

# HAMRO SAHAKARYA: OUR COLLECTIVE ACTION THE STORYTELLING INITIATIVE

UN Women believes in a holistic approach to tackling structural gender inequality, transforming discriminatory social norms and ending harmful practices. Efforts to transform these inequalities must take into account not only institutional, political and administrative structures but also recognise how gendered social norms affect processes and outcomes. Systematic efforts are necessary to better understand and measure how, and by how much, specific interventions make a difference. This storytelling initiative, implemented by the UN Women Nepal Country Office with financial support from the Government of Finland, aims to understand pathways for social norm change and the factors that spur transformative shifts toward gender equality. It builds

on Sustainable Development Goal 5 to empower women and girls by increasing their voice, choice and security, and features three main components: research, community-based programming interventions and advocacy that uses storytelling to challenge dominant narratives. Alongside the research, the initiative provides support to women and excluded groups through a comprehensive relief package that meets their immediate needs. From Year 2 of the initiative, it also includes interventions on economic empowerment, leadership enhancement, engaging men and boys and different forms of storytelling to build social movements.

"It's so cold and the floods are coming in. I wish my baby and I were safe with the others. Why does it have to be the second day of my period?"

**Duration:** 2022 to 2026

**Target Groups:** Women, LGBTIQ+ communities and people with disabilities

**Location:** Sarlahi, Kavre, Surkhet, Kailali and Doti (Madhesh, Bagmati, Karnali, and Sudurpaschim provinces)

**Budget:** USD 2.5 million (approx.)

**Implementing Partners:** Government: Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizen; the Ministry of Social Development at the provincial levels; and local governments

**Civil Society Organisations:** Justice and Rights Institute Nepal, Feminist Dalit Organisation, Centre for Dalit Women Nepal, Support Nepal, and The Story Kitchen

**Others:** Gender at Work and Rain Barrel Communications



"How do we make sure our daughters don't have to suffer the way we did?"

The illustrated story is based on a narrative collected from a woman in Sudurpashchim Province during the baseline research. The first image shows the woman observing chaupadi, a social norm in which women stay in a tent or hut during their menstrual cycle, away from other members of their household. In the image, the woman stays in the chaupadi hut overnight with her infant daughter, even as her village is being flooded. Meanwhile, the other residents of her village stay in a tent set up by the government on higher land; they refused to let her stay with them as they believed she would bring the village bad luck. She stated that she has had unfavourable feelings about chaupadi ever since.

She explained: "In our village, women are not permitted to fetch water while menstruating. I considered not exposing my daughter to the same problem, but I am compelled to do so since it is a custom in the community. If I do not comply, people will not touch me or allow me and my family to fetch water from the common tap in our community. I have to stay in society, so I can't abandon the practice. I wish to go to a place where there is no such chaupadi practice, but we don't have any land in other areas, so I have to stay in this village and continue practicing chaupadi. We can abolish this behaviour if everyone in society educates themselves and changes their thinking".

Story panels 2, 3 and 4 share how her aspirations of a chaupadi free society for her daughter could materialize through her involvement with the interventions in the initiative.

## STORYTELLING TO MEASURE SOCIAL NORM CHANGE

Women and girls are the best source to identify indicators for complex and hard-to-access dimensions of change in gendered power relations and social norms. Stories allow people to make sense of their environment and lived experiences while also permitting the exploration of themes and topics that may otherwise be hidden and deemed 'undiscussable'. This opens up the possibility of delving deeper into the complex domain of social norms. As a method, storytelling also empowers, providing women and girls with an opportunity to strengthen their voices, insight and agency by sharing their experiences, opinions and suggestions. Storytelling that supports healing enables people to recognise their values and identify resources to help live those values.

This five-year initiative uses storytelling to identify pathways for social norm change at the individual and community levels, with the goal of designing transformative programming for gender equality. The research will help elucidate how interventions make progressive contributions toward transforming gendered social norms and most importantly, how to effectively create and measure these changes. By identifying patterns in social norms and discrimination based in them, the research will establish a baseline for tracking changes in specific social norms over time. The research will be conducted three times during the project duration (baseline – 2022, mid-line – 2024 and endline – 2025/26).

The research will lead to the creation of a "learning hub," a virtual platform with information and knowledge products on gender norms and storytelling. The hub will host a discussion forum (community of practice) for development practitioners and serve as a repository of key resources for information sharing, such as research outcomes and products.

# STORYTELLING AS AN EMPOWERING PROCESS

In addition to research using storytelling approaches to identify patterns in social norm change, this initiative is also designed to empower women and their wider social groups.

This process begins with organising self-help groups in the community. To support the immediate needs of women and excluded groups during the first two years of this initiative, the self-help groups (with local governments' support) decide who receive in-kind support in their communities (food and non-food/essential items for 1,000 households). The in-kind support includes materials such as seeds/vermicomposting, menstrual products, cooking gas, mobile phones and data cards. This initiative will also provide psychosocial and legal referral support.

The self-help groups will be accompanied by "reflection sessions" and group mobilisation. These reflection sessions will seek to build awareness and

consciousness about gender equality and prevent violence as well. The initiative will also map local resources and conduct market need analyses leading to a selection of participants for livelihood interventions. At this stage, an intervention package for sustainable livelihoods and leadership will be designed and rolled out. Selected members of the self-help groups will also receive political leadership training that include public speaking, conducting advocacy and campaigning.

In addition, there will be facilitated intergenerational dialogues, discussions with men and boys, and dialogues with adolescents around gender norms, masculinity and their role in promoting gender equality. These are aspects that may contribute toward building social movements. The goal is to create an enabling environment for social change, which will include the development of communication products that narrate the stories of change.

Collective action focuses on women's well-being. End chaupadi!



# STORYTELLING TO CHALLENGE DOMINANT NARRATIVES: ADVOCACY FOR SOCIAL NORM CHANGE

It is widely recognised that storytelling can support and strengthen advocacy for social change by challenging dominant narratives and developing new ways for people to listen to each other. Storytelling plays a key role in widening perspectives, strengthening communities and helping diverse groups of people recognise their commonalities. Along these lines, UN Women will strengthen advocacy for social norm change through capacity development as well as social mobilisation.

The project will implement creative forms of storytelling for wider social change from its third year onwards. To this end, UN Women envisages developing a set of communication products and anonymized case studies to trigger reflection in communities as part of awareness raising and capacity development. UN Women will extend support to women's

groups and research participants to convert their stories into other creative forms, such as theatre, songs and multimedia content. The aim of these efforts is to foster an environment where people can question social norms and take time to empathise, understand, self-reflect and deconstruct the ways in which society supports or creates obstacles around gender equality and social inclusion. In addition, UN Women will convert the stories into a series of books, animations and/or comic strips in local languages for a cross-section of stakeholders, including children. Discussion sessions aimed at stimulating wider and deeper self-reflection will accompany these communication materials.

Concept by Ashma Shrestha

Story and text by Sharareh Bajracharya

Illustration and design by Ubahang Nembang

"It took us some time to get here, but I am so happy to see that my daughter can eat with her family and go to school even when she has her period."



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