Habitat for Humanity®

Terwilliger Center for Innovation in Shelter

Room to Rise

A gender lens assessment of small-ticket housing finance in India and Nepal

March 2026

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Executive summary

This report synthesises key findings from an assessment of small-ticket housing finance by three partner financial institutions (FIs) – across India and Nepal – in collaboration with Habitat for Humanity's Terwilliger Center for Innovation in Shelter. The study applies a gender lens to examine how housing finance products contribute to improved living conditions and influence women's participation, confidence, and decision-making within households.

The assessment adopted a **mixed-methods approach**, integrating a quantitative survey of **480 respondents** (241 women and 239 men) with **43 in-depth interviews** and institutional discussions with FI management and field staff. This design enabled the study to capture both measurable outcomes and lived experiences across diverse socio-economic and geographic contexts.

Respondents reflected diverse livelihoods and income profiles. Women were mainly homemakers or self-employed in petty trades, while men were engaged in wage labour, farming, salaried work, or small businesses. The modal household income ranged between **INR 30,000-40,000 (US$330-440)**, though clients of one of the FIs reported lower incomes on average.

Housing loans were primarily used for **new construction or extensions (49%)**, followed by **beautification (31%)**, **repairs (24%)**, and improvements in **toilets (19%)** and **kitchens (13%)**, highlighting priorities linked to daily comfort, hygiene, and dignity.

Key study findings: barriers, increased participation and other outcomes

- Women's **active participation** in the loan process – signing documents, choosing materials, supervising construction – enhanced their self-esteem and recognition within households.
- **A little less than a third** of respondents reported initiating or expanding home-based income-generating activities.
- A majority acknowledged **better emotional well-being**, linking it to increased dignity, reduced stress, and a renewed sense of pride in their homes.
- Women in particular highlighted **greater confidence in decision-making**, linking their enhanced role to improved housing, increased financial involvement, and stronger recognition within the household.
- Many respondents – especially women – reported **higher confidence in planning for the future**, connecting this to safer homes, greater financial stability, and the security that well-built structures provide.
- **Mobility constraints, the need for spousal consent, and lack of property ownership** emerged as major barriers for women.

This assessment suggests that well designed housing finance products can be a powerful lever for women's empowerment and household resilience. When institutions combine financial inclusion with respectful engagement, safe housing becomes an instrument of social change. Across the areas covered, the intervention elevated safety, comfort, privacy, and dignity while nurturing confidence, shared decision-making, and community recognition. The change is not solely physical but relational – reshaping how families live and decide together.

Summary of reported household impacts from small-ticket housing finance (1 of 2)

	Health	Education	Livelihood and income	Convenience
% of respondents positively impacted	>40%	>35%	31%	>55%
Use case for housing loan	Window and door construction; toilet construction	Home extension, wall and toilet construction	Additional room, improved workspace, better lighting and ventilation	Kitchen construction, water tank installation, separate rooms
Impact experienced	Family members falling sick less often; improved hygiene and ventilation	More space to study; improved focus	Increased ability to work from home; ability to start or expand home-based business	Reduced time spent in daily chores; improved efficiency
Most impacted in family	Children and women	Children	Men and women equally	Women primarily
Changes due to housing loan access	Better ventilation and sanitation; reduced incidence of illness, especially for women and children who spend more time indoors. Toilet access reduces risk of infections and improves dignity.	Extra study space, fewer disruptions, and lower incidence of illness lead to improved attendance and performance.	Better infrastructure (room, light, ventilation) enables tailoring and food processing activities, or storage for small trade. With incidence of illness going down, there is an increase in productive workdays.	New kitchens, piped water, and separate living spaces save time for women, reduce the burden of daily chores, and improve household organization

Summary of reported household impacts from small-ticket housing finance (2 of 2)

	Safety	Quality of life	Social status	Confidence and decision-making
% of respondents positively impacted	30%	>50%	>60%	20% - 50%
Use case for housing loan	Boundary wall, sturdy doors and windows, lighting	Complete or partial house renovation, sanitation, water supply	External finishing, painting, adding rooms or floors	Participation in loan process, design, and supervision
Impact experienced	Enhanced security and protection from theft, harassment, and weather	Overall comfort, hygiene, and emotional well-being	Increased respect, visibility, and social recognition	Greater say in financial, housing, family matters and increased confidence in planning for future
Most impacted in family	Entire family; women and children particularly	All household members	Both genders	Women mostly
Changes due to housing loan access	New gates, plastering, and lighting improve overall sense of security. Women feel safer when husbands are away and children are safer indoors.	Better housing materials, sanitation, and ventilation lead to improved comfort and sense of well-being. Respondents felt more satisfied and proud of their homes.	Neighbours share appreciation of visible home improvements and families feel proud to invite guests home. Community members seek their advice in this area, elevating social status.	Signing documents and engaging with FI staff boosted women's confidence. Men report consulting wives more. Improved homes led to ehanced self-respect and equality in decision-making.

About the study

Access to safe, adequate, and affordable housing remains one of the most pressing challenges for low-income households across South Asia. Housing deficits are not only about poor physical structures but also about inadequate security, a lack of privacy, health risks, and diminished dignity. For women, these challenges are often compounded by limited mobility, unequal property rights, and constrained access to formal finance. In this context, dedicated small-ticket housing finance holds the potential to act as more than a financial product – it can become a pathway to improved living conditions and to greater participation of women in shaping household decisions.

This assessment examines how small-ticket housing finance products, implemented by three financial institutions (FIs) across Nepal and India – in partnership with Habitat for Humanity's Terwilliger Center for Innovation in Shelter – contributed to women's empowerment and household well-being. The study explores whether and how access to housing finance translates into changes in agency, confidence, safety, dignity, and everyday family dynamics, alongside improvements in physical shelter.

Purpose and scope of the assessment

The assessment had the following interrelated objectives:

- To understand the **profile and needs** of low-income households accessing small-ticket housing finance across different institutional and geographic contexts.
- To examine how **gender-informed design and delivery** of housing finance influence women's participation, confidence, and decision-making within households and communities.
- To assess the **outcomes of housing loans** in terms of housing quality, comfort, safety, privacy, and well-being.

The scope of the study covers three partner FIs with distinct models:

- **Partner FI 1 (India):** Non-collateralised home improvement loans targeted at existing and open-market clients.
- **Partner FI 2 (India):** Collateral-based small-ticket size housing finance products.
- **Partner FI 3 (Nepal):** Non-collateralised women-focused micro home loans aligned with its broader empowerment mandate.

By examining these three models, the study seeks to identify both common pathways and context-specific dynamics in how small-ticket housing finance interacts with gender.

Methodology: A mixed-methods, gender-sensitive approach

The study adopted a **mixed-methods design**, integrating quantitative and qualitative tools to capture both measurable outcomes and lived experiences.

Quantitative survey:

A structured survey was administered to **480 respondents** (241 women and 239 men) across selected locations in India and Nepal. Respondents included borrowers, co-borrowers, or close household members of borrowers.

What the survey captured

- Socio-economic profiles
- Access pathways to housing loans
- Decision-making roles
- Confidence and expression
- Housing improvements
- Post-loan outcomes related to safety, privacy, quality of life and well-being

Where both male and female respondents were interviewed from the same household, they were interviewed separately – often by different enumerators – to reduce response bias and encourage openness, particularly among women.

In-depth interviews:

To deepen understanding, **43 in-depth interviews** (23 women and 20 men) were conducted with a purposively selected sub-sample of survey respondents. Selection ensured diversity across gender, age, income, marital status, geography, loan use, and institutional affiliation. Semi-structured checklists guided these interviews, allowing respondents to narrate experiences in their own words. The qualitative analysis focused on themes such as agency, confidence, household relationships, safety, dignity, and future aspirations.

Institutional interviews:

Structured discussions were held with senior management and field staff of the three partner FIs to understand product design, lending processes, staff practices, and challenges in promoting gender inclusion.

Ethical safeguards:

All enumerators and researchers underwent safeguarding training. Informed consent, confidentiality, and privacy were emphasised, particularly when discussing sensitive issues around household roles and decision-making.

Together, these methods enabled triangulation of evidence across data sources, making the findings more robust.

Partner FIs: Approach and perspectives

Discussions with three FIs highlight a shared recognition of strong unmet demand for small-ticket housing finance among low- and middle-income households, as well as the value of combining credit with technical guidance and client awareness.

Partner FI 1 launched its small-ticket housing finance portfolio in mid-2023 with the Terwilliger Center's support, leveraging its wide outreach and experience in income-linked lending. Management noted positive client response, healthy early repayment, and strong demand for unsecured loans supported by technical advice. Gender inclusion was embedded by prioritising women borrowers and ensuring women's participation as co-borrowers, which they saw as strengthening household engagement and sustainability of the product.

Partner FI 2 positioned the Terwilliger Center-supported loan as an extension of its existing housing finance portfolio, emphasising housing as a source of family security and dignity in the low-ticket size segment. The Terwilliger Center's role in marketing and technical guidance was viewed as critical. While the institution encouraged women's participation, collateral requirements and male-dominated property ownership limited their ability to serve as primary borrowers, though many were included as co-borrowers. Service quality and personalised engagement were seen as key strengths amid competitive pressures.

Partner FI 3's women-only small-ticket housing finance loan closely aligned with its empowerment mandate. Management noted strong borrower enthusiasm, high repayment discipline, and the value clients placed on the technical support provided. The main constraint was the regulatory cap on loan size, which they felt did not fully meet housing needs. Still, they remained optimistic about scaling up given the social impact observed.

Overall, partner FIs viewed small-ticket size housing finance, strengthened by the Terwilliger Center's support with awareness building and construction guidance, as a promising addition to their portfolios and a pathway to deliver both shelter improvements and gender-intentional outcomes within their operational contexts.

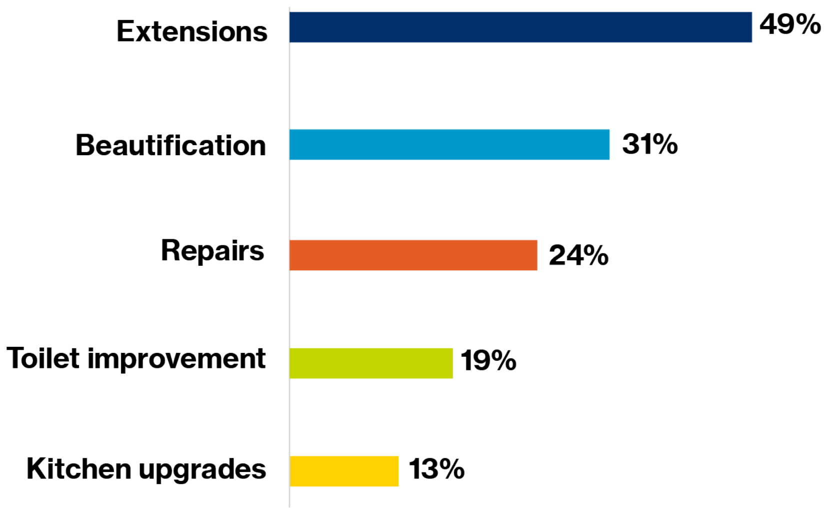
Findings & outcomes

Profile of respondents

Respondents in the survey represented a diverse cross-section of low- and middle-income households. Women were primarily homemakers or self-employed in petty trades, while men were more often engaged in wage labour, salaried jobs, farming, or small businesses. The modal monthly household income across the sample was between **INR 30,000–40,000 (US$ 330-440),** though Partner FI 3's clients in Nepal reported lower incomes, with nearly half earning less than the equivalent of **INR 20,000 (US$220).**

Men were identified as the principal earners in over **97%** of households, reflecting persistent gendered divisions of labour. Property ownership was also predominantly male. In cases where women reported ownership, it was often through spouses or family arrangements, highlighting why formal housing finance can be harder for women to access independently.

How housing loans were used



Key barriers and pathways to accessing housing finance

For many respondents, small-ticket housing finance marked their first meaningful engagement with formal credit for shelter. Nearly half of respondents learned about the product through neighbours or community members, underscoring the role of trust-based diffusion. FI staff explanations were another important source of information, while spouses and male relatives played a larger role in informing women.

Despite a good understanding of product features in general, women faced distinct barriers:

- **Mobility constraints**, limiting their ability to visit branches or interact freely with staff.
- **Need for spousal or male consent**, often embedded in institutional processes.
- **Lack of property ownership in their own names**, which restricts eligibility, especially for collateralised products.

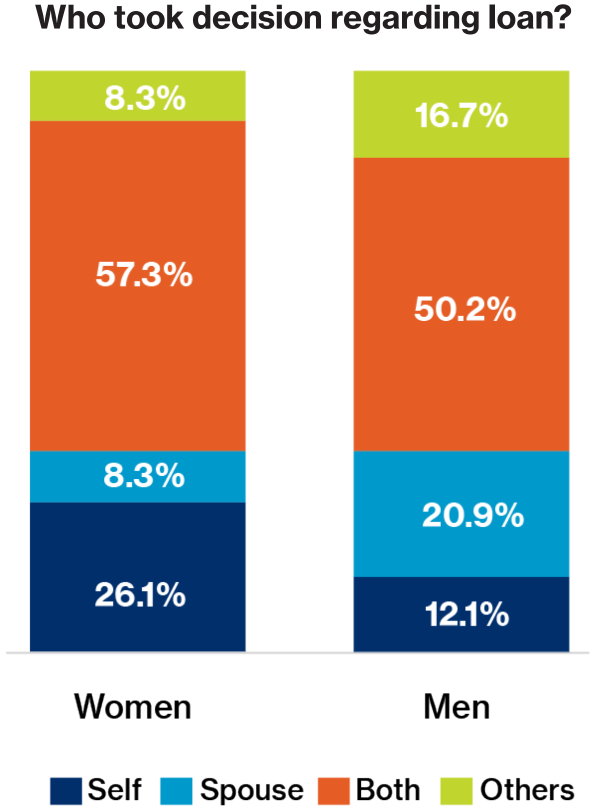
About **three-fourths of women respondents** reported needing the presence of a male relative during loan application. The exception was with Partner FI 3 in Nepal, where women operate as primary borrowers by design.

In-depth interviews revealed how women navigate these barriers pragmatically. Many relied on male relatives to meet procedural requirements, while taking the lead themselves in deciding how the loan would ultimately be used. Supportive field staff, doorstep services, and patient explanations were often cited as enabling women to engage more confidently. In Nepal, women borrowers described how being recognised as the main client removed the need for male mediation altogether.

These insights suggest that barriers are often institutional or normative rather than reflecting lack of interest or capability among women.

Agency, decision-making and household dynamics

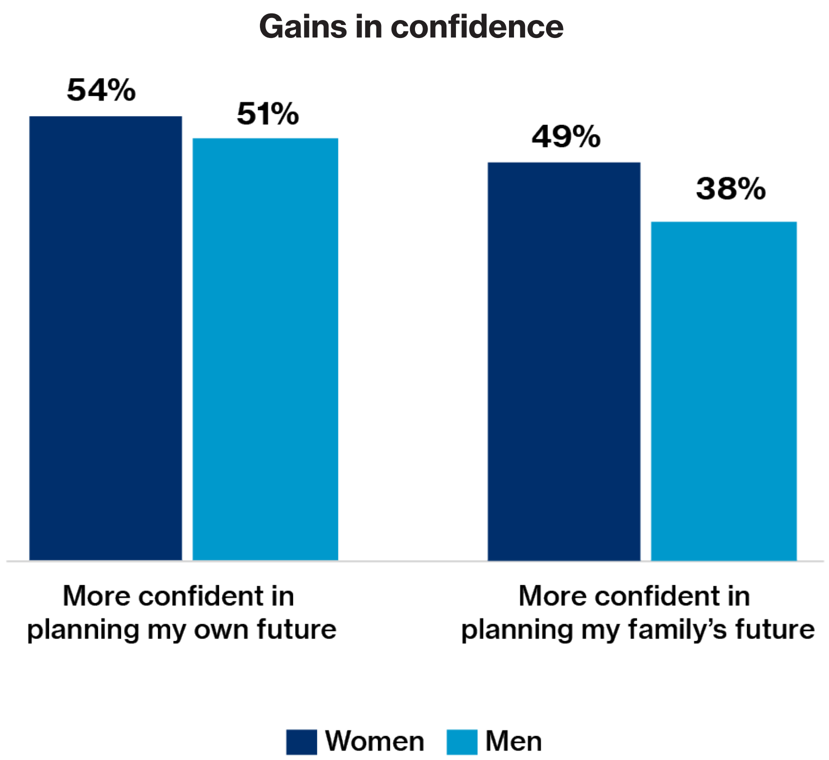
One of the most significant outcomes of small-ticket housing finance lay in shifts in agency and decision-making. Across the sample, joint decision-making between spouses dominated loan decisions, accounting for about half of all cases



Yet women's independent role increased markedly, particularly among Partner FI 2's and Partner FI 3's clients. **Many women described how signing documents, selecting materials, and supervising construction enhanced their sense of control and recognition within the household.**

Nearly **74%** of the men stated that they now consulted their wives more on financial and housing matters and over **63%** of the women stated that they play a greater role in these matters. While men often framed this as better coordination or family harmony, women framed it as being listened to and respected. Together, these narratives point to subtle but meaningful shifts toward shared responsibility.

Both women and men reported increases in their ability to express opinions, with over **50%** indicating some improvement. This extended beyond the household to community interactions and dealings with service providers, though levels varied by institution. Confidence gains were also reflected in future orientation. Many respondents, especially women, reported greater confidence in planning for their own and their family's future, linking this to safer homes and improved stability.



Respondent base: Female - 241; Male - 239

Gendered narratives of change

While survey results showed broadly similar levels of improvement across genders, in-depth interviews revealed that women and men narrated change differently. Women often described change in relational and affective terms – being consulted, feeling respected, having the courage to speak up, or managing households more confidently when male members were away. For them, confidence was tied to everyday interactions and recognition.

Men, by contrast, frequently framed confidence in terms of fulfilling their role as providers – taking pride in building a better home, ensuring safety, and securing the family's future. These narratives reflect socially shaped expectations of masculinity and responsibility.

Importantly, both sets of narratives point to enhanced self-esteem and agency, but through different lenses. Reading them together reveals empowerment as a relational process, negotiated within existing gender roles rather than replacing them outright.

"My husband now relies on me for household decisions, including where to save money. We now discuss all money-related matters", says a borrower from Tamil Nadu, India.

Increase in women's participation and more

Joint Decision-Making

Joint decision-making largely prevalent; women's roles increased

Expression & Confidence

Most felt more confident expressing their opinions

Contextual Contrast

Women gained autonomy, men more confidence

Community & Planning

Greater confidence in community involvement, future planning

Home-Based Activities

Increase in income generating activities

Housing improvements and household well-being

Home-based livelihoods and economic engagement

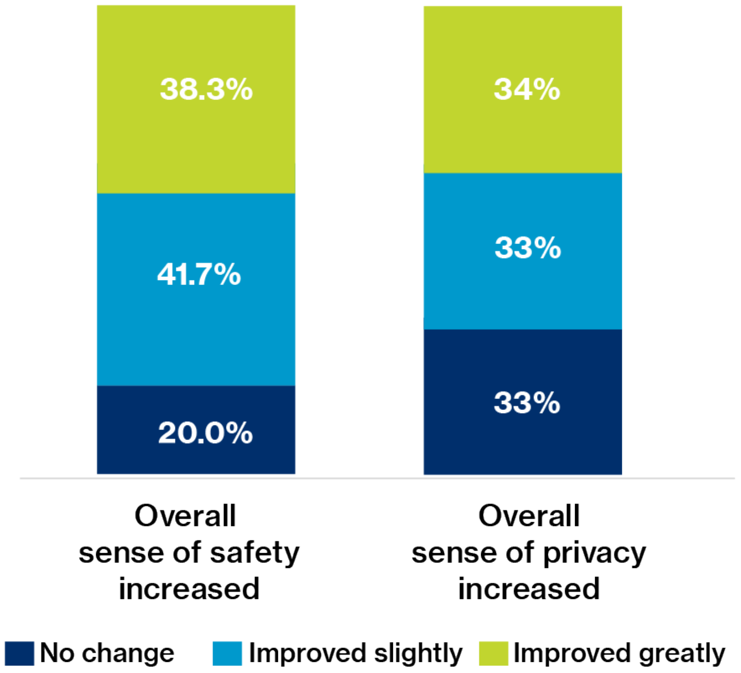
Improved housing also opened space for livelihoods. A little less than a third of respondents reported starting or expanding home-based income-generating activities, such as tailoring, food processing, or small retail. Better lighting, ventilation, and additional rooms enabled such activities. Overall gender differences were minimal. Women frequently linked these activities to greater visibility in household decisions and a sense of contribution, while men associated them with household stability and productivity. Although most households reported stable rather than rising incomes, these livelihood gains suggest that housing improvements can act as a platform for modest economic diversification.

Safety and privacy: everyday dignity in practice

Around **80%** of respondents reported improved safety following housing upgrades. Survey figures showed negligible gender differences, but interviews helped clarify the meanings behind the numbers.

Women linked safety to practical features: stronger doors, boundary walls, lighting, secure roofs, and enclosed toilets. These reduced everyday anxieties – about theft, weather, or using toilets at night – and enhanced peace of mind, especially when male members were away. Men framed safety in terms of protecting family and assets, expressing pride in providing a secure environment.

% reporting improved safety & privacy



Around **two-thirds** of respondents reported improved privacy. Men highlighted reduced congestion and better family organisation. These accounts show that housing improvements carried deep social and emotional significance beyond physical shelter.

Women emphasised separate rooms, internal partitions, and enclosed bathing spaces as critical to dignity and comfort. Privacy was described not merely as space, but as emotional relief from crowding and constant exposure.

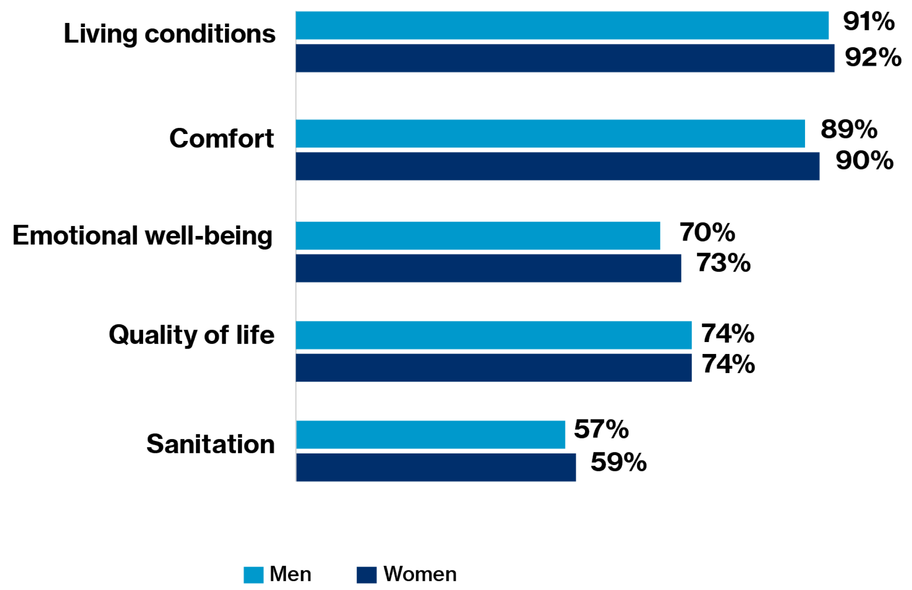
Impact of enhanced living conditions

Access to housing loans meant that respondents were able to make home improvements that altered everyday living conditions in substantive ways.

A large majority - at least **70%** of both men and women - reported improvements in emotional well-being,linking better homes to reduced stress, pride, and dignity. Quality of life showed marked gains across institutions, especially in Nepal where baseline conditions were poorer.

Water access and household income remained largely stable, suggesting that housing finance most directly affects living conditions and well-being rather than core infrastructure or income per se. When asked about the main benefits experienced, respondents most often cited convenience **(59%)** and safety **(30%)**, with minimal gender differences – indicating shared household gains.

% reporting improvements in living standards & well-being:



Gains in household well-being

91%
Reported better housing conditions

Nearly 91%
Experienced improved comfort

Around 55-60%
Saw gains in sanitation access

Investments in housing yield broad, multidimensional benefits especially for low income households. Improved housing enhances daily comfort, strengthens health, increases social pride, supports children's development, and expands livelihood opportunities.

For women, these changes span material, psychological, and relational dimensions – from better living conditions to enhanced confidence and control. Ultimately, housing becomes more than a structure; it becomes a space for personal and social transformation, where everyday improvements nurtured equality and harmony.

Improvements in personal and social status

In-depth interviews uncovered other nuanced ways in which access to housing finance boosted the status of women - within their homes and outside them - as well as the overall standing of families in their communities.

> Improved housing or business outcomes gave families new social visibility - with neighbours seeking their advice about construction, contractors, or credit access.

Benefits commonly cited by respondents

confidence
cleaner
self-worth
better health
safe
space for small business
comfort
privacy

Even women who identified primarily as homemakers stressed that renovated kitchens contributed to a greater sense of dignity in their daily lives, associated with navigating cleaner and safer spaces. Their involvement in choosing materials and layouts was cited as recognition of their expertise in managing household spaces. For these women, the tangible improvement in working conditions inside the home translated into intangible gains in self-worth and status within the family.

> In several cases, women took on active roles in supervising construction or choosing materials, leading to increased confidence and a greater sense of involvement.

Institutional practices and systems that support empowerment

> Institutional support played a key role in shaping gender outcomes. Staff across all partner FIs noted that women borrowers were more communicative, organized, and consistent when it came to repayments, driving engagement based on mutual trust and transparency.

Two of the FIs revised promotional materials to be more gender-responsive, while the third encouraged co-signature norms.

Management across FIs reported strong demand for small-ticket housing finance and emphasised the value of combining credit with construction counselling to build trust and ensure safer outcomes.

At the same time, staff acknowledged persistent challenges – particularly property titles in men's names and documentation norms – that constrain women's independent access, highlighting areas for continued innovation.

Across all three FIs, clients reported high satisfaction levels with respect to loan and service parameters – including loan amount, tenure, interest rate, application process, documentation, disbursement and collection.

- More than **50%** of respondents felt their FI consistently encouraged participation, with this number around **90%** for Partner FI 3
- **60%** of respondents rated FI staff as 'always responsive'
- **80%** of respondents were satisfied with loan sizes accessed
- **85%** of respondents were also positive about disbursement and collection practices
- Across FIs, **80%** of respondents were satisfied with loan interest rates, although respondents for one FI cited high rates

From better homes to better lives

This assessment shows that gender-informed small-ticket housing finance, as implemented by three FIs in India and Nepal, has contributed to meaningful improvements in both living conditions and social dynamics for households involved. The evidence suggests that housing finance, when designed and delivered with attention to women's roles and constraints, can serve as more than a financial product – it can become a platform for enhancing dignity, confidence, and participation in everyday family life.

Barriers for women

Key gender barriers included mobility restrictions and property ownership

Increase in agency

Independent women's role in financial and housing decisions grew sharply

Post-loan outcomes

Improved housing conditions, safety, social status, and well-being

Gender-informed small-ticket housing finance delivered through the three FIs in this assessment has led to gains in housing quality, comfort, sanitation, safety and privacy. A large majority of respondents reported improved living conditions, with safer structures, enclosed toilets, additional rooms, better ventilation, and lighting transforming daily routines. These physical improvements translated directly into enhanced emotional well-being, reduced stress, and a stronger sense of pride in one's home.

Beyond shelter, the study finds clear relational and social changes, particularly for women. Many women described greater confidence in expressing opinions, increased involvement in financial and housing decisions, and a feeling of being more respected within their households.

Men, in turn, often spoke of greater consultation with their spouses, improved coordination in planning, and pride in jointly creating a better home. While women and men narrated these shifts differently – shaped by their social roles – the combined accounts point to a gradual movement toward more shared responsibility and dialogue within families.

Improved housing also created space for everyday economic and social activities. Around one-third of households initiated or expanded home-based income-generating activities, enabled by better space, lighting, and ventilation.

Respondents across institutions reported greater confidence in planning for their future, linking safer and more dignified homes to stability and hope. These outcomes underline how shelter improvements can ripple outward into livelihoods, aspirations, and social engagement.

Importantly, the evidence indicates that these outcomes are not automatic consequences of access to credit alone. They are closely tied to how housing finance is experienced – whether women are directly engaged as borrowers or co-borrowers, whether field staff interact respectfully and patiently, whether loan processes reduce women's dependence on male mediation, and whether construction choices reflect women's priorities for daily comfort, safety, and privacy. Where women were positioned as primary clients and actively involved in planning, as in the model of Partner FI 3, gains in confidence and agency were especially pronounced.

At the same time, this assessment recognises that the core mandate of the intervention is financial inclusion through housing finance. The program is not designed as a standalone gender transformation initiative.

The findings show that when housing finance is delivered with gender intent, it can create conditions in which women's voices gain visibility and legitimacy within households.

In this sense, the program's contribution lies in embedding gender sensitivity within everyday financial and housing processes, rather than treating transformation as a separate objective.

The study finds that the gender-informed design of the housing products has generated meaningful outcomes in access, awareness, and participation, with positive shifts also observed in women's confidence and perceptions of ownership. At the same time, the findings underscore that achieving more transformative changes in household decision-making and social recognition is inherently complex and often unfolds gradually. This points to the value of continuing to deepen gender-responsive and intersectional approaches alongside financial products to address long-standing structural inequalities.

Rising through housing finance

Women's home improvement journeys

Sarita (Indore, India)

Sarita is a 35-year-old homemaker who took a housing loan, along with her husband, to renovate their home, focusing on repairing the kitchen – adding tiles and plaster – and improving electrical fittings.

> With a monthly income of INR 45,000 (US$492) from farming, the couple aimed to improve safety and comfort within their home. Sarita was actively involved in choosing materials, particularly for the kitchen, while her husband oversaw the renovation process.

The completed upgrade created a more pleasant home environment for the couple and their children. The experience has boosted Sarita's confidence in engaging with financial institutions and increased her ability to participate in the family's financial decisions.

Kushba Bai (Rajasthan, India)

Kushba Bai and her husband earn INR 40,000 (US$438) a month through daily wage work. The couple made the joint decision to get a housing loan in order to add two rooms to their home.

> While her role as co-borrower was initially procedural, it gave Kushba Bai standing to actively engage in discussions on money management and construction planning.

Her husband acknowledges her judgment, and their decision-making has become more collaborative. The family's living conditions have improved – in terms of space, safety, and overall well-being.

Raj Kumari (Sunsari, Nepal)

Raj Kumari's family of five include her husband, an adult son and two daughters who are still in school. The monthly family income is around NPR 50,000 (US$343) – from farming, poultry, and labour.

Their old mud-walled house had just two rooms, no kitchen or toilet, and was exposed to wildlife, extreme weather and potential break-ins. Two years ago, Raj Kumari took out a NPR 1.5 lakh (US$1,030) loan to build new brick walls for four rooms, a bathroom, and a kitchen. Recently, she took out another NPR 1.5 lakh loan to add the roof slab, an activity which is nearing completion.

She helped drive every step of the process – handling bank transactions, buying materials, and supervising construction. The new home offers more than enough space for the family to work, study and rest.

> Raj Kumari's **confidence** and **social visibility** have increased significantly through this experience.

This report is an abridged version of a more detailed assessment. The findings presented here are based solely on primary data gathered through interviews with key stakeholders, including staff and management of the participating financial institutions, as well as their customers. Approved AI tools were used to summarize and condense certain sections to enhance clarity and accessibility; however, the interpretations and conclusions remain the responsibility of the authors, including Habitat for Humanity's Terwilliger Center for Innovation in Shelter.

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