HOW COMMUNITY AGENCY DRIVES SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL NORM CHANGE

INTRODUCTION

People in Need (PIN) is a Czech-founded, non-governmental and non-profit international organisation established in 1992. PIN began working in Nepal as part of the humanitarian response to the April 25, 2015 earthquake. Since then, PIN Nepal has worked to develop and facilitate systemic solutions that respond to the needs of vulnerable and marginalised populations, including people living in geographically remote areas and groups experiencing exclusion based on ethnicity, age, gender, or other social and structural barriers. Its work in Nepal currently spans three strategic pillars: emergency response and recovery, climate resilience, and civil society and inclusive governance. Across these areas, PIN Nepal works through partnerships with civil society organisations, the Government of Nepal, academia, the private sector, and other stakeholders. This partnership-based approach supports locally led solutions that strengthen inclusion, resilience, and access to opportunities and services.

UNDERSTANDING THE PATHWAY TO CHANGE

The **Security and Justice Programme (SJP)** works to prevent and respond to gender-based violence (GBV) by strengthening community agency, transforming harmful social norms, and improving the responsiveness of local systems. In Madhesh Province, the programme works across five local governments, **Janakpurdham, Barahathawa, Simraungadh, Loharpatti, and Jaleshwor** with communities, community-based organizations, and local governments to build the knowledge, confidence, and collective capacity needed to challenge harmful practices, support survivors, and strengthen local GBV prevention and response mechanisms. SJP takes a community-led and locally grounded approach, recognising that sustainable change is strongest when communities are equipped to lead and sustain it.

This approach created an opportunity to test a fundamental assumption underpinning SJP's theory of change which rests on a core premise: that lasting reduction in gender-based violence requires simultaneous and mutually reinforcing change across three domains.



Gender and Social Norms

Shift harmful norms around gender roles, masculinity, and violence through safe, community-based reflection spaces (GTSN), behaviour modelling, and peer diffusion.



Community Agency

Build the confidence and collective capacity of women, men, and youth to act on emerging beliefs speaking up, supporting survivors, and challenging harmful practices in everyday spaces.



System Responsiveness

Strengthen GBV coordination mechanisms (GIEN), local government ownership of GBV action plans, and survivor-centred help-seeking pathways so that community change is met with institutional support.

The Community Diffusion Assessment conducted in December 2025 -January 2026 tested whether this theory is working in practice examining not just what changed, but how change is happening and what is sustaining it across communities and institutions.

The Interdependence Principle

SJP's findings reflefct that norms shift when communities believe institutions will respond. Institutions respond when communities demand accountability. And survivors seek help when both norms and systems signal that it is safe to do so. SJP's focus was on this interdependence, not on a single intervention in isolation.

WHAT DID THE PROJECT DO DIFFERENTLY?

We started with a simple idea: **social norm change begins when people have a safe space to question what they have always been told is "normal."**

Through GTSN, community members explored gender roles, power, masculinity, and GBV, and were encouraged to reflect on how these norms shaped their everyday lives. But the process did not stop with the sessions. Participants were supported to talk about what they were learning with their families and peers, while CBOs, change agents, and community groups created opportunities for these conversations to continue through dialogues, street dramas, youth activities, school engagement, and other local initiatives. Sub-grants gave CBOs the resources and space to take the lead, adapt activities to their communities, and bring more people into the conversation. In this way, the programme moved from reflection to confidence, from confidence to action, and from individual action towards wider community engagement the pathway through which SJP sought to build community agency and contribute to longer-term social norm change.

EVIDENCE OF CHANGE: NORMS, AGENCY, AND DIFFUSION

Because behavioural change is complex to measure and attribution is particularly difficult. The SJP MEL framework used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to build a stronger body of evidence. The Gender Transformative Social Norms (GTSN) pre-post assessment provided quantitative evidence of changes in knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs among participants. To go beyond these immediate measures and understand whether changes were translating into behaviour and spreading through communities, SJP conducted a **Community Diffusion Assessment (CDA) in December 2025–January 2026** across the three municipalities. The CDA used qualitative inquiry and diffusion mapping to explore how changes were being experienced, practised, and shared beyond the programme sessions. Together, these methods provided a more robust assessment of behavioural and social norm change and strengthened the evidence base for validating SJP's approach.

39% → 65%
GBV knowledge score (pre to post)

33% → 51%
Belief in gender-equal roles

66.7%
Participants showing positive behaviour change

71.9%
Spoke up against GBV in their community

Source: GTSN Pre-Post Test Analysis

LEARNINGS

1 Agency Often Emerges Before Social Acceptance

Across all three municipalities, women who participated in GTSN described increased confidence to speak publicly, greater autonomy over their movement, and growing ability to participate in household decisions previously dominated by male authority. These are not isolated reports; they are corroborated by striking shifts in quantitative indicators: awareness of GBV rose from 47% to 89%, and belief in gender-equal roles from 34% to 75%.

What is particularly significant is that these changes are observable before full social endorsement. Women are speaking up in community meetings despite anticipating ridicule; men are sharing domestic responsibilities despite pushback from elders. This pattern- behaviour change preceding collective acceptance is a recognised early marker of genuine norm internalisation, not superficial compliance.



LEARNING

Social norm change does not require unanimous community agreement before action occurs. Individuals can become agents of change when they feel sufficiently confident, informed, and supported to act on new beliefs. Programmes should therefore identify and support early adopters, while creating safe spaces and peer networks that help them sustain new behaviours. At the same time, engaging families, community leaders, and other influential actors can help individual changes gain wider acceptance and spread through the community.

89%
Awareness of GBV

75%
Belief in gender-equal roles

Source: SJP endline report

2 Men, Masculinity, and Visible Behaviour Change

The CDA revealed that some of the most powerful shifts were occurring through highly visible behaviours that challenged traditional expectations around gender roles. Men in FGDs reported engaging publicly in household tasks that directly challenge norms framing domestic work as exclusively women's responsibility. The significance lies in the visibility of these acts in front of extended family, neighbours, and community, signalling a transition from private attitude to public norm performance.

72.3% of GTSN participants reported participating in GBV awareness activities, and 63.75% said they felt comfortable reporting GBV incidents, indicating growing legitimacy of non-violent masculinities in communities where these norms were previously unquestioned.

> "I was told I am breaking our culture by taking on women's role, but I continued because I felt it was the right thing to do." -CBO Representative, Barahathawa.

63.75%

Feel comfortable reporting GBV incidents

LEARNING

Norm change accelerates when new behaviours become visible and socially observable. Programmes should therefore invest not only in awareness raising but also in creating opportunities for positive role modelling.

3 Conversations Travel Further Than Programmes

A central finding of the CDA is that norm shifts rarely remain confined to formal and controlled programmatic spaces like the GTSN sessions. While GTSN sessions provided the initial catalyst for reflection and discussion, ideas spread most effectively through everyday interactions.

Diffusion mapping exercise shows that ideas spread most powerfully through informal spaces such as homes, tea shops, agricultural worksites, and women's gatherings where people feel less exposed and more able to test new ways of thinking.

ASPECTS	JANAKPURDHAM	BARAHATHAWA	SIMRAUNGADH
Primary Spaces	Homes, peer groups, CBO meetings	Women's groups, homes	Tea shops, farms, youth circles
Key Diffusers	Change agents	Women CBO members	Youth, change agents
Diffusion Depth	High	Medium	Medium-low
Main Barrier	Cautious institutional trust	Gendered backlash, gossip	Elder resistance, isolation

The assessment found that diffusion was highly relational and informal. Information travelled further when individuals who already held trust and credibility within their communities communicated it. In contrast, messages delivered by individuals without strong social standing were often acknowledged but rarely translated into action.

Importantly, the spaces where diffusion occurred varied across municipalities, reflecting local social dynamics. However, the underlying pattern remained consistent: change spread through trusted relationships rather than through programme structures alone.

This reinforces a critical lesson for future programming. Community change is not achieved by increasing the number of sessions delivered; it is achieved by strengthening the social networks through which ideas are shared, debated, and normalised.

LEARNING

Diffusion is fundamentally interpersonal, and change agents are effective when they have social legitimacy and strong messages. Programmes should invest in trusted local actors and their existing networks, using familiar spaces such as families, women's groups, youth networks, workplaces, and informal gatherings to create opportunities for ideas to be discussed, tested, and normalised.

4 Sub-Grants as Structured Diffusion

The programme's sub-grant mechanism provided an important bridge between individual reflection and wider community engagement. 22 CBOs supported through sub-grants reached 7,538 people.

The evidence suggests that the value of the sub-grants was not simply the number of people reached, but the opportunities they created for messages introduced through GTSN to be discussed

in other community settings. CBOs used the grants for **cultural performances, youth forums, women's dialogues, school sessions, intergenerational activities, peer engagement, and interaction with local institutions.** This created additional points of contact beyond the formal GTSN sessions.

The Community Diffusion Assessment provides further evidence that these conversations were reaching everyday social spaces. Diffusion mapping identified **homes, peer groups, women's groups, tea shops, agricultural worksites, youth circles, and CBO meetings** as spaces where people discussed and encountered new ideas. Change agents, CBO members, women CBO members, and youth were identified as important diffusers across the three municipalities. Importantly, the assessment also found that diffusion was not uniform. It was stronger where people communicating the messages were already trusted and socially connected. In Janakpurdham, for example, change agents and CBO members were identified as key diffusers, while in Barahathawa women CBO members played a prominent role, and in Simraungadh youth and change agents were important. The assessment also identified barriers such as gendered backlash, gossip, elder resistance, and limited institutional trust.

Taken together, this provides evidence that the sub-grants created structured opportunities for messages to move beyond programme sessions and into existing community networks. The assessment also suggests that repeated and layered exposure can support the diffusion process. However, the evidence should not be read as demonstrating that repetition alone caused wider norm change. Rather, it shows an important pathway through which programme messages were reinforced, discussed, and adapted within community relationships.

LEARNING

Diffusion is strengthened when communities repeatedly encounter new ideas through trusted people and familiar spaces. Sub-grants can help local organisations extend these conversations beyond formal sessions. Programmes should therefore plan for diffusion and track not just reach, but who carries the messages, where conversations happen, and whether ideas are discussed or acted on beyond direct participants.

LOOKING AHEAD: IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMMING

These findings carry clear implications any programme seeking to achieve durable, community-driven norm change in similar contexts.

Support early adopters explicitly since they are doing the most difficult normative work	Behaviour change precedes full social acceptance. Programming should protect and sustain early adopters through peer networks, visible leadership endorsement, and collective reinforcement mechanisms not assume that individual conviction is sufficient.
Informal spaces are where norms consolidate design for them	Tea shops, farms, homes, and peer groups are not incidental they are where GTSN messages are tested and embedded into daily life. Programme design should explicitly map and support these informal diffusion channels alongside formal session delivery
Social credibility of change agents is a strategic asset, not a delivery variable	Diffusion speed and depth correlate most strongly with the change agent's social standing. Investing in agent selection, peer support structures, and retention is therefore a core programme strategy not an operational afterthought.
Community agency and institutional responsiveness must grow in parallel	Where systems are weak or politicised, community agency is fragile. Survivors revert to informal coping, and early norm gains are not sustained. Strengthening GIEN functionality and ensuring routine budget utilisation are prerequisites for protecting community-level progress.
Help-seeking is a social decision, not a technical one	Survivors navigate social risk, not just service availability. GIENs and CRMs are effective only where they function as trusted, discreet intermediaries. Confidentiality, survivor-centred practice, and consistent institutional responsiveness are non-negotiable for referral pathways to function

Ultimately, the assessment reinforces a central lesson of SJP's theory of change:

> **"Where norms shift, people act differently. Where people act differently, systems are pressured to respond. Where systems respond well, trust grows, and change becomes self-sustaining."**

SJP's experience shows that community agency can strengthen the conditions for sustainable social norm change. GTSN created space for reflection, while CBOs, change agents, and sub-grants helped carry these conversations into families and wider community spaces. The Community Diffusion Assessment, endline findings, and programme evidence also tested the theory of change in practice, providing encouraging evidence of links between increased agency, community-led action, and wider diffusion of new ideas. While the evidence does not establish causality, it shows the value of investing in communities as active agents of change rather than only recipients of programme messages.

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