl/finland-s-development-cooperation-in-country.

5 https://um.fi/goals-and-principles-of-finland-s-development-policy

2.4 A mass storytelling research project

People have always told stories. It is widely recognised that storytelling can be empowering, providing women and girls in particular with an opportunity to strengthen their voices and agency by sharing their experiences, opinions and recommendations. Stories allow people to deal with complex realities and contexts in an effort to make sense of their environment and lived experiences. Stories permit the exploration of themes and topics that may otherwise be hidden and deemed 'undiscussable'.[6]

In terms of *data generation*, the mass storytelling tool combines the interpretive depth of storytelling with the statistical power of aggregated data for tracking patterns and trends in social norm behaviours. With this tool, the GoF and UN Women Nepal aim to enrich their 'feedback loop' of evidence and learning. As a result, they expect to be better placed to influence social norm changes and end harmful cultural practices through improved gender-transformative programming.

At the same time, this research project complements the *process* of storytelling for advocacy and capacity development amongst women and excluded groups. The storytelling-driven process is being supported through UN Women Nepal and GoF programming, implemented across the districts that formed the sampling frame for this research. This programming integrates access to essential services, economic empowerment, leadership development, consciousness building, community mobilisation and movement building for social change.

6 For example, 'Breaking the Silence, Ending Impunity,' a digital platform supported by UN Women Nepal and the GoF documenting the stories of conflict-related sexual violence victims, was successful in highlighting and incorporating the experiences of these victims into the transitional justice process, and it is now a central focus of Nepal's Second National Action Plan for United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology centres on mass storytelling for measuring social norm change in order to understand what contributes (or not) to complex social norm change processes. The research is framed by the Gender at Work Analytical Framework for mapping and interpreting social change (see **Section 3.1**). It uses a mass storytelling survey instrument called SenseMaker to measure and interpret impact-level changes in social norms and gender equality. This instrument combines the interpretive depth of qualitative methods alongside the statistical power of aggregated data (see **Section 3.2**). Research rigour was enhanced through the triangulation of stories, researchers and perspectives, including episodic moments of 'sense making' at the community, district and national levels (see **Section 3.3**).

The research process was designed to be participatory and feminist, placing mainly female storytellers at the centre of their own research based on their lived experiences (see **Section 3.4**). The research teams themselves were 'peer researchers,' selected from local community-based organisations. Locations and storytellers were sampled from geographical areas in which UN Women Nepal and GoF programming is either ongoing or planned. In this way, the research aimed to foster deeper conversations around patterns in storytelling that would feed into ongoing gender-transformative programming (see **Section 3.5**). The research was conducted using high ethical standards, ensuring transparency and confidentiality, and with protocols for linking storytellers to follow-up support services if needed (see **Section 3.6**).

It is important to note that the research process was subject to methodological trade-offs and limitations. These are discussed in more detail in **Annex B**. A key trade-off emerged in relation to the thematic scope of the research, with preference given to an open-ended story prompt that allowed for multiple social norms narratives at the expense of more thematically focused content. A further trade-off centred on where to strike the balance in a mass storytelling methodology between extractive breadth of inference and interpretive depth of analysis. A third trade-off related to balancing the 'extractive' element of the research process with the transformative potential of embedded participatory research in local communities.

3.1 Research conceptual framework

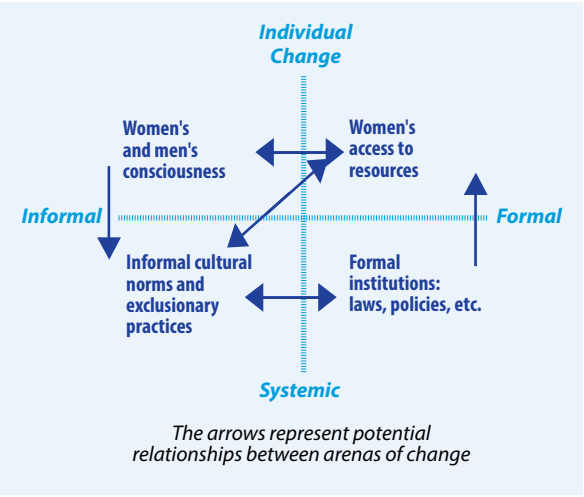
Gender social norms underpin those forms of institutionalised behaviours that are defined by gender roles and relations and which reflect an "entire community's beliefs and actions."[7] Social norms are built and perpetuated around *social expectations*: one's

[7] See Mackie, G. et al (2015). *What are Social Norms? How are they Measured?* UNICEF, 27 July. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282851305_What_are_social_norms_How_are_they_measured.

beliefs about the actions and beliefs of others in any given reference group.[8] These social expectations tend to be embedded but nonetheless can be shifted through intervention. This provides an entry point for progressive programming.

Figure 1

Gender at Work Framework



The arrows represent potential relationships between arenas of change

This research uses the Gender at Work Analytical Framework (see **Figure 1** below)[9] as a framing tool to identify and map pathways to social norm change. The four quadrants presented in the framework equate to domains of social change. The research teams worked with these domains to develop signification questions (see **Annex A**) that storytellers answered to analyse the significance of their stories in relation to deeper social norm change processes.

By mapping social change 'drivers' to the framework (see **Section 5**), it then becomes a useful operational tool that distinguishes areas of transformation in gender roles and relations. The framework captures the interaction of structure and agency along two continuums and in four quadrants: the informal and formal institutions that govern behaviours and relations, as well as the interior and exterior capabilities of individuals or social groups.

Sharpening the focus of programmatic interventions to shifting gender social norms that underpin harmful practices (the bottom-left quadrant) can be aided by this type of conceptual framework.[10] To this end, ongoing and planned interventions are mapped across the quadrants to conceptualise contribution to specific gender social norm change objectives.

3.2 Research instrument

The baseline research for this project used a storytelling research instrument called SenseMaker. This instrument combines storytelling about change (through text, pictures or other forms of narrative) with self-signified quantification (using multi-choice, dyads, triads and stones) of key themes or concepts associated with the changes described in the narrative. SenseMaker can be adapted for use amongst different social groups. It is a visual tool that can work with both literate and illiterate populations, although piloting is key to ensuring that concepts can be widely and commonly understood across respondents.

8 A reference group in this context is a social group used by an individual as a standard for evaluating themselves and their own behaviour.

9 See Kelleher, D. and Rao, A. (nd) "What is Gender at Work's Approach to Gender equality and Institutional Change?" unpublished paper, Gender at Work.
http://gender.careinternationalwikis.org/_media/resource_3_rao_2006_gender_at_work_integrated_framework.pdf

10 This framework has already been adopted by UN Women Nepal and operationalised in aspects of its work.

SenseMaker also has a highly interactive software interface that allows for real time uploading, aggregation and analysis.[11] Through aggregation of hundreds or even thousands of data points emerging from this mass storytelling instrument, patterns and trends in social change emerge, allowing strategy directors and programme managers to interpret change, test their hypotheses about their contribution to change and make 'course corrections' in programme design and implementation.

In summary, through its mix of interpretive depth and quantifiable breadth, SenseMaker brings the following benefits to research:

- Depth and complexity of lived experience.
- Ascribed meaning through self-signification, with the need for careful attention to ensuring shared understanding of concepts amongst researchers and across storytellers.
- Aggregation of data points to reveal patterns and identify interesting clusters.
- Comparison over time and across locations for longitudinal monitoring.

During research design and inception phases, a SenseMaker questionnaire was developed and piloted to test its utility for tracking and interpreting social norm change (see **Annex A**). The questionnaire begins with the following open-ended instruction:

> *"Think about a significant change in traditional practices, beliefs and social norms in your community for women and girls during the past five years. It could be a negative change or a positive change.*
>
> *Think about something that happened in your life or in the life of someone like you during that period: any event or experience that made you change the way you see yourself or that changed the way others see you. It could be something you did, said, thought or experienced. Please describe what happened."*

The instrument then draws on the Gender at Work Analytical Framework (**Figure 1**) to provide signification questions for the storyteller to answer. By answering these questions, storytellers are able to signify their change stories in ways that explain, from their social position and identity within their communities, key aspects of those stories, including: identifying triggers for the change they describe; ascribing emotional qualities to the story; identifying thematic aspects of their story; articulating changes in their voice, value, agency and power relationships; identifying enablers and disablers to change; and evaluating the impact (including permanence, scale and transformative qualities) of their story on social norms, behaviours and attitudes in their communities.

[11] In this context, research teams collected stories and signification data using paper instruments then later uploaded the data to the secure SenseMaker platform (attaching stories as JPEG files) via a mobile phone app.

3.3 Achieving rigour through triangulation of stories, researchers and perspectives

The storytelling research process achieves rigour through a combination of quantitative and qualitative tools for strengthening validity and achieving trustworthiness.

The SenseMaker mass survey instrument was administered to a random stratified sample of storytellers across five districts (see **Section 3.5** below), with over 1,000 data points collected to achieve 'brute data' confidence of inference at the national level.

Through the self-signification of stories, interpretive patterns of emotions, behaviours and decision-making associated with stories emerged in the aggregated data set. These patterns could then be cross-referenced with the underlying stories to increase confidence in their meaning and representativeness. Within their teams, researchers then tested their emerging insights by challenging the evidence base of colleagues' working hypotheses, in this way reducing the possibility of researcher bias.

At episodic moments during the fieldwork phase, the perspectives and insights of different stakeholders in the community, district and national levels were triangulated during sense-making events. At these events, research findings were shared and discussed, with contrasting positions and conflicting findings noted. At the ward level, these events were organised at the end of a fieldwork period in each ward, with community members invited to participate. At the district level, the compiled results of the ward-level research were shared and discussed with district stakeholders, including district officials, donor programme managers, civil society groups, businesspeople, media and community representatives. Finally, once the district-level data had been compiled, aggregated and analysed at a research-debriefing workshop, a national-level sense-making workshop was then conducted with national decision makers, donor representatives, international and national NGOs, academics and others.

3.4 A participatory, feminist research process

This research project is implementing a feminist research process. It has adopted an analytical lens that recognises gendered and patriarchal power relations and social hierarchies. It is using a research tool that places women and girls[12] at the centre of their storytelling and signification process. It includes the voices and stories of men and boys to build understanding of gendered perspectives.

This research process is also distinct for its emphasis on a participatory approach to empowering storytellers through a process of facilitated learning and action. This is a feminist and empowering use of the storytelling instrument. It fits particularly well with group-based reflection, learning and social mobilisation aspects of UN Women Nepal's programming and is in line with the overall gender equality goals of Agenda 2030.

In this way, participatory research becomes a 'win-win' for impact assessment. Through the implementation of a mass storytelling instrument, participatory research generates generalisable information about changing patterns of behaviour and underlying social

[12] It is important to note here that while the research methodology allowed for self-expression of non-binary gendered identities, this situation did not arise in the course of fieldwork. This could be seen as a limitation if field researchers were insufficiently cognisant of gender fluidity in local contexts.

expectations that can be subject to interpretive analysis by groups of storytellers and subsequently by external analysts. At the same time, through facilitated group reflections involving women and other excluded groups, participatory research can be an empowering feminist tool in which participants reflect on their lived realities and take action for change.

3.5 Sampling protocol

The baseline research site selection adopted a purposive sampling method, selecting wards within local government units (LGUs) that are exposed to ongoing or planned UN Women Nepal and/or GoF programming in each district.[13] A total of some 1,000 individual storytellers were selected from programme-intervention wards in LGUs across five districts of four provinces (see **Table 1**). Of these four selected provinces, UN Women Nepal has ongoing presence in the three provinces of Madhesh, Bagmati and Sudurpashchim, while GoF has a Water and Sanitation programme in Karnali province.

Table 1

Research sampling locations

Province	District	Wards + Municipalities (LGUs)	Ward	No. of stories per ward (actual no.)	Total no. of stories per LGU
Madhesh (Province 2)	Sarlahi	Ward 8 Barahathwa LGU (CTM) Ward 5 Brahmpuri Rural LGU (CTM) Ward 3 Haripurwa LGU (CTM) Ward 6 Malangwa LGU (CTM)	4	63	252
Bagmati (Province 3)	Kavre	Ward 13 Banepa LGU (CTM) Ward 4 Mahabharat Rural LGU (RR)	2	62	124
Karnali (Province 6)	Surkhet	Ward 11 Birendranagar LGU (RR) Ward 12 Bheriganga LGU (RR) Ward 6 Gurbha Kot LGU (RR) Ward 7 Lekhbesi LGU (RR)	4	63	252
Sudurpaschim (Province 7)	Kailali	Ward 8 Bhajani LGU (RR) Ward 4 Kailari Rural (RR) Ward 12 Dhangadi sub-metro LGU (RR)	3	62	186
	Doti	Ward 7 Dipayal Silgadi LGU (RR) Ward 6 Shikar LGU (CTM) Ward 2 Badi Kedar Rural LGU (RR*)	3	62	186
4 Provinces	**5 Districts**	**16 Municipalities 10 remote rural (RR) 6 close to markets (CTM)**	**16 wards**		**1,000 stories**

**Still remote but now changing with the arrival of a paved road two years ago.*

[13] Given that the goal of UN Women and GoF programming is to contribute to 'system-wide' change in social norms across programme districts, it was inappropriate to adopt a quasi-experimental approach to the sampling protocol through which neighbouring 'without intervention' wards are selected as comparison sites for 'with and without' analysis.

Drawing on the expertise and local knowledge of UN Women Nepal's programme partners[14] and the District Research Coordinators, the sampling protocol first stratified the population according to geographical distinctions in the social, economic and political context of the wards in which the country programme operates. Whilst all communities sampled were essentially rural, the sampling protocol distinguished between those that were 'remote rural' (RR) with access taking many hours by car and those that were 'close to market' (CTM) with relatively easy access by road to urban market centres.

Within the selected wards, storyteller sampling then captured the different positionalities of individuals from identity groups that were subject to different sets of social expectations, including women, men, adolescent girls, Dalit groups and people with disabilities.

Over the subsequent five-year research period, sampling at midline and endline will follow the lives of a minority 'panel' (10 to 15 per cent) of storytellers from different social and ethnic groups.[15] The majority of storytellers (85 to 90 per cent) will be selected through a 'fresh' random sampling process. This mix is important to capture long-term panel trends while ensuring that the types of life changes experienced by the overall sample of storytellers is not 'biased' by continued exposure to the participatory impact monitoring intervention. Importantly, as the research process shifts from data collection to feedback, reflection and action, the process will become fully inclusive.

The baseline research adopted a 'cluster sampling' approach in order to capture a higher number of respondents from a relatively smaller number of geographical population 'units' (administrative wards). A cluster sample approach ensures an agreed level of statistical confidence of inference while lending itself better to a participatory research process that involves an extended period of feedback and reflection in the selected wards.

3.6 Putting research ethics into practice

Conducting qualitative fieldwork requires high ethical standards to ensure that communities are accessed openly, participants have a clear understanding of what will happen, expectations are not raised and confidentiality is maintained. These basic tenets of fieldwork apply to the individual storytelling and the group-based participatory feedback and reflection process. The fieldwork process was designed to ensure that the research adhered to the World Health Organization's 'Ethical and safety recommendations for intervention research on violence against women (2016),' UN Women's 'Violence Against Women and Girls Data Collection during COVID-19 (2020) standards and other relevant guidelines that assure the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants. As such, several key ethical issues were addressed during the research process:

14 These partners are Justice and Rights Institute Nepal (JuRI-Nepal), Feminist Dalit Organisation (FEDO), Centre for Dalit Women Nepal (CDWN) and Support Nepal (SNP).

15 It is important to note that the sampling somewhat overrepresented Dalit populations. This was in large part due to the fact that programme implementing partners, who were helping to facilitate research team community access, worked more prevalently in Dalit communities.

- Research coordinators ensured that permission was sought for the interviews and focus groups through consultations with the local community. This included seeking permission from the parents of storytellers under 18 years old.
- Researchers established and communicated clear parameters for the storytelling and group reflection sessions through a process of informed consent. This meant clearly stating the purpose, the limits of the research (not raising expectations) and follow-up, taking into account language and sociocultural barriers.
- Researchers ensured that participants were not being exploited. Demands on participants' time were not excessive, times and locations were convenient to the storytellers and participants knew of their right to not participate, ask questions or withdraw at any time.
- Researchers recognised that participants were possibly vulnerable and that the interviews and group sessions would be conducted with an understanding and mitigation of the power differentials that existed within and between community members and researchers.
- Researchers secured the safety and protection of participants, which meant ensuring that the research environment was physically safe, that there were at least two facilitators present during group sessions and, if possible, that a local stakeholder group was involved in monitoring activities. Research teams were closely supervised by district coordinators.
- Researchers ensured anonymity and confidentiality during all interactions and in record keeping and report writing, with no personal details made public.
- Researchers, in collaboration with UN Women Nepal and local implementing partners, provided referral pathways to counselling and/or support services for participants for whom the storytelling process had surfaced traumatic experiences.[16]
- Whilst there was not direct benefit for participation in the research, as part of its programmatic intervention, UN Women Nepal and its partners will provide a range of support for economic empowerment, leadership development and social norm change actions to women and excluded groups in the research project locations.[17]

16 Whilst research teams confirmed that this advice was provided as deemed appropriate, we do not have follow-up data on whether storytellers took action to make use of these pathways.

17 This means that storytellers will have the opportunity to be included in future programming (as they live in programme catchment areas) but will not be directly targeted.

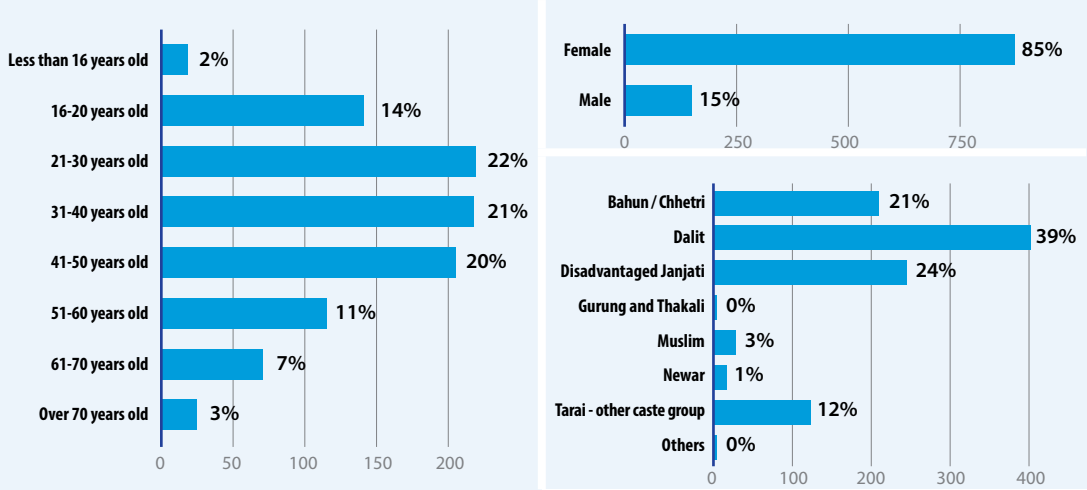
4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Overview

The baseline research elicited over 1,000 change stories from storytellers of all ages and from a wide range of socioeconomic, caste and ethnic backgrounds. The stories were collected mainly from women and girls but also included a significant minority of male storytellers in order to capture the gendered perspectives of men and boys (see **Figure 2**).

Figure 2

Who were the storytellers? Age, gender and social/ethnic background



The stories encapsulated many emotions, themes and experiences with social norms in the lived experience of the storytellers. Most stories described permanent and transformative changes in individuals, relationships and communities. Storytellers had different feelings about their stories. Most storytellers linked their behaviours to fear, insecurity, anxiety or isolation and with sadness and worry. Others associated their stories with self-confidence and self-respect as well as happiness and hope.

Through their storytelling, individuals expressed the importance of power relations that underpinned and perpetuated social institutions and behaviours and attitudes. Many of these stories discussed specific harmful cultural practices – discussed and illustrated below – including menstrual isolation (sometimes referred to as *chhaupadi*), caste-based discrimination, child marriage, witchcraft superstition, disability discrimination, domestic violence and dowry.

The pattern of storytelling content varied across district contexts, social and ethnic groups, ages and genders. In some districts, certain harmful cultural practices were more prevalent or more harmful in their impact. The practice of menstrual isolation, for instance, was widespread but varied by context and was most prevalent and most

extremely manifested in Nepal's far western provinces. The linked cultural practices of the bridal veil (*ghumto pratha*) and bridal isolation (*kanya pratha*)[18] were quite localised but widely prevalent amongst the Madhesi communities of the Terai lowland region of southern Nepal (Madhesh province). Witchcraft superstition was nationally widespread but appeared to be most evident and entrenched in Kavre (Bagmati province) and Kailali (Sudurpashchim province) districts. The practice of dowry was also widespread but most insidious amongst the Madhesi population of Madhesh province, where the damaging effects – exacerbated by the 'dowry inflating' effects of gulf migration – manifested in property loss, family feuds and even homicides. The *kamaiya* practice of bonded labour in Kailali district (Sudurpashchim province) predominantly affected men and women of the Tharu community indigenous to the Terai lowlands.

An inter-generational gap emerged in many instances and across contexts. Younger storytellers – both male and female – were more likely to speak out against what they described as superstitious or conservative practices, recognising their harmful and socially unjust impacts. Men and boys told stories about social norms that directly affected their lives. These included stories about caste-based discrimination (including experiences of intercaste marriage), bonded labour (Kamaiya) and disability discrimination. Significantly, men and boys also talked about gendered discriminatory norms that affected their family members or friends. A young married man talked, for example, about the damaging effect that his family's son preference has on his marriage. Another recounted being taunted by other men for helping his wife with domestic chores. An older man revealed that he was a reformed alcoholic who now bitterly regretted years of physically abusing his wife. Another older man recalled being the first parent in his village to send his daughter to school and the backlash he faced as a result.

In other cases, both male and female storytellers revealed their continuing belief in the superstitions that are associated with abandoning cultural practices, such as bad luck and ill health. Typical of this perspective was the storytelling around menstrual isolation. One young man explained his support of *chhaupadi* because of its perceived protection against illness and social harm, while a young woman described moving back into menstrual isolation after perceiving that she had contributed to her husband's ill health by sharing his bed during menstruation.

Like women and girls, men and boys also occasionally revealed through their storytelling an awareness of the benefits that external interventions have on tackling gender discriminatory behaviours and underpinning norms. One married man reflected, for instance, on the influence of the arrival of modern health services in counteracting the harmful sexual and reproductive health effects of faith healers. A middle-aged man reflected on the decline of 'veil' (*ghumto pratha*) culture in his community as a result of social programming. An older man reflected on the success of external interventions, such as street plays, in shifting attitudes and behaviours around *chhaupadi*. A young man reflected that girls now outnumbered boys at the local school – in part due to government scholarship programmes – but that life opportunities for girls were still limited by restrictive social norms.

In the sections that follow, we dig deeper and present the findings that emerged amongst storytellers relating to a key set of harmful cultural practices.

18 *Ghumto pratha* is the cultural practice within Madhesi communities of married women veiling their faces before other men. *Kanya pratha* is the related Madhesi cultural practice of in-home marriage isolation amongst new brides, which can last up to five years.

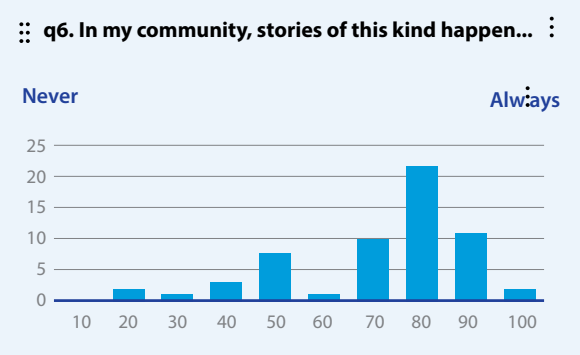
4.2 Menstrual isolation/*chhaupadi*

Menstrual isolation – know in some regions as *chhaupadi* – is a harmful cultural practice in which women are considered untouchable and forced to stay in isolated huts during menstruation. Menstrual isolation is now a criminalised practice in Nepal.

The research revealed that, despite its illegal status, menstrual isolation is still a widely practiced social norm across local communities in Nepal, with forms of practices varying across the country (see **Figure 3**). Menstrual isolation was most prevalent in Karnali and Sudurpashchim provinces.[19]

Figure 3

Frequency of chhaupadi experiences



This is a discriminatory practice that imposes fundamental restrictions on the lives of women and girls. During their menstrual cycle, women are separated from their households and denied access to infrastructure (notably water taps) and some farming activities (touching cattle or wheat), deprived of nutritious food (milk and curd) and excluded from social institutions (temples and community participation). Girls are similarly isolated and stigmatised in their access to education, for example, by having to taking separate routes to school.

This social norm was revealed to be resistant to change, entrenched by superstitious fears – fuelled in part by traditional healers and priests – and reproduced through intergenerational household relations. Hence, storytellers explained that they practiced menstrual isolation in part due to the norms of their (especially male) elders and/or the strictures of their mothers-in-law but also because of their own fears about the dangers of breaking this taboo:

> *"Girls/women follow the practice of menstrual exile because of the thinking of people in our community who believe in it."*
>
> [16-20-year-old male from Dalit community, Kailali district (04DK23)]

> *"We and our daughters stay separately during menstruation. We practice staying separately strictly because of our mother-in-law's fear and the fear of our own heart."*
>
> [31-40-year-old female from Bahun/Chhetri community, Kailali district (04DK32)]

A significant number of women expressed a perceived inability to change their behaviour due to the power of village religious authorities. This meant that in some villages with powerful religious strictures, menstrual isolation remained a particularly resistant social norm. Similarly, within private spaces, mothers, mothers-in-law and the older generation in general retained a powerful influence on behaviour during menstruation. One young woman from Doti district described the dual influences of the local temples and the older generation (see **Box 1**).

[19] It was significant that during a reflexive debrief, the female research team members in Doti described being denied entry into restaurants and recalled not being given food during their stay in local communities due to local concerns over menstrual isolation.

Box 1

"My Village Waiting for Change"

It has been six years since I was married. In my parents' house, I never slept in chhau goth. I know staying in chhau goth means accepting old tradition, but I cannot do anything against the culture practiced here. You saw four temples while coming to this village. Because of these temples we cannot step out of the house during menstruation. The older generation says that if we touch cattle during menstruation, cattle die, milk will be ruined, blood will get mixed into the milk while milking the cow [and] older people will become sick and diseased. So, we cannot say anything against chhaupadi. It is happening. When we say that these all are lies, they tell us that we are the sinners of this time and because of us, many incidents are happening in the village. We feel bad when we hear such things, but there is no truth in it.

We are different from them; certainly there will be change. But making this older generation aware is a challenge for us. I say that the harmful practice of giving respect to these opinions of the older generation should be stopped. We need everybody's help in this.

[21-30-year-old female from Bahun/Chhetri community, Doti district (05MK19)]

A reluctance to change is also reinforced by women's own belief systems and/or their fear that abandoning the practice could risk harming their families, especially their husbands and male family members. One storyteller, for instance, described seeing blood in the milk when she milked her cow during her period. In another story excerpt, a middle-aged woman from Doti district reverted to physically isolating, as she linked her husband's deteriorating health with their decision to allow her to share his bed while menstruating.

Storytellers revealed, however, some positive shifts in the practice of menstrual isolation, seen especially in a physical shift from the use of dangerously isolated *chau goth* (*chhaupadi* huts) to in-home isolation and to women being given nutritionally-important milk and curd during menstruation (see **Box 2**). This was linked to the behavioural effects of awareness-raising and training programmes that emphasised the health risks attached to *chau goth* isolation.

Box 2

"Eradication of Chhau Goth (Menstrual Hut)"

This society treats [a menstruating women] like an animal; our women have to suffer a lot. After lots of trainings and meetings, people have allowed the women having menstruation 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 (05JS13)]

Through their stories, a significant minority of middle-aged women reported the influence of these types of health programme interventions on household and community behaviours around menstrual isolation. Typical of this experience was a middle-aged woman from Doti district who described how she now allowed her

daughters to sleep in the house during menstruation "and drink milk and curd" (see **Box 3**).

Significantly, through a mix of education and programme interventions, there has been a noticeable shift in attitude amongst the younger generation towards menstrual isolation. Patterns emerged of younger, educated storytellers who had been able to make their own decisions while also challenging what they saw as a discriminatory practice. **Figure 4** reveals a pattern of storytellers (represented by the circled clusters of dots) who defied community expectations and in doing so challenged discrimination. This underpinning discrimination was described by a young female storyteller in Doti district as *"the darkness below the lamp."* One teenage male storyteller from a community in Kailali district captured this shift when reflecting:

> *"Because of the older people (…) women are treated like untouchables during menstruation… (but) the new generation is bringing change."*
>
> [16-20 year old male from Bahun/Chhetri community, Kailali district (04DK27)]

Alongside this generational shift in thinking there is a sense that even if the practice of menstrual isolation continues, people are at least now 'naming' this practice and talking about what society thinks.

Box 3

"Unchanged Belief in Changing Time"

Many organisations bring different awareness programmes in the village and conduct trainings, conferences and plays to spread the message that we should not practice such things. Because of [this], women have successfully stayed in rooms instead of sheds. Now, sisters of the village are allowed to sleep in a room inside a house during menstruation. Women are [now] given milk and curd during menstruation, but in some families it hasn't changed. There are three daughters in my house. I make my daughters sleep in the room and drink milk and curd. People say time changes everything. It is changing. They say time is strong. It is also a matter of change.

[41-50-year-old female from Bahun/Chhetri community, Doti district (05JS19)]

Figure 4

Patterns of attitudes and behaviours underpinning menstrual isolation stories

Nonetheless, the action of challenging norms by speaking out against the practice of menstrual isolation clearly remains a huge hurdle within local communities. It was significant that there were no cases of storytellers using legal routes to challenge the practice. One female storyteller explained how she felt she lacked the support of her community in trying to challenge the practice:

> *"They (the community) always backbite me. I feel like speaking out against them and filing a police report, but I lack the strength to do so because I do not have anyone's support."*
>
> [21-30-year-old female from Bahun/Chhetri community, Doti district (05JS19)]

In another story, the community and local police destroyed a *chhaukudo* (menstruation house), but then the community rebuilt it closer to the women's houses. The storyteller reflected that her community was "*near the office of Rural Municipality, but no one does anything here.*" This story underscores the ways in which informal and formal institutions can combine, remaining deaf or even complicit in the continuation of this harmful social norm (see **Box 4**).

Box 4

"Chhaukudo"

We, four or five girls having menstruation, sleep in the re-constructed chhaukudo (separate house made for the girls having menstruation). Four families have one chhaukudo. Sometimes we are three or four girls there, and sometimes we are alone. During menstruation, sleeping is not the only problem; we also have problems with eating. We cannot eat or drink any dairy product, like milk, curd and whey. We have to do work, like cutting grass and firewood, carrying manure, working on the farm and doing all the work outside the house, but we cannot do anything inside the house. 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 be sick. Saying all these things, they neither give nutritious food nor secure a place to sleep. They have done injustice to us in the name of gods and goddesses. They also say that the menstruation of girls and women is different. I am not so educated. I have heard that we should not practice untouchability during menstruation, but my family and society does not listen to me. In fact, a few months ago, people and the police destroyed the chhaukudo. But they made the chhaukudo again, this time nearer to our houses. We have to sleep alone during menstruation and they control the food given to us. No one listens to us, so we have to suffer. I am worried. When will there be change in this place? It is near the office of Rural Municipality, but no one does anything here. When will the tradition of this place change?

[31-40-year-old female from Bahun/Chhetri community, Doti district (05MK19)]

4.3 Caste-based discrimination

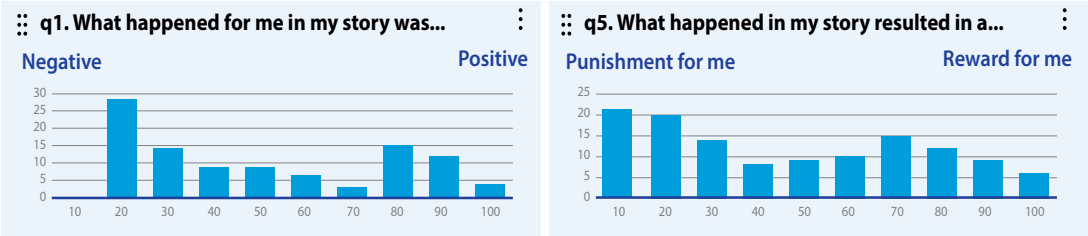
The research confirmed that caste-based discrimination remains a widely practiced and internalised social norm across communities in Nepal. Storytellers frequently associated their experiences of caste-based discrimination with feelings of isolation and fear. They also linked their stories to notions of status, value and self-respect (see **Figure 5**). Furthermore, storytellers widely linked their stories to negative emotions and a sense of being punished for their caste background (see **Figure 6**).

Figure 5

Feelings associated with caste-based discrimination stories

Figure 6

Emotions associated with caste-based discrimination stories



This social norm is highly resistant to change, entrenched in the public sphere by physical, social, infrastructural and occupational separation (underpinned by landlessness). The reinforcing of caste-based discrimination along occupational lines (see for example **Box 27**) was widely reported by storytellers and discussed in community and district sense-making events. In instances where Dalit community members were able to change professions and become more socially mobile, on the other hand, this could trigger a shift in perception amongst non-Dalits in the community. One participant in the Doti district sense-making workshop, for example, raised the case of a Dalit who had become a schoolteacher and as a result gained greater respect within his community.[20]

This isolation in turn is reinforced and perpetuated by the attitudes and behaviours of authorities in control of budgets and infrastructure spending, as illustrated by the unsuccessful efforts of a Dalit community in Surkhet district to access irrigation provision (see **Box 5**). This story underscores a wider concern over Dalit representation in local government: namely, that while legislation has promoted and expanded Dalit political participation (with Dalit women entering local government in record numbers) this has not in many contexts translated into Dalits having increased influence over local decision-making and resource allocation.

20 It is important to flag here that other participants from Dalit communities in that workshop disagreed with this perspective. In a powerful intervention, they argued that Dalits should be respected for their profession. In this case, they argued that the community should respect the Dalit as a shoemaker since this was a legacy of his family and not because he subsequently became a schoolteacher.

Caste-based discrimination intersects with gender to place fundamental restrictions and harm in the lives and opportunities of Dalit women and girls. Female Dalit storytellers recounted humiliating and dehumanising experiences in their interactions with non-Dalit communities, including sexual abuse and violence. Dalit men also experienced violence and beatings at the hands of non-Dalits. Significantly, Dalit storytellers were typically reluctant to report these incidents to the local police either because they did not believe the police would represent their interests[21] and/or for fear of reprisals from non-Dalits (see **Box 6**).

In a seemingly positive development, the research identified a widely confirmed and significant change in public discussion of, and behaviour towards, Dalits. Community reflection sessions confirmed that due to the legislative banning of caste-based discrimination and accompanying threat of sanctions, people were generally far more wary of outward displays of discriminatory behaviour in public.

Both storytellers and group reflections identified, however, a disconnect between public behaviour and continuing private resistance to norm change around caste-based discrimination. This disconnect was powerfully expressed by a community representative who participated in the district sense-making workshop in Kailali district. This community member stood up to challenge the official narrative that caste-based discrimination was on the retreat in the district. Some officials acknowledged her contribution; others ignored it. Recognising the 'voicelessness' of many in local communities, she said:

Box 5

"Who Will Understand Our Pain?"

We went to the offices many times to request a canal water provision. That request hasn't been fulfilled yet. But in the Chhetri and Thakuri villages, there is water. Crops and vegetables are green there. Our people (Dalits) are not in the authority level. Those in authority get the facility.

[41-50-year-old female from Dalit community, Surkhet district (03NB025)]

Box 6

"Discrimination"

(Non-Dalits) went to my brother-in-law's, threatened my sister-in-law and beat up my brother-in-law. We decided to file a complaint with the police, and my sister-in-law agreed to testify in front of the officer. After hearing about my sister-in-law, my brother-in-law's attacker threatened that if she acts as a witness in the case, she should be prepared to leave the village as soon as she completes the police report. After learning that my sister-in-law refused to report the incident to the police, we Dalits do not have access to justice either. They either do not take complaints about such discrimination seriously or are unable to punish the guilty people because they hold positions of authority. As a result, we Dalits must band together and speak out against the injustice and suffering that we have faced in society.

[41-50-year-old female from Dalit community, Doti district (05RK35)]

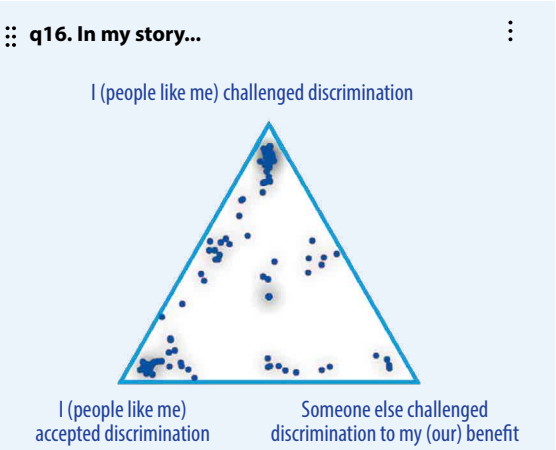
[21] Sense-making workshop participants reflected that the police indeed widely practise and normalise discrimination against Dalit communities.

> *"This is the first time that I have been invited to a forum where I can stand up and tell you about the reality (of caste-based discrimination) in my community."*

The research also revealed that Dalits have taken action in response to their daily experiences of discrimination. Patterns emerged in the storytelling data indicating that individuals had challenged discriminatory behaviour in their daily lives, while in some cases others in the community challenged discrimination on their behalf (as shown by the circled dot clusters in **Figure 7**). In some instances, this is a 'negative' action, most notably in cases of Dalit households converting to Christianity (or to newer guru-led spiritual movements or cults) in order to break away from discrimination.

Figure 7

Patterns of action linked to caste-based discrimination stories



In other cases, the actions taken are more positive and empowering. One story of a young Dalit woman challenging the discriminatory behaviour of a non-Dalit at the community water tap powerfully illustrates the younger generation's willingness to tackle caste-based discrimination (see **Box 7**).

Box 7

"Caste Discrimination"

I was going to fetch water from the public tap. I was in hurry and accidentally collided with a neighbouring sister who was carrying water. She poured all my water on the floor and I had to go fill [it up] again. I jumped on her, crying and saying that they keep on discriminating [against us], as if we are not humans. At that time, one of the teachers came there and scolded that sister. After that day, not only that sister but others also stopped discriminating against us at the tap.

16-20-year-old female from Dalit community, Surkhet district (04DK29)

In a few isolated cases, storytellers described taking legal redress against caste-based discrimination. In one story, a Dalit leader described how, despite inaction from the local police and a negative decision by the district court, he took a case of caste-based discrimination up to the high court where he was finally successful (see **Box 8**). He and other Dalit leaders subsequently took more cases to court: "*We did not succeed in all subsequent cases filed after the incident, but we continued our efforts. We are raising our voices in favour of the discriminated-against Dalit society.*"

Box 8

"Triumph"

Dalit leaders play an important role in eliminating untouchability and discrimination against Dalits. As a matter of fact, I am a Dalit leader too. My family and I got displaced from our village after rebelling against a discrimination that happened to me 13 years ago. Despite what happened, I've never stopped raising my voice against it. I went to buy cigarettes in a nearby shop four years ago during the evening time. I asked for a cigarette and went inside the shop. He said that he didn't have any cigarettes and ordered me to leave the shop immediately. He scolded me, saying I touched his water. He misbehaved with me, called me 'doom' (a so-called lower caste). He denied giving me what I asked for. When I asked him what had I done to be treated in such a humiliating manner, he continued scolding and humiliating me.

It was hard for me to take this humiliation, so I went to the district headquarters and reported the incident to the police station. The police officials refused to file a case. The official in the case-filing department said that s/he was unaware of the laws related to racial discrimination. Then, I consulted a lawyer and filed a case in the District Court. As I was the victim of the incident, I didn't get proper justice and the court decision was not in my favour, so we went to the High Court and filed a case. This effort finally brought a fruitful result when the High Court decided in my favour. We (other Dalit leaders and I) did not succeed in all subsequent cases filed after the incident, but we continued our efforts. We are raising our voices in favour of the discriminated-against Dalit society, and this has yielded some positive results. Discrimination has decreased these days and it is not like [how it was] earlier; however, more positive changes are needed.

[21-30-year-old female from Dalit community, Doti district (05MK25)]

More generally, positive patterns of changing attitudes and behaviours emerged amongst the younger generation; there is a widely articulated desire for change and impatience with what young people see as outdated behaviours. Caste mixing, teacher behaviour and socialisation at school as well as mixing in friends' houses emerged as important drivers of changing attitudes amongst young people, as illustrated by the impassioned views of a young non-Dalit storyteller from Kavre district (see **Box 9**).

Box 9

"Untouchability is a Bad Thing"

I am daughter of a Bomjan (an indigenous group that historically did not practise the caste system and untouchability) and there are many Dalit people in our village. I did not understand [caste discrimination] when I was small, but now I do; seeing people avoiding their touch and discriminating against them makes me sad. Maybe because we are educated, right? All human beings are the same. They come to our house to work on the farm, but grandfather doesn't allow them to come inside; they have to eat outside and clean their plates themselves. Everybody treats them the same way. While I was studying in maybe class 7 or 8, I asked my grandfather about that, but he scolded me, saying we have a god who might get angry and that it was a custom running through

generations. They probably have their gods too, but it is not the same for them. All of us – Dalit, Magar, Tamang – sit together at school, and nothing bad happened. We even eat our meals together. If something had to happen, then it would have happened. I feel encouraged to study, seeing my teachers at school. They make so much income while still living in the village. They don't follow untouchability or discrimination. They face each student. I learned from them not to discriminate against Dalits. They don't do discrimination in the cities, right ma'am? I wonder when the village people will understand. Grandfather doesn't listen to us. How can he listen to kids like us? I feel bad that one of my friends is Dalit, but I am not allowed to bring my friend home. They [my family] scold me at home. When I grow up, I will not think the same way as my family members, ma'am. We all are the same, aren't we? They are human beings too, aren't they?

[16-20-year-old female from a disadvantaged Janajati community, Kavre district (02ss08)]

Another young female storyteller from a non-Dalit background in Doti district reflected:

> *"In my society and my village, the old tradition is still in practice. The Dalits of my village are suffering. Equality is just in the words of people, but I don't think it is in practice. I want the new generation like me to do good things in society. I suggest to my friends in my community to try to bring about change in more communities and change our society for the better".*
>
> [16-20 year old female from Bahun/Chhetri community, Doti district (05JS20)]

Finally, instances of intercaste marriage emerged as hugely significant, life-changing events in the lives of some storytellers and indicative of deeper social shifts in behaviours. In most cases, the couples involved were still forced to confront the prejudices of family members and communities but were prepared to take action against injustice and prejudice for the sake of their own lives and happiness. These decisions have taken their toll on intergenerational relationships, as illustrated in the case of a son who ran away to marry his Dalit girlfriend (see **Box 10**).

Box 10

"Intercaste marriage"

My life was running smoothly and happily. I educated my son up to class ten, but during the first phase of COVID-19 he ran away with a girl from a Dalit community. We searched for them with the help of relatives and found them in the state of Himachal Pradesh in India. We brought them back home and arranged for them to live in another nearby house. We discussed the situation with local community leaders and accepted my daughter-in-law, even though she is a Dalit. But my son refused to live with me and started living at his in-law's house. Now, my son is staying in his wife's house. My daughter-in-law blamed me for this, saying I was biased against her because of her caste. Her family also threatened me. Socially, this type of incident was not in practice earlier in our time. But my own son has married a Dalit girl and is living with her. Even he hates me and does not talk to me. I feel like this relationship ruined our family relations.

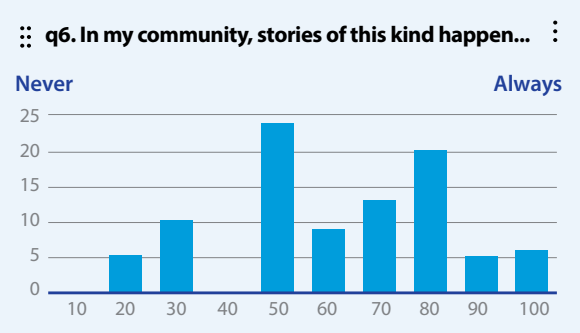
[41-50-year-old female from Terai community, Sarlahi district (01MJ32)]

4.4 Child marriage

The research confirmed that the social norm of child marriage remains widespread across all districts. The majority of storytellers relating their experiences with child marriage perceived it as a frequent occurrence in their communities (see **Figure 8**).

Figure 8

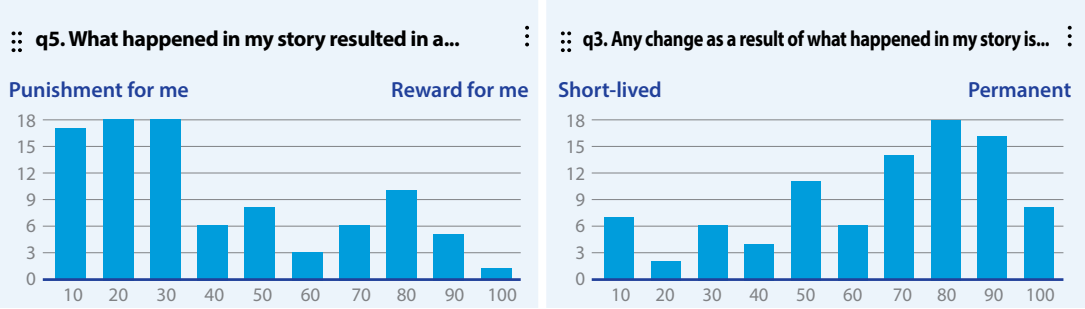
Frequency of experiencing child marriage



Storytellers widely associated their experiences of child marriage with negative emotions and the feeling of being punished. Unsurprisingly, they saw child marriage as having a permanent effect on the lives involved (see **Figure 9**).

Figure 9

Emotions associated with child marriage stories



The child marriage tradition was associated in both stories and community group reflections with the importance of maintaining family honour by ensuring the 'purity' of daughters entering marriage. The decision to arrange child marriages for daughters was often reinforced by the perceived need felt by poor households to ease their economic burden by 'marrying off' their daughters at an early age.

Moreover, child marriage was perceived by storytellers and within community reflection sessions to be an increasing trend. Much of this increase was reportedly due to children (both female and male) eloping together and marrying without parental permission, in contrast to the longer-standing tradition of arranging marriages between child brides and older men. Storytellers and community members explained that this trend in eloping had been facilitated by social media connections that enabled youth to communicate and socialise in the face of conservative conventions and parental restrictions on their movement. At the same time, these young couples were being 'pushed' to escape their family environment due to problems at home, such as alcoholism and domestic violence.

This action was seen by teens as a form of escape but often ended in isolation, vulnerability to domestic violence and even tragedy. In one powerfully illustrative story, a young woman in Doti district described feeling trapped, isolated and abused in her new situation and left with a feeling that there was *"no way out."* (see **Box 11**).

Box 11

"Regret"

My parents' dream was to educate me, but I did not think that. When I was 14 years old and studying in class 8, I eloped with a boy from a nearby village. I gave birth to a daughter after two years of marriage. For two years, my husband loved me, but after that he started listening to others and treating me badly. Now, it has been seven years of marriage and I have not been able to go to my parents' house. I cannot go anywhere from this house. Other women in the village can go everywhere, but I am trapped in this situation. Earlier, I did not listen to my parents and did such work; now, I feel like dying.

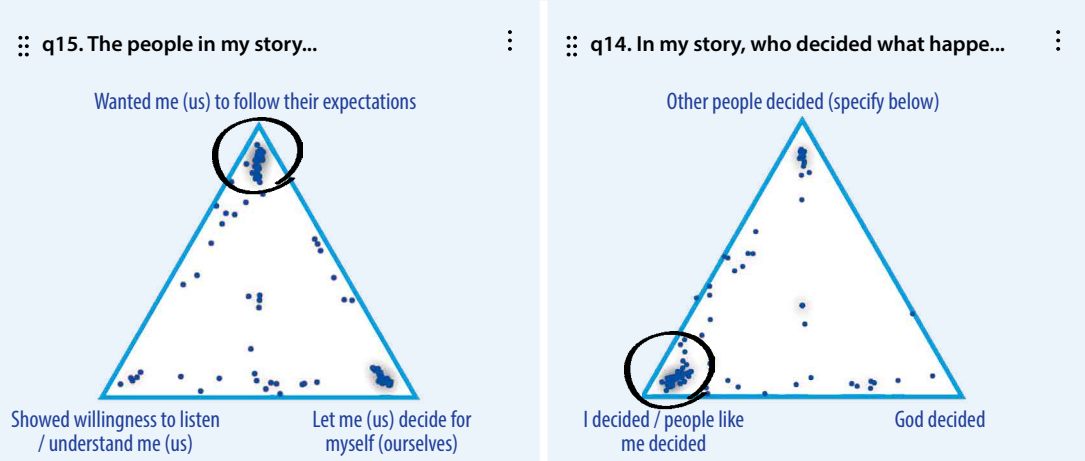
I want to tell my problems to others, but I am afraid my husband might come to know about it. In the evening, he always drinks alcohol, then comes home and doesn't let me eat properly. I don't know what to do. There's no way out. I will never have peace and happiness in my life.

[21-30-year-old female from Bahun/Chhetri community, Doti district (05LB17)]

Hence, while a significant pattern of stories emerged in which the storyteller had made their own decisions in the face of social expectations (as conveyed by the circled dot clusters in **Figure 10**), many of those decisions led to unhappiness and isolation.

Figure 10

Social expectations and decision-making amongst child marriage stories



Many storytellers, when detailing their negative experiences of child marriage, described lost opportunities for education and work as well as the daily cycle of abusive husbands and controlling in-laws. In many instances, teen births led to severe complications and even infertility, which could heighten abuse and domestic violence, especially if the storyteller had not given birth to a son.

Strikingly, many storytellers who experienced child marriage and are now mothers resolved to ensure that their daughters did not go through the same experience. The influential role of external programmes was revealed through the storytelling. Those individuals who had been exposed to external sensitisation and awareness-

raising initiatives vowed to speak out on the issue. One survivor of child marriage from a community in Doti district, lamenting her lack of education and early marriage, articulated her hopes for her own daughters and the need for a wider conversation:

> *"My parents married me off when I was very young. I gave birth to a child when I was still young. We had a child, but my husband had no income. Our expenses increased so much that my sister-in-law always complained about it. I suffered from marrying at an early age and being uneducated.*
>
> *I also have daughters. I think about educating my daughters and marrying them off 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 marriage."*
>
> [31-40-year-old female from Dalit community, Doti district (05JS15)]

In some cases, young people spoke out against the practice of child marriage through their storytelling as well as in community reflection sessions. In one illustrative story, a group of female school students tried to dissuade their friend from agreeing to an arranged marriage, warning of the risks involved and the cost in terms of her life opportunities. The storyteller, a friend and classmate, described making a visit to her friend's house to speak directly to her family members and even talked about the illegality of their decision, but in vain (see **Box 12**).

Box 12

"Effort Unsuccessful"

One of my classmates had an arranged marriage less than four months ago. Actually, my friend had not reached the age of marriage. She was 17 years old. Since it was an arranged marriage, we went to her house to stop the marriage, requesting her family members to stop it. We informed them about the disadvantages of child marriage and the legal punishment they would get for arranging one. Even when we told them about the bad effect of child marriage on the education, health and mental well-being of our friend, we could not stop that marriage. Instead, her father linked her marriage with religion and told us that no matter what we said, the reason behind arranging this marriage was her grandfather. The grandfather was 89 years old and if he died after washing her feet during the marriage, he would go to heaven. He told us not to interrupt this effort. At last, she was married. When we saw her after the marriage, we told her that she did not listen to us and got married and that she might now face problems.

[16-20-year-old female from Bahun/Chhetri community, Doti district (05MK22)]

Only in a few isolated incidents did individuals take the legal route of involving formal authorities in an attempt to prevent or tackle a case of child marriage. In one such case, it was significant that the respective families got the police involved, only because in this instance the child marriage involved a non-Dalit child who had eloped with his Dalit girlfriend. In this case, caste-based discrimination trumped the acceptance of child marriage (see **Box 13**):

> *This incident reached up to the police station just because it was an intercaste marriage."*

Box 13

"Child Marriage"

It has been around four years since a non-Dalit boy married a Dalit girl in my neighbourhood. Both of them were minors. The matter made it to the police station, but the case was closed on the condition that both would live separately. But they ran away from here and are now living in India. This incident reached up to the police station just because it was an intercaste marriage. I feel that the practice of child marriage is increasing in society and maybe because of this, the relationship between husband and wife is also getting worse. There have been around 15 or 20 cases [here] over the past five years. Although many programmes are conducted to stop child marriage, awareness is not being seen by society. Educated people go to foreign countries and people living here are not even trying to stop it. Even when people try to stop it, there will be conflict in society, so they don't even try it. When will people realise that child marriage harms society? I think child marriage can be stopped if the programmes being conducted address child psychology and implement the law effectively.

[21-30-year-old male from Dalit community, Surkhet district (03SG025)]

4.5 Witchcraft superstition

Witchcraft superstition emerged as a deeply embedded social norm. Witchcraft accusations and persecutions are typically levelled against single women from so-called lower caste backgrounds and reflect entrenched societal power relations. Crucially, this norm is sustained by the behaviour of socially powerful traditional healers and shamans who blame ill health or unexpected death on witchcraft. Furthermore, in contrast notably to caste-based discrimination, local people appear unaware of the illegality of witchcraft accusations, resulting in the absence of any official sanction. It was particularly evident and entrenched through storytelling in Kavre and Kailali districts.

Witchcraft accusations are made against women of all ages. Women who are single, childless or widowed, or who have relatives who have become ill, can be singled out as witches. Meanwhile, those who fall ill are commonly seen as being possessed by witches and will be taken to the local shaman or guru. In this way, witchcraft superstition is intricately linked with wider superstitions of evil spirits and the stigmatisation of those who are in some way different. The following story excerpts powerfully illustrate the stigmatising and isolating effect of witchcraft accusations:

> *Ever since three members of my family passed away, the villagers started accusing me of being a witch. Some people in the village don't even want to talk to me. They abuse me and look at me in a bad way."*

[21-30-year-old female from Dalit community, Sarlahi district (01RJ08)]

> *"I sent my daughter to study in India and a few days after going to India, my daughter died suddenly. I found out that there is a witch's house near my father's house and she is the one who killed my daughter."*
>
> [21-30-year-old female from Dalit community, Sarlahi district (01RJ15)]

> *"A widow since the age of 21, I have suffered all the pain that a single woman has to suffer. Single women are still called witches, bad omens and 'husband killers' in our society and discriminated against."*
>
> [41-50-year-old female from Bahun/Chhetri community, Doti district (05MK24)]

Witchcraft accusations are particularly harsh in their impact on teenage girls who suffer from mental health issues (widely referred to as 'hysteria') and who can easily become labelled and stigmatised as witch-possessed. One storyteller explained how her daughter-in-law, who had been suffering from mental health issues, was labelled by a local guru as being "*possessed by some witch spirit as a result of the horrible things she did in her previous life*" (see **Box 14**).

Box 14

"Witchcraft Allegation"

My daughter-in-law has been unable to have a child. She became severely unwell after two years when her menstrual cycle began. She shivers and is occasionally psychologically disturbed. When we went to the doctor, he couldn't figure out what had happened to my daughter-in-law. So, we went to a local guru who practised black magic in our area, and he said she was possessed by some witch spirit as a result of the horrible things she did in her previous life. That is why the deity is enraged and has cursed her. After hearing this, I did not immediately believe the guru, but others in our community began to refer to her as a witch. And they also thought that we should not allow her to reside in the village because she may curse someone, causing that person to also become a witch. When I tried to defend my daughter-in-law by claiming that there was no such thing as witchcraft and that she was merely suffering from a medical problem, they refused to believe me.

[61-70-year-old female from Bahun/Chhetri community, Doti district (05Lb04)]

It is unsurprising then that storytellers widely associated their experiences with witchcraft accusations with feeling sad or worried (**Figure 11**). In some instances, storytellers linked feelings of hope and happiness to their stories, often in cases where a cure or change of fortune had removed the label of witchcraft from them or someone in their family. Likewise, storytellers overwhelmingly ascribed to their experiences negative emotions and the feeling of being punished (see **Figure 12**).

Figure 11

Feelings associated with witchcraft superstition stories

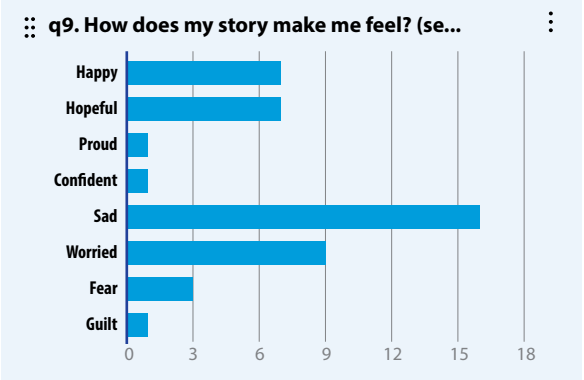
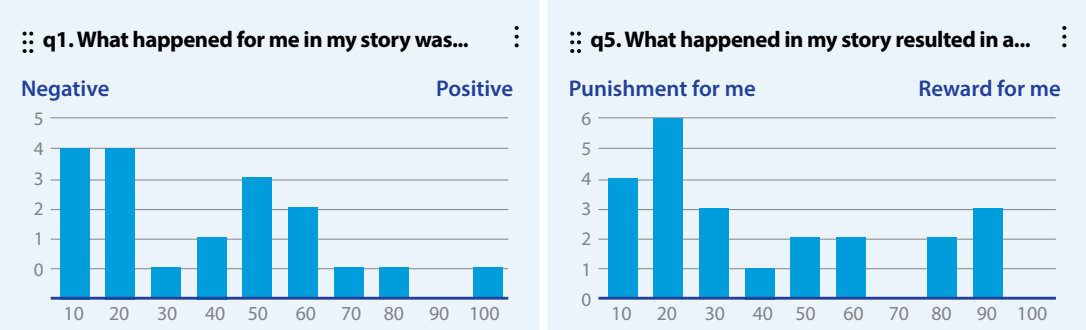


Figure 12

Emotions associated with witchcraft superstition stories



Storytellers and community reflection discussions confirmed the idea that powerful local shamans often transfer and promote these superstitions across generations. In Kavre, for instance, even young people tended to believe in the power of traditional healing and in some instances reported feeling cured after visiting a shaman. In Kavre, they even have a traditional healer workplace or *Ta'doma*.

Modern medical practitioners are typically physically distant from these rural communities and can't prescribe a quick solution to serious health shocks in most cases. Traditional healers, on the other hand, have a constant, powerful and undisputed presence in their communities and can claim immediate solutions. As a result, this insidious social norm appears resistant to change (see **Box 15**).

Box 15

"Witchcraft Practice"

Two years ago, I became quite unwell. I didn't wake up for two days. Because there was no way to go to the hospital from our village at the time, they took me to a shaman. He taught me the witch chant, but even after performing it, I did not get better. His reputation was on the line at the time, so when he was unable to heal me, he said that I had been influenced by a witch's soul. As a result, people in my community referred to me as a witch and refused to touch me.

[41-50-year-old female from disadvantaged Janajati community, Kailali district (04dk04)]

In a few isolated instances, storytellers involved the local authorities in an attempt to push back against witchcraft accusations. In one such case, an older woman recounted how she had reported her witchcraft accuser to the local police and that the police had then intervened and sorted it out (see **Box 16**). What is revealing about this story is that the accused storyteller was not disputing the existence of witchcraft – she was only disputing the accusation being directed at her. Similarly, the police's involvement is not due to the illegality of witchcraft accusations but is essentially a response to a 'domestic' dispute.

Box 16

"Witch Accusations"

In my village, an old woman was accused of being a witch by other women in her neighbourhood. One woman became sick with a headache and vomited, so she blamed that old woman, accusing her of being a witch. And the old woman who was accused of being a witch complained to the village people, but the sick old woman did not stop with her accusations. At this point, the accused woman filed a police case against her accuser, after which the police intervened and reconciled the two old women. Now, no one in our village accuses anyone of being a witch; everyone lives together. The husband of the old women accused of being a witch has already died. Her children are not here either. Now, those two old women do not fight with each other. Even if they do not directly accuse each other of being a witch, they still believe that they are witches. But I don't believe in witches that much.

[16-20-year-old male from disadvantaged Janajati community, Kavre district (02ua17)]

Some individual stories were, however, linked with hope and the prospect of change. As with other superstitions explored in this research, a narrative emerged amongst younger storytellers and in community reflection sessions that education is a key driver of behavioural change. This was illustrated in the reflections of a young female Dalit storyteller who discussed the impact of education on attitudes and behaviours within her community (see **Box 17**).

Box 17

"From Darkness Towards Light"

Discrimination amongst different ethnic groups is prevalent in our society. There are problems, such as blaming people for being witches. I think the 'witch blaming' is due to illiteracy. Since many are illiterate and uneducated, this type of thinking and perception is found in our society. We Dalits have become educated and literate these days. Witch blaming and discrimination are less visible amongst people in the neighbourhood. Because of education, people have developed the perception of not discriminating.

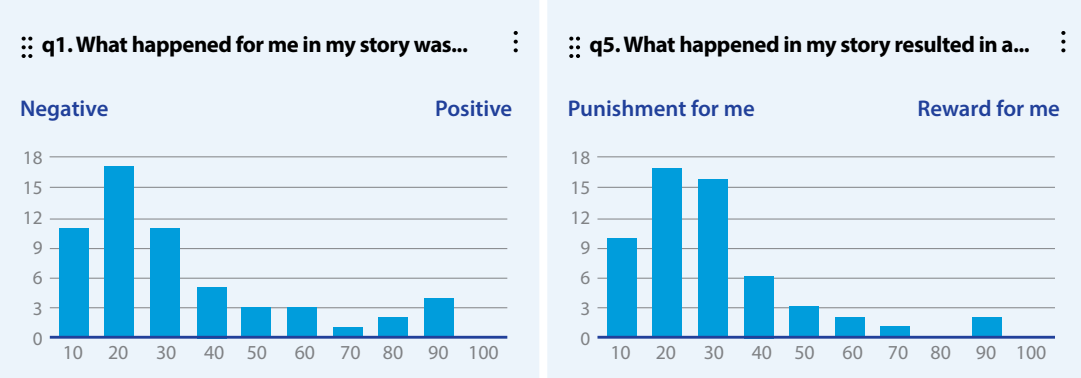
[16-20-year-old female from Dalit community, Kavre district (02ml09)]

4.6 Disability discrimination

The research revealed that disability discrimination is prevalent in communities across all districts. Storytellers relating experiences with disability discrimination overwhelmingly associated their experiences with negative emotions and a sense of being punished (see **Figure 13**).

Figure 13

Emotions associated with disability discrimination stories

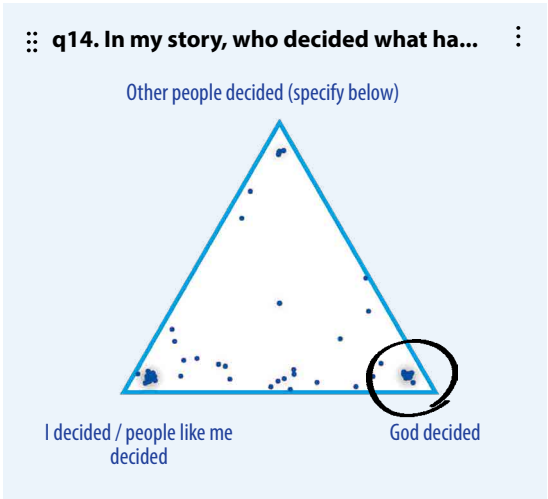


This notion of punishment is particularly powerful in cases of disability discrimination, as disability is still widely associated with a curse from a past life. In this way, patterns emerged in which storytellers associated this discrimination with 'God's plans' for them (see circled dot cluster in **Figure 14**). Families often see a family member with disability as a burden, while people with disabilities in turn feel that they are a burden on their families. At its most extreme, people with a mental disability can be subject to abuse by their families.

The effect of this pattern of stigmatisation and shame on the mental and physical well-being of people with disabilities can be profound.

Figure 14

Decision-making in disability discrimination stories



Many storytellers framed their stories by explaining that their families and friends saw their disability as a curse or punishment from the gods. For those individuals from poor and excluded groups, this can leave them extremely isolated and vulnerable, with few assets to draw down on or support networks to lean on. In some cases, families are able to access a disability identity card through the government, which provides a small safety net. One quite typical story was shared by a middle-aged woman from a Dalit community who described the spiral of increasing vulnerability and isolation she has experienced since becoming disabled (see **Box 18**).

Box 18

"A Life Full of Sorrow"

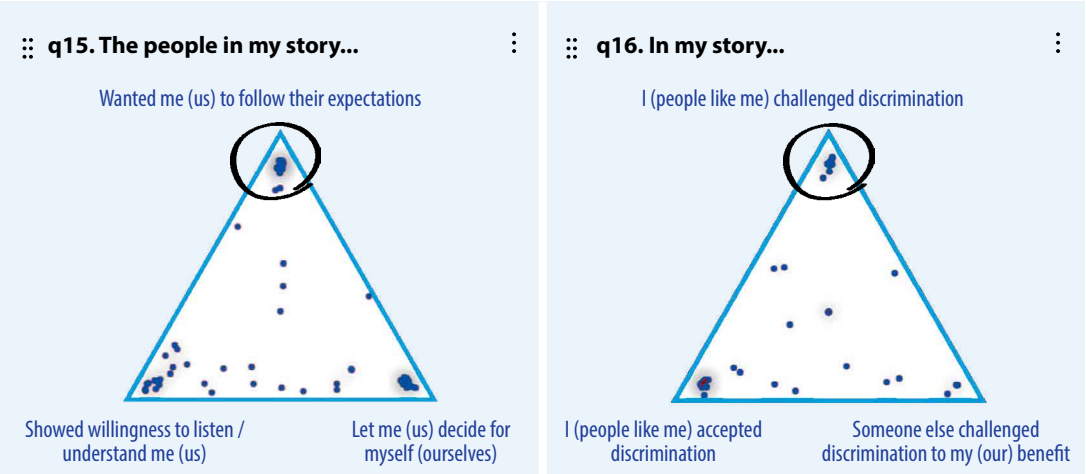
I am from a low-income family. I've spent my entire life in misery and sorrow. I married when I was young and began living with my in-laws. However, my spouse abandoned me and fled. I am a disabled individual with only one eye. They obey and worship the deity at my household and they also believe in black magic. According to the myth, I was crippled due to the curse of a god, which I asked for and got as a blessing. The belief is that my household did not properly care for me due to their busy pace of work, causing the deity to become enraged, and I lost my sight. Now, I have no assistance from my spouse and I don't have a house or plot of land on which to work, so I make my livelihood through manual labour. If you have something important, society treats you well; otherwise, they treat you poorly. One of my sons has vanished, and I have no idea where he is. My daughter-in-law works outside and earns a living. I don't have anyone to lean on, so my issues and anguish stay with me.

[51-60-year-old female from Dalit community, Surkhet district (03UK012)]

However, emerging stories of people with disabilities speaking out and being active in their community suggest that these attitudes and behaviours can be interrupted by actions and narratives that create positive reinforcement. A small but interesting pattern of stories emerged that were associated with challenging discrimination and rejecting expectations, as well as with others in which people showed a willingness to listen and understand (see circled dot clusters in **Figure 15**).

Figure 15

Challenging expectations and discrimination in disability discrimination stories



In some instances, this form of challenge occurred when a person with disability became more actively visible in their community. In other instances, prejudices were challenged as disabled students progressed through the education system. One storyteller explained that by progressing through to higher secondary level at school, *"people's way of looking at me has changed"* and he urged others with disabilities to follow this same path (see **Box 19**).

Box 19

"Story of Pain in My Heart"

Since I was four years old, I have had the problem of having a twisted neck, which became worse by the age of 15, affecting my body, vision and speaking. At school, my friends looked at me differently. Small children also teased me. I also felt different. Because of my family's economic situation, I couldn't have an operation. Now, I study in a higher secondary class. I am moving forward by getting a higher level of education. Now, the way people look at me has changed. My friends in my community don't treat me badly. I haven't faced such problems from my elders. People like me should study. We should not be weak. I want to give this advice to all differently-abled brothers and sisters.

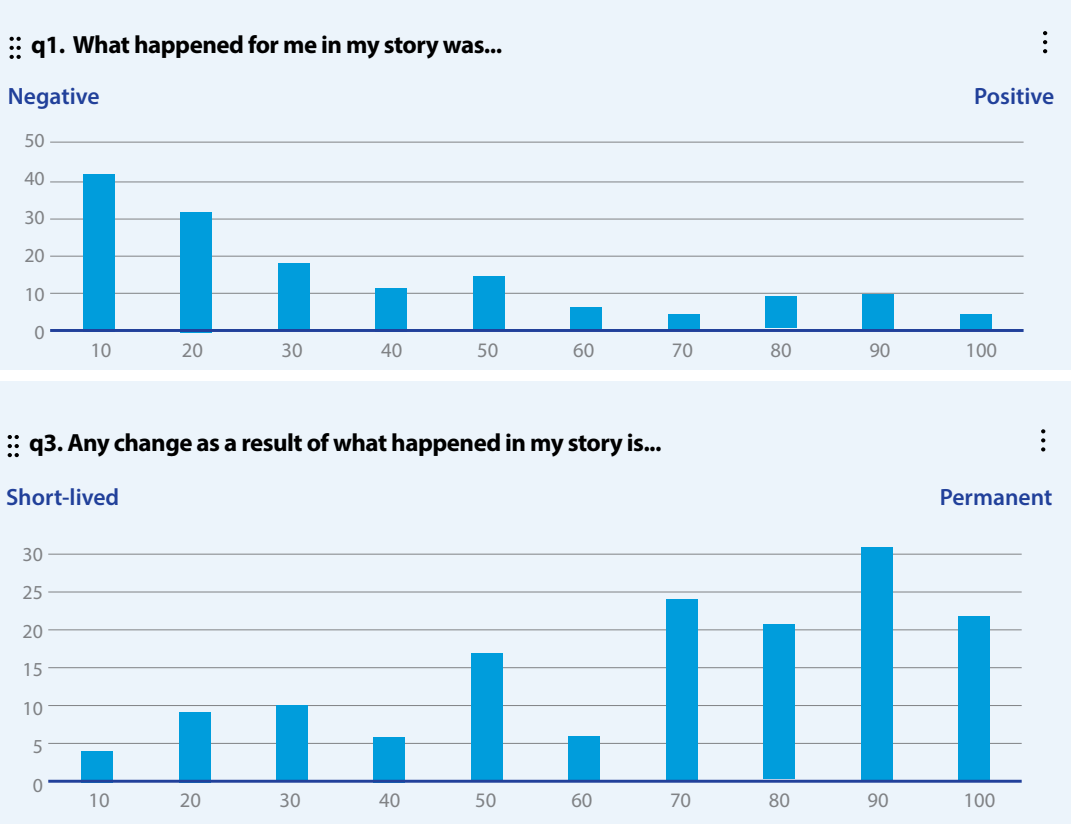
[16-29-year-old male from Dalit community, Doti district (05JS24)]

4.7 Domestic violence

The research found that domestic violence is a widely prevalent social norm across all districts. The stories portrayed how marriage made women vulnerable and increased their risk of facing domestic violence at the hands of their husband and in-laws. Storytellers pointed to the negative and permanent effects of their experience with domestic violence on their lives (see **Figure 16**).

Figure 16

Effect of domestic violence experience on storytellers



Storytellers described events that led up to a pattern of abusive behaviour meted out by family members. Across many stories of husbands abusing their wives, a pattern of associated factors emerged, including the interrelated factors of economic stress, unemployment and alcoholism. Son preference was another significant trigger of domestic violence. One storyteller's experience with her husband's desire for a son illustrates this powerfully. It resulted in a pattern of abuse and 'poverty trap' within her household and denied educational opportunities for her children (see **Box 20**). Patterns of abuse could also be triggered or intensified by a lack of trust and suspicion of affairs, fuelled in some cases by concern over a wife's social media use.

Box 20

"Discrimination Against Daughters"

I have been married for sixteen years. I married at a young age, and after a while, I had a daughter. I gave birth to nine girls and I used to quarrel a lot with my husband who had always desired a son. He even threatened to divorce me and marry someone else because I couldn't give him a son. In his frustration, he would use physical violence against me. After around seven years, I had a son and my husband's behaviour changed; he began to treat me well.

Now that we have a large number of children, it is difficult to give food and education to everyone. My spouse works as a labourer, and we have to feed our family on a single person's salary. We have not even been able to purchase school uniforms for our children, so they remain at home and unable to attend school. I don't think we'll ever be able to get out of poverty. I believe that if that hunt for a male child had stopped, we would not have as many children and would have enough money to pay for their education as well.

[31-40-year-old female from Dalit community, Doti district (05Lb06)]

While storytellers signified violence in their stories as primarily between women and men, a pattern of stories also emerged that involved coercive abuse experienced by women in the homes of their in-laws (see the circled dot clusters in **Figure 17**).

Figure 17

Domestic violence experience in stories

These abusive relationships signalled the powerlessness and sense of worthlessness experienced by many women in the households of their in-laws. This type of in-law abuse was in some instances fuelled by dowry tensions (see **Section 4.8**). During times of stress, in-laws challenged their daughters-in-law with the question: *"What have you ever brought to this household?"* Community reflection sessions confirmed that a higher dowry price was associated with lower levels of in-law abuse and violence.

Through their storytelling, women in some instances described being so desperate to escape from domestic violence that they were willing to leave their children to do so. One woman's experience with serial abusers illustrates the lengths to which such storytellers are driven to make this choice (see **Box 21**).

Box 21

"Domestic Violence"

At the age of seven, I went up to Kathmandu to work as a bonded labourer. When I was 14 years old, my uncle came to Kathmandu, took me with him and married me off. That husband was very bad. He used to drink a lot of alcohol and beat me. Then, I went to my parents' house with my daughter because it was very difficult for me. My husband came after me. I did not go. He returned home and committed suicide. Later, I married again and gave birth to a son. My second husband also gives me mental torture. He drinks alcohol, hides his earnings from me and does not trust me. I am frustrated. I feel that if I had money, I would leave him and go right now.

Now, I have planned to live alone because I am fed up with everyone. When my son turns seven, I will divorce him and stay alone. They will not let me keep my son, but I will keep my daughter with me. I will work hard and live alone, as I cannot live with him [my husband]. I will never have happiness in life by living with a person who gives me mental torture. My daughter's future will also be good.

[21-30-year-old female from Janajati community, Kailali district (04DK31)]

While there is little if any emerging evidence of a positive pathway out of domestic violence, stories of escape from violence signalled the resilience and agency of women survivors and the role that friends, relatives and authority figures and peer networks (including community leaders, the police and sexual and reproductive health women's organisations) could play in helping victims escape and start a new life. A clear pattern of behaviour emerged, however, in which women found it very difficult to raise domestic abuse formally with authorities due to their vulnerable position and fear of reprisals. One story told by a domestic violence survivor illustrates this point powerfully. She lived right next to the Municipal Office but felt trapped and unable to escape the situation by reporting it: *"I want to tell everyone and the police everything, but I'm afraid of returning to the same place, so I don't see the sense in complaining"* (see **Box 22**).

Box 22

"Suffering from Violence"

I live with my two boys and my husband. My in-laws stay far away from our house. My oldest boy is two years old and my youngest is just six months old. My spouse returned to Nepal after working in India for several years because of the company's closure in India. He has no employment for the time being and spends his days playing cards. He drinks hard at night and then beats me and threatens me when he gets home. I believe this is related to his frustration over losing money while playing cards. Every time he sees me, he tries to find an excuse to fight with me.

Sometimes I wonder what I did to deserve such treatment. I want to tell everyone and the police everything, but I'm afraid of returning to the same place, so I don't see the sense in complaining. What can I do now? I've also 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 Bahun/Chhetri community, Doti district (05MK32)]

In another instance, a female storyteller who repeatedly witnessed domestic violence at her in-law's house recalls threatening to report her father-in-law to the police "in a small voice," and in this case, it was sufficient in stopping his abusive behaviour (see **Box 23**). Reflecting on the legal route for tackling domestic violence, another storyteller, a woman in her early 30s, observed that while society has changed a lot and women "generally are not as shy as they were," most women still fear the repercussions of taking legal action against their abusers. She concluded that this legal route is more realistic for better educated women:

Box 23

"There is Peace"

I have been married for 10 years. When I came to my in-laws' house after marriage, my father-in-law used to beat my mother-in-law. When we asked why he had beaten her up, there was no reason. If he was even slightly dissatisfied, he used to raise his hands on her. In our neighbourhood, many men also used to beat their wives. Some used to beat them while they were drunk, while others used to beat them for no reason at all. One day, when my father-in-law was beating my mother-in-law, I told him, in a small voice, that if he did it again I would call the police. Then, when he beat her again, she herself told him that she would call police. From that day onwards, he stopped beating her. There was a tendency to beat wives after drinking alcohol, but now people have understood things with time.

[21-30-year-old female from Janajati community, Kavre district (02ua20)]

> *"For those few [women] who understand the procedures, the legal route has helped, but it is not the same for those don't understand."*
>
> [31-40-year-old female from disadvantaged Janajati community, Surkhet district (03SG018)]

4.8 Dowry

Dowry emerged in the storytelling research as a widely prevalent and insidious social norm. While most of the social practices discussed in this report are now legally banned, dowry, like caste-based discrimination, is perhaps the practice most publicly acknowledged as illegal. Interestingly, as a result, some participants in community-

level and district-level reflections even denied the existence of dowry in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary as surfaced in this research.

Stories told that centred on dowry were frequently associated with feelings of sadness, worry, fear and guilt by storytellers (see **Figure 18**)

A smaller but significant pattern of associations with happiness and hope also emerged. This indicated that some patterns of behaviour in response to dowry enabled individuals or their families to resolve differences or even forge new opportunities.

Dowry is nonetheless overwhelmingly perceived as damaging to women and girls, as it equates their worth as individuals with the value of their dowry and so reinforces their powerlessness in the households of their in-laws. The experience of one female storyteller who was abused by her in-laws for selling her father's property to pay for his hospital treatment powerfully illustrates the power imbalances that dowry expectations reinforce (see **Box 24**).

Dowry appeared to be most prevalent, and most damaging, in the relatively culturally 'closed' Madhesi communities of Sarlahi and (amongst the smaller Madhesi population in) Kavre districts. In Kavre, there were reports of brides being burned or even killed if they didn't bring enough dowry. In Kavre and Sarlahi too, there has been a particularly strong trend of 'dowry inflation' – seen to a lesser extent in other districts – that has resulted from high remittances from migrant family members working in Gulf countries. In Sarlahi, for instance, it was reported that the cost of dowry had increased from the equivalent of $1,000 to $10,000 USD. In contrast, dowry sums remain relatively low in the Province 7 districts of Kailali and Doti, where remittances from migration to India are lower.

Figure 18

Dowry experience in stories

Box 24

"Dowry System"

One of my neighbours wanted my father's property, so he proposed to marry me. My in-laws used to talk about the property all the time; I tolerated it all, but suddenly my father got ill. He was taken for treatment. There was not enough money, so I sold the property that was in my name and spent it on treating my father. My in-laws heard about it. When I returned home from my parents' house, my in-laws started beating me. They threw me out of the house.

[41-50-year-old female from Bahun/Chhetri community, Surkhet district (03SB03)]

For poorer districts and households, this type of dowry inflation can be particularly damaging, as it further disincentivises families from investing in girls' education. With a higher education, girls would expect to marry a better educated man, meaning that their parents would then have to pay an even higher dowry price.

Yet despite these clear negative and permanent impacts of dowry on women's lives, dowry remains a resistant social norm. The attitude amongst storytellers and during group reflections where dowry was acknowledged was linked to a reluctance to break the cycle of payments and benefits. The attitude expressed by parents was 'I'm giving it and I'm taking it, so it's equal.' In one story told by a mother from Sarlahi district, she articulated how dowry as a social norm would not stop simply due to the actions of individuals and that in the meantime she would therefore continue to pay – and benefit from – this practice (see **Box 25**).

Box 25

"Dowry"

I had no idea how old I was when I got married. My family gave me a pair of oxen as a dowry when I married. It is now impossible to be married to someone who has the same. I have two sons and one daughter. When my daughter was in grade 10, we received a wonderful marriage proposal from a good family. They asked for two lakh rupees and one motorcycle as dowry, so I got her married by selling a piece of land I had and fulfilling the demands of the groom's family. When it was my son's turn, I demanded two lakh rupees and one bike, but I only received one lakh, since the family came from a weak financial background. Anyone who provides will take dowry. When my younger son marries, I will take the dowry that's given. This evil habit will not disappear if I do not take it; even if everyone stops taking it, I still will. I will have to purchase back the land I sold for my daughter's wedding when I receive dowry for my son's marriage.

[41-50-year-old female from Madheshi community, Sarlahi district (01SL03)]

As with other social norms discussed in this report, storytellers who have suffered from their experience with dowry are often reluctant to report it to the authorities due to a fear of escalating it or facing repercussions. This reflects their vulnerable and often powerless situation in the households of their in-laws. One storyteller described the situation faced by her daughter in her in-law's household, lamenting that she was unable to report this situation to the police "because of the fear that my daughter's family will kill her" (see **Box 26**).

Box 26

"Dear Government, Please Remove Dowry System"

Even the boys who don't have any qualities are demanding motorbikes and huge amounts of cash for their marriage. I have four daughters; how can I afford all this for their marriages? For my elder daughter's marriage, I gave a buffalo worth 100,000 Nepali rupees. This was settled on after multiple meetings and an agreement with the community. I gave dowry for my daughter but didn't take anything for my son's marriage (my daughter-in-law is an orphan, so there was no question of dowry). We have to manage money for dowry in the marriage of daughters. We cannot even complain about this to the police because of the fear that the daughter's family will kill her. So, for the sake of their daughter's life, people are giving dowry as per the demands of their in-laws.

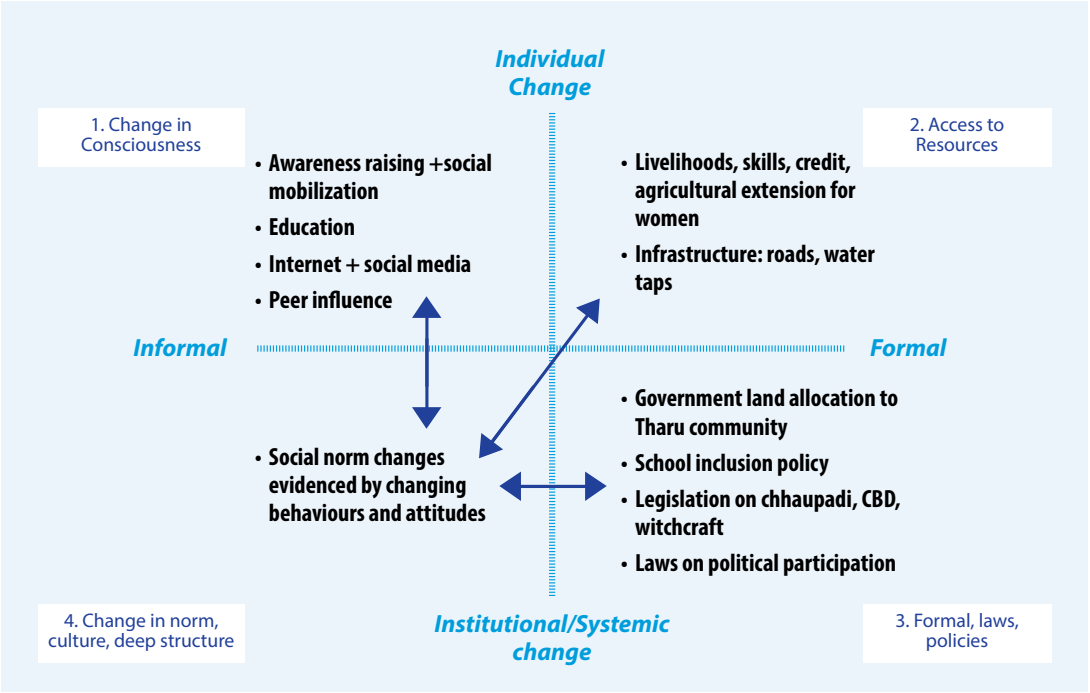
[41-50-year-old female from Dalit community, Sarlahi district (01SL10)]

5 LEARNING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The baseline storytelling research project generated insights and analysis on patterns of behaviour for a range of social norms affirming discriminatory practices amongst women and girls. The storytelling analysis also signalled a number of important signposts for social norm change. These are processes that interrupt embedded or resistant social norms in ways that signal a progressive change in a community or wider society. It is important to reflect on and learn from these interrupters in order to help design or improve ongoing or future policy and programme interventions. Below, we reflect on some of the key signposts that emerged from our analysis. These signposts are summarised and mapped onto the Gender at Work Analytical Framework in **Figure 18**.

Figure 19

Mapping signposts for social norm change onto the Gender at Work Analytical Framework



5.1 Changes in consciousness

Awareness-raising and social mobilisation interventions shifted attitudes and behaviours

Across all the storytelling, the instrumental role of transformative social mobilisation programming was flagged in a small but significant number of cases for its impact on 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 at the same time empowering women and girls to raise their own voices and advocate for change.

This was particularly evident in the role played by health-focussed awareness-raising programmes linked to ending (or at least modifying) practices linked to menstrual isolation. Through the entry point of sexual and reproductive health, such programmes proved effective in highlighting the dangers of the practice and starting a wider conversation about change. Similarly, women exposed to training on the health risks associated with child marriage and teen pregnancy have also been empowered to speak out in their peer groups on this issue.

Socialisation and mixing at school challenged widely held social prejudices

More fundamentally, the storytelling revealed patterns of progressive intergenerational shifts in attitudes and behaviours. Young people articulated their frustrations with what they perceived as outdated social norms, even in remote settings where exposure to other attitudes and behaviours remains relatively limited.

The role of socialisation at school through social mixing between caste and ethnic groups, and the progressive reinforcement of social equality by teachers, emerged as a key interrupter and signpost for future intervention.

It was particularly evident from the storytelling that caste-based discrimination was widely rejected by young people of all caste backgrounds in their daily experiences at school and friendship groups. The religious and social taboos that reinforced exclusion of Dalit castes were recognised and challenged by young storytellers. In a similar way, exposure to people with disabilities at school enabled young people to challenge the norms of older generations that associate disability with an intergenerational religious curse.

Education for girls was widely valued for social mobility and expanded life chances

At the same time, education was widely – and reportedly increasingly – valued by mothers as a means of social mobility for their children and a route out of powerlessness for their daughters. While son preference remained a strong factor behind favouring sons' educations, particularly private educations, female storytellers widely expressed hopes for their daughters' educations and alternative life opportunities.

Patterns of stories emerged in which women looked back with pain and regret at being denied education due to early marriage and household poverty but still had a steely determination to keep their own daughters in school for as long as possible (see for example **Box 27**). In this way, future interventions to support expanded access to school for girls are pushing at an open door.

Box 27

"Lack of Education"

We 'Baadi' people (a lower-caste community traditionally involved in prostitution) are normally uneducated. We did not get to study earlier, but today's children go to school. I got married at the young age of 15. I was not in a position to study due to the financial status of my family. I felt like crying whenever I sat down to study. I am 20 years old now and have three sons. I married with my family's consent, and I didn't know anything about family planning devices. I didn't notice my menstruation period and was not aware about the calendar method of family planning. As a result, I had three babies at a young age. I have a uterine problem because of it. I was told that this is because I wasn't looked after well during my maternity treatment (by medical personnel). We don't have land to work on. We manage our expenses with my husband's limited amount of income. We have to educate our children, have to manage meals, buy clothes. Life is not the way we hoped it would be.

I now regret not studying. I might have made some progress in life. There wouldn't be unawareness and lack of education. I will educate my children and not let them be like me. I feel like what has happened has happened. Now, we must think ahead and make our lives better.

[16-20-year-old female from Dalit community, Surkhet district (03UK016)]

Interconnectedness through the Internet and social media emerged as both an opportunity and a risk

Increased access to the internet and social media across rural communities was significant in influencing participants' reflections on social change, particularly during community reflection sessions.

Social media created an opportunity for exposure to competing attitudes, behaviours and worldviews beyond those that were deeply rooted locally and carefully policed by community gatekeepers, such as elders and religious leaders. These include new opportunities for intercaste socialising and the breakdown of caste-based discrimination. This is illustrated by the observation of a young male storyteller from a Tamang community who said, *"It's the era of the Internet. People have positive thinking and are educated these days"* (see **Box 28**).

Box 28

"It is Possible to Remove Malpractices Now"

In the time of our ancestors (in the Tamang community) while finalising an arranged marriage, gifts had to be given to the bride's family. Sarki and Daami (so-called lower castes) were not allowed inside the house. They are considered untouchable in our sacrament. Intercaste marriage with them was not allowed. Things such as stinging nettle (sisnu), garlic and pork were not allowed in the kitchen. Such things are less followed these days. It's the era of the internet. People have positive thinking and are all educated these days.

> *Because we are educated, we should not discriminate against anyone. We are only categorised as male and female; everything else is not important, like caste and ethnicity. For example, my brother has married a Magar girl (intercaste marriage). It is all good with him right now. My parents have accepted it. If I have an intercaste marriage in the future, my parents will accept it because I am their youngest son and they have committed to accepting my wife regardless of ethnic background. They also have said that they will be happy if I am happy. It is possible to remove malpractices now.*
>
> [21-30-year-old male from Tamang community, Kavre district (02km10)]

At the same time, the increasing use of social media had created a backlash amongst distrustful husbands who see their wives communicating on their smartphones. Meanwhile, young people were able to communicate online and this had led to eloped marriages, often with sad and even tragic consequences.

Future violence prevention programming needs to consider how best to navigate social media, making the most of the social disruption of wider exposure while mitigating the harmful effects that such exposure can bring in traditional community contexts.

5.2 Access to resources

Increasing access to resources can economically empower women in a context of social change

Social change – notably through mass economic migration – has brought shocks to communities and households in rural communities. But opportunities have also arisen for the exercise of agency through female economic empowerment, presenting a signpost for social norm change. Women have become de facto household heads through the lengthy absence of migrant husbands. Storytellers confirmed a pattern of women household heads becoming more economically active and gaining greater control over household resources.

Similarly, women storytellers who had experienced the shock of widowhood (bringing its own stigma) or who had made the decision to divorce their husbands or escape abusive relationships were able in some instances to begin livelihoods and sustain themselves and their families.

The roles of outreach programmes that provide resources and agricultural extension support to women were referenced in stories and community reflections as contributing to economic empowerment. Meanwhile, investment in community infrastructure – including roads and water taps – has freed up women's time while increasing their access to markets.

5.3 Formal laws and policies

Policies that shift entitlements can reposition and empower socially excluded groups

Beyond such programmatic support, policies that shift entitlements emerged as empowering for specific communities and signalled the possibility for social norm change. Kailali district, for instance, used to have bonded labour practices, which

predominantly affected the Kailali Tharu community indigenous to the Terai lowlands. Under a new government policy, Tharu households are now entitled to a small piece of land, which enables them to build their own houses, although these houses are not sufficiently large enough to sustain livelihoods, meaning that they continue to struggle and migrate for work (see **Box 29**). This policy shift signals, however, that land entitlements can provide a pathway to social repositioning and norm change amongst excluded ethnic and social groups.

Box 29

"Bonded Labour (Kamaiya/Bukhari)"

At first, we used to stay in a shed. We didn't even have a house. We, as husband and wife, used to work in our landlord's house as kamaiya (bonded labour). We had four children. My husband worked as a kamaiya and I worked as a bukhari. After working for one whole year, my husband and I, along with our four children, only had enough to eat and buy a pair of clothes. If we were late for work, the master used to get angry and he used to abuse us. But still, we had to tolerate all the pain to feed ourselves. When our people started going to the field and building houses, the government burnt our houses and destroyed the rest of the houses by bringing elephants [to stampede over them]. We suffered a lot and didn't know where to go.

But then the government understood us and gave us five katha (units) of land. We have now built a nice house and we farm the land. There are 10 members in my family. We all earn money by labouring, and we are able to feed ourselves. I am so happy now. All the children are with me. They earn. Life is very good. Now, my life is completely different from before. Despite being poor, we are able to be happy and satisfied.

[51-60-year-old female from disadvantaged Janajati community, Kailali district (04LB21)]

Legislative change can prompt behaviour change, if enforced

Finally, the storytelling research signalled an awareness of – and possible behaviour shift resulting from – legislative banning of specific social norms and the threat of sanctions. Discussions during community reflection sessions confirmed patterns of behaviour emerging from storytelling around public changes in behaviour towards caste-based discrimination in particular (although Dalit storytellers underscored the differences between public and private behaviour towards them), as well as wariness around discussing dowry and child marriage.

Individual storytellers, however, explained that fear of retribution and a lack of understanding of rights make the legal route to challenging discriminatory social norms both challenging and risk-filled for these vulnerable individuals. So, while this is no silver bullet, the legal route is surely an increasingly important tool in disrupting embedded social norms. That said, legal change must be systematically enforced, with important strategic thinking needed around deliberative law-making and enforcement in the context of federalisation. It also needs to be accompanied by awareness-raising and public conversations for it to be effective, as the lack of understanding about witchcraft accusations being illegal demonstrated, for instance.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The Nepal 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 in their communities. Through a mix of in-depth narratives and quantifiable perception-based signification questions, the research surfaced patterns of behaviour that could be analysed and interpreted through a deep-dive review of story content. A research process that built in moments of collective reflection and analysis through community and district-level events enabled further diagnostic discussion while revealing the 'positionality' of different stakeholders at the local level. The convening of a national-level workshop provided a forum for policymakers, donors, programme managers, researchers and others to reflect on the forward-looking implications of the patterns of behaviour emerging from the research.

Perhaps most powerfully, the act of storytelling itself 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 centred on group reflection and action has been excitingly confirmed and is now underway in these districts, with funding support from the GoF.

Over the next five years, this impact-level social norms research will be repeated as midline and endline data collection, with future methodological design tweaks allowing for more thematically focussed exploration. The next phases of this research will allow programme managers and policymakers to monitor and explore specific social norm patterns and trends across the country in greater depth.

ANNEXES

Annex A

SenseMaker Questionnaire

Enumerator: Date: Interview ID:

SHARE YOUR STORY

I am a researcher and community mobiliser with The Story Kitchen and Gender at Work. We are talking to people in this community to collect stories about how their lives have changed recently. With your permission I'd like to ask you to tell me a story about a change in your life. This will be anonymous and will only be shared more widely with your permission. If you feel uncomfortable or anxious at any point in this interview, please let me know and we can stop straight away.

Think about your life in your community, think about who you are in this community and about your relationships with people around you. Can you describe something that happened in your life in past one year that made you change the way you see yourself or that changed the way others see you? It could be something you did, said, thought or experienced. Describe what happened. Why it was this change important, and how did it affect you, your family or your community?

What title would you give your story?

Enumerator: Date: Interview ID:

Module 1: Please answer the following questions in relation to your story

1.What happened for me in my story was ...

negative ——— positive

2. What happened in my story ...

Had no effect on my life ——— Transformed my life

3. Any change as a result of what happened in my story ...

is short-lived ——— will never end

4. People think my behaviour in this story...

Maintains my usual way of life ——— Goes against my usual way of life

O N/A

5. What happened in my story resulted in...

A punishment for me ——— A reward for me

6. Stories of this kind happen...

A reward for ——— Never All the time

Enumerator: Date: Interview ID:

7. If applicable, in my story, which factors helped / hindered my experience?
(pick up to 2 answers)

The respondent can chose 2 elements that either hindered or helped the experience.	Helped	Did not change	Hindered
Time	0	0	0
Money	0	0	0
Family	0	0	0
Education / Corrpetencies	0	0	0
Livelihoods	0	0	0
My Gender	0	0	0
Peer group / Community	0	0	0
Health	0	0	0
Other (Please specify)	0	0	0

8. My story is about...
(pick up to 3 answers)

- ☐ Isolation
- ☐ Status/ respect/ value to others
- ☐ Self respect
- ☐ Fear/ insecurity / anxiety
- ☐ Self confidence
- ☐ Freedom to make different choices
- ☐ Cooperation/group action
- ☐ Fun and enjoyment
- ☐ Other...

9. How does my story make me feel?
(pick up to 2 answers)

- ☐ Happy
- ☐ Hopeful
- ☐ Proud
- ☐ Confident
- ☐ Virtue
- ☐ Peace
- ☐ Sad
- ☐ Worried
- ☐ Shame
- ☐ Fear
- ☐ Guilt
- ☐ Anger
- ☐ No strong feeling

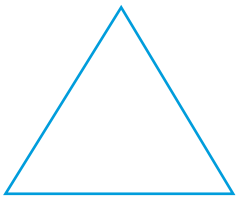
10. What happened in my story mainly influence
(pick up to 2 answers)

- ☐ My control over my body
- ☐ My physical safety
- ☐ My psychological well being
- ☐ My ambitions / dreams
- ☐ My relationships
- ☐ My status/ value
- ☐ Employment / employment prospects
- ☐ My education
- ☐ My movement and where I live now
- ☐ Other...

Enumerator: Date: Interview ID:

11. This story has to do with my (or people like me)..

Skills/ capacities

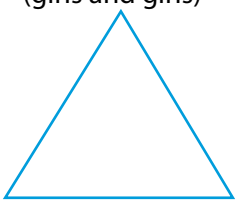


Social connections/ friendships

Confidence to think/ do/ act differently

12. The events in my story involve relationship

Between women and women (girls and girls)

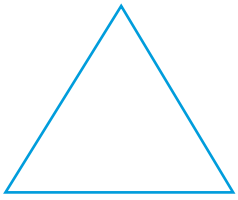


Between women and men (girls and boys)

With someone in authority

13. In my story, my experience affects mainly..

Myself

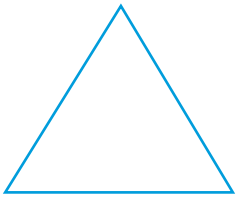


My family

My community

14. In my story, who decided what happened to me/ people like me?

Other people decided (specify)

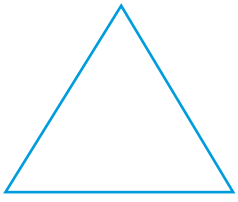


I did/ people like me did

God decided

15. The people in my story...

Wanted me (us) to follow their expectations

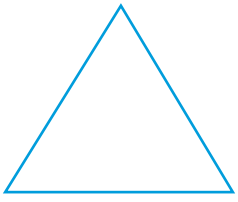


Showed willingness to listen/ understand me (us)

Let me (us) decide for ourselves

16. In my story...

I (people like me) challenged discrimination



I (people like me) accepted discrimination

Someone else challenged discrimination to my benefit

Enumerator: Date: Interview ID:

About you (insert key demographic questions here)

17. What's your age?

- ☐ <16 years old
- ☐ 16-20 years old
- ☐ 21 to 30 years old
- ☐ 31 to 40 years old
- ☐ 41 to 50 years old
- ☐ 51 to 60 years old
- ☐ 61 to 70 years old
- ☐ Over 70 years old

18. Gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Gender non-conforming
- ☐ Do not want to disclose

19-21. Where do you live? (INSERT Ward, LGU + District codes)

22. Province

- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 6
- ☐ 7

Thank you very much for your time, we appreciate it very much. Your story and the stories of other interviewees will be used to understand better the situation of your community.

Do you have any questions for me? If not, thank you again for your availability and for sharing your story.

Thank you for your collaboration

Module 2: To be completed by the researcher

23. Who was directly involved in this story?

- ☐ Girls
- ☐ Mother
- ☐ Father
- ☐ Mother-in-law
- ☐ Grandmother
- ☐ Grandfather
- ☐ Partner/Spouse
- ☐ Boys
- ☐ Relative
- ☐ Govt officials
- ☐ Neighbours
- ☐ Health workers
- ☐ NGO workers
- ☐ Religious leader
- ☐ Teacher
- ☐ Police
- ☐ Persons with disability
- ☐ God
- ☐ Animal
- ☐ Other

24. What ongoing programme and support elements, if any, were mentioned in the story?

- ☐ Farming and agricultural inputs (specify)
- ☐ Relief supplies
- ☐ Welfare support (cash transfers, food, in -kind)
- ☐ Water and sanitation infrastructure
- ☐ Women's political participation
- ☐ Women's livelihoods/economic empowerment
- ☐ Group training/education
- ☐ Group reflection/consciousness raising
- ☐ Other (please specify)

25. This story is about...

- ☐ Education
- ☐ Marriage/ Divorce/ widowhood
- ☐ Menstruation
- ☐ Access to health care (incl. SRH)
- ☐ Fetching water/ Household-related work
- ☐ Relationship (please specify)
- ☐ Money, financial security
- ☐ Conflict
- ☐ Discrimination and stigma
- ☐ Caring for sick, elderly & children
- ☐ Son preference
- ☐ Involvement in loccil government
- ☐ Access to shelter
- ☐ Disability
- ☐ Work / income
- ☐ Violence
- ☐ Food
- ☐ Access to information
- ☐ Access to justice/ legal agencies
- ☐ Migration
- ☐ Livestock
- ☐ Access to school
- ☐ Harmful practices (e.g. witchcraft, child marriage, dowry, CBD)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

26. Please indicate any harmful practices mentioned in the story, if applicable:

- ☐ Witchcraft
- ☐ Child marriage
- ☐ Dowry
- ☐ CBD
- ☐ ...
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Annex B
Methodological Reflections

The storytelling research project described in this report adopted an ambitious and innovative methodology and process, described in **Section 3** of the main report. In this Annex, we provide some additional reflections on the methodology and process, highlighting challenges and trade-offs that emerged. We then consider the implications of these reflections for further rounds of this longitudinal storytelling research project.

B.1 The research methodology and process

This methodology adopted a 'combined methods' design in order to achieve both interpretive depth and breadth of inference. It drew on Nepal's long tradition of storytelling, collecting rich stories that would allow the research team to interpret social norms in depth and in context. By collecting stories at scale – and including a questionnaire-style set of quantified signification questions – the methodology recognised the power of aggregated quantitative data for identifying broader patterns and trends in those social norms.

Underpinning this methodology, the research was implemented using a feminist, participatory process in which women and girls as well as men and boys put themselves at the centre of a process of social change. The research was facilitated by mixed-gender 'peer researchers' who were selected from local community-based organisations. These researchers recognised the social norms context, built trust and connected with storytellers in ways that outsiders would find more difficult.

Storytellers often confided with researchers that the act of sharing their stories had in itself been empowering, giving them a sense of self-validation in a context where these types of stories were often not aired and shared. The research process built in follow-up moments of group reflection and sense making at the community (ward), district and national levels to allow for a wider discussion and processing of many of the issues raised in individual stories.

The fieldwork timetable was hampered by a local election cycle and by the need to complete fieldwork before the onset of the rainy season in some parts of the country. This compacted the time available for fieldwork, with research teams working hard to complete the fieldwork and facilitate feedback sessions in communities and districts. This meant that research teams were not able to spend as much time in their communities for follow-up discussion and reflection as they might otherwise have done. Nonetheless, all teams successfully facilitated ward-level and district-level sense-making sessions that deepened analysis and prompted wider community conversations about social norms.

While the storytelling was not directly linked to follow-up programmatic interventions, an indirect link was established by selecting wards from a 'sampling frame' in which UN Women Nepal programming was ongoing or planned. Specifically, this is a UN

Women Nepal programme for social transformation. It is in turn driven by storytelling, and it supports the establishment of self-help groups, group reflection sessions, group mobilisation and intergenerational dialogue, along with economic empowerment and leadership development among the members of the self-help groups.

B.2 Emerging trade-offs

This methodology and underpinning process proved to be powerful in many ways but also involved trade-offs.

Research scope: Open-ended vs. thematically focussed questions

An important trade-off emerged around the thematic scope of the research. This research sacrificed a more focussed and narrow exploration of specific social norms in any given context in order to allow for the breadth and intersectional complexity of locally prioritised norms to surface.

Impact assessment research projects consider the contribution of specific interventions in changing impacts on the ground. In many cases, project managers are keen to understand a causal chain of events between their intervention and improved well-being amongst a target population. For example, how did an immunisation campaign impact under-five mortality and morbidity rates? Or, how did a rural livelihoods project economically empower local women?

In this instance, UN Women Nepal and the GoF sought to better understand gendered social norms and their implications for women and girls across the country. They also hoped to tease out the complex, interacting contribution to social norm change of external events, including policy and programme implementation, as the basis for future policy and programme prioritisation, design and delivery. For example, how did legislation to criminalise specific harmful cultural practices contribute to change on the ground? Or, what contribution did social mobilisation campaigns make in transforming attitudes and behaviours on the ground?

The goal, however, was not to narrow the research to focus on one specific social norm and examine contribution. The research methodology was instead deliberately designed to be open-ended. The prompting question in the storytelling questionnaire (see **Annex A**) was carefully worded to allow storytellers to focus on social norms-focussed stories that were most significant to them. The result was that over 1,000 stories were told that uncovered a range of intersecting social norms. At the same time, patterns emerged in the data that pointed to the frequency or incidence of emotions, behaviours and drivers of change associated with these norms.

Methodological priority: Extractive breadth vs. interpretive depth

Another key trade-off emerged between maximising the extractive power of mass storytelling – through achieving breadth and scale of research coverage – with the interpretive depth and transformative elements of embedded participatory research in local communities.

Mass storytelling instruments can rush to aggregate, emphasising quantity at the expense of quality. In these scenarios, teams of researchers collect many stories per day. These stories can be a brief narrative of two or three sentences. Relatively little time is spent with the storyteller on the signification questions in the questionnaire (see **Annex A**) and in deepening the story iteratively. During this research project, researchers were encouraged to take time with storytellers while also being careful not to exploit their time. They were trained to 'probe' signification responses with a *why* prompting question (for example, "Why did you put the dot at that point in the triad?") in order to enrich the stories and strengthen their interpretive content. Hence, rather than adopting a linear approach of 'story followed by signification,' researchers were trained to go back to the story as a result of these probes. Through this iterative approach, the resulting story was deeper and richer in insight.

Research process: Empowering process vs. extractive data collection

A third trade-off emerged within the research process. As a feminist, participatory process that placed the storyteller at the centre, there was an opportunity to build transformative elements into the storytelling research process. This process was discussed with research teams in stark contrast to traditional forms of research in which 'respondents' are passive and powerless 'data points' in an extractive research process. Indeed, this transformative dynamic lies at the heart of much participatory research.

In this instance, however, the research process was one strand of a broader programme of UN Women Nepal's storytelling-driven transformative programme. In this sense, the participatory process was already built into programme implementation. Nonetheless, it remained important that feminist and participatory principles be attached to the research component. This meant that stories were not rushed; researchers were in 'active mode' and able to talk through the stories with individual storytellers. The research team then employed the 'word rescue' method[22] that is widely used by research partner The Story Kitchen to deepen the content of the stories being told. This involved researchers sharing the stories that they had collected with each other in pairs at the end of each day and 'interviewing' each other in order to capture the full richness and meaning of those stories. It also meant that the fieldwork schedule was punctuated by participatory group reflections at the ward and district levels, allowing for processing and discussion around emerging issues. As discussed above, despite constraints of the looming rainy season and the hiatus caused by local elections, research teams were able to fulfil these group engagements in all districts.

B.3 Considerations for future rounds of storytelling research

With these reflections around trade-offs in mind, it is useful to think ahead to the design of future rounds of storytelling research that will form part of this longitudinal impact monitoring research project.

22 'Word rescue' is a therapeutic method pioneered by narrative therapists. The Story Kitchen has been applying the word rescue method in its storytelling and community work.

First, in relation to research scope, the open-ended nature of the *why* prompting question discussed above introduces a dilemma for future 'midline' and 'endline' data collection. If this open-ended approach is repeated in year three, it is likely that we will collect another 1,000 stories revealing similar patterns and insights. It is unlikely that trends in the practice of say, child marriage, will emerge in this way. There is therefore a strong case for adapting the framing of the methodology to generate greater insight into trends and patterns that build on the baseline storytelling database.

This means that interesting patterns that emerged in different locations across the country, and which will be further revealed through the storytelling-driven programme implementation itself, can be followed up in thematically focussed ways. There are many interesting areas for follow-up tracking that emerge from this baseline. How is the inflationary effect of Gulf migration on dowry in Sarlahi district playing out? How sustained is the sexual and reproductive health approach to tackling *chhaupadi* in Doti district? In what ways do publicly expressed changes in attitudes and behaviours towards caste-based discrimination feed through to the private sphere? How does the surfacing of the prevalence of domestic violence feed into changing dynamics within households? And so on.

This thematic and contextual approach to a future round of storytelling would in turn have implications for the second trade-off identified around the breadth vs. depth of research. The population frame for this type of contextual and thematic research would become more localised, with less pressure to achieve representativeness at national scale through aggregating what social statisticians call 'brute data.' This would mean that peer researchers could spend longer in communities triangulating methods and findings to deepen their understanding of patterns and trends in selected social norms while also generating quantified data for aggregation at ward and district levels.

Finally, in relation to the third trade-off around empowerment vs. extraction, might there be a case for linking the storytelling research more closely to UN Women Nepal's ongoing transformative storytelling programme? By dissolving the boundary between the research and programme components, storytellers could be more directly linked to forms of follow-up and empowering support. Meanwhile, research sampling strategies can identify additional storytellers who are not (yet) linked into the programme, perhaps in neighbouring communities, in order to tease out the contribution element of the programme in changing behaviours, attitudes and social norms.