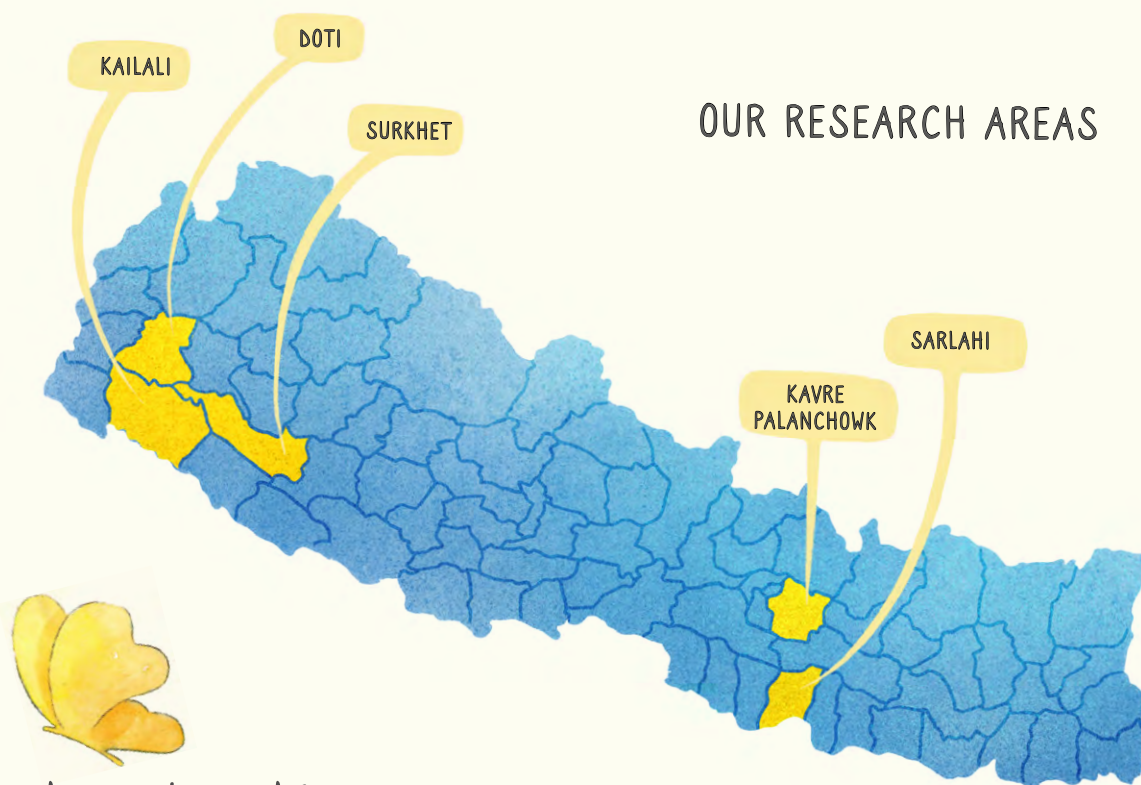


# Whose voice counts?

STORYTELLING IN A RESEARCH PROCESS







# Introduction

*Hamro Sahakarya* (Our Collective Action), a five-year storytelling initiative in Nepal implemented by UN Women with support from the Government of Finland, explores the factors that lead to changes in social norms, which in turn can influence transformative shifts towards gender equality and social inclusion. The project integrates community-level programme interventions, research and advocacy to tackle harmful social and cultural norms. The research component was designed to better understand the impact-level changes underpinning gender transformation through a longitudinal effort to track, test, reflect on and adapt change pathways that have a bearing on discriminatory social norms. Gender at Work (G@W), the research lead for the project, has partnered with The Story Kitchen (TSK), a pioneering Nepal-based organisation that uses storytelling guided by narrative therapy principles in its community work. Together, they have implemented a feminist and participatory approach to understand social norm change as part of the longitudinal research process.

Significant changes leading to transformations in gender equality come about not because of one single factor but because of multiple factors that come together to create impact. Understanding the complex nature of this impact required a shift away from traditional methods of monitoring and evaluation, which are based on pre-determined indicators and quantitative performance measures analysed by external experts, to a more embedded process that centred the perspective of communities. G@W and TSK used this opportunity to test an exciting approach at the baseline research stage that used storytelling to understand the prevalent social norms contributing to gender inequality and the factors that enable or inhibit change. This learning brief focuses on the lessons learnt during this innovative research process.

To read in brief about what the research revealed at the baseline stage, please click this [link](#).  
To read the full research report, including a detailed methodology, please click this [link](#).

# The methodology

The research methodology for the baseline integrated mass storytelling into its process, drawing on Nepal's long tradition of storytelling. People have always told stories. Using participatory and feminist principles, this research process tested a research tool and an analytical approach that placed women and girls at the centre of the storytelling and signification process, understanding current harmful norms and change narratives through their lived experiences. The storytelling and story-writing method used in this research is guided by narrative therapy principles that centre people as meaning makers and experts of their own lives.

The stories were gathered using a storytelling research tool called [SenseMaker](#). This tool combines storytelling (in words, pictures or other methods preferred by storytellers) and signification questions that enable storytellers to associate their stories with key themes or concepts described in the narrative as leading to change, such as power relations, voices, agency, attitudes and behaviours. This process resulted in the collection of qualitative and quantitative data that:

- Explores the depth and complexity of lived experiences
- Gives meaning to the stories through self-signification and a shared understanding of concepts amongst researchers and across storytellers
- Enables aggregation of data points to reveal patterns and interesting clusters
- Allows comparison over time and across locations for longitudinal monitoring

In addition to sense making at the storytelling stage, validation exercises conducted at the provincial and federal level confirmed trends and patterns that emerged from the mass storytelling data.



# Empowering the storyteller and the peer researcher

This methodology resulted in the collection of 1,000 stories, and the process led to some interesting learning that can inform other research on social norms. Storytellers often confided to 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 are often not aired and shared.



No one showed any interest in my struggle before. All my pain was inside my heart. This was the first time anyone asked me for an opinion. When I heard my own story, I felt very good and relieved. I realised how much I have struggled for my child and myself.

Click [here](#) to watch Kali BK talk about how sharing her story made her feel.

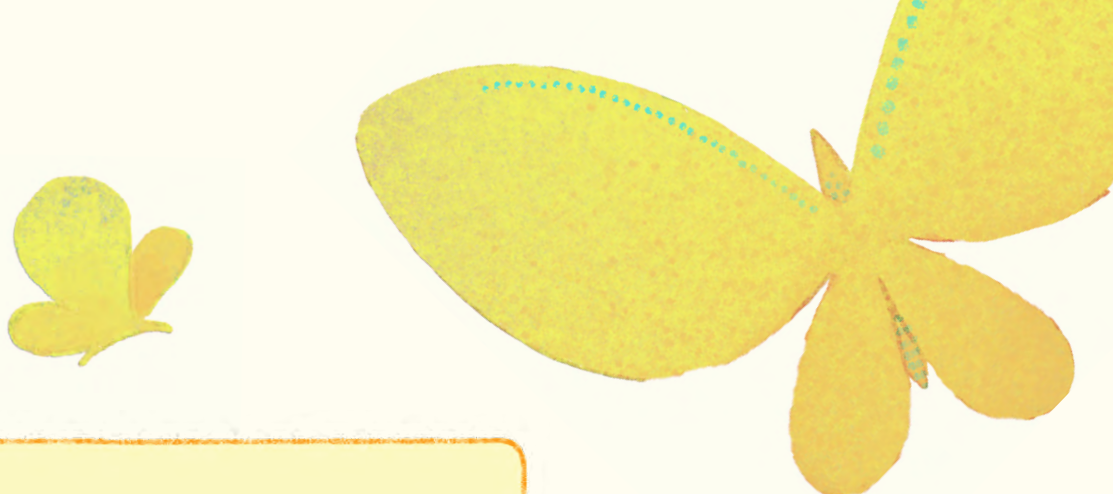
The research teams who collected the stories were primarily female peer researchers selected from local community-based organisations. 25 peer and district researchers – working in five teams of five people – were trained to collect stories and use [SenseMaker](#). Each team included one male researcher. These researchers recognised the local social norms context, earned trust and connected with storytellers in ways that outsiders would find more difficult to access. Researchers were encouraged to spend time with storytellers while being careful not to exploit their time. Researchers were trained to probe signification responses with ‘why’ questions, working to unpack why storytellers felt something was significant or of importance. Rather than adopting a linear approach that focused on a story followed by signification, researchers were trained to go back to the story as a result of these probes. This iterative approach resulted in deeper, more insightful stories.

We did not write the stories by ourselves. We were in a group, and my friend wrote the story I was facilitating while I wrote her story in return. I liked this method very much.



Click [here](#) to watch Jayanti Sewa talk about the research process:





We spent time understanding the community reality. Since we are from the area, we understood the community's customs, behaviours and its people. We started with talking about the usual things with them. They trusted us – we built this by being honest about what we were doing and becoming friends with them. Initially, they hesitated to share their story. They said 'I don't have a story,' but as we spent more time, they trusted us with their stories. They felt it was an opportunity to share their experience and their pain.



Click this [link](#) to hear Ritu Kadar talk about the importance of building trust during the storytelling process.

This process was empowering for the community-based peer researchers, with many sharing a sense of fulfilment in being able to contribute to a research process that was seeking to understand the nature of problems and solutions using community perspectives rather than external experts and analysts. The process was also transformative for the peer researchers as it helped them see things differently in their own communities, giving them new impetus to continue working on changing practices.



My understanding of the Chaudhary community changed during the research. I had heard that chhaupadi (the practice of isolating women and girls during menstruation) is not practiced in the Chaudhary community anymore, that all the chhau goths (sheds) have been demolished, that the women and girls are staying inside the house during their menstruation. But the reality is different. I saw this with my own eyes. I met with women and girls during the story collection who shared this bitter reality. Those social traditions are still deeply rooted in our society. We have to figure out how to uproot these practices.

Click this [link](#) to see Shakuntala Chaudhary sharing her experiences from the research process.

We used to think that there were no discriminatory practices in our area. That there is no racial discrimination, untouchability and chhaupadi. This is what we used to hear. But when we went to collect the stories, we found that the reality is different. Of course, things have improved compared with the past, but discriminatory practices are still being followed quietly. That is what we learnt.



Click this [link](#) to hear Sarita Sob talk about her own learning journey during this research process.

The peer researchers were also able to spend time together in communities, triangulating methods and findings to deepen their understanding of patterns and trends in selected social norms and increase confidence in their findings.

## Reflections and implications


This innovative and empowering approach to conducting social norms-related research has led to many reflections from the research team. A few are highlighted here. Please read the full report for more in-depth information on these themes.

The process of empowering peer researchers and storytellers is an example of localising power related to the research process. While building the capacity of researchers in Nepal who can continue this work, it also contributes valuable lessons that can inform monitoring and evaluation approaches and practices globally. The research process was designed so that the participants – the storytellers – had the power to make sense of their lived experience rather than that power lying solely with researchers. It created space for the storytellers to identify changes in their lives while defining and signifying that change on their own terms.

In such processes, there is a potential trade-off between empowerment and extraction. This research project has made a strong case for linking the storytelling research process more closely to other elements, such as programming, to ensure that interventions are transformative and respond to community-expressed needs. Storytellers can be more directly linked to empowering support systems by bringing the research and programme components closer.

In this way, the storytelling research can be part of an empowering process whilst also exploring the contribution of the programme and other interventions in changing behaviours, attitudes and social norms.





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

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

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

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