

**“YOU CAN’T BE A FEMINIST AND BE A
DAUGHTER-IN-LAW”:
NEGOTIATIONS OF HONOUR AND
WOMANHOOD IN URBAN NEPAL**



Sarah Homan

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
Discipline of Anthropology, School of Social Sciences,
University of Adelaide
August, 2016

THESIS DECLARATION

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

Signed: _____ **Date:** _____

Sarah Homan

TRANSLITERATION

Nepali is written in Devanagari script and the transliteration of Nepali words and phrases in this thesis is done in a romanised format. These transliterations were taken from Schmidt's *A Practical dictionary of modern Nepali*, 1994. This dictionary was accessed via an online database (last updated in 2005) that is supported by the U.S. Department of Education at: <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/schmidt/>.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	iv
ABBREVIATIONS	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	viii
ABSTRACT	x
PROLOGUE: A POEM	13
INTRODUCTION	16
<i>Ijrat</i>	23
<i>Gendered subjectivities</i>	29
<i>Bikāś: Development in Nepal</i>	31
<i>“The Daughter-in-law”, “The Feminist” and the tension between honour and freedom</i>	36
<i>Conclusion: Summary of chapters</i>	40
CHAPTER ONE: ORIENTATIONS	43
<i>Physical orientations: Geographical, political and demographic contexts</i>	44
<i>Ethnicity and caste</i>	48
<i>Ethnographic orientations: Choosing a field site</i>	54
<i>Ethnography, the Feminist lens and reflexivity</i>	59
<i>Gendered modernities</i>	63
CHAPTER TWO: “IF I AM NOT MARRIED, I AM NOT WHOLE”:	
<i>IJJAT AND THE ‘GOOD’ WOMAN</i>	69
<i>Introduction</i>	69
<i>Figured worlds</i>	72
<i>Nepali Honour: Ijrat</i>	76
<i>Gender and Nepali Ijrat</i>	82
<i>The ideal life path for Bhaktanagari and Kathmandu women</i>	87
<i>Marriage: the making of a wife and daughter-in-law</i>	91
<i>Basanti’s Marriage</i>	95
<i>Rita’s Marriage</i>	96
<i>Being single: Off the idealised life-path</i>	99
<i>Single women</i>	100
<i>Widows</i>	101
<i>Mahima</i>	103
<i>Conclusion</i>	104
CHAPTER THREE: “EVERYONE SEES”: <i>IJJAT</i>, SURVEILLANCE AND GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY	106
<i>Introduction</i>	106
<i>Gendered subjectivity</i>	109
<i>Gender as performative practice</i>	113
<i>Surveillance</i>	125
<i>The Contraceptive Pill</i>	129
<i>Conclusion</i>	134

CHAPTER 4: “‘GOOD’ SEXUALITY IS IJJAT”	136
<i>Introduction</i>	136
<i>Ijjat and sexuality</i>	138
<i>The Sexual body</i>	141
<i>Virginity</i>	145
<i>Menstruation</i>	148
<i>Pregnancy</i>	154
<i>Trafficking and Rape</i>	159
<i>Conclusion</i>	167
CHAPTER FIVE: “TENSION COMES”: IJJAT AND ITS DISCONTENTS	171
<i>Introduction</i>	171
<i>Anthropology and violence</i>	174
<i>Gender violence</i>	176
<i>‘Woman Violence’ in Nepal</i>	179
<i>Languages of suffering in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu</i>	182
<i>“How dare you take my ijjat to market?”: Ijjat and violence</i>	187
<i>“Hold up that burden until you can’t”: Nepali women and suicide</i>	193
<i>“She never expressed those things and we lost her”:</i> Nanda’s murder	198
<i>Conclusion</i>	200
CHAPTER SIX: “IJJAT IS A NICE NAME FOR SILENCE”: THE FEMINIST, BOLDNESS AND THE ROLE OF VOICE	203
<i>Introduction</i>	203
<i>Development feminism and the Nepali women’s movement</i>	206
<i>The Feminist</i>	210
<i>Freedom</i>	212
<i>“First, we must have sāhas”:</i> ‘Boldness’ as a process of change	216
<i>The role of ‘voice’</i>	217
<i>Negotiations with boldness and voice</i>	221
<i>Tīj reimagined</i>	231
<i>Conclusion</i>	235
CONCLUSION: “THE WALL WON’T TUMBLE DOWN ALL AT ONCE”	237

LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Figure 1: Households, population and population density by urban/rural divide, ecological belt and Development Region.....</i>	45
<i>Figure 2: Nepal's Provinces, post 2015</i>	46
<i>Figure 3: Main intersection in the market place, Bhaktanagar.</i>	55
<i>Figure 4: Market place in Bhaktanagar.</i>	57
<i>Figure 5: Maoist Banda, Bhaktanagar (Photo: Orr Niv).....</i>	58
<i>Figure 6: Married women, Bhaktanagar, wearing the symbols of marriage.....</i>	94
<i>Figure 7: Local water source in Bhaktanagar, where families wash themselves.</i>	117
<i>Figure 8: Women dressed in sārī for Tīj, Bhaktanagar.....</i>	120
<i>Figure 9: Young woman in kutār salwar and shawl, Bhaktanagar.....</i>	121
<i>Figure 10: Me dancing in kutār salwar at Tīj, without my shawl (Bhaktanagar).....</i>	123
<i>Figure 11: Predominantly male crowd watching me and other ladies dance at Tīj (Bhaktanagar).</i>	124
<i>Figure 12: Typical pharmacy in Bhaktanagar.</i>	132
<i>Figure 13: Activity - Gendered task distribution, Red Cross (Bhaktanagar).....</i>	142
<i>Figure 14: Typical cowshed, used for menstruation separation (Bhaktanagar).....</i>	150
<i>Figure 15: A Bhaktanagari woman practices post-partum restrictions.....</i>	157
<i>Figure 16: A common scene in Kathmandu Durbar Square, where friends and couples socialise.....</i>	169
<i>Figure 17: Underlying factors related to suicide in Nepali women, aged 10-50.....</i>	195
<i>Figure 18: Women's illustration of outcomes of 'boldness' in Red Cross Workshop, Bhaktanagar.....</i>	217
<i>Figure 19: Stories of Nepal Facebook Page</i>	227
<i>Figure 20: Parbati's tale on Stories of Nepal Facebook Page.....</i>	228
<i>Figure 21: Women protest rape of a migrant worker by a police officer in Kathmandu</i>	230
<i>Figure 22: Tīj protest for the long life of the Nepali Constitution, 2011 (Bhaktanagar).</i>	234
<i>Figure 23: Nepali New Year Celebrations with village women and children (Photo: Orr Niv).....</i>	237

ABBREVIATIONS

ANWO – All Nepal Women’s Organisation

CDO – Chief District Officer

CEDAW – Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

CPN (Maoist) – Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)

CPN (UC) – Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Centre)

EMA – *Eklai Mahilā Adhikār* (EMA) (Single Women’s Rights)*

EMF – Equality Media Forum*/EMFN – Equality Media Forum Nepal*

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

GAD – Gender Analysis in Development/Gender and Development

GBV – Gender Based Violence

HBV – Honour-based Violence

INGO – International Non-Government Organisation

HIV/AIDS – Human Immune-deficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual and Transgender

M & E – Monitoring and Evaluation

MMM – The Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Survey 2008/2009

NGO – Non-Government Organisation

SA – *Samudāya Āvāj* (Community Voice)*

SWC – Social Welfare Council (Nepal)

UCPN (M) – Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)

UML – Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist)

UN – United Nations

UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund

VAW – Violence Against Women

WID – Women in Development

To the women of Nepal, thank you. Thank you for showing me the way, for helping me find my own *sāhas*. Because of you, I am the woman I am today. May you find what you're looking for, may you get what you're fighting for.

नेपालका ददीबहनीहरु सबैलाई धन्यवाद । मलाई बाटो देखाइदनुभएकोमा र आफूभित्रको साहस पहिचान गर्न मलाई मद्दत गर्नुभएकोमा तपाईंहरुलाई धन्यवाद दनि चाहन्छु । म आज जे छु तपाईंहरुकै कारणले छु । तपाईंहरुले चाहेका कुराहरु पूरा होस् । जुन कुराहरुका लागि तपाईंहरुले वर्षौदेखि संघर्ष गर्दै आउनुभएको छ, त्यो छट्टै सफल होस, मेरो शुभकामना ।

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The paradox of a PhD is that you go it alone, and yet can't do it by yourself. Knowing this, I will first address the latter point.

My first and loudest thanks go to the many, particularly women, who shared with me their stories, especially those that took great courage. Your vulnerability was your greatest strength and my biggest inspiration. To my translators and staff at the NGOs I worked with, 'Swar', 'EMFN', 'EMA' and 'Maya Garden'. I can't name you, but you know who you are. Please know this study would not have happened without your help, I'm forever grateful and think of you often.

I must profusely thank my supervisors, Dr Alison Dundon and Emeritus Professor John Gray. For someone who habitually overwrites, I'm actually lost for words. Your guidance and support turned what seemed like a slim possibility into a reality. Dr Andrew Skuse, thank you so much for your initial supervision. Indeed, I have you to thank for nudging me in the direction of my PhD and sending me to Nepal in the first place. Dr Penny Robinson, thank you for mentoring me and giving me confidence. Thanks to the staff, Sharon Lewis and my colleagues in the Anthropology Department, University of Adelaide. There's nothing like the support from those who truly get it. A special thanks goes to Margy for being my Nepal pal. Thanks for keeping me together.

Auntie Hilary, the generosity and speed with which you edited for me prior to submission means more than I could express. I probably should have asked you to write these acknowledgments actually. You will forever be a supreme 'Editor in Chief' to me.

I have so much love and gratitude for my dear friends Bhumika and Bikram. I have this thesis because of you. Thank you for all your *māyā*, *momos*, encouragement and efforts to help me with extra translation in the writing up stage.

To Maggie, I just love you. You and your family were my sanity and safe harbour during fieldwork. You saved me everyday I lived in 'Bhaktanagar'. When I think about you, your divine staff and children, you save me a little more. Thank you doesn't even cover it but it's a great place to start. May Ravi be resting in the brightest peace.

Rashmi, Jaya, Irada and Pabitra; your help was invaluable, *dherai, dherai dhanyavād*.

Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one. I am blessed to have more than one. To my “friend-families” in Australia, Nepal and New Zealand – I am lucky to have too many to name and so you all know who you are and what you mean to me. Your love and encouragement was certainly felt, no matter where you were. Thanks to James for the support and for being the teacher I didn’t know I needed. And to Orr Niv, for many things, but especially for some far better photographs than I myself could capture.

To my “family-family” thank you for loving, nurturing and taking care of me. To Nana and Smokey, who saw me start the journey but didn’t see me finish; thank you both for supporting my education like no one else. I hope I’ve made you proud. My extended family of choice, you’re the best. Russell, I miss you. Ollie and Steph, thank you for your love and belief in me. Especially to my Mum, Marnie Homan, thank you for your little toe, fierce mother-love, and compassionate heart. You inspire me so much and I’m almost as proud of you as you are of me. To my Dad, Mike Bevan, thank you for the (almost) daily talks that always keep me calm and help me make sense of things. You’re the very best buddy I could ever have asked for. I love you all, always, always.

And now I turn to the former point – me. This thesis is both about, and the product of, the colliding of different subjectivities. I argue in the pages within that people engage with different subject positions and that these are crafted in particular spaces and times. This is no less true for myself. Nepal was the very best thing that ever happened to me. Sometimes I fill a whole day just remembering the tiny, quiet moments that are mine. It is not just a story I’ve told – it’s a story I’ve lived. How was I ever to distil it into words? This is my attempt. It was difficult. Writing is hard, and occasionally great but usually not. I did this with an enormous amount of help but at the end of the day this was a solitary venture, in which I had private moments of despair and triumph. This was years in the striving, in the searching, in the creating. I finally uncovered what was buried beneath. And it was very worth it.

ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that an urban Nepali womanhood is practised and understood fundamentally through local understandings of what it means to be *ijjatdār* ('honourable'). While *ijjat* generally translates to 'honour' in Nepali, I argue it is a complex configuration of interrelated, nuanced understandings, activities, rules and assets, which provides a gendered framework for directing the practices, beliefs and experiences of urban Nepalis. When one female informant insisted, "You can't be a feminist *and* be a daughter-in-law", my attention was drawn to the ways 'tension' is imbricated with honour and how women experienced it, as they balanced traditional expectations with 'modern' desires. Thus, womanhood was centred on practices of negotiation between 'traditional' expectations and emerging 'modern' ones in urban locales. The 'daughter-in-law' represents a strict social code of what it means to be a 'good woman' and is founded on traditional notions of what it means to be honourable. The 'feminist' represents the rhetoric of development feminism, whereby women agitate for social change and engage with 'boldness' and 'raising voice'. I use these analytic binaries as devices for discussing urban Nepali womanhood to critically engage with the everyday dynamic between various gendered subjectivities, modernity and tradition.

Based on fieldwork conducted in two urban locales in Nepal between 2009 and 2011, my research looks at salient themes in women's lives, such as surveillance, the notion of the 'good' woman, sexuality, violence and discontents to examine the negotiations women utilise to enact their womanhood.

New political and social influences are changing the ways women view themselves and their place in Nepali society. Historical notions of a 'respectable femininity', tied to *ijjat*, have committed women to the private sphere, with little bodily autonomy and education. Traditionally, *ijjat* has presumed strict gendered behavioural norms, dictating a prescribed 'life path' for many, particularly Hindu, Nepali individuals. However, development and other modern influences have made it more acceptable for Nepali women to access public domains, higher education, labour markets, and exercise freedoms and choices that were previously denied them.

As a way of analysing the strategies and potentials of urban, predominantly Hindu, women as they actively negotiate womanhood, I look at theories of practice and ‘doing’ gender to understand the nuances and subjectivities of my informants. I frame womanhood as structured by *ijjat*, yet not as static and unchanging: it is a continual and dynamic process actively negotiated in flexible ways. However, this negotiated womanhood is also dependent on other dynamics such as power, women’s other subjectivities and the contexts in which they find themselves. By performing gender through various improvisations, women are finding contextual ways to be both ‘feminists’ and ‘daughters-in-law’. I argue this is a mode of being ‘alternatively modern’, which conceptually acknowledges that, in the processes of ‘becoming modern’, there are particulars of local sensibility and subjective dispositions at work.

Indeed I do not forget that my voice is but one voice,
My experience a mere drop in the sea,
My knowledge no greater than the visual field in a microscope,
my minds eye, a mirror that reflects a small corner of the world, and my ideas –
A subjective confession.

Carl Jung

PROLOGUE: A POEM

She's the First

I am a girl.

A girl in Nepal, in the beautiful mountains.

The sun is on the horizon.

I'm getting older and with the passing of time I start to feel like
the world is set against me.

I am a girl on the side of a river bed breaking stones

Morning to dusk washing dishes and clothes

Working, earning, **in someone else's home**, in the fields, in a city hotel.

Sleeping in the alley between the big buildings, under a piece of plastic, or in a mud house.

Somehow I feel like I'm failing.

I am a girl.

I begin to dream.

I want to be a doctor, an engineer, a pilot, a teacher

I am told that I'm a girl who can't get an education, knowledge, and opportunities.

I'll have to get married and go to my husband's house.

Spending on my education would be a waste of money.

So I work in the kitchen and in the fields like **all of the women who came before me.**

I am a girl.

I sleep in the cowshed, outside on the floor, in the cold, on a pile of hay, with the animals.

I can't touch anything or do certain things for five days of the month, because I'm suffering from something that I can't control when I have my period.

I am a girl, turning into **a young woman.**

I have feelings that I never had before.

Everyone says it's time for me to get married. There are rules according to my caste, my age, my family, my wealth. But what about me? Why didn't anybody ask me if I was ready? I feel too young. I don't feel mature. **Is this for society to decide?**

I dig my feelings deep into the depths of my heart.

Dear mother, **I cannot breathe, in this tradition** somewhere in between rich and poor, somewhere in between higher and lower castes, somewhere between discrimination, is me.

A girl.

Let this all pass.

Let's bring a change and make this **a new Nepal, a new world.**

Let's make our failures the beginnings for the path to success.

I am a girl and I cannot suppress my feelings. **I will not spoil my life.**

I will not ignore my opportunities waiting in front of me like a new day.

I am going to defeat this.

The sun is on the horizon and I'm dreaming but I'm awake.

I am a girl but **I am not a failure.** Not anymore.

I am a girl and I am better than you think, sturdier than I look, smarter than you know, **braver than I show and stronger than you believe.**

I am a girl.

I will be the first.

To go to school. To get an education. To have chances.

To love and express my love.

The earth will not be destroyed by **me making my own decisions.**

I can be like Florence Nightingale, or Mother Theresa or Ghandi or whatever I want. I will not stumble.

I'm going to shake up the world from the corners, and light up the sky with my laugh.

And instead of breaking rocks I am going to rock the world.

I'll wash away old traditions while I wash dishes and clothes, and when I plant in the

fields, **I'll plant a new future, a new path.**

One of equality.

I will be the first.

The sun is on the horizon and **the day has come.**

I woke up, realized the world was behind me. Fighting for me. Cheering for me. Set up for me to thrive and succeed.

This is a place where I will leave my mark.

And when I've done everything I needed to do, they will say.

She was the first.

Shova Nepali

Age 14

Bhaktanagar, Nepal

Performed at a District-wide
'Poetry Slam' Competition