

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



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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/>.

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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 ।

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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

INTRODUCTION

The title of this thesis was born out of a passionate discussion with a friend and informant, Basanti, in a Kathmandu taxi. While travelling back to Pāṭan, in the Kathmandu Valley we had a conversation about the engagement celebration we had both just witnessed. Basanti, a married Hindu Nēwār woman, grabbed my hands and emphatically insisted, “You can’t be a feminist *and* be a daughter-in-law!” This statement startled me, as I had taken for granted that women had the potential to develop multiple identities of their choosing and had never questioned the simultaneity of such identities. I realised she was speaking about a strong tension for Nepali women: a tension between what might be called ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ (see Liechty 2003: xiii) and certain, associated, subjectivities. I asked Basanti why she felt she could not be both.

Because it’s completely different being in in-laws’ house, because of the pre-set duties and pre-set responsibilities, being a daughter-in-law you are supposed to be disciplined, or be polite every time, not talk loudly and get up early and clean the house, prepare meal for everybody, serve everybody...if you don’t behave that way, then you are a bad daughter-in-law. It also brings negative impact to your Mum and Dad. Like you know, how she’s [the daughter-in-law]... been brought up and she doesn’t know the rules of society. It’s just considered bad. I don’t know if it’s – yes, it’s ‘honour’ [*ijjat*]. ‘Honour’ of your parents and you.

Buhārī is the Nepali for daughter-in-law and ‘feminist’ in Nepali translates to *mahilā adhikār karmī*. *Mahilā* means ‘woman’; *adhikār* translates to ‘rights’; and *karmī* means ‘an agent of change’. Therefore, the term can roughly be translated to ‘an agent of change for women’s rights’. Unprompted and with great conviction, Basanti selected these two representative subjectivities of the feminist, and the daughter-in-law, to frame the everyday dynamic between modernity and tradition. For her, they represented polar opposites, very difficult to reconcile, being two very different types of woman. When I queried her further it became clear that the problem was that she wanted to be both; she valued the traditions of hospitality, ritual and the centrality of the family. On the other hand she felt women do not have ‘freedom of choice’ in their lives, as they are governed by a strict social code of what it means to be a so-called ‘good woman’. She desired

'freedom' to choose what to do with her own life, which included the choice to dress how she liked, work where she wanted, and go out of the home. She desired freedom from the expectations placed on her as a daughter-in-law. However, Basanti felt that to behave in ways that were perceived to be 'modern', or to her, like a 'feminist', she would exhibit behaviour that was historically, and in many current contexts, considered dishonourable.

Ijjat in Nepali is a complex and nuanced term, capturing definitions related to honour and prestige. However, it is also further imbricated with respect, status, chastity, shame and reputation. Used by men and women, and across different ethnic and religious demographics, it is an important concept for Nepalis. In this thesis I use Nepali understandings of *ijjat* as a framework to analyse the ways urban Nepali women understand and experience a Nepali womanhood and what it means for their negotiations with modernity and tradition. These categories, 'modernity' and 'tradition', more generally offer ways of thinking through issues of subjectivity, change and temporalities. They are imbued with meaning by various actors and often used strategically to help make sense of daily social life (Plesset 2006: 6). It is by no means the only way to view gender, modernity or honour in Nepal but it was the most salient to me during my fieldwork between 2009 and 2011 in two Nepali cities. I found that, for my informants, the practices and experiences of being a woman were mediated by narratives about *ijjat* and modernity, especially modernity experienced as development, or *bikāś*.

There were a number of reasons why I settled on honour as a specific lens with which to view how Nepali women live and experience their womanhood. Firstly, I came to understand the great significance of honour for Nepalis. So much so that I argue honour forms a framework within which Nepalis in my field sites make sense of the world and which shapes almost all social interaction, especially gendered interaction. Having identified relationships, marriage, surveillance, sexuality, violence and activism as key gendered experiences in my field sites, I wanted to explore the role *ijjat* played in all these. Honour became a unifying principle for key elements I was witnessing in women's lives.

Secondly, it became apparent that honour is not only one avenue for examining prominent features of women's lives, it is also a way to understand the tension between being both 'modern' (*ādhunika*)¹ and 'traditional' (*paramparāgat*). Markers of tradition and modernity are everywhere in Nepal. Nepal, though steeped in the mystic image of the Himalaya (see Fisher 1987; Bhandari 2010), is and has been moving into the twenty-first century at great speed (see Bista 1991; Liechty 2003). Daily life, particularly in the urban centres of the capital Kathmandu and Bhaktanagar² in Province Six in the mid-west of Nepal, is an assortment of modern amenities, mass media, technological advancement, international development programmes, pop culture and international tourists, mixed with historical dress, traditional food and art, ancient architecture and ceremonies passed down for generations. Relationships, marriage, surveillance, sexuality, violence and resistance are sites where experience, power and practice intersect with the dynamic between tradition, modernity and *ijjat*.

At the heart of this thesis are gendered subjectivities and how these are experienced and shaped through practice (see Bourdieu 1977, 1984; Ortner 1989b; Kemper 2001). Subjectivity refers to the "shared inner life of the subject, to the way subjects feel, respond, experience" (Luhmann 2014: 231). I also focus on the practices, ways and means through which urban Nepali women negotiate being what they see as both modern and traditional in a rapidly changing socio-political environment. For the purposes of this thesis, I take practices of negotiation to be akin to the creative cultural improvisations and interpretations people employ in their daily lives. Ingold and Hallam make four points of distinction when discussing improvisation. First, it is generative, in that it creates phenomenal forms of culture that are experienced by people who live by or with them. Secondly, improvisation is relational because it is continuously created in response to the performance of other social actors. Thirdly, it is temporal because it cannot be merely condensed into a moment but embodies a particular duration of time. Finally, it provides for the ways in which people operate, in both the everyday, as well as a more reflexive sense (Ingold & Hallam 2007: 1). In terms of practice theory, Ortner states, it is "a theory of the relationship between the structures of society and culture on the one hand and the nature of human action on the other" (Ortner 1989a: 14). Practice

¹ *Ādhunika* can also translate to mean new, contemporary, or the latest of something.

² With the exception of Kathmandu and some of its well-known districts (such as Pāṭan), I have changed the name of my field site and nearby towns in order to retain anonymity for the informants within. Pseudonyms are also used for the names of informants and NGO partners I worked with as well.

theory accounts for how people, with diverse motives and intentions, create and transform the worlds they live in (Ortner 1989a: 193). It looks at the relationship between structures and agency and the influence each has on the other. In the Nepali context, certain structures exert power over women's agency with regard to the experience of a Nepali womanhood. *Ijjat* is but one of many issues of power in this context. This interplay between power and practice renders women's behaviour a 'negotiation' in the first place, as they mediate their behaviour to suit different contexts.

This thesis is situated in anthropologies of Nepal and contributes to debates on Nepali women, honour, and modernity and tradition. There are four primary arguments I make in this thesis. Firstly, *ijjat* can be viewed as a dominant framework from which many Nepalis in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu derive an understanding of their world and which informs their agency within it. Secondly, *ijjat* is gendered. Nepali women are seen to meet daily societal expectations of conformity to tightly prescribed gender norms and notions of what it means to be a 'good' woman³ and *ijjat* is key in mediating this. *Ijjat* and womanhood thus form a dialectic relationship; *ijjat* is a framework vital for constructing womanhood, and a key function of womanhood in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu is the accumulation and preservation of *ijjat*. I argue that, for my participants, Nepali womanhood is a negotiation of the interplay between various subjectivities and contexts, because, as Liechty asserts, his Kathmandu informants must:

[...] negotiate a range of competing and coexisting systems of value and meaning. In Kathmandu the meaning and experience of modernity lies in daily balancing the demands and possibilities of a transforming social and material context against those of a deeply rooted cultural milieu of moral values, systems of prestige and notions of propriety.

(Liechty 2003: 5)

³ I do not suggest all Nepali women fulfill this expectation. Many would contest this for various reasons, including differences in religious and ethnic narratives of womanhood, as Tamang (2011) and Watkins (1996) have shown. However, generally, there is a tightly prescribed notion of womanhood in Nepal that suggests that it is favourable to be viewed as a 'good' woman. In my field site, it became evident that women were preoccupied with either fulfilling or resisting this role, or both, in different contexts.

While the ‘feminist’ and ‘daughter-in-law’ are used as devices to think about women’s lived experiences of modernity and tradition, I do not propose that women should be thought of as one or the other. Rather than representing dichotomies, these express ideological positions about womanhood on a continuum, on which multiple other subjectivities also exist. Nepali womanhood is therefore more a negotiation of the interplay between these, and other various, subjectivities.

Thirdly, given *ijjat* is central to women’s lives (and men’s in different ways), it is best understood as having both disabling and enabling qualities in the ways women mediate their identities in a rapidly modernising social economy. Most salient is the crucial role that *ijjat* plays for some women in preventing them from being both ‘feminists’ and ‘daughters-in-law’. Increasingly, however, *ijjat* as a concept is also changing and can empower women to be other than the ‘good woman’. For example, within the women’s rights movement, perceptions are changing as to what it means to be honourable, to encompass more inclusive notions of freedom and choice that are coming out of development and human rights discourses.

Finally, *ijjat* is linked to being both modern and traditional. ‘Being modern’ includes but is not limited to, urbanisation, development, concepts of democracy, individualistic attitudes and structural differentiations across various institutions such as media, communications and political structures (Giddens & Pierson 1998: 94; Eisenstadt 2000: 1). For this thesis however, it is most useful to understand that modernity for the Nepali context is connected to the development project (see Bista 1991; Pigg 1992). However, the concept of ‘being’ or ‘becoming modern’ is problematic due to a perceived dichotomy with tradition. I do not assume here that ‘tradition’ is oppositional to ‘modernity’ or ‘development’. Within this thesis, ‘tradition’ denotes the social ideas and practices that have historical continuity or social inheritance within a culture (Bauman, R 2001: 15819). My informants used both terms frequently and meant ‘tradition’ to refer to those social concepts and practices perceived to be long since established ‘norms’ in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, and, therefore, Nepal more generally. More specifically, informants mentioned that tradition meant living a life focussed on family and religious practice, and did at times entail forgoing certain wishes. One informant, Sangita, a Bāhun woman from Kathmandu said, “being traditional means giving much

more emphasis on family values and social customs, sometimes by giving up your own feelings.”

Ijjat is linked to both tradition and being modern because the roles that Nepali women categorise as traditional are understood in direct reference to honour. *Ijjat* provides the cultural framework from which women conceive of what it means to be a woman and how to practise their womanhood. Among other things, *ijjat* instructs women what a normative ‘womanhood’ should look like, such as, though not exclusively, remaining in the private sphere, maintaining their chastity⁴, being married, monogamous child bearers, and devout followers of faith (see Bennett, Lynn 1976, 1983; Majupuria 2007). Conversely, women experience tension when being seen as modern because traditional expectations deem modern behaviours as dishonourable. In this way, *ijjat* remains a powerful factor in women choosing (or not) to adopt modern roles or behaviours as this is often judged as giving up their honour. One male Gurung informant said,

Modern ideologies, advancements and practices for women have rattled patriarchal society, which see such advancements as opposing values to its traditional practices. Compared to thirty years back, now women have equal rights to property, freedom and development but still there are challenges in real implementations of such ideologies. This has often led to conflict in the house and community.

How *ijjat* is constructed and maintained through gendered spaces and interactions is of crucial importance to the experience of this tension. As such, there is a challenge for modern women to make honour visible and portable (Liechty 2010: 310).

In some senses I found Basanti correct in expressing that one “can’t be a feminist *and* be a daughter-in-law”. A majority of my informants felt in at least some aspects of their lives that they were constrained by rules prescribed by *ijjat*. Some women found it difficult, for example, to wear Western dress in the home of their in-laws or challenging to convince family members to allow them out of their house at certain times of day.

⁴ Chastity is of particular significance to high-caste Hindu groups (see Bennett, Lynn 1983) and other groups may not place such a high importance on female chastity and monogamy, for example some low-caste Hindu groups, such as Badi (Cox 1992) or the Nyinba in North-western Nepal (see Levine, Nancy E. 1988).

This was couched in terms of reputation, or of what other people would think of them should they do these things. However, while I acknowledge the challenge to be both, I also found nuanced and complex processes that demonstrated Nepali women undertake practices whereby they consciously negotiate their womanhood as both traditional and modern, relationally, in different contexts. Practice, in these circumstances, is consciously negotiated due to the power dynamics of the given context.

I argue that the Nepali women of my field sites, embedded in a swiftly modernising society, are finding ways to be modern in ways that make sense for them. They are embodying a kind of “alternative modernity” (Knauff 2002a). These identities are as varied as the heterogeneous nature of Nepali demography for, while women often express a desire for freedom in some form, it is often a highly localised, contextual and individual interpretation. While honour in one form or another was usually at the base of gendered interactions I encountered, outcomes would differ depending on a woman’s various subjectivities such as education, family background, economic status, caste, religion and ethnicity.

Bista (1991) acknowledges that describing sociality in Nepal is indeed a struggle:

[...] because Nepal is such a complex cultural conglomeration seeking perpetually to accommodate, if not synthesise, its diverse discrete parts. Nepali society is heterogeneous and is in constant flux. This makes the process of analytic generalisation difficult and subject to even more qualification than is normally the case.

(1991: 7)

The intent becomes rather to present the complexity of the matter and illustrate the nuances of such a “complex cultural conglomeration” of experience and phenomena as my informants conveyed them to me. For the remainder of this introductory chapter, I will outline the basic underlying themes of this thesis. Firstly, I will briefly discuss *ijjat*, which will be more fully explored in later chapters. Secondly, I will argue that *ijjat* provides a framework that provides Nepalis with a shared understanding of the world and behaviour in it. While this can be viewed similarly to cultural models, which gained popularity in anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s, I argue that *ijjat* as a framework has

more scope for improvisation and offers less rigidity than a structured model might provide. Thirdly, I discuss gendered subjectivities and why a conceptual understanding for subjectivities rather than identities allows for a more flexible representation of women's experiences. Next, I will discuss the shape of modern life in Nepal, particularly as framed through a lens of development or *bikāś*. I will follow this up with a brief introduction to alternative modernities and display its usefulness in conceptualising how the women in my field sites actively engaged in negotiations of both modern and traditional concepts and practices of womanhood. Subsequently, I will look to the uses of the figures 'feminist' and 'daughter-in-law' as devices of 'being modern' and 'being traditional', briefly discussing how Basanti and other informants discussed these subjectivities and account for the uses and contestations of such terms. Another key theme regarding these is the concept of freedom, or *svatantratā*, which will be briefly addressed before discussing this in later chapters and the thesis conclusion.

Ijjat

The discourse on anthropologies of honour and shame lie outside the scope of this thesis, however it would be remiss not to outline at least brief origins before introducing the related Nepali concepts. Anthropologists have looked at honour and shame in great detail across a variety of social settings (Persistiany, J.G. 1965; Pitt-Rivers 1977; Herzfeld 1980; Wikan 1984; Abu-Lughod 1985). Honour and shame became a popular focus of study in the 1960s, especially anthropologies centred on Mediterranean concepts of honour (see Persistiany, J.G 1965; Pitt-Rivers 1965). Pitt-Rivers defines honour as,

The value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his *claim* to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognised by society, his *right* to pride.

Pitt-Rivers 1965: 21

A chief understanding of honour and shame was that it maintained social order in numerous ways. Schneider named the "interdependent concepts, honour and shame"

(1971: 1) as being related to practices administering family integrity and the chastity of a society's young women (1971: 1). Positing honour as a political phenomenon, honour and shame can be found in a number of social interactions, from small, such as within a family unit, to large, such as a wider community or nation state Schneider (1971: 2). For example, Mediterranean societies that were traditionally both pastoral and agricultural in nature competed for resources in ways that fragmented the organisation of different communities. Schneider posits that codes of honour and shame were developed as their own means of social control, in the absence of a unified and controlling state (1971: 3).

From within the Mediterranean context, in which much anthropology of honour is focussed, the terms honour and shame have been used to describe a variety of "local social, sexual and economic standards" (Herzfeld 1980: 339). Herzfeld cautions however, on not making the mistake that honour and shame are readily translatable terms, for in the context of Mediterranean societies, there is a complexity that belies so-called 'English' or 'Western', understandings⁵.

South Asia⁶ has a very particular notion of honour, which finds some correlation with anthropologies of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern honour. Anthropology on honour and shame on the sub-continent gained popularity during the 1970s and 1980s (see Papanek 1973; Das 1976; Sharma 1978; Lapoint and Joshi 1986; Mandelbaum 1988). Looking across a variety of societies, ethnic groups, caste groups, and classes across the whole of South Asia various anthropologists have looked into the key factors of honour and shame systems to construct common themes of honour and shame across the sub-continent, with particular regard to sexuality, chastity and also to gender-based violence.

Persistiany asserted people or groups could be labelled as being 'with honour' and 'without honour' (1965: 10), however much recent anthropology suggests this is out dated, but rather shows that people can share gradients of honour and shame. Wikan argues in this way, "a shameful act may affect the person's value, but some value

⁵ The same would be applicable for the Nepali context, and as such, I have sought address the tension Herzfeld speaks of, and to understand local definitions of honour and shame by focussing specifically on the ethnographic contexts.

⁶ As to what countries constitute as making up South Asia, I am using the UN geographical composition index, which are, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

derived from other behaviour remains, and other consequences of the act may also accrue” (1984: 644).

While there are no definitive, overarching scripts for social and cultural life, there are unquestionably scripts *within* it (Ingold & Hallam 2007: 12). *Ijjat* presents Nepalis with a script, or framework, from which they derive an understanding of their world and which informs their agency. Thus, sociality and subjectivity in Nepal are associated with *ijjat*. *Ijjat* is a complex and nuanced system of values, behaviours and understandings. It is pertinent to note that in my field sites of Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, I worked largely with Hindu-based groups. I noted with some Buddhist informants, and in the literature, that correlations in people’s conceptions of *ijjat* could be found across a variety of demographic groups to varying degrees (see Mandelbaum 1988; McHugh 2001). Despite some correlations existing conceptually and in practice across diverse communities, there will undoubtedly be contestations across different religious and ethnic groups. Therefore, the form of *ijjat* I am presenting here does have certain grounding in more Hindu normative based traditions (see Bennett, Lynn 1983; Mandelbaum 1988; Gray, JN 1995), which will be discussed more fully throughout the thesis.

Ijjat is the shared framework that influences and speaks of a person’s honour, prestige, dignity, status, respectability, purity and chastity. Abstractly, *ijjat* is not any particular action in and of itself. While it loosely means ‘honour’ or ‘prestige’, it is contextual and thought of as having ‘thing-like’ qualities (see Liechty 2003, 2010). It can be measured against what *ijjat* others have and weighed against previous accumulation and loss. It is what one has or does not have, based on a complex range of factors such as caste, family, economic status, but importantly it is also based on one’s own and other’s actions and perceptions. It is the outcome of actions, or what honour one derives in the eyes of one’s community, not the actions themselves.

Ijjat provides a motivating force for individuals and groups and yet it also formulates an instructive discourse in itself, which provides an explanatory framework for women’s actions, beliefs, movements and appearances. However, it is important to emphasise that *ijjat* is not static or rigid and the extent to which it is internalised by different individuals varies depending on specific subjectivities. As different life circumstances

and external forces influence women, *ijjat* can be contested and is constantly being reconstituted and redefined through practice.

Nepalis understand that being *ijjatdār*, or ‘honourable’ is an important function of womanhood and is vitally responsible for the making of a ‘good’ woman (see Bennett, Lynn 1976, 1983; Skinner 1990). Cameron worked extensively on the theme of gender and honour with low-caste people in Western Nepal and offers useful criteria for the makeup of *ijjat*. She argues, and I agree, that women are responsible for *ijjat* in ways different to men, perhaps even disproportionately so. She states:

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the honour of the collective depends on the honour of its women. A household’s absence of honourable women (or abundance of dishonourable women) prevents a collective – be it a household, a patriline, or a caste unit – from claiming *ijjat*.

(1998: 137)

Due to this stewardship of *ijjat* it would appear women are seemingly afforded the ability to accumulate more honour than men. However, because women accumulate *ijjat* not only for themselves but for family members as well, this is not the case. Men and families have *ijjat*, too. Rather, there are much higher expectations socially on women than men to act honourably and accumulate honour for their family. Women are therefore not seen to have more *ijjat*, but are seen to have more responsibility for *ijjat*. Despite this, they are still seen more generally to maintain a lower status than their male counterparts (Cameron, 1998: 6). While status and honour are not mutually exclusive as concepts (Cameron 1998: 138), it is more often the case that a degree of status is earned for women through honourable action. This would suppose that practice is paramount in the accumulation and maintenance of *ijjat*. While practice is fundamentally important for acquiring honour (see Moxnes 1993), there are a number of factors which make up one’s *ijjat*, which will be further explored in the next chapter.

Ijjat provides a framework from which urban Nepali women experience and construct a sense of self and womanhood⁷. I favour the term framework over more structured terms, such as a model, because I do not presume this to be static or rigid and I aim to present it without suggesting homogeneity or unquestioned hegemony (Tsing 1993: 33). Furthermore, it is not the only framework from which Nepalis may derive a sense of self; however, it is a salient one. While not termed ‘a model’ here, it is worth drawing on the collected works of Holland and her colleagues, as she traces similar themes, of dialogic processes, practice and agency, through work on cultural models (Quinn & Holland 1987) and figured worlds (Holland *et al.* 1998). These theories are useful in explaining, firstly, how *ijjat* composes a powerful framework from which people derive some shared understandings and practices in their social worlds and secondly, how *ijjat* can be subject to contestation and reconfiguration.

Ijjat in Nepal can be framed similarly to the cognitive anthropological paradigm of the ‘cultural model’ (Quinn & Holland 1987; D’Andrade & Strauss 1992). Cultural models are presumed and “taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared (although not necessarily to the exclusion of other alternative models) by the members of a society and that play a primary role in their understanding of that world and their behaviour in it” (Quinn & Holland 1987: 4). In her work with daughters who care for their mothers in Hong Kong, Holroyd notes in respect to the caregiving obligations of her informants, that these models, while providing strong guidelines for what is considered ‘right’ and what behaviour should occur, are also highly personal and idiosyncratic (Holroyd 2001: 1128). This can also be said for what *ijjat* provides Nepalis, for it also carries embedded in its framework, among other appropriate behaviours, notions of what is acceptable femininity and what is not, and how this ought to be carried out in practice. Holroyd further explains the complexity, arguing:

Some cultural models are enacted daily and come to be seen as ‘right’, as arising ‘naturally’ without conscious thought, whereas other cultural models are only a hollow echo of public-social discourses and as such have virtually no

⁷ This is not to say other Nepali women may not also derive a sense of personhood or womanhood from *ijjat* or from other value systems as well. Certainly, an argument could be made to this effect based on looking at the available literature (see Cameron 1998; McHugh 1998). However, due to my field sites centering on urban locales, this will focus on what can reasonably be said about women in the contexts in which I studied.

motivating force. What is central to this analysis is that the dominant discourses of obligation are not merely reproduced, but are embedded in a complex process of understanding, experience and life circumstances (generation, gender and social class) that can lead to their acceptance or rejection.

(2001: 1128)

While people may draw from the similarly shared cultural model, their actions and feelings will be slightly different depending on the subjectivities of the individual and the context. This acknowledges that “obligation is not merely reproduced” (2001: 1128) but is internalised by individuals and acted upon based on varied processes informed by unique understandings, experiences and circumstances. This appears to have deepened and progressed in the work of Holland *et al* on ‘figured worlds’ and ‘History in Person’ (Holland *et al.* 1998; Holland & Lave 2001b). These works are more attentive to the dynamic play of negotiation, contestation and reconfiguration. I thus utilise the ‘figured worlds’ of Holland *et al* (1998), in particular, as a useful frame for analysis because they explain both the shared understandings of what it means to be a ‘good’ woman and the complexity, nuances and diversity of experiences that arose in my field sites.

McHugh has argued that honour provides a cultural model for Gurungs, a Buddhist ethnic group of Nepal. She claims honour has remained a constant guiding principle in the lives of her informants, despite Nepal undergoing rapid political changes in recent times (1998: 156). For Gurungs, honour provides an organising principle from which people apprehend their own significance. She says they devote much time and effort to enhancing, defending and managing their honour, as well as appraising the honour of others (1998: 155). McHugh proposes that there are indeed “multiple slippages”, whereby individuals may interpret honour in ways other than that which is generally socially endorsed due to an “intermingling of contrasting and overlapping value systems according to which honour is defined” (McHugh 1998: 155). McHugh says this may be owing to internalising different versions of a cultural model based on varied life experiences or to migration. I agree but argue it is more nuanced than this. By negotiating the ambiguous areas created by such “slippages”, we see what McHugh terms “the active production of selves” (McHugh 1998: 156), whereby honour becomes a concept useful to understanding the identities, experience and history of Gurungs and

more broadly Nepalis. I find “the active production of selves” to pertain less to rigid models as such, and more useful when considering the practices and experiences of womanhood, particularly through processes of negotiation in certain contexts.

For McHugh, honour is pivotal for constructing a Gurung sense of personhood, formulated within the cultural model honour provides. She, like Holroyd, also accounts for the complex ways in which people act within this cultural model.

It is helpful to remember that action is complexly motivated, not entirely determined by ideology or circumstance. People act in reference to goals they have formulated or feelings that impel them. Whether reaching for goals or responding to feelings, the individual draws on a framework of ideas, or schema, in determining a course of action.

(McHugh 1998: 156)

In a similar manner, and because *ijjat* has gendered dimensions, I argue that *ijjat* was an important force in the constitution and experience of Nepali womanhood for my urban informants. Thinking of *ijjat* as a framework in these ways offers a useful tool for the analysis of gendered subjectivities in the contexts of Kathmandu and Bhaktanagar. While it accounts for commonly understood and shared motivational forces in people’s lives, it also provides for the complex, flexible nature of people’s experiences, practices and subjectivities. *Ijjat* helps to explain why some people do what they do; however, it does not ensure they will do what a model may dictate. In this space lies the practice of negotiation, which lies at the heart of this thesis.

Gendered subjectivities

Numerous anthropologists have utilised subjectivity or a subjective lens through which to view their fields (see Uhlmann 2004; Das, Veena 2008; Kunreuther 2009; Spiro 2013; Ortner 2014). Actors’ subjectivities are best conceived of as their “thoughts, sentiments and embodied sensibilities, and, especially, their sense of self and self-world relations” (Holland & Leander 2004: 127). March asserts bodies are important, as they

are concurrently the focal points of both selfhood (the thinking subject) and personhood (the morally constituted object of wider relations) (March 1998: 220). Ortnor inserts agency into her definition of subjectivity, understanding “subjectivity as the basis of ‘agency’, a necessary part of understanding how people (try to) act on the world even as they are acted upon” (2006: 110). She posits that agency becomes tangible as specified aspiration and intention “within a matrix of subjectivity – of culturally constituted feelings, thoughts and meanings” (2006: 110).

For Chodorow, gendered subjectivity suggests that gender is not wholly constructed by culture, politics or language. Rather, there are individual psychological processes, which are separate from power relations, culture and language, and together, assist to construct gender for a person (1995: 517).

Each person’s sense of gender – her gender identity or gendered subjectivity – is an inextricable fusion or melding of personally created *and* cultural meaning... When I claim that gender is inevitably personal as well as cultural, I do not mean only that people create individualised cultural or linguistic versions of meaning by drawing upon cultural meaning and images, but they experience them emotionally and through fantasy, as well as in particular interpersonal contexts. Individuals thereby create new meanings in terms of their own unique biographies and histories of intrapsychic strategies and practices.

(1995: 517)

For a field site that yielded multiple and complex views associated with *ijjat* and the ‘ideal’ Nepali woman, acknowledging subjectivity as a framework of understanding, particularly gender, is useful. I entered the field with a quote ringing in my ears: “The job of the anthropologist [is] to find culture...I had been taught that people followed cultural patterns. Where were the obedient pattern followers?” (Holland *et al* 1998: 16). Like Holland *et al*, I could not always find them. As I puzzled over this it became evident that people, individually and grouped, do not simply hold only one perspective at one time but are instead “dialogic in nature”, with a tendency to embrace a number of different views in “virtual simultaneity and tension” (Holland *et al*. 1998: 15) regardless

of whether there is a logical compatibility or not. For my project, the aim is to demonstrate that by “taking seriously the subject’s own experience of their gender, we gain important insights” (Albanesi 2009: 105) into womanhood in Nepal, which is, in turn, informed from the shared cultural framework *ijjat* provides. This allows for several notions to come to the fore. Firstly, the concept of subjectivities permits a much wider range of possibilities of experience and practice to emerge from the data. Secondly, it is forgiving of the fact that, despite some shared understandings of cultural frameworks such as *ijjat*, Nepali women are not “obedient pattern followers” (Holland *et al.* 1998: 16). Allowing for subjectivities prevents it seeming that Nepali women act in ways that contradict the framework of what it means to be a ‘good’ woman. Rather, they act contextually and in ways that resonate with differing but interrelated subjectivities. Focussing on subjectivity, rather than fixed identities, allows for the myriad of contexts to fully describe a Nepali woman’s notion of womanhood as a lived dynamic, fluid and changing. As Holland and Lave argue:

Subjectivities [...] are formed in practice through the often collective work of evoking, improvising, appropriating, and refusing participation in practices that position self and other. They are durable not because individual persons have essential or primal identities but because the multiple contexts in which dialogical, intimate identities make sense and give meaning are re-created in contentious local practice.

(2001a: 29-30)

As a lived dynamic, womanhood not only changes and adapts over the course of a woman’s lifetime, but oftentimes over the course of a single day, as different contexts elicit different behaviours.

***Bikāś*: Development in Nepal**

Development is simultaneously a concept, an activity and a goal. As Peet and Hartwick suggest, “development is a founding belief of modernity” (2009: 1). Its vision is global

and universalising (Escobar 1988) and might be best thought of as a “process of social transformation (‘modernisation’; ‘empowerment’) that is brought about by specific programmes... such as maternal health... or ‘meeting basic needs’” (Pigg 1992: 496). The discourse appeared between 1945 and 1955, as new approaches in global relations were adopted between rich and poor nations. This developed for a number of historical reasons, namely decolonisation, changes in population and production structures, the advance of communism in particular areas and the fear of it in the capitalist world, and an increased faith and advancements in science and technology (Escobar 1988: 429).

Development has become a significant mechanism for an emerging modernity in Nepal (see Bista 1991; Pigg 1992; Kramer 2008). Pigg argues that development in the Nepali context has a “more profoundly social meaning” and does not stand for the “residues of imperialism”, but is rather more a linkage made between Nepal and the West. She states: “*Bikāś* is the term through which Nepalis understand their relationship to other parts of the world” (Pigg 1992: 497). Nepali life is undergoing a rapid state of change, particularly in urban areas, such as Kathmandu and Bhaktanagar. As Liechty says, “people [...] are powerfully aware of living in a radically new era” (Liechty 2003: 4). The Social Welfare Council (SWC) of Nepal puts registered NGOs at 30 284 and of these, there are over 2300 registered women’s NGOs alone (SWC 2014). Development was taken up as a serious national project in Nepal during the 1960s’ *Panchayat* era⁸ (see Whelpton 2005). As road networks and communication systems expanded, improvements were also made to healthcare and education (2005: 137-139). As development took off in the 1980s and 1990s with an increase in foreign aid and local NGOs, it consolidated itself as a powerful and dominant discourse for Nepalis. It has significantly affected the ways in which Nepali concepts of personhood have evolved, as evidenced by changes in expressed beliefs, consumption practices, and use of language (Pigg 1996; Liechty 2003; Ahearn 2004).

Other influences also operate alongside development. Liechty (2003) engages with a broader modernity than simply development. He argues that the emergent middle class in Kathmandu produces its culture through shared practices of modernity, in the form of pop culture, media, education, and shared tales of morality. He proposes middle-class

⁸ King Mahendra introduced the *Panchayat* System in 1961. He abruptly dismissed the popularly elected Nepali Congress and instated his own party-less rule for the next thirty years, when it was overthrown in the 1990 *jana andolān I*, or the first people's movement for democracy (Khadka 2010: 47).

practices exist within cultural scapes of honour, achievement and abilities. His focus is on the *practice* of class rather than what one may posit class to *be*. Liechty's work on an "*ijjat* based economy" (2010) is a key ethnographic work that analyses honour and modernity in an urban Nepali context. With this in mind, I argue that Knauft's discussion on 'alternative modernity' (see 2002b) is useful for expanding on the themes found in Liechty's work, because he prioritises the importance of both the histories and the localities of modernity when he asks, "what does it mean to be or resist being modern in world areas and locales that have different local histories?" (Knauft 2002b: 1) My work acknowledges Liechty's contribution with regard to practice, modernity and *ijjat*, but departs from looking at class alone. I argue that there is evidence to suggest there is room for comparison *across* class, caste and, to an extent, religious and ethnic background, because these are also vital components that make up the different "local histories" of Kathmandu and Bhaktanagar. This is because I found *ijjat* to be significant to Nepali women from a range of different demographic positions.

Knauft describes 'being modern' as a mediation process.

Standards of social advancement and progress are seen to differ depending on cultural and historical conditions. The process of becoming modern is contested and mediated through alter-native guises. It has been increasingly suggested that modernity is importantly regional, multiple, vernacular, or "other" in character.

(2002b: 1)

From this he asks, "how does modernity become different?" (Knauft 2002b: 2) and this is where he offers us the term "alternatively modern". This concept acknowledges that at the centre of 'becoming modern' lies an articulation between regional and global forces of supposed progress and the particulars of local sensibility and response. It "engages the global with the local and the impact of political economy with cultural orientations and subjective dispositions" (Knauft 2002b: 24). Therefore, Knauft asks, "What new social formations arise? What forms of subjectivity and subordination are incited? What new diversities are generated and how do these draw on local history as well as on regional connections or international influences?" (Knauft 2002b: 1) Similarly, I also ask what kinds of gendered subjectivity are incited for women in my

field sites? Within the framework of *ijjat*, how do contexts and different subject positions influence women's negotiations of womanhood in the face of tradition and modernity?

Knauft speaks of modernity as a process, and what this process of 'becoming' or 'being' so-called modern entails. People in various locales take up or resist change and indeed this is a key feature of modernity (Lal 2001: 249). This point was critical to my understanding how women in my field sites understood and practised their sense of womanhood as they negotiated being 'modern' and being 'traditional'. It is a fundamental feature of daily life for women in urban Nepal, as women described resisting and taking up change to varying degrees. One day, sitting on an office roof in Kathmandu, I asked Jyoti, a Bāhun woman working for EMFN, about menstruation and the traditions⁹ that dictate perceptions and behaviour surrounding it.

Sarah: What do you do when you have your period?

Jyoti: I cook, I go into all rooms but if I have to touch the god in the temple I have to think twice. If I touch the god then my hand shakes. *This* is socialisation. Young women say, "Yeah yeah yeah, I touch the god, but they don't. I know it's not impure from analysis of scientific way. I don't hamper anything. I can analyse this with my mind. But to touch the god, I analyse this with my *man* (heart) and the *man* is what's socialised in this society.

Jyoti describes herself as a modern Nepali woman. She has a successful career, a love marriage¹⁰ and considers herself a feminist. She works as a prominent radio personality, working on radio programmes for women's empowerment and development. Her comment about the heart being socialised offers insight into how Jyoti, and Nepali women more generally, might see the internalisation of values being tied to strong feelings. Across numerous Nepali groups there is an understanding that the heart, or

⁹ Hindu normative traditions have strict understandings and practices surrounding menstruating women. These will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

¹⁰ The most common marriages I encountered were 'arranged', whereby parents organised the marriage, and 'love', which refers to marriage instigated by the bride and groom and is sometimes met with disapproval of the family.

*man*¹¹, is more commonly conceptualised as a ‘heart-mind’ (McHugh 1989, 2001; Desjarlais, RR 1992; Henderson 1996; Kohrt, Tol & Harper 2007; Kohrt & Harper 2008). For many, the heart-mind is considered the seat of emotion and also where anxiety (*cintā*) and suffering (*duḥkha*) are most strongly felt (Kohrt, Tol & Harper 2007: 544). In McHugh’s work with Gurung people the ‘heart-mind’ “brings feeling, memory, and thought together in the body” (McHugh 2001: 44). In telling me the heart is socialised, Jyoti speaks about the emotional dynamic involved in the tension between using her “scientific way” and her heart, socialised by *ijjat*. For her, the socialised heart is where tension is felt as she is pulled between modern and traditional knowledge and practices.

This thesis asks central questions about processes and practices of modernity in Nepal and the ways which women experience ‘becoming modern’ as a negotiation between competing subjectivities. These subjectivities are commonly articulated through an analytic binary of being either traditional or modern, but in reality are context dependent, multiple and nuanced. As Knauff describes:

The alternatively modern thus harbours a dialectical notion of how becoming locally or nationally “developed” occurs through selective appropriation, opposition, and redefinition of authenticity in relation to market forces and aspirations for economic and political improvement... the alternatively modern is the social and discursive space in which the relationship between modernity and tradition is configured. This configuration is forged in a crucible of cultural beliefs and orientations on one hand, and politico-economic constraints and opportunities on the other. In short, the alternatively modern is the articulatory space through which notions of modernity and tradition are co-constructed as progress and history in the context of culture and political economy.

(2002b: 25-26)

It becomes important to see how Nepalis are influenced by global modernity, and even Western modernisation, and how these are linked with both personal subjectivities and

¹¹ *Man* is the Nepali word for ‘heart’ or ‘heart-mind’. Other language groups in Nepal and the region have similar concepts, for example, *sem* for Yolmo and Tamang peoples (Desjarlais, RR 1992; March 2002: 8) or *sae* for Gurung people (McHugh 1989, 2001).

locally defined images of socio-cultural development and womanhood. ‘Alternative modernity’ posits that identities and social processes are relational, no matter how big or small, global or local. They are also complex and multi-faceted. ‘Alternative modernity’ thus addresses “the figure-ground relationship between modernity and tradition as these are locally or nationally perceived and configured. Though these features are often viewed as antithetical to one another, they are in fact intricately and importantly intertwined” (Knauft 2002b: 25). In terms of gendered subjectivity, one of the ways in which the “figure-ground relationship” between tradition and modernity is configured is in the practices and experiences of women negotiating the roles of the daughter-in-law and feminist.

“The Daughter-in-law”, “The Feminist” and the tension between honour and freedom

Basanti’s comment offers a useful device with which to examine modernity and tradition in Nepal, particularly for women. The ‘feminist’ and the ‘daughter-in-law’, as analytic and not literal binaries, are prominent concepts for Nepalis, as gender norms are central to evaluating women’s behaviour. These figures are not to be thought of as set identities or pathways to which women must adhere. Rather, they are points of reference that women (and men) recognise as being important culturally for figuring certain practices as more important than others. These figures are significant for the imaginary practices of being a woman and for womanhood in Nepal generally. Development discourse positions women as important figures in a ‘new Nepal’ as the nation-state undergoes rapid and extraordinary political change (see Greenland 2013). These, of course, are not the only roles with which women engage and they may and will take up many overlapping roles, such as, though not limited to, mother, daughter, wife, mother-in-law, student, worker, sister and widow. These two, however, seem largely representative not only of a perceived dichotomy of modernity and tradition, but as two contentious and desired roles for women in Nepal. They are both contentious because they can cause tension when women try to reconcile being one in relation to the other. They are also both desired, as being a daughter-in-law is traditionally the socially

accepted way to garner and maintain *ijjat*. However, women also desired features of the feminist because she represents access to and enjoyment of rights, freedom and equality. I critically engage these terms to analyse the tension women described between being modern and traditional. In doing so, I look at ways women are negotiating their identities in an environment that encourages both traditional values, and the adoption of modern desires and assets.

In Basanti's comment, it is clear that the 'daughter-in-law' represents for her the antithesis of a 'feminist'. Where the 'feminist' is linked to notions of empowerment, rights, freedom and equality, the 'daughter-in-law' represents the historical and stringent notions of an honourable Nepali womanhood. This is not to imply daughters-in-law are viewed negatively. Rather, she speaks to the frustrations associated with the expectations of being a daughter-in-law that many other women also discussed with me. The position of daughter-in-law was one in which many informants described feeling the most pressure to perform familial and societal expectations to be a so-called 'good' and honourable woman. Yet, despite a tension, it was also a role in which informants took great pride and desired for the status, honour and respect they could potentially attain. Essentially, informants posited the figure of daughter-in-law as a role in which an idealised womanhood could be realised. Idealised womanhood was also figured as being traditional because of women's relationships to men. There have long been notions that the male/female dichotomy comes to represent other dichotomies, such as public/private or modern/traditional (Lamphere 2007; Liechty 2010: 314). As Liechty argues, "to the extent that 'modernity' is claimed as a male domain, women are relegated to an equally imagined domain of 'tradition' (Liechty 2010: 316).

For Basanti the concept of the feminist was also appealing. When I spoke to other informants it was variously conceptualised, and framed within understandings of women's rights through development. One constraint of this work is that my informants were largely activists, development workers and/or target audiences of development practice and so this could not be said to represent all Nepali women's sentiments. For these informants, their understandings of and positive feelings towards feminism would be at least partly shaped by feminist discourse disseminated through the development discourse and practice they were exposed to. For most, the feminist was associated with features, such as rights, equality and employment, linked to modernity. Many

informants also shied away from the label feminist because it invoked accusations of ‘man hating’ and ‘bra burning’. A large number of informants correlated feminist with being ‘outspoken’, which had both positive and negative associations. While many felt ‘raising voice’ (Kunreuther 2014) was positive because it brought about rights and positive political change, others felt it was negative because according to traditional frameworks of *ijjat*, a ‘good’ woman does not raise her voice at all (Bennett, Lynn 1983: 3). When I undertook deeper discussions with participants, a majority said that to ‘be modern’ meant to have freedom to choose one’s life path. One informant emphatically stated, “To be modern to me is to take decisions about self without objection from anyone!”

Freedom (*svatantratā*) became a noteworthy theme as my fieldwork continued. The definition of freedom differed amongst my informants. Generally, freedom could be categorised as increased mobility, increased decision-making power, and freedom of choice in a range of areas, such as dress, education, employment, where to go and whom to see in one’s spare time and whom to marry. For some it additionally meant freedom from poverty. Freedom is in part recognised not through discussions explicitly about freedom itself, but by virtue of discussions about restriction. Nepali girls often receive differential treatment to boys and one of the ways this manifests is they are “not permitted freedom of movement”, especially with the onset of puberty (see Skinner 1990; Majupuria 2007: 166). I noticed this as an evident tension for my informants. One day in a restaurant, my Chētrī friend and informant Rita held my hand and wept as she was dismayed at the pressures she was feeling as a daughter-in-law, saying:

You know, I used to think badly about a friend for choosing to leave [Nepal].
There’s so much to do here! We need her [skills]. But maybe she is right?
Maybe I need to prioritise my freedom for my happiness and work for my
country better because of that happiness?

Liechty identifies freedom as an important component in urban Nepali women understanding themselves as modern. However, it is also a source of fear as it brings social stigma and violence (Liechty 2010: 308). This supports my argument that *ijjat*

has both enabling¹² and disabling qualities. In this understanding, *ijjat* can limit a woman from taking up certain freedoms, and thereby constrain her capacity to be ‘modern’. One study in the Mid-West also identifies freedom as both an issue of desire and contention for married girls and their families. Gautam’s interviews with Bāhun¹³, Chētrī, Thārū, Kāmī and Damāi¹⁴ groups, discovered that her young married informants were “sad” as they believed that their life became more difficult after marriage. Reasons cited were because “they could not attend good activities out of the house as they did not have any freedom; they were under pressure from their parents-in-law; their husbands did not listen to them” and further that they had to discontinue their education and had ongoing conflicts with sisters-in-law and mothers-in-law (1999: 43). A common barrier to girls’ development was stated to be bad gossip, as all informants felt “if freedom is given to a daughter, neighbours criticise (the) daughter and mother” (1999: 56). However, when parents and in-laws did give young women more freedom, daughters and daughters-in-law said it “feels good for them” (Gautam 1999: 38).

Foucault discusses freedom not as a state that can be achieved but in terms of exercising freedom. In doing so he refers to the degree to which and the ways in which people are able to exercise choice or are subject to coercion (see Foucault 1997). As Laidlaw puts it simply, “One can have more or less freedom, and it takes different forms, in different historical situations” (Laidlaw 2014: 104-105). Therefore, freedom is a comparative term. In my field sites, it signified many different things to women from different backgrounds. For some poorer or lower caste women, freedom generally meant freedom from ‘suffering’, which usually indicated having fewer financial burdens, food security for themselves and their children, education for their children and themselves, freedom over their own bodies, and being free from a violent husband or family. For upper classes and castes the concept of freedom meant a whole host of issues. These informants noted a range of issues including achieving tertiary and post-graduate education, having employment and income control, choice of spouse, participation or

¹² Enabling qualities are more subtle than disabling ones and will be explored through ethnographic content throughout and in the conclusion to the thesis.

¹³ Bāhun is the local Nepali term for the highest Hindu caste, traditionally of priests, also commonly referred to as Brahmin (see Höfer 2004). Both terms are used in literature on Nepal and were also both utilised by my informants.

¹⁴ Thārū people are indigenous to the Tarāi region (see Guneratne 2002). Kāmī and Damāi are so-called low-caste, ‘untouchables’, belonging to the groups associated with metal work and tailoring respectively. While a minority of people within these groups identify as Buddhists, the census puts the majority of Bāhun, Chētrī, Thārū, Kāmī and Damāi as Hindus (National Planning Commission Secretariat 2012).

non-participation in religious ceremonies, and freedom of choice over their mobility and dress. The majority of women were concerned with choice. Some women felt they had “no choice” and so freedom and choice became pertinent issues by virtue of their absence. Many other women were fraught with concern at some level or another as how to negotiate choice and autonomy on a grounded, experiential level.

Conclusion: Summary of chapters

This thesis investigates how *ijjat*, tradition and modernity are important for shaping Nepali women’s gendered subjectivities and consists of six substantive chapters that reflect key facets of these intersecting themes. Chapter One locates the ethnographic contexts of Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu within the wider geographical, political and socio-cultural background of Nepal. I also discuss key methodological features, including feminist ethnography and reflexive, auto-ethnographic accounts and their uses, as well as address a background to the literature on gendered modernities.

Chapter Two discusses more fully the dimensions of *ijjat* in terms of its relationship with gender. In Kathmandu and Bhaktanagar, there was a sense that there was a particular notion of womanhood. Therefore, this chapter argues that *ijjat* forms a strong framework for conceptualising, understanding and practising this ‘idealised’ sense of womanhood, otherwise termed as the ‘good’ woman. It further contextualises the importance of *ijjat* and the collective, by discussing the deep importance of women’s relationships and how these differ, vary and change over the lifecycle of a woman.

Chapter Three discusses gendered subjectivity and how it is variously shaped by gendered performance and surveillance. Having established the features of a ‘good’ Nepali woman, I then realised that it was rather more important for my informants not simply to *be* a ‘good’ woman, but to *be seen to be one*. This chapter highlights the ways and means in which women negotiated their womanhood contextually. The public sphere is of great importance to the construction of womanhood for my informants because it is the space in which women can gain, maintain and/or lose *ijjat* in the eyes of their communities. While the public sphere acts as a governing mechanism of sorts, it

is important to note that women found subversive ways to exert their agency and achieve desired ends, even when it contravened the normative notion of being a ‘good’ woman.

Chapter Four explores women’s sexuality with regards to *ijjat* and how this is important for the construction of an idealised womanhood. Sexuality is used either to bolster and maintain, or to undermine and destroy a woman’s, and her family’s, *ijjat*. Therefore, ‘good’ sexuality it is seen as pivotal for reputation maintenance amongst families and communities. In order to maintain *ijjat*, a woman’s sexuality is controlled in various ways. Because matters of menstruation, puberty, pregnancy and childbirth are related to women’s bodies and sexual health/practice, there are key activities that many women also felt were sources of tension. This chapter concludes with attitudes to women who do not maintain their chastity or sexual propriety, even those whose sexuality is seen as ‘bad’ due to factors outside her control such as rape and trafficking.

The fifth chapter argues that violence is a prominent feature in Nepali women’s lives. However, on speaking to my informants it became obvious that their understandings were not simply articulating violence as depicted in languages of development, but were identifying a more pervasive sense of suffering, or *duhkha*, in their lives. *Ijjat* is linked to violence in various ways. For one, it is often rationalised as integral to the management of *ijjat* and reputation. It is also largely responsible for why women keep their discontents to themselves, instead opting for silence in order to maintain the *ijjat* of the family. Addressing first anthropology of violence, I move on to discuss how violence is normalised through local expectations and language, which causes women to discuss violence in terms of ‘difficulty’, ‘tension’ and ‘suffering’. I argue that even in the face of such suffering, women experience difficulty in speaking out against violence because the preservation of *ijjat* is of paramount concern. In this sense, I see silence as one of the traditional ways women not only manage their *ijjat*, but come to manage their discontents as well. There is also a sense, however, that discontents can become unbearable and this is exemplified in the high rates of suicide amongst Nepali women, which I also discuss in detail here.

In the final chapter, I discuss emerging ways women are responding to modernity, *ijjat* and their discontents by engaging with other gendered subjectivities, such as the

feminist, or those firmly grounded in development rhetoric. I contextualise the feminisms that are pertinent to the Nepali setting by briefly detailing development feminism and the women's movement in Nepal. I will look at the figure of the feminist, translated in Nepali as *mahilā adhikār karmī*, an 'agent of change for women's rights'. This establishes how the feminist was understood and practised in the contexts of Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, as well as looking at the concept of freedom, which was raised constantly as a key desire and marker of being modern. Because *ijjat* makes it difficult to speak up in the face of injustice, I turn to what women termed *sāhas*, or 'boldness'. My informants expressed they consciously thought about 'boldness' in order to "raise their voices" against violence and discrimination. 'Raising voice', or *āvāḥ uṭhāune*, (see Kunreuther 2009, 2014) was also identified as an important practice to being identified as modern and achieving women's rights. Voice has been identified as being strongly linked to political action in Nepal, not only the women's movement (see Kunreuther 2014). In engaging with 'raising voice' (see Kunreuther 2009, 2014) a space is being created where women are actively engaging with the figure of the 'feminist', and/or its related development discourses, as a means to express their discontents and bring about social change.

I conclude that the posited *analytic* binary of the feminist and the daughter-in-law represents real tensions for women; hence Basanti's emphatic belief one cannot be a feminist *and* be a daughter-in-law. However, what she is ostensibly indicating is that, from the subject position of daughter-in-law, it is difficult to take on characteristics and practices of the feminist, because these are positioned in vastly different figured worlds (see Chapter Two). This thesis will show that these can and do shift. Furthermore, womanhood was practised and experienced in contextually nuanced ways, which were influenced through *ijjat* and themes of being modern and being traditional. Womanhood for my participants was processual and dynamic. Furthermore, while there were also undoubtedly sacrifices to be made, through this dynamic process, in which they engaged directly in different formations of womanhood, it became clear that the lives of women are undoubtedly changing, in their words, "for the better".

CHAPTER ONE

ORIENTATIONS

As I slumped into my seat on the tiny tin can plane, I breathed a drawn out, complicated sigh of relief and anticipation in an attempt to counter the pit of anxiety in my stomach. The waiting was finally over and I was almost where I had envisioned myself, at some ends-of-the-earth pinprick on the map. Kathmandu, while intriguing, was not far enough. My original plan, somewhere in the hills at the border with India was, it seemed, too far. So Bhaktanagar would be my compromise. It wasn't the world's end, but it felt close enough.

As the two flimsy propellers tacked onto the wings sprang to life and lifted me upward and into the next year and a half of my life, Nepal appeared through the grubby window as a land of contrast. Flying above the landscape I took in an almost frightening beauty, the huge Himalayas to my right. The tiny plane must have looked like a speck of dust against the tall white, grey and desolate backdrop. To my left, the expanse of the southern plains, flat, at times green and lush, at others hazy and brown. I took in the millions of tiny houses and lives below. The rice paddies and streams glowed golden, as if the sun was shining through tiny cracks beneath the earth, lighting my way.

Field Reflection, excerpt

This chapter will focus on the orientations of the research. First, it will set up the physical orientations, demography of Nepal and my field sites and also introduce a brief political and cultural history of Nepal. Secondly, it will detail the ethnographic methodologies I considered and employed while directing the focus of this study, accounting for particular focus on multi-sited and feminist ethnography as well as reflexivity.

Physical orientations: Geographical, political and demographic contexts

Underneath Tibet¹⁵ and the ridge of the central Himalayan mountain range, Nepal sits cupped by India along its Western, Eastern and Southern borders. It stretches for approximately 800 kilometres from east to west and 160 kilometres from north to south. Many of the world's highest mountains, including the highest, Mount Everest,¹⁶ are located inside Nepal's borders. Geographically, Nepal is divided into three ecological regions: the high Himalayas (known as the Mountain region), Middle Hills and *Tarāī* or plains. The mountainous region sits higher than 2000 metres above sea level. South of the high Himalayas, at an altitude between 2000 and 1000 metres above sea level, is the hills region. Two chief mountain ranges sit in this region, the Mahabharat Lekh and Churia Siwialik ranges. These extend along this zone made up of temperate and tropical forest, although much has now been cleared for agricultural purposes. The lower plains of the *Tarāī* run along the southern border of Nepal with India. The northernmost scope of the Gangetic flood plain, it is home to the country's most productive farmland (Wilmore 2008: 11-12). As Figure 1, below suggests, the majority of Nepal's population lives in the more fertile regions of the Middle Hills and *Tarāī* (National Planning Commission Secretariat 2012: 51).

¹⁵ Tibet is otherwise known as the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, but is referred to as Tibet in this thesis.

¹⁶ *Sagarmāthā* in Nepali and *Chomalongmo* in Tibetan.

Area	Household *	Population			Area in Sq. Km.	Average House-hold Size	Sex Ratio	Population Density
		Total	Male	Female				
Nepal	5,427,302	26,494,504	12,849,041	13,645,463	147,181	4.88	94.2	180
Urban/Rural								
Urban	1,047,297	4,523,820	2,306,049	2,217,771	3,276.28	4.32	104.0	1,381
Rural	4,380,005	21,970,684	10,542,992	11,427,692	143,904.72	5.02	92.3	153
Ecological Belt								
Mountain	364,120	1,781,792	862,592	919,200	51,817	4.89	93.8	34
Hill	2,534,430	11,394,007	5,440,067	5,953,940	61,345	4.50	91.4	186
Terai	2,528,752	13,318,705	6,546,382	6,772,323	34,019	5.27	96.7	392
Development Region								
Eastern Dev. Region	1,231,505	5,811,555	2,790,483	3,021,072	28,456	4.72	92.4	204
Central Dev. Region	1,964,045	9,656,985	4,841,624	4,815,361	27,410	4.92	100.5	352
Western Dev. Region	1,066,362	4,926,765	2,292,597	2,634,168	29,398	4.62	87.0	168
Mid-Western Dev. Region	695,419	3,546,682	1,706,450	1,840,232	42,378	5.10	92.7	84
Far-Western Dev. Region	469,971	2,552,517	1,217,887	1,334,630	19,539	5.43	91.3	131

Figure 1: Households, population and population density by urban/rural divide, ecological belt and Development Region (National Planning Commission Secretariat 2012).

As of September 2015, Nepal was politically divided into seven provinces¹⁷, with seventy-five districts. Each district is governed by a Chief District Officer (CDO), who is responsible for the maintenance of general law and order, and implementing national policy and strategies.

¹⁷ At the time of this study Nepal was divided into five development regions, consisting of fourteen administrative zones and seventy-five districts. From west to east these development regions were named the Far-Western Development Region, the Mid-Western Development Region, the Western Development Region, the Central Development Region and the Eastern Development Region.

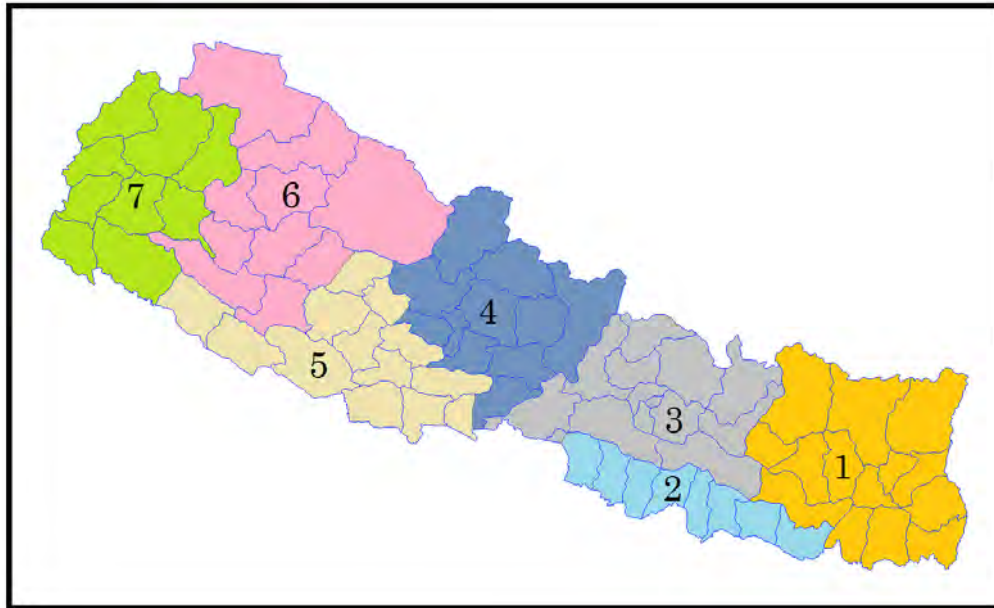


Figure 2: Nepal's Provinces, post 2015 (Karma 2015)

Nepal has a long, rich and diverse history (see Whelpton 2005). Now named the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, it was once a Hindu kingdom. While subject to disputes with the Chinese and Tibetans throughout the 18th and 19th centuries and various internal disputes for centuries more (Whelpton 2005), Nepal has remained a relatively autonomous nation, withstanding colonialism and invasion from the outside. Under the monarchical rule of the Ranas in the first half of the 20th century Nepal began a period of self-definition based on promoting the singular use of a national Nepali language (Gellner 1997). In 1948, the Nepali Democratic Congress was born and it led a popular political movement during the 1950s, which saw the autocratic Rana rule come to an end (Khadka 2010: 47) and the Shah lineage of kings reinstated (Whelpton 2005: xxi). After a short period of parliamentary democracy, King Mahendra¹⁸ removed the Congress government and established direct royal rule with the Panchayat System in 1960. He furthered the creation of the Nepali nation state through a series of reforms encapsulated in the slogan “one language, one national dress, one country”. The *Panchayat* system was primarily focussed on unifying the nation under values centred on the monarchy and its role in making and sustaining the nation state, on the primacy of the Hindu religion, and on making Nepali the national language (Whelpton 2005: 183-184). The assimilationist agenda was so intense it was even purported that citizens,

¹⁸ Of the Shah Dynasty and King from 1955 until his death in 1972. He was succeeded by his son Birendra.

especially children starting school, should switch to exclusive use of the Nepali language as soon as possible, forgetting their native tongue, so that “greater national strength and unity [would] result” (National Education Planning Commission, Nepal, NEPC 1956). This rule lasted for thirty years, continuing under Mahendra’s son, Birendra. The propagation of this unified Nepali national identity occurred to the detriment of other ethnic groups. As a result, various movements for the rights of different *janājāti* (ethnic groups) have gained popularity in recent times (see Gellner 2009; Hangen 2010). For thirty years, discontent brewed and in 1990 a popular people’s movement, the *jana āndōlan I*, forced Birendra to take on a multi-party democracy (Khadka 2010: 47). He still, however, retained certain reserve powers, which included control over the military (Whelpton 2005: 246). Nonetheless, a groundswell of civil unrest still bubbled beneath the surface, as many groups remained dissatisfied with government process and this provided the genesis of the Communist/Maoist era of Nepali politics, which subsequently led to a decade long civil conflict.

The landscape for communist politics in Nepal is complicated as many splinter groups arose in the 1980s and 1990s, breaking free of the original Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Centre), or CPN (UC), which was formed in 1949. After the 1990 *jana āndōlan I* the open political system introduced an environment where there was “no shortage of platforms for individuals and organisations to set out their own demands and their own vision of Nepal’s future” (Whelpton 2005: 201). The complex histories of the various communist parties are beyond the scope of this thesis. However, of most note are the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), or CPN (Maoist)¹⁹ and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) (UML)²⁰. The CPN (Maoist) was formed in 1994, by Pushpa Kamal Dahal, known as ‘Prachanda’, meaning ‘fierce’. The CPN (Maoist) launched the ‘People’s War’ in 1996. By 2001, when the Nepali Army joined the campaign, the CPN (Maoist) had control of much of the country, especially the rural western provinces (Whelpton 2005; UNTERM 2014). The conflict lasted from 1996-

¹⁹ In 2009 the CPN (Maoist) merged with CPN (Unity Centre- Masal), a conglomerate of the original CPN (UC) and the newer CPN (Masal). The new party changed its name to the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) or UCPN (M) (UNTERM 2014).

²⁰ Formed in 1991, the CPN (UML) was not directly involved in the Nepali Civil War. However, its importance comes in its popularity and presence in the current political climate as key seat holders in the Nepali Constituent Assembly, whereby it maintained the second highest votes in the 2013 elections (Nepali Times 2013) after the Nepali Congress, the centrist democratic party (Nepali Congress 2015).

2006 and more than 13 000 people were killed (Gellner in Pettigrew, Judith 2013: vii) and many disappeared, at the hands of Maoists and the State (Pettigrew, Judith, Shneiderman & Harper 2004: 20). During the Civil War the Maoists were most active in rural areas, adopting guerrilla-style tactics and recruiting the poor, women and ethnic groups. The Maoist agenda had a significant impact on women during this period. Some figures put female participation at forty percent²¹ (Pettigrew, Judith & Shneiderman 2004: 19). Some argue it was pivotal for women's empowerment in Nepal because of the gusto with which some *janājāti* women took up the struggle (Manchanda 2004)²² and that women's leadership was central to the success of the People's War (Onesto 2000; Yami 2007)²³. It was also noted that women's employment levels increased during this period (Menon & van der Meulen Rodgers 2011). On the other hand, many Nepalis felt forced to support the Maoist revolution (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009). Pettigrew and Shneiderman (2004) are critical of the argument that the Civil War as a vehicle of women's empowerment in Nepal. For them there are clear gaps between the rhetoric of women's empowerment and what was experienced on the ground (2004: 19). They concede that, although women were transformed by their involvement in armed insurgencies, they rarely gained socio-economic or political equality through this engagement (2004: 19).

Ethnicity and caste

Caste and ethnicity are not central themes of this thesis; however, I am mindful of how crucial these are to the Nepali context and, because both field sites are made up of multi-caste, multi-ethnic demographics, it is worth looking at these briefly. The demography of Nepal is a cultural mosaic, and the 2011 census reports there are 125 distinct caste/ethnic groups and 123 languages spoken in Nepal (National Planning

²¹ Thapa believes that percentages of female participation in the War could be exaggerated (2003: 51).

²² Manchanda also notes the paradox of a feminist politic which posits emancipation of women in the "crucible of a militarized, hierarchical, authoritarian culture of violent politics" (2004: 237).

²³ Yami has also published under the pseudonym 'Comrade Parvati' and while positive about the roles of women during the People's War, she has acknowledged problems between men and women, raising issues of female leadership: that female cadres experienced difficulty asserting themselves and male cadres had difficulty relinquishing the privileged position bestowed on them by the patriarchal structure (Parvati 2003).

Commission Secretariat 2012: 4). A large majority of the population are of Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burmese decent, but there are a number of indigenous groups, such as the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley (see Gellner & Quigley 1995) and the Tharu of the Western-Tarāī (see Lam 2009).

The caste system separates people into exclusive, hereditary groups on the basis of a hierarchical configuration (Dumont 1980; Searle-Chatterjee & Sharma 2003). Caste is managed by rules of “endogamy, commensality and purity-pollution” (Das, V. 2001: 1529). The hierarchical coexistence of those pure and impure is a central concern of the caste system (Dumont 1980: 43) and the key function of it requires that those castes considered pure and impure be kept separate (Dumont 1980: 21; Searle-Chatterjee & Sharma 2003: 3).

The Nepali system, based on the *Mulukī Ain* of 1854 (Höfer 2004), posited five *varṇa* or caste divisions, which encompass various *jāt*, or individual castes and ethnic groups. These were divided hierarchically according to occupation and along lines of relative purity and impurity. Holy castes were situated at the top, such as Bāhun (or Brāhman) followed closely by Chētrī, with Dalit service castes, previously called “untouchable” castes, such as Sunār (goldsmiths) and Damāī (Tailors), at the bottom. Unlike caste in India, the *Mulukī Ain* placed non-Hindu groups, mainly from the middle hills and mountain regions, in a middle ranked position of the caste hierarchy, despite great cultural and social divergence from Sanskritic ideals (Höfer 2004 : 9). This saw them placed higher than the low Hindu service castes, but below the Nepali-speaking Hindus of the hills regions, and similarly below high-ranking Tarāī and Nēwār castes (Levine, Nancy E. 1987: 72). There are also caste systems present amongst other ethnic groups such as the Nēwār (see Gellner & Quigley 1995; Höfer 2004 ; Parish 2008), and Madesī ethnic groups²⁴, and these are not necessarily commensurate to the *Mulukī Ain*. This system of separation between castes encompasses a range of activities, whereby high-castes were historically barred from certain interactions with the lowest castes, such as receiving food and water or making inter-caste marriages. While a law was passed in Nepal in 1962 outlawing discrimination on the grounds of caste, feelings of bias and

²⁴ Madesī are indigenous to the Tarāī.

prejudice have not entirely disappeared (Sharma in Höfer 2004 : xxvi) and still exist today.

Historically the caste system is seen as rigid, therefore rendering “an individual’s social position fixed at birth, unable to be changed”²⁵ (Giddens 1989: 735). This, however, was an interesting point of contestation in my field sites as on a few occasions I came to know of people changing their caste in different ways. For example, I heard of people changing their names to gain the benefits of low-caste university scholarships. Another case was the principal of a Bhaktanagari school, named Bimal Nepali, who belonged to an ‘untouchable’ caste. One way he sought to change his caste identity and the impurity associated with it was to create a high-caste identity online. I came to know of this when I received a friend request from him on Facebook with the changed name of ‘Bimal Koirala’ a high-caste, Bahun name.

Many anthropologists have found different ways to view and define caste (see Appadurai 1986; Levine, Nancy E. 1987; Quigley 2003; Khare 2006). Dumont (1969, 1980) argued that caste consisted of political, economic and kinship-based relationships, which were sustained by specific values of hierarchy based in Hinduism. He believed that the singular person could not be isolated to be understood on the individual level, but was to be seen as a ‘part’ that can only exist in relation to the entire structure (Searle-Chatterjee & Sharma 2003: 3). This analysis was founded on the principle of the pure/impure dichotomy. For Dumont, this dichotomy is underscored by concepts of hierarchy, in which pure comes to mean ‘superior’ and impure comes to mean ‘inferior’ (1980: 46; 65). Concepts of separation are an integral part of caste for Dumont, as that which is pure and impure must be kept separate (see Dumont 1969, 1980; Calhoun 2002). Instead of viewing caste in the traditional Dumontian framework, Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma suggest it is more useful “to look at caste as something which people ‘do’ rather than something which they ‘are’ (Searle-Chatterjee & Sharma 2003: 9). Shukra (2003) develops this in his auto-ethnographic account, where he asserts that, as an ‘Untouchable’, caste is something ‘experienced’. Furthermore, it is not experienced as something one ‘does’, but as something ‘done to’ an individual. Quigley

²⁵ This rigidity is refuted by many anthropologists, as many examples have arisen in the field, such as constructing false genealogies (Shah & Shroff 1958), moving locality and assuming a different identity (Caplan, L 1975), or conversion of religion (Issacs 1965; Juergensmeyer 1982).

takes a similar position, arguing caste is a ‘verb’ (2003: 27), which is most useful when considering how I came to see caste in my study. This view acknowledges the vital role of agency, which Dumont failed to recognise in his analysis of caste. The practical considerations of caste in my field sites were usually centred on prestige and inter-caste marriages. As caste implies a hierarchy based on purity and pollution, prestige, one facet of *ijjat*, is generally thought to be a form of honour ascribed (see Moxnes 1996) to higher caste people. In terms of marriage, caste proved a paramount consideration as arranged marriages are still designed around caste principles and inter-caste marriages often prove difficult to negotiate between families. When I asked Binod from EMFN, a Bāhun, if he would consider marrying an ‘untouchable’ caste he emphatically said no, though he stressed “not from my side. I am fine with it. But it would be so difficult, as rules suggest she couldn’t even enter the kitchen to cook.”

Caste can be further considered a matter of perspective. With a multitude of ethnic groups, many subscribing to different caste systems, there is no consensus on which groups occupy which tiers. I discovered this in Binita’s marriage. Though she and her husband are both Nēwār, Binita belongs to the caste of Nēwār Hindu doctors and he to the Nēwār Buddhist priests. Knowing caste would have influenced their parents’ initial disapproval of their love marriage, I asked them who was higher in the caste formation of their traditions and received a laugh from Binita. “Well, I am Hindu and he is Buddhist. His family think he is higher and my family think I am higher! According to them, we both married ‘down’. But how can we *both* marry ‘down’?” This not only speaks to the reality of a multitude of caste systems and the reality that, as Quigley asserts, South Asians engage in “endless dispute about which *jāti* belong to which *varṇa*” (1993: 7). Furthermore, it demonstrates that caste is a matter of both self-representation and representation by others (Quigley 2003: 28), and as such can be seen as a subjective phenomenon rather than social fact.

A further noteworthy point in my research with regard to demographic diversity is that I did not seek to look at any one group, defined along ethnic or caste-based demarcations. My research looked specifically at the experiences of women located in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu. While these locales were made up of diverse ethnic, caste and religious groups, the majority of my informants happened to be mixed-caste Hindus and I acknowledge this directs much of the work. This led to a tension with regards to how I

might name my population, and it is a problem that many academics working in Nepal have faced. Upon my first arrival in Kathmandu I was naming populations simplistically with the term ‘Nepalese’. However, a colleague at EMFN quickly admonished me, saying that this was an “Anglo-Saxon” phrase imposed by outsiders and he requested I utilise the preferred “local expression” of ‘Nepali’. Due to his request I began to preference the term, despite there still being prevalent usage of ‘Nepalese’ in the literature. Further investigations, both in the field and within the relevant academe turned up more nuanced terminology, grounded in ethnic and historical contexts and so it is imperative to explore beyond even the requested ‘Nepali’ to look at other terms of more encompassing usage. Two such terms *Parbatiya* and *Khas* are frequently used in the literature also. *Parbatiya* meaning ‘those of the mountains’ is a name given to people who make up the dominant religious and cultural groups of the state of Nepal (Kondos *et al* 1991: 176). Consisting of people from Bāhun-Chētrī castes, they were originally Hindu and originated from Gorkha, situated to the North-East of Kathmandu. *Khas* is another basis of classification referring to the language spoken and origins of people to come also from the Gorkha region. These terms can be elided to form the term *Khas-Parbatiya* (March 2016) and can be used synonymously to refer to people who might now more specifically identify themselves as caste Hindus originally from the Indian plains, such as but not only Bāhun-Chētrī (March 2016; see also Burghart 1984; Kondos *et al* 1991). March argues there is value in utilising such terms over more generalised terms like ‘Nepalese’ or ‘Nepali’ because they recognise distinctive histories, do not analytically privilege language, religion or politics in the definition, and also do not exclude non-*parbatiyas/khas* as being non-Nepali (March 2016). While referring to *Khas-Parbatiya* might more clearly articulate the socio-cultural position of most of the informants and their communities I worked with in Bhaktanagar and Surkhet, I have chosen to continue to use Nepali because it was the term that I was asked to use and was also exclusively used by my participants. The intention is not to exclude *janajāti* and other groups but to utilise the term most often used as my informants intended it to mean. In the current political climate, for my informants, ‘Nepali’ meant “people of Nepal”.

With this in mind, I understand my assertions about *ijjat* and womanhood are not necessarily applicable across other ethnic and religious divisions. I am mindful of the myth that ‘the Nepali woman’ be “implicitly understood as being ‘Hindu’ and upper

caste” (Tamang 2011: 283). Nonetheless, when I did interview women from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, some correlations between certain experiences and understandings could be put down to wider cosmological understandings founded in Hindu traditions. This can be explained perhaps in the relative influence of Hindu traditions on Nepali culture more broadly (see Pradhan 2011), as its laws were once heavily influenced by Hinduism and, even now, more than 81% of the population is Hindu (National Planning Commission Secretariat 2012). Acharya notes, regarding attitudes to women and their participation in the economy, that the distinction between ethnic divisions “is not entirely clear cut, because some Tibeto-Burman communities have been significantly Hinduised, while Indo-Aryan communities living in the hills have been influenced considerably by Tibeto-Burman cultures” (Acharya, M 1993: 121). Informant Dr Maya confirmed this in an interview when considering practices and attitudes to women.

Cultural practice in this country, in this society *is* religion because it’s very much any cultural practice you do at home, is shaped by religion. Directly, whether you are Buddhist, or Hindu or a Muslim or whatever. But it is very much shaped by Hindu religion, because the country [as a] nation was built in that way. “OK you are a Hindu nation”. Whether you follow or not, you are a Hindu... You are a Hindu citizen, because you are from Nepal. So that is why I found that when I interviewed women, I interviewed Muslim women, I interviewed Christian women. I interviewed Hindu, Buddhist women. Or I interviewed women from [various] ethnic, they have their own practices. But still their expression was very much influenced by Hinduism. Because it’s not they are doing *pūjā* (prayer) every day at home. It’s not because they are visiting Pashupati²⁶ and following those things. Because it’s ingrained in their mind and the day one they came in this earth, they started practising those things²⁷. And I think that is very much.

²⁶ Nepal’s most important Hindu temple, formally called Paśupatinātha, located on the Bāgamatī River in Kathmandu (Bindloss, Holden & Mayhew 2009: 170).

²⁷ Dr Maya is referring to discriminatory practice, *ijjat* and patriarchal features in particular.

Ethnographic orientations: Choosing a field site

I arrived in Kathmandu, Nepal's capital, at the end of February 2009. It was nearly the end of winter and the chill that remained in the air meant I could cover my body from the stares it attracted, easing a culture shock I had not prepared for. I lived in Chakupat in the heart of Pāṭan (Lalitpur), one of the three original kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley. Pāṭan is a hub for NGO's and many foreigners reside there. For a project that would soon look at themes including modernity and development, Pāṭan was a veritable cosmopolitan centre, with its department stores, German bakery, Italian restaurants and varied embassies and INGOs. Yet the old town quarter still maintained a gentle daily pace amidst the temples and vegetable stalls. With this mix of Nepali life and international influence, it was an appropriate starting point that introduced me to Nepali life as smoothly as possible.

Prior to my arrival I had formed a loose alliance with a media for development NGO called Equality Media Forum Nepal (EMFN). In exchange for my English skills, they would supervise and assist me with my fieldwork. EMFN is a not-for-profit organisation that delivers critically needed information and education through media and direct community engagement. EMFN engages mostly in radio programming, as radio is the most easily accessible medium for most of the population (see Banjade 2006). I was to be attached loosely to a UN-funded radio programme, which sought to promote mutual understanding between husbands and wives and further raise awareness on the intersection of domestic violence and HIV/AIDS. For a number of reasons this was a great programme to introduce me to a wide range of issues for women. First of all, it was broadcast across the nation and so addressed issues identified as being broadly pertinent to Nepali women. Secondly, I had immediate access to examples of women's lives from the field, gathered by reporters, that I was able to follow up on in my fieldwork. Finally, for monitoring and evaluation (M & E) purposes they had pre-selected six districts to operate listeners' focus groups to track the programme's impact. This provided me the basis for choosing a field site that would offer support and also deliver a wealth of pertinent research material.

Choosing a field site proved more wearisome than expected. I was discouraged from my initial choice at the Far-Western border for its isolation worried the EMFN team, which

in turn worried me. I felt strongly about researching in the West, and so discounted the three districts to the north and east of Kathmandu. However, by May 2009 I still had not settled where to live and I was getting nervous. Visa troubles and constant *banda*²⁸ were frustrating the process, as did the slow pace of scouting the three most suitable locations in the West. When Binod, an EMFN colleague, announced I would accompany him on an M & E field trip I was elated.



Figure 3: Main intersection in the market place, Bhaktanagar.

My initial field visit with Binod took me on a two-week journey out West, as we toured the three Western districts targeted by the radio project for M & E. We visited the districts I initially favoured on the western border, one in the Western Tarāī and another valley in the Mid-West. In the end, distance and a bout with giardia tainted my first impressions of the western border town and frequent political strikes in the Tarāī meant I could not live there with much certainty. After consideration, I dismissed them both in favour of Bhaktanagar. Bhaktanagar is the urban centre of a valley-based district,

²⁸ Sometimes spelt, *bandh*, it is the Nepali for ‘closure’ and refers to the frequent political strikes occurring throughout the time of my fieldwork. At these times businesses were closed and vehicles could not drive on the road.

situated in what was once the Mid-Western Development Region, and now Province Number Six. With a population just over 52 000 people, the demography consists of multi-ethnic, mixed caste and religious groups, though the majority of my informants happened to be Hindu. It is a popular destination for migration from the hills districts to the north. My first impressions of the town were positive. I noticed one of the vegetable stalls on the roadside and exclaimed, “The tomatoes are enormous, Binod!” I was extremely impressed by the quality of produce in the Mid-West. I also noted the friendliness of the locals, and on several occasions I was stopped by curious and welcoming strangers and asked, “Excuse me miss? What is your good name? Why are you here?” This was a refreshing change from my experiences in Kathmandu. Other features, such as the tree-lined streets, fresh air, a hospital and the convenience of an airport, all influenced my choice to make Bhaktanagar the location of my study.



Figure 4: Market place in Bhaktanagar.

I struck up a working relationship with EMFN's partner *Swar* ('Voice') who were responsible for collating M & E as they surveyed the impact of the radio programme amongst local listeners. More broadly, it is an NGO that targets the eradication of domestic and sexual violence against women and children. I further struck up relationships with two additional NGOs, *Eklai Mahilā Adhikār*²⁹ (EMA), which

²⁹ *Eklai Mahilā Adhikār* translates to 'single women's rights'. 'Single women' is a term being used by the widows' rights movement, instead of the word 'widow' (*bidhavā*). The aim of this shift is to avoid stigma brought about by the term 'widow' (see Chapter Two).

supported local widow's rights, and Maya Garden. Maya Garden is the project of American woman, Amy, who became a good friend. It operates a children's home, school and women's centre. All NGOs were invaluable to orienting me to the themes of my study and offered support and access to informants.

Unintentionally, Kathmandu also became a field site. Having decided on Bhaktanagar, there was still the question of meeting the requirements for a yearlong student visa. The process from arrival to obtaining my student visa took several months and became a lesson in tolerance and persistence, tempered with patience. In the end, this had a fortuitous outcome as, all the while, I carried on interviewing and observing the themes of my study in Kathmandu, particularly amongst EMFN's workers and other women's rights activists.

The political landscape in Nepal in 2009 fostered much uncertainty and I met with more obstacles in setting up my research, including weekly *bandas* (strikes), drawn-out procedures at the Immigration office, lengthy processes for obtaining the much-needed student visa from Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, and general bureaucratic delays.



Figure 5: Maoist Banda, Bhaktanagar (Photo: Orr Niv)

Ethnography, the Feminist lens and reflexivity

The research undertaken for my study, from 2009 until 2011, followed an ethnographic methodology, the primary components being interviews, focus group discussion (FGDs) and participant observation. I worked closely in Bhaktanagar with two female translators, Bindu, a twenty-one year old Bāhun, and Priya, a twenty-year-old Magar, Buddhist woman. I found it possible to conduct most interviews in Kathmandu in English. Looking across two locales and considering themes of international development made me conscious of Marcus' notion of 'multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus 1998). He articulates a particular type of ethnography, one that is 'self-consciously embedded in the world system' (Marcus 1998: 79). This, by its very nature, is forced to move outside of the localised sites of traditional study and look at the "circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space" (Marcus 1998: 79) in the climate of globalisation. While my research was not multi-sited in all the ways Marcus alludes to, whereby the anthropologist studies subjects within contexts of a more traditional world system, such as colonialism or state formation (Marcus 1998: 80), it does consider "connections, associations and putative relationships" which, he says, "are at the very heart of designing multi-sited ethnography" (Marcus 1998: 81). Traditions in Bhaktanagar, and the gendered subjectivities of the women I came to know in my study, were indeed influenced by phenomena such as development, globalised media and tourism. Taking note of the multi-sitedness of this influence helps to analyse the complex mosaic of women's gendered subjectivities in Nepal.

As Liechty notes:

Transnational currents of modernity have daily consequences for the lives of people in Kathmandu, with satellite television, unemployed youth, beauty pageants, mass tourism, and countless other examples linking the city to worldwide trends. At the same time an ideologically weighted politics of 'development' and 'progress' places Nepal and its capital in the structural position of modernity's opposite. Nepalis are frequently reminded that among the worlds "least developed countries" (LDCs), Nepal ranks near the bottom. Yet hundreds of thousands of people in Kathmandu led lives riddled with both the problems and pleasures of modernity [...] Nepal has long been a favoured

site for Western projects of imagining 'tradition'. In almost all these imaginings, 'Nepal' and 'modern' end up on opposite ends of the conceptual spectrum. This contradiction presents Nepalis with a challenge [...] to *produce themselves* as members of, and inhabitants in, a world that is both modern *and* Nepali.

(Liechty 2003: xi)

This was true for the people of Bhaktanagar, as an urban centre, and the locals there were also concerned with the "daily consequences of modernity" as it filtered through from Kathmandu and the rest of the world.

I must also reflect on the feminist lens through which I viewed my research. Feminist ethnography takes a number of standpoints, the most pertinent of which for this thesis is that it explicitly questions the validity of an objective truth (see Abu Lughod 1990) and therefore can favour a more reflexive, literary or auto-ethnographic turn (see Visweswaran 1994, 1997; Aune 2009; McNamara 2009). As I reflected on why I favour these turns, I was reminded of an excerpt from my field diary:

I am walking down a dusty, hot and littered street in Bhaktanagar, and my cheeks are burning bright red. A group of young men of about eighteen years old have just gathered around almost blocking me as I walk past. They are pointing their camera phones in my direction, smirks on their faces. One brave young teen yells out after some jeering from his friends, 'Eh! *Kuireni!*³⁰ I fuck you?' and he is met with a sea of laughter from his peers. I feel silenced, unable to say anything appropriate. I rearrange my scarf as I round my shoulders, keep my sunglasses on, look down and keep walking.

This was my own unique experience, and does not necessarily reflect Nepali women's experiences. Yet it clearly echoes the central themes of power, sexuality, violence, and honour. Feminist ethnography has shifted from being viewed as grounded research by, about and for women, to being about seeing it as diverse written constructions of

³⁰ 'Kuireni' is feminised version of the Nepali 'kuiṛē'. It is used to refer to a Caucasian foreigner with blue or grey eyes. Oftentimes it can be used as a derogatory term, which derives from the belief that, for Nepalis, it is traditionally considered inauspicious to have blue or grey eyes.

gendered experiences (Aune 2009: 309) and as such I favour a subjective lens for the very real impact this had on my understanding of other women's experiences.

Auto-ethnography is also a feminist consideration and is a research method whereby the experiences and feelings of the ethnographer are used in the investigation of the work and writing they undertake. Ellis defines it as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (Ellis 2004: xix). Some researchers argue that there are several concerns about auto-ethnography, such as a propensity to focus excessively on the self (see Chang 2008: 54). Krizek suggests that auto-ethnography, no matter how personal, should always connect with the readers and elicit their wider understanding of a cultural event, practice or place (Krizek 2003: 149). While I do not use my own subjective experience as a central point of understanding, I do acknowledge I used my experiences to direct my attention more acutely to issues raised by my informants. My experiences were useful particularly regarding how I came to understand the power of *ijjat*.

I came to know well how strong a force *ijjat* is in influencing women's agency in Nepal as experiences in the field forced my attention to my own sexuality, body and relationships. I had told Nepalis in Bhaktanagar that I was a married woman. My rationale was that it is what any twenty-five year-old Nepali woman would be, so I should be too. I believed being 'married' would make me seem 'normal' and protect me from unwanted sexual attention. However, this attempt to fit into what I perceived to be Nepali life had no protective quality whatsoever; men still stared, whistled, called me names, took my photograph and touched me. Being 'married' also left me in a rather awkward position in terms of my reputation. Several months into my research, I met a fellow foreigner working in Bhaktanagar, and we started a romantic relationship. Clearly not the husband I had told everyone I had left behind in Australia, this left me feeling nervous I would be caught out and thought of by my community as a woman with bad morals. Hindsight tells me I was naïve to think they could not conceptualise "an other", just as I was conceptualising them. However, these experiences forced me to become "more aware of myself as a gendered being" (Altork 2007: 107) and come face to face with the very object of my study; what it feels like to be a 'good' woman in Nepal. I would not, however, liken my experiences strictly to those of my informants. My roles as researcher, outsider and Westerner placed me in positions of power, and

also afforded me liberties my informants could never have had. For example, on one formal occasion I attended a meeting with the Red Cross. Upon my arrival, to my surprise, I was positioned on the dais with the four most important Bāhun men in the room. In my field notes I wrote, “My place was changed to fit where they saw me. In their minds as a foreigner I was to be honoured/respected highly alongside the highest caste (who happened to be all men)... Not only did the lower castes in the group recognise this but so did the Bāhuns.” As a woman however, I was subject to experiences common to many young women; I fell in love, I misled others, I was harassed and I was worried about my reputation.

Many are critical of writing the self and emotion too explicitly into ethnography (see Van Maanen 1988); others are in favour (see Ellis 2004; Altork 2007). My experiences related to my topic of gendered subjectivity, honour, intimate relationships, and violence that I felt it gave me the opportunity to have insight into what honour means for people, and for women in particular. It made me realise what a motivating force it is for people, influencing their bodies, relationships, movements, appearance and choices, and my behaviour changed as a result. I started to lie about my whereabouts to my landlords. I would arrive at my boyfriend’s house at certain times of the day in an attempt to manage how I was seen, when and by whom. After being confronted with sexual harassment by Nepali strangers and my boyfriend’s Nepali colleagues, I began to feel tense. I never left the house without my headphones and sunglasses and called them ‘weapons’. I wore a scarf to cover my shoulders and dressed in oversized Nepali clothing because the cat calls, laughter and debasement of my person were brutal demands on my senses (Homan Forthcoming). I put extensive thought into how I behaved and dressed because “in short, considerable effort was required at times to act, think and move about in life” (Desjarlais, R 2005: 374). I was experiencing anxiety and fear of being caught out by members of my community. Upon reflection, I realised some of my feelings and actions were mirroring those of some of my informants; I was an Australian woman, and yet, I had become concerned for my own *ijjat*.

Feminist ethnography further acknowledges the exploitative nature of research and as such queries whether or not research can ever truly adhere to feminist principles. As such, feminist researchers argue that introducing reciprocity into the exchanges and transactions between researchers and participants seeks to counterbalance the

supposedly exploitative relationship between researchers and informants (Bryman 2004: 379). I was acutely aware of reciprocity as a core principle and function of my fieldwork because I feel passionately about an “ethnically grounded anthropology” (see Scheper-Hughes 1995). Fieldwork made me witness to poverty and suffering as I had never known in my own life. Women opened up their homes and welcomed me to share in their *thūlō thūlō duḥkha* – their “big, big suffering” (see Chapter 5). As such, it did not sit comfortably to simply, as Scheper-Hughes once tried to explain to her informants, “observe, to document, to understand and later to write about their lives and their pain as fully... as I could” (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 410). As such, I offered what little of my skills or self I could. For some the exchange was tangible, such as writing a report for *Swar* or using my ‘otherness’ to attract a crowd for a public campaign. For others it was the ‘privilege’ (their words, not mine) of my company or a simple photograph. Many times my informants were satisfied that “one-day” their words would reach an audience that might “care”.

Despite having a preference for both morally charged and auto-ethnographic styles, I admit that, while I felt some similar emotions, and had similar experiences due to my shared gender, they could never be one and the same. The activist in me would like to think I could speak on behalf of them; the feminist would like to think I speak through them; though the anthropologist in me knows I do not truly speak for them, but *about* them (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992: 9).

Gendered modernities

Because this is a feminist ethnography about Nepali women undertaking negotiations of their womanhood in a rapidly modernising social economy it is pertinent to address gender and modernity as it sits in the literature and within the framework of my thesis. Gaonkar argues that there is a change in the general trajectory in how societies are engaging with modernity (Gaonkar 2008: 13). As such, Gaonkar, like Knauff (2002b), favours speaking of “alternative modernities” (Gaonkar 2001, 2008). As alternative modernity questions traditional frameworks, which posit modernity as a coherent and singular process (see Knauff 2002b), I am also mindful to discuss how modernity or

being modern, can be further viewed as gendered. I argue women experience the effects and practices of modernity differently from their male counterparts (see Wardlow 2002). In Nepal, one way this manifests is due to the greater tension women feel when taking up freedoms and rights, due to a greater responsibility of *ijjat*. Wardlow (2002), asks, “many theorists and ethnographers of modernity have suggested that gender influences how people engage changing patterns of commodity production, acquisition and consumption. But in what ways are the meaning and experience of modernity intrinsically gendered?” Through her work with the Huli in Papua New Guinea, Wardlow posits that “gender is a central axis of difference through which the disjuncture of modernity are engaged, performed and instantiated” (Wardlow 2002: 147). She starts from the premise that women and men consume, perform, inhabit and appropriate different spaces of modernity. From this she posits that it is not possible to discuss local, or what she terms, “vernacular” modernities, without discussing female and male as yet another kind of “vernacular” in itself. “Is ‘modernity’ so internally differentiated by gender that even at the most ‘local’ level we cannot talk about homogenous modernities?” (Wardlow 2002: 147)

Modernisation and modernity are not gender neutral (Roces & Edwards 2000: 1) and it is widely accepted that modernity includes gender processes (Plesset 2006: 5). Rofel argues that the various meanings, knowledges and identities of gender operate at the heart of modernity’s power (1999: 19). Plesset argues that just as gender can be utilised to understand particular visions of modernity, understandings of modernity can also be used to lay claim to certain visions of gender (Plesset 2006: 5). Gender has been positioned in modern discourse in ways that have historically victimised women from developing countries (see Mohanty 1988; Escobar 1995). There is an emerging discourse on the image and terminology of the ‘modern woman’, both generally and in Asia (see Wolff 1985; Sen & Stivens 1998; Munshi 2001; Stivens 2002). Until relatively recently, much scholarship has focussed on Euro-American experiences of the intersection of gender and modernity (Stivens 1998: 11). Wolff argues that until recently, discourse on modernity accounts for the experiences of men as discussions have centred on public spaces and historically women have been relegated to the private sphere (Wolff 1985: 37). Liechty similarly acknowledges this tension for urban Nepali women, calling the issue a challenge as, Nepali women are discovering they must construct a new femininity that still claims the promises of modernity, such as freedoms

in a “new rhetoric of publicness”, individual rights, achievement, educational advancement and merit (Liechty 2010: 309). This demarcation of public and private is relevant to the experience of Nepali women in Kathmandu and Bhaktanagar, as they negotiate issues of freedom and being modern, with normative expectations of womanhood.

Stivens (1996, 2005) problematises the relationship between women and modernity in the Malaysian context. On feminine modernities in Asia more generally, she notes that, as more women gain employment outside the home, there seems to be a “nostalgic vision of femininity” being entreated in the production of the ‘family’ and the ‘modern Asian woman’ across the region. This is problematic, she says, because in the discourse of the Asian family, women are the guardians and producers of this vision of family.

The family is the bulwark against the social costs of modernity (and of dissent) and the dangers of fragmenting national and personal identities produced in the current (post)modern order. The autonomous and sexualised modern woman threatens to break this complementary dualism of public and private, male and female, tradition and modernity.

(Stivens 1998: 17)

As such, the modern Asian woman’s representation of herself has come to represent and preserve the dearly held notion of the ‘family’. Any change to this conjures up a perceived threat to the family.

Munshi’s volume (2001) analyses the ways and means women in Asia are presented in the media and looks at what representations make an Asian woman ‘modern’ in certain contexts. She points out that the terminology of a ‘modern Asian woman’ is full of contradiction. Where media representations are concerned, the ‘modern Asian woman’ is less real, more a subject position constantly being developed. She says, “The discourse about the ‘modern woman’, particularly in Asian contexts, is underpinned by ideas of social progress, improvement and ‘acceptable modernity’” (Munshi 2001: 6). There is no consensus on what makes the ‘modern Asian woman’ modern as this differs slightly from context to context, however, it is this ‘acceptable modernity’ that was a

palpable tension amongst my informants, and that Basanti speaks of when she speaks of not feeling able to be a feminist *and* a daughter-in-law.

Mohanty's work is particularly relevant to issues of women, agency and modernity. She argues that women in the 'Third World' are characterised in much development literature as having "needs" and "problems" but limited choices and no freedom to act. Due to this, the image of an average 'Third World' woman is constructed through categories and statistics that sets her apart from the 'Western woman', offering an unhelpful dichotomy.

This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being "third world" (read: poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimised etc.) This, I suggest, is in contrast to the implicit self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions

(1988: 65)

Because of this paternalistic attitude, Mohanty argues there is an idea that the 'Western woman' is superior to the 'Third World' woman. To counteract this trend, she says "power needs to be defined and named" (Mohanty 1988: 63). For the Nepali context, Tamang discusses how development has positioned women in Nepal, actually serving to disadvantage many women in Nepal. She says that development apparatus and discourse has set itself the task of "developing" the Nepali woman, an image that is purported to mean "patriarchally oppressed, uniformly disadvantaged and Hindu" and did not exist prior the Nepali development project (Tamang 2011: 281).

For my study, *ijjat* is a central concern not only for experiences and formulations of womanhood generally, but it is a central point of tension for women and the ways they experience being modern in my field sites. Liechty's work highlights the intersection between gender and modernity with regards to *ijjat*. Firstly, he draws focus to *ijjat* in terms of a "prestige economy" (2010: 311), which he describes as fundamentally patriarchal and can be seen as the space where processes of producing or squandering

ijjat are enacted. He argues *ijjat* is a key material marker for his middle class informants in Kathmandu and is, in fact, so important, that it is the “main arena in which people stake middle class claims to identities” (Liechty 2010: 318)³¹. Looking at consumerism and modernity in middle class Kathmandu, he analyses *ijjat* with regards to its link to women and the tension it creates for them in a modernising Nepal. For Nepali women the central component to being modern is the concept of freedom (2010: 308). However, the concept of ‘having freedom’ would clash with historical social norms according to *purdāh*³² or *dhāknu*³³ (see Chapter Three), or as Liechty asserts, the prestige economy (2010: 325). Women are finding it difficult to escape a system of victimisation that has traditionally kept them housebound (2010: 311). For women in Kathmandu, Liechty argues that modern women are finding themselves having to make visible and portable a respectable femininity, which was always reserved for the domestic sphere (2010: 310). He writes:

Women celebrate new freedoms offered in education and careers, but struggle in a continuing and re-configuring patriarchal prestige (*ijjat*) economy. Because *ijjat* is both one of the primary policing mechanisms for middle-class privilege and a fundamental domain in which patriarchy is naturalised, women are trapped in contradictions between claims to class status, and rights to gender equity.

(2010: 311)

What is clear for my female informants in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu is that they actively engaged with negotiations of being both traditional and modern through, and because of, the daily tensions they felt because of *ijjat*. In doing this, as the subsequent chapter will discuss more specifically, these women were creating dynamic new notions of womanhood and contemporary cultural practice that are relevant to their lived experiences. The next chapter will look in detail at concepts of the ‘good’ Nepali

³¹ I agree with Liechty’s point, yet also argue *ijjat*, as a social economy of prestige and respect, is also equally important to lower classes and diverse castes.

³² *Purdāh* is the form derived from Persian and Middle- Eastern Languages, which is described as a practice in the literature. *Padār* is the Nepali term, from which it has similar roots, however in Nepali it simply means ‘curtain’ and does not pertain to the practice of being veiled as it does in other countries, however McHugh found evidence in Buddhist communities some referred to a person’s scarf as their *padār* or more specifically as one’s ‘modesty’ (see McHugh 2001).

³³ *Dhāknu* is the Nepali term ‘to cover up’ and is used similarly to *purdah*.

woman, as a framework for understanding the traditional conceptions of what it means to be a woman in these locales, and the fundamental role *ijjat* plays in those conceptions, experiences and negotiations of womanhood.

CHAPTER TWO

“IF I AM NOT MARRIED, I AM NOT WHOLE”:

IJJAT AND THE ‘GOOD’ WOMAN

And the most important thing if you look at the family and if you ask a woman there, ‘What is your dream?’ you’ll never find her dream... Being a woman in Nepal is like, when you are a daughter you just follow your father’s dream. And when you get married, you just fulfil your husband’s dream. And when you give birth to your children, a son... they want son... if you ask a mother what her dream is, she doesn’t have any dream; she just has to live with her son’s dream.

Jyoti, Formal interview

Introduction

Much of social life in Nepal begins and ends with families. Even the idea that a woman could have a dream for herself, separate from family, seems an unusual concept, as Jyoti brought to my attention with the statement above. As she and many other informants noted, it is common for Nepali women to primarily conceive of their lives in direct relationship with family, especially male family members.³⁴ She and my other informants believe that for Nepali women there exists a dominant “narrativised account of the life path of a good woman” (Holland *et al.* 1998: 53). Several authors have described this idealised life path for women in Hindu societies, which is similar to those of my informants in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu (see Bennett, Lynn 1976; Caplan, P 1985; Skinner 1990; Cameron 1998; Kondos 2004; Majupuria 2007). However, I do not mean to indicate that women’s roles are static or unchanging; indeed, negotiations between being modern and traditional were constants I observed in my informants’ lives, as they challenged and reconfigured many aspects of their womanhood in a rapidly changing Nepal. As Skinner notes in a mixed caste Hindu community in Central Nepal, “the socialisation framework, in large part, guides and restrains them in line with

³⁴ I do not suggest this is static or always the case; however, it is a crucial concern.

the dominant gender ideology in their understanding of what it is to be female, but their environment also contains other voices that question this ideology” (Skinner 1990: 73-74).

Singh argues, “If you are a woman in South Asia, chances are that you’ve been told how to be one” (2015). My informants felt that at every stage of their lifecycle, there are expectations placed on women by family, society, and even themselves. No matter what role she fulfils (and she may fulfil multiple at any given time), be it daughter, daughter-in-law/wife, or mother/mother-in-law, there are certain ‘acceptable’ ways to behave in order to be a ‘good’ woman. As Liechty argues, “Women are contained within the domestic space of ‘traditional values’” (2010: 316). I propose these are largely dictated by *ijjat*³⁵. Tension noticeably increased with expectations associated with being a wife and daughter-in-law. As Basanti said,

It’s really tough to change once you become a daughter-in-law, like you have to follow that custom. Every morning when I get up I need to bow in front of my mother-in-law, father-in-law and my older brother-in-law. So whoever is older in my family, you are supposed to do that... That’s what my culture, says. I will be taught that way, before getting married. My relatives will come [and say] ‘and now after you get married get up early in the morning’, ‘get dressed and make sure that your hair is well combed’ and ‘don’t go in improperly dressed’ and ‘bow to everyone of them who is elder to you’, ‘prepare tea for them’. That is the ‘orientation’ session right before you marry!

Basanti’s family directed her in the proper behaviour of a daughter-in-law and in, doing so, displayed their concern for maintaining family *ijjat*. The act of instructing Basanti in the good habits of a daughter-in-law ensured she accumulated *ijjat* for herself and her natal and affinal families. It also demonstrates that they had the good *ijjat* to instruct her well in such matters in the first place. Key here, however, is the tension Basanti identifies regarding her feelings and that she would rather have the freedom to choose different behaviour.

³⁵ I do not propose *ijjat* is the only framework that dictates a ‘good’ womanhood; simply, it is a dominant one.

In this chapter, I argue there are tightly prescribed gender norms in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu. For women, this centres on the notion of being ‘the good woman’. *Ijjat* is key in mediating this conceptualisation and practice, and provides the framework of how to achieve this. To explore this ‘idealised’ life path women must follow in order to be seen as ‘good’, I first utilise the notion of ‘Figured worlds’ (Holland *et al.* 1998). These are prototypical, simplified narratives, which can be seen as generally shared guidelines for idealised behaviour in a given context. Figured worlds account for the ways people ‘figure’ some meanings and values over others and then choose how to act in competing contexts (i.e. the figured worlds of a ‘good’ woman, or specifically a daughter, daughter-in-law, or a feminist, for example). Because *ijjat* is an integral component of this conceptualisation and experience of womanhood, I next discuss what constitutes *ijjat* and how it is gendered. Thirdly, I discuss what was commonly considered to constitute the ideal life path of the ‘good’ woman. In the figured world of Nepali womanhood in my field sites, marriage is seen as very important.³⁶ People ‘figure’ marriage as being an imperative and valued aspect of womanhood. It is essential to note that people become who they are, not by virtue of *being* but by *being dynamic*, active and “in encounter” (Barth 2004: 247). This means identity is always defined in relation to others (see Mach 1993: 9), is constantly becoming through processes of social change and interaction (see Isaacs 1975), and is expressed differently depending on context (see Kluckhohn & Murray 1948). Therefore, it is not simply in *being* married, but in the dynamic *practice* of ‘doing’ marriage, that women actively engage in a Nepali womanhood. “A person is dynamic within a relational context. We become ourselves in relation to others” (Labuschagne 2013: 4). Relationships formed through marriage are pivotal for the construction of the ‘good’ woman³⁷ and it is also the practices within marriage that are of significance for her, and her kin’s, *ijjat*. Practice, however, is not without its constraints (see Ortner 2006), and women in my field sites attested to tensions in their lives, especially in terms of the responsibilities of becoming a wife and daughter-in-law. I argue that that one of the consequences of *ijjat* is the production of tension. One cause of this tension is the desire to take up certain aspects of what they feel it means to be modern (education,

³⁶ It should be noted, in the figured world of gender and family relations more generally, marriage is considered important for men and women.

³⁷ This is not to imply that natal relationships are not important; prior to marriage it is the central nexus of relationships in a girl’s life. However, both informants and the literature imply that in the trajectory of a girl’s life, it is of vital and prominent importance that she value and perhaps even prioritise her affinal relationships once married (see Bennett, Lynn 1976, 1983).

employment, freedom), and yet feeling it is not always *ijjatdār* (honourable), or ‘idealised’, to do so. I use case studies of both married and single women to highlight the importance of marriage in understandings of *ijjat* and the tension women felt around fulfilling the role of the ‘good’ woman in my field sites.

Figured worlds

It is a central argument of this thesis that *ijjat* and womanhood form a dialectic relationship. *Ijjat* is a framework vital for conceiving of and experiencing womanhood, and conversely a key function of womanhood in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu is the accumulation and preservation of *ijjat*. Due to this, there is historically a commonly conceptualised, specific way to ‘be’ a woman in these locales. This involves envisioning womanhood as made up of specific attributes and behaviours by which others in the community could reasonably name a woman *ijjatdār*. One of the key ways of envisioning a ‘legitimate’ womanhood (that is, one that serves a function in achieving the accumulation of *ijjat*) is within the institution of marriage. However, it is also evident that perceptions of womanhood are shifting, causing tensions and contestations in what constitutes it. In many ways informants I spoke to enacted or articulated an idealised womanhood; however, these expectations also brought about noticeable tension. I find the work of Holland *et al* (1998) on figured worlds and positional identities particularly useful for this dynamic in Nepal.

A ‘figured world’ is “a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (Holland *et al*. 1998: 52) Essentially, Holland *et al* speak about the ways in which people ‘figure’ certain things as important over others, including but not limited to meanings, values, actions, goals and other people. For example, in the figured world of Nepali Hindu womanhood, and particularly in Bhaktanagar or Kathmandu, women understand that *ijjat* is an important component of womanhood. Furthermore, they understand that being married, and their appropriate actions within marriage, are of importance for not only being honourable themselves, but allocating that honour to family members. A figured world thus forms a

prototypical, “simplified world populated by a set of agents... who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state... as moved by a specific set of forces” (Holland *et al.* 1998: 52). In Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, my informants would be the agents Holland *et al.* speak of, as well as their families, colleagues and community members. The meaningful acts depend on one’s subject position. For a wife and daughter-in-law, it may be those acts that she and others conceive will make her an ‘ideal’ woman; for example, by working hard, respecting in-laws, and maintaining her chastity. For those family members who have a vested interest in her accumulation of *ijjat*, it might be those acts that enforce (or try to) the ideal behaviour of the ‘good’ woman, for example, scolding, punishing and gossiping³⁸. The forces that move them could be (among other things) the desire to avoid shame and maintain and/or accumulate honour. A figured world is the socio-historic imagination that facilitates behaviour and informs participants’ subject positions. “The ability to sense (see, hear, touch, taste, feel) the figured world becomes embodied over time, through continual participation” (Holland *et al.* 1998: 52-53). Therefore, a figured world is produced and reproduced in two ways. Firstly, the significant consistencies of daily life are separated into expectations about how particular events should unfold based on the socio-historic imagination. Secondly, it is reproduced in the interpretations of the everyday according to the distillation of past experiences. It is not to be seen as the nuanced behaviour that actually occurs in daily life, but the idealisations that offer a guide that people can follow (Holland *et al.* 1998: 53).

Figured worlds offer a sense of narrative, which Holland *et al.* also acknowledge, saying that many elements of a figured world relate to one another in the form of a “standard plot” (1998: 53). Informants across my field sites offered many accounts of the idealised life path for women, such as how they should dress, talk and behave. In terms of marriage, when I asked if they could move away from their in-laws, Basanti and Rita were both emphatic that they simply could not. They argued, “it’s just not done” and “it’s too hard to do that here”, because the idea of forming a nuclear family separate from in-laws does not fit within the figured world of marriage and an ideal daughter-in-law would never advocate this. This did not, however, stop them feeling or mitigating

³⁸ It may also not be as overt or negative as this, and may just be that the potential these acts could occur. Acts may also, in different contexts, include positive reinforcement, such as praise.

this tension by venting their frustration with female friends outside the home or, in Basanti's case, moving to another country.³⁹

In the figures of the feminist and daughter-in-law, Basanti understands two things. Firstly, for her and other Nepalis, these represent simplified, narrativised versions of womanhood. Secondly, for Basanti, they signify ways of being that are incompatible with one another as, in the figured world of Nepali womanhood, a woman cannot be both. Yet, many informants displayed different nuanced ways and means through which they actively negotiated the figured worlds of Nepali womanhood as both feminists and daughters-in-law and many other subjective positions. A figured world thus is not prescriptive, but rather forms a significant backdrop for interpretation (Holland *et al.* 1998: 54).

Positionality is also interrelated with the figured world. While figurative identities are built upon the acts, characters and stories that “make the world a cultural world”, a positional identity is a person's understanding of her social positioning in a grounded context, dependent on myriad other factors such as others present, her greater or reduced access to “spaces, activities, genres, and, through those genres, authoritative voices, or any voice at all” (Holland *et al.* 1998: 127-128). As such, a person's positional identity is correlated with day-to-day relations of power, entitlement and deference, social affiliation and distance and how these might interact and relate to structures in a lived, everyday sense. It is how one identifies one's position relative to another, as a daughter-in-law is related to her parents-in-law. Yet it also speaks to how this relationship is mediated through the ways she might feel comfortable or constrained to do one thing or another, such as to speak to another, to be in the space of another, or to act (or not) in deference to another. Relational identities can be specific to and formed in the figured world. My informants were acutely aware of their positionality and how to behave in relation to certain people, especially with regard to how they should accumulate and maintain *ijjat*.

The idealised life path of a Hindu Nepali woman from Bhaktanagar or Kathmandu could be termed a “figured world”⁴⁰. This does not prescribe with any certainty that a

³⁹ Basanti now lives with her husband, Vishnu, in America. They return periodically to visit family.

woman fulfils this life path, but as a ‘figurative’ and generally shared imagining of what it means for a woman to be *ijjatdār*, it provides a meaningful framework for interpretation. It also does not preclude other, competing figured worlds, which may be entered or called upon in different contexts. From these shared understandings of *ijjat*, however, meaning is assigned to certain acts performed by people. This, in turn, results in certain acts being valued over others. Therefore, in the figured world of a Hindu Nepali woman from Bhaktanagar for example, marriage is generally more valued than remaining single because of the meanings of *ijjat* associated with a married woman.

I am interested in extending the concept of the ‘figured world’ to look more exactly at the ‘figures of womanhood’ for women in Nepal. If a figured world is seen as a socially and culturally constituted realm for interpretation, in which certain social actors can be recognised, I would argue then that the figures themselves within that social space can also be ‘figured’ in similar ways. The ‘figure of daughter-in-law’, for example, is not only a character to be merely ‘recognised’ within a figured world, but is more specifically *herself* a dynamic site for interpretation. Indeed, this thesis seeks to understand this very point by looking at the interplay of different subjectivities as they are variously shaped by honour and shame, as well as modern and traditional influences.

The ‘figure of the daughter-in-law’ does not reflect any one reality or experience. In the literature she is presumed to be high-caste, Hindu and more recently conceptualised as urban, or at least upper-class, ‘more modern’ or ‘more educated’. This figure stands closer to the lived experiences of some of my informants than others. For others, she stands in the distance. However, this figure, this *buhari*, is known by virtually all women in Nepal. Whether they share specific *buhari* traits that encompass notions of being virginal, modest, menstruation-stained, motherhood-redeemed, widowhood-cursed and violence-vulnerable, or not, is perhaps in some ways, quite beside the point. They *know* her. She is a point of reference by which they are judged. They recognise who she is and how they should strive to come ever closer to or further away from her. Women’s negotiations with the ‘figure of the daughter-in-law’ are a constant practice of instantiating, elaborating, resisting and transforming her as a way to negotiate and

⁴⁰ Holland *et al* term the ‘domestic relations’ of Skinner’s field site a figured world (Holland *et al.* 1998: 53), and this is fair to say, even of my own field sites. However, I also look more broadly at an idealised womanhood that encompasses other relational realms and is not restricted to the domestic sphere.

communicate their own, very different situations. And because they can identify her, they also acknowledge a newer arrival: the figure of the feminist. Due to the ubiquity of development in Nepal, women recognise her too and many, as I found in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, articulated desire to move closer to her. These figures, much like the worlds in which they move about, are important points of reference for the lived practices of womanhood, especially with regards to honour and shame.

Nepali Honour: *Ijjat*

To have many children is honourable, yet they consume the wealth that maintains honour. Land and gold make honour, yet as they are divided and passed down they dwindle. Honour is passed through blood and bone. It is physical, inherited, essential, yet it must be enacted to be socially real, through gifts and hospitality, through power and ownership. It is inherited, yet must be cultivated. It is essential, yet can be lost.

(McHugh 2001: 39)

*Ijjat*⁴¹ is a complex term with no singular meaning (Gilbert, Gilbert & Sanghera 2004: 112). Instead it relates to various overlapping meanings and has many nuances. As outlined in the introduction, *ijjat* translates to ‘honour’, or sometimes ‘prestige’, but is connected to a variety of interrelated themes, such as respect, dignity, respectability, status, chastity, and purity. It has been called a type of social currency that is perhaps the most important kind of cultural capital of Nepali life (Stirr 2010: 259). I argue that it is the framework that encompasses and directs the understandings, norms, practices, power, constraints, assets and beliefs, which pertain to a person’s, and a community’s, sense of honour. It is as much an unseen structure or conceptual understanding as it is a physical asset. It is as much to do with power and constraint, as it is to do with agency and practice. Mandelbaum argues that it always refers to “how a person carries out the

⁴¹ *Ijjat* is etymologically linked to the Persian and Arabic transliteration *izzat*. In the discourse they are similar concepts. I use the Nepali transliteration *ijjat*, except when directly referring to literature that uses the Persian *izzat*.

group's values, how he or she realises them in actual behaviour" (1988: 20). For many people across South Asia their *izzat* "is everything" (Lindholm 1982: 189) and a central concern, especially for relationships between the sexes (Jeffery 1979: 100). Gilbert *et al* worked with South Asian migrant groups in the United Kingdom and defined it as "a learnt, complex set of rules an Asian individual follows in order to protect the family honour and keep his/her position in the community" (2004: 112). Furthermore, *izzat* has both qualities of an individual and group nature, as personal behaviour, especially of women, often reflects the traits of a collective (Mandelbaum 1988: 21). Honour and shame are socially recognised (Lindisfarne 1998); it is local, public opinion that is the gauge of *ijjat*. However, a person or family with high *ijjat* commands power and influence. With regard to power, Mandelbaum deems *izzat* as "a symbolic summary of past achievements and a main element in present power. Power, properly deployed, enhances *izzat*: *izzat* legitimates power" (1988: 22).

In my field sites, people would use a variety of different terms to discuss *ijjat*. *Ijjat nabhaēkō* or *ijjat chaina* means 'there is no *ijjat*'. People couple the term *ijjatdār*, 'honourable', with nouns such as *pariwār* (family) or *mānche* (person). Another phrase, *ijjat jānu*, literally meaning '*ijjat* goes', is used to express the 'loss of face' of a person or family. A common turn of phrase was to say a dishonourable person had '*nāk chaina*' or 'no nose'. As I came to know it, this has foundations in physical caste features. Lower castes and ethnicities are said to have flatter noses, while Bāhun people are said to have more prominent noses, which reflects their occupancy of the top tier in caste hierarchy. Sometimes people would discuss honour without referring to *ijjat* at all. There are a number of phrases used in everyday speech that would indicate that someone's *ijjat* was being discussed, praised or scrutinised. *Asal* and *kharāb* are prefixes meaning 'good' or 'bad' with regard to moral behaviour. Shame, *lāj*, is also readily discussed, perhaps even more than honour (see Wikan 1984). Other, common phrases include *kastō lāj nalāgēkō?* and *kastō lāj śaram nabhaēkō?* which mean 'aren't you feeling shy/embarrassed?' and 'don't you have any shame?' These were commonly used to remind people to behave better when they acted shamefully.

An inter-related term is that of *mān* or 'respect'. In an interview with Basanti, as we were discussing the abstract nature of *ijjat*, she said, "If you ask somebody, 'what is your *ijjat*?' they will not understand you. But if you say, 'do people respect you?' then they will know what you are referring to." This correlates with the Nepali alternate

translation of *ijjat*, ‘prestige’, which signifies a person's standing in the estimation of others, founded on a widespread respect and admiration for perceived qualities or achievements. Anthropology has paid little attention to respect as a conceptual category, perhaps because it is encountered and enveloped in other analytic categories such as power, subordination and dominance (see Finkelstein 2008). Social psychologist Gaines does, however, define respect as the “social acceptance of another person” (1995: 57) and this provides a useful base for understanding a dimension of *ijjat*. Part of *ijjat* can therefore be conceptualised as the complex system that informs actions and ideas culminating in respect for a person by a community (Finkelstein 2008). To contest *ijjat* would alternatively grant an individual no respect and they would therefore be seen to have no honour. This would bring shame to an individual and their family.

However, *ijjat* should not be conceptualised as synonymous with ‘respect’. Many instances occurred in the field whereby people’s status, caste, gender, age and family position⁴² meant they were owed respect, as seen through practices of deference, such as the higher positioning of the palms in a formal greeting or the pronoun used to address them. However, a person receiving such practices of respect could still be considered morally corrupt. According to Vishnu and Basanti, “true *ijjat*” was linked to being *naitik*, (moral) and included, but was not limited to, “displays of hospitality, not cheating people (especially in business), doing good works in the community” and more generally adhering to the rules of *ijjat*. Moral behaviour undergirds *ijjat*. Therefore, it could be said that one can ‘receive’ respect, or rather, deference, without having *ijjat*, but one cannot have *ijjat* without receiving respect.

Some excellent works have been written relating to Nepali *ijjat* focussing on how *ijjat* pertains to a particular caste (Cameron 1998), ethnic group (McHugh 1998, 2001) or urban population (Liechty 2003, 2010). Cameron has worked extensively in Far-Western Nepal, particularly with women and low castes (Cameron 1995, 1998). She posits that honour in the Nepali context relates not only to an individual’s personal sense of honour but is explicitly linked to that of one’s kin (Cameron 1998). In this sense, the responsibility to act honourably is not simply reflective of one person’s positioning within society, but directly reflects on the social standing and honour of the

⁴² Elders are granted great respect, and I witnessed sons and daughters-in-law bow and touch the feet of elders, even their mothers/mothers-in-law, as a sign of respect.

whole family (1998: 137). Jyoti confirmed this stating, “*kulko ijjat*”, the ‘clan’s *ijjat*’, is “the highest thing”. If she were to “do something a little bit bad” she would spoil her *buvāko ijjat* (father’s *ijjat*). After marriage she would spoil her *lōgnēko* (husband’s) and *sasurāko* (father-in-law’s) *ijjat*. She said, “In this spectrum I don’t have my *ijjat*... I’m too much overloaded to keep up the *ijjat* of all these people... by keeping my character at the level where the society or my family wants to put it.”

Cameron argues *ijjat* is “largely an achieved state” and must be earned through the efforts of the individual, but that it resonates through the collective community. As such, *ijjat* is articulated through both the person and the collective (1998: 136). Cameron acknowledges there are “ascribed facts of birth”, such as gender and caste, but for her, these merely assist in the judgement of honourable behaviour (1998: 137). In my field sites, however, both acquired and ascribed (see Moxnes 1993; Moxnes 1996) facets of *ijjat* were important in deeming whether or not an individual and their family were considered honourable. I agree that honour is an “active, not a passive principle” (1998: 136) however, the dynamics of *ijjat* are complex and there are a number of influential factors that can be quantified outside of one’s actions. The actions of one individual can ascribe honour to other members of their household (1998: 136). Vishnu and Basanti, further posit that *ijjat* is also largely formed by the person’s caste, gender, religion, assets, education, place of birth, access to resources, economic status, occupation, community positions and what births and deaths have occurred in the family. All these factors play an inter-relational part in ascribing someone’s honour, separate from their behaviour. Furthermore, because *ijjat* is susceptible to change from different spheres of influence, it can fluctuate over a person’s life. One day I was having a conversation with Binita, who was trying to explain to me the complexity of *ijjat*. She had a story to portray the changes in her father’s *ijjat*.

You know like, I’ll give you my one example. My father’s *ijjat*, he’s born in a family [where] my grandpa was a doctor for the King. So of course you have high *ijjat*. But once my grandpa passed away we had low economic status and nobody cared. There goes the *ijjat* down! Even in a person’s lifetime your *ijjat* can’t be stable. So it goes down... But my father had four daughters and [it went] down before having one son, which then gained some back. Then his daughters, me included, had inter-caste love marriages and it [*ijjat*] went down

according to him and my Mum... And he starts earning and doing good for his family, it's going up. And doing good for society, going up. Once he got into this finance [cooperative], he became chairperson for the finance, and they didn't do it well, they closed down. And boom his *ijjat* goes down! And everything goes down, financial situation goes down, *ijjat*, everything goes down. And slowly now he's going up. He is president of our local community now, his *ijjat* it's going up, he's doing yoga. Doing service for people it's going up and up.

In this example, the fluidity of *ijjat* can be seen as susceptible to fluctuation based on a number of factors, both within and outside of Binita's father's control. *Ijjat* is a dynamic force in people's lives which can be regained with one's own effort, but is not also simply lost or gained due to someone's own actions and choices. Furthermore, when a group is judging the *ijjat* of an individual, it is important to note that, "opinion is rarely unanimous in judgment, is often volatile in ratings, usually varies among local groups but it is nonetheless a force that affects much of a person's and family's striving" (Mandelbaum 1988: 22).

Cameron further acknowledges a complexity arises when considering honour and status *between* different castes and ethnicities. She notes that, while previous work on honour carried out in North India (see Madan 1965; Sharma, U 1980) correlates with her experience regarding caste, patriline, auspiciousness and giving and sharing, it focuses primarily on high caste groups. She writes that, based on this, one could presume that honour has little to do with lower-caste groups in the region. Cameron emphatically states that honour is a concern for all peoples, however inflected differently (1998: 138). I agree with Cameron's notion that *ijjat* intersects caste as many of my low-caste informants were preoccupied with their sense of honour and prestige and felt great tension when considering the impact of their behaviour on their families.

Liechty further defines *ijjat* as a 'thing' (2003: 257) to gain, receive or have. Ajay mentioned one day it could be "lost", and that, "if you lose *ijjat*, you lose everything." In this sense *ijjat* can be seen as something that is just as important to a person as any assets they may own. He states:

Ijjat is a thing: it can be gained or lost, preserved or squandered. Honour or prestige is the central form of middle class social capital. In this social economy sexual propriety, suitable marriages, ritual observances, TVs, education and jobs are not *ijjat* in and of themselves. Instead they *give ijjat (ijjat dine chij)*; they *produce* social capital.

(2010: 324)

Jyoti alluded to this ‘thing-like’ nature of *ijjat* as having substance and weight and as very much gendered. One day we were sitting in her office in Kathmandu discussing my confusion at the seemingly disproportionate division of *ijjat* between men and women, based solely on women’s behaviour. I queried that a woman’s honour never seemed to be her own, because it reflected her husband or kin, saying, “it almost seems like honour belongs to everyone and no-one at the same time?” She decided the best way to explain it was to exemplify how women’s responsibility for honour ‘weighs’ more than a man’s.

So this is the, how do you say, you know like a weighing machine? Scales. But the level is like this [exemplifies an uneven scale with her hands]. If you look at the honour from this perspective, honour is linked with everyone but it is his honour, for men. And for women honour is linked with everyone but it is not hers, it is less.

This feeling that *ijjat* was *something* heavy came up several times in my fieldwork and Stirr argues that *ijjat* is sensed in the body and accompanied by feelings (2010: 259). Informants who discussed the ‘tension’ of being a good woman would make hand signals as though something was coming down upon their shoulders. Dr Gita termed *ijjat* a “heavy notion” with reference to being a good woman and stated that women were “overburdened” with *ijjat*, invoking the physical notion of carrying a heavy load.

Gender and Nepali *Ijyat*

Anthropological literature has extensively explored the gendered dynamics of honour and shame in different locales (see Persistiany, J.G. 1965; Wikan 1984; Mandelbaum 1988; Abu-Lughod 1999; Magrini 2003; Crivello 2008). Wikan (1984) offers a useful gender perspective in her analysis of Middle Eastern societies, namely Oman and Cairo, Egypt. She discusses the gender bias present in dichotomies of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’, stating that honour is ascribed “principally to men, leaving women with, if anything, only shame” (1984: 635). However, Wikan does not suggest women *do not* have honour and that they *only* have shame; on the contrary, she seeks to analyse the complex relationship between the two and examines the different ways in which honour and shame are reified on an everyday, contextual level⁴³. Certainly, in my field sites many women took pride in being considered ‘good’ daughters-in-law, as well as other various subjectivities. Local constructions of honour and shame require analysis as part of a wider system of gender expectations and strategies, the bases of which are often fraught with ambivalence and contradiction (Crivello 2008: 40). This is the approach I take when considering Nepali *ijyat*. Earlier anthropologies viewed honour and shame as a simplified binary correspondingly associated with male and female respectively (see Persistiany, J. G. 1965). While there certainly are elements of the relegation of shame to women in certain contexts, it also accounts for the ascription of honour. *Ijyat* is not straightforward. In order to fully understand how *ijyat* is gendered it makes sense to look at how women and men establish, accumulate and lose *ijyat* in their daily practice in complex and sometimes seemingly contradictory ways.

In Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, I came across many opinions about the gendered dimension of *ijyat*, not only that men and women experience and deploy it differently, but also that there are different social expectations about what is considered honourable, and shameful, for each gender. Common proverbs offered everyday judgements on

⁴³ There are contestations to the idea that women do not have honour, particularly with regards to sexuality. Åsman (2016) looks at Tamang women sex workers in Mumbai and uncovers various ways women displayed agency with regards to setting apart their identities as ‘victims’ – a discourse often purported by development and anti-trafficking organisations. She argues that returned Tamang sex workers make significant contributions due to their sex work and have been able to create significant personal and structural social changes in their places of origin with regard to gender roles, family relations, rituals and inheritance rights. Brown worked with courtesans in Lahore, Pakistan. Even though sexualised, the women of Brown’s study had a deep sense of their honour and daily struggles often involved maintaining honour as courtesans (Brown, L 2005, 2011).

moral differences between men and women or the shame women, in particular, could bring a family. For example, people perceive it is more serious for women to act dishonourably than men as one proverb suggests. ‘*Puruś bigre ghar bigrāncha, mahilā bigre samāj*’ means ‘when a man is ruined, only his home (family) is ruined. When a woman is ruined, her society is ruined.’ For women, to behave dishonourably is seen as a significant transgression, whilst men may be more readily exonerated for dishonourable behaviour. Another says, “*rudra ghanṭi nabhaēkā āimāi kasarī bīśvāsa garnē*”, meaning ‘how can you trust a woman without an Adam’s apple?’ The *rudra ghanṭi* or ‘lump in the throat’ refers to a man’s Adam’s apple. In Nepali understandings it is conceptualised as a box in which secrets can be kept. It indicates a woman is not trustworthy because she is physically incapable of keeping secrets. Another proverb offers ‘*āimāi ko petmā arkidaina*’, which translates to ‘women cannot keep things in their tummy’ and means women cannot keep secrets⁴⁴. These everyday proverbs display the entrenched understanding that women have a natural propensity for gossip, an activity seen as unseemly and yet often used to regulate behaviours identified as honourable or shameful (see Rapport & Overing 2000a).

Literature on different South Asian contexts suggests a great deal of the responsibility for family and men’s honour lies with women. If the honour of a family’s women is compromised or vanishes, so too does the family’s public position in the community, especially male members of the family (see Pettigrew, Joyce 1975: 59; Mandelbaum 1988; Cameron 1998). Ajay, a Nēwār man proclaimed, “*Ijjat* is about men actually. If a girl wears a short skirt it will give her father a headache not her mother!” Jyoti indicated that judgement is made more on women. She offered me the example that if she were to go out and not return to her home before evening, the wider community would witness that and ask, “what type of woman is this? She’s travelling around in midnight! Whose daughter is this? Whose wife is this? Whose mother is this?” In this sense, a woman’s honourable or dishonourable behaviour reflects the honour of the collective (Cameron 1998: 136).

Seeing the onus on women to maintain honour, I started to wonder about the honour of men. Surely they could not be merely passive recipients of honour granted by the

⁴⁴ Though I asked several informants about the relevance of the tummy and why things should be kept there, no informant could explain its significance.

endeavours of female relatives? It is the case that men can in many ways be seen to behave differently to women. They undoubtedly have more freedoms and are more easily forgiven for indiscretions, as my informants attested to. Ajay expressed his own feelings about how his family treated him in comparison to his sister, saying:

Being a man for me, I can actually explore a lot of things. I can go to places. It would never taint my character. For my sister, if she says she wants to go somewhere or to a person's house... my Dad would definitely comb the entire community, seeing whether that person is respected or not, whether my sister might be harmed in some way or not. He'll certainly be Sherlock Holmes in action. But for me, you know, I'm free to do anything.

Nonetheless, men do have certain obligations to maintain their status and reputation. What becomes clear is that these obligations are different, the practice of *ijjat* is distinct for men and women and therefore what it means to be honourable is different for men and women. Jack, Pokharel and Subba found that men measured themselves against traditional standards of masculinity, which largely focussed on being primary wage earners and being dominant in the family (2010: 165). My informants had further varied ideas on the differences between men's and women's honour. Pratima, a Bāhun woman, and manager of *Swar* in Bhaktanagar, said, "For men *ijjat* is the position and role of providing for his family, for being strong. For women it is following her husband and caring. If they behave otherwise people won't respect them." Basanti and Vishnu, her husband, discussed the ways men accumulate *ijjat* for themselves and the family. Oftentimes this included being self-sufficient and being ascribed honour through employment. One day, while visiting family in Kathmandu from America, Vishnu was left without a motorbike for transportation. Basanti's father lent Vishnu his motorbike. While this loan is seemingly innocuous, it is not "prestigious" for a husband's parents-in-law to lend him things, and "a few of his friends commented on that". Furthermore, "It's not prestigious to use, not only bike, but if they [wife's parents] give something like money, house or land, even that is not considered prestigious. He must earn it himself or get from [his] own parents." According to Vishnu, education and occupation are further means by which men earn *ijjat*. "Doctors and engineers have higher place in Nepal, just because they are doctors and engineers. No matter how their attitudes are... Doctor, engineer, pilot, big business men, they automatically gain *ijjat* and nobody

questions this.” When I asked what a man might do to lose *ijjat* from his own activities, both agreed that, “cheating, harming, corruption or marrying a lower caste” would decrease a man’s *ijjat*.

Ijjat in connection to men’s occupation was also notable in Bhaktanagar. One day, with Binod from EMFN, I was conducting a focus group discussion (FGD) with a group of female radio listeners. When we finished, my pale features had, as usual, attracted a large crowd. Binod started to address the group as I watched. He spoke passionately about my studies and the content of EMFN’s radio programme. Then he turned his attention to a young girl in front of him. “*Namastē*, little sister, what is your name?” “Shanti” she replied. “Oh Shanti! How old are you?” “I am nine years old.” “What do you aim to be when you grow up?” “A doctor”, she shyly answered in English. The men in the gathering erupted in laughter and began to talk excitedly with the group as the little girl hid shyly in her mother’s suit. Binod later explained to me the men were convinced a woman could not be a doctor, because women had responsibilities in the home and they are not supposed to hold such prestigious positions. However, they also thought this to be ‘wrong’ because they had imagined how ridiculous it seemed for a man to be a nurse, the role they envisioned for women in the medical field. “Women cannot be doctors because men cannot be nurses, it’s too silly! What kind of a man would this be?” they had exclaimed.

Informants were also emphatic that in some circumstances men’s honour is bound up in the manner in which they seem to “control” women. The Nepali for the verb ‘to control’ is *niyantraṇa garnu* and it is used to talk about a person dominating another person’s behaviour. As Jyoti told me:

If you think about a man’s honour, if he can’t go out and earn money for his family, then honour is linked. ‘What kind of guy is this?’... But if he can’t control his wife, then he will be tagged as ‘what kind of *husband* is this? He is no longer a man, he doesn’t have any control over his wife.’ And this is also linked with honour... If his wife does anything wrong then everyone in the society... will start saying, ‘what type of husband you are? You even can’t control your wife. And you can’t even resist your wife from going there and talking with many men out in the community, talking with women, seeking

information, talking about many things, learning about many things and scolding at you. What kind of man you are, you are not anymore a man.’ And [his] *ijjat* goes down.

Men are gossiped about and sometimes patronised for any perceived lack of control over their wives (or other female relatives). Once, while conducting an FGD with an EMFN listeners’ group in a village outside the Bhaktanagar municipality, a topic on this theme arose. The women of the group were discussing the difficulties of *samajhdārī*, ‘mutual understanding’ between husband and wife, because, as they put it, men are often seen as “dominating”. When I asked if there were any cases of women dominating men, they started to laugh and call out “*jointingre!*” When I queried this, my translator, laughing said, “Hen-pecked!” and went on to make a beak out of her hand and gesticulate in a pecking motion that evoked the image of a man being pecked incessantly by a chicken. Rita later told me it translates to mean ‘a man who is possessed by his wife’.

This idea that a wife could be ‘dominating’ over her husband was expressed as undesirable, and in keeping with characteristics of a *kharāb māhila* (immoral woman). Men were purported generally to have dominance over their wives. Themes of constraint were common amongst women, especially those expressing desire for more freedom. In Bhaktanagar, Namita, a Bāhun widow who had married a Nēwār man, said, “A woman’s place is still delicate comparing to the man’s, even in her family. A woman can’t do things that she likes freely and she has to stay under the pressure of a man also. She is doubted whatever she does.” However, ‘control’ is a nuanced and complex issue of power and not merely present from male to female, although many women brought this up as a notable tension in their daily lives. This dynamic exists in a matrix of relationships, flowing in multi-directions, sometimes simultaneously, between different actors. This includes from men to women, but also between other men, other women and from women to men, For example, a common tense relationship is that of the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law. Some women, like Jyoti, Rita and Basanti, felt equality in their relationships with their husbands, with dominance not being a personal issue. For these women pressure and dominance came from family and the wider community. Nevertheless, the predominant responsibility for *ijjat* remains with women. Ajay had passionate feelings about the inequality between men and women when it came to ‘*ijjat*

responsibility’ and he was deeply troubled by the seemingly “suffocating aspects” of *ijjat* on women. Following on from his comments regarding the differences in freedom between him and his sister, he said, “That’s why *ijjat* is definitely one of the things that binds a woman, restricts a woman. It’s nothing respectful for me. It’s the most degrading thing that someone can toss at a woman.”

Many of my informants felt strongly that *ijjat* can have disabling qualities when it comes to women’s agency. That is to say, in social interactions many felt it prevented them from taking up choices they might well have preferred if they were not concerned about their *ijjat*. Overwhelmingly, people reported that expectations of women to behave honourably meant negative consequences for them, including violence, ostracism and stigma⁴⁵ (see Chapter Five). Many argued that there is no escaping the importance of *ijjat* in people’s lives and, despite some negative impacts or sentiments regarding *ijjat* and gender relations, informants still felt that *ijjat* is important. With regard to traditional gender norms, it can be seen as having enabling qualities too, as it is conceived by many as pivotal to accumulating a whole host of things, such as status, respect, merit and good will. One woman even petitioned me to seek a more nuanced understanding, saying, “I don’t think you understand. Standing in front of our mothers-in-law – that feels *good* to us. To be able to do that with honour is a special and important thing for us.”

The ideal life path for Bhaktanagari and Kathmandu women

I have been gone from Bhaktanagar for almost seven months and it is a relief and a joy to be back. Today, Amy and I had just sat down to catch up on the past several months, when her sister entered with one of the schoolgirls, her arm hanging limply and painfully by her side. I guessed her to be about ten

⁴⁵ Definitions on stigma vary (Stafford & Scott 1986). Goffman’s argues that stigma is an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” and reduces the bearer “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman 1963: 3). Crocker, Major and Steele posit that a stigmatised person possesses or is believed by others to possess “some attribute or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context” (1998: 505). In my field sites, the latter definition links to the notion there is a desired, prescribed notion of gendered citizenship and the consequence of being labeled by society as being outside of this renders one stigmatised.

years old. “What happened?” we asked. She had fallen off the slide and we suspected she had dislocated her arm. We took her to the doctor’s office in the marketplace. Her Auntie joined us an hour later as we waited for the x-ray results. As we sat on the wooden bench, she roughly nudged her niece and scolded, “Why were you playing around? You bring us nothing but trouble! You better hope they can fix your arm! Who’s going to want to marry you with a broken arm?”

Field Diary excerpt

Much has been written about family relationships and the expected life path for Hindu women across many castes in South Asia (see Bennett, Lynn 1976; Stone 1978; Bennett, Lynn 1983; Caplan, P 1985; Skinner 1990; Gray 1991; Cameron 1999; Kondos 2004; Majupuria 2007). While individual practices vary from caste to caste, and between different ethnic and religious groups more generally in Nepal, there are consistent themes across the literature, such as an idealised model of female behaviour and the notion that it is right and proper for a woman to marry⁴⁶. While these are undoubtedly being contested and reconfigured, such notions still permeate many aspects of daily life and remain influential, guiding and constraining women in line with the dominant gender ideology. These gender norms were salient amongst my informants in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, as were voices of contestation, negotiation and mediation of them.

The ideal Hindu Nepali woman has a number of characteristics. While most of the key features of being *ijjatdār* can be taken to be a format for ideal behaviour of sorts, there are additional rules and practices that are considered necessary for ‘good’ femininity, which contribute to one’s *ijjat*. In other words, one informs the other, as part of being *ijjatdār* informs ‘good’ womanhood, and undertaking practices of ‘good’ womanhood helps make one *ijjatdār*. Bennett’s work (see 1976, 1983) with high-caste Hindu women explored numerous aspects of womanhood considered socially appropriate, for which I found correlation in my field sites as well. The proper conduct for women, she asserted, is that of “*lāj mānnu*”, the idea of being shy, timid, ashamed or self-conscious. A

⁴⁶ There are similar expectations for men; however, there is more flexibility where age is concerned. Furthermore, men’s roles are understood to encompass more activities and responsibilities outside of marriage and family, such as employment or community affairs.

compliment given to women in her field was that a woman was good if she “sits and says nothing” (1983: 3). Majupuria picks up on similar themes, asserting in Nepal “the female child is not expected to be demanding, especially in relation to health and food requirements” (2007: 166). Liechty says women are entrusted with certain tasks in the domestic space, particularly the socialisation of children and “the maintenance of ‘traditional local morality’” (2010: 316) and any failure to perform such tasks is seen as evidence of a woman’s “moral failing and the rejection of their natural roles as traditional wives and mothers” (2010: 316).

The ideal Bhaktanagari or Kathmandu woman is faithful, obedient and industrious, be she daughter or daughter-in-law, though the strictures on the latter are more obvious as my informants testified to feeling more freedom before marriage (see Skinner 1990: 75). That she be respectful to her husband and in-laws upon marriage is highly regarded. One of the variants of the word for ‘respect’ (*mān*), is *mānnu parne*, and means ‘the one who *should* be respected’ and is an important practice between women and their husbands (see Gray 1980, 1993). As well as respect for those who are hierarchically higher, a woman goes about her duties without complaining, does not run away to her *māitī* (maternal home), steal or quarrel with others in the community (Skinner 1990). A good daughter-in-law obeys her husband and mother-in-law (Skinner & Holland 1998: 93). Ramila, a Bāhun woman from EMA, said of the qualities that are expected of a woman in Bhaktanagar: “She must have a good character. She must be cooperative, not [be] the quarrelling type. She must understand, [be] friendly and frank. She must be helpful and believable (trustworthy)”. Many also expressed that women should not be overly sexual (see Chapter 4) or be seen in the company of men other than family or her husband, and women are thought less of if they are considered *nāthi* (a flirt), *bōksī* (a witch), or *randī* (a prostitute) (Skinner & Holland 1998: 92).

It is well known that, starting in infancy, sons are generally preferred over daughters in Nepali households and one common saying amongst Bāhun-Chētrīs states, “to be born as a daughter is to have an ill fate” (Majupuria 2007: 161) while “the birth of a son paves the way to heaven” (Malla 2011: 108). I heard some variation of this preference many times, even once when my friend Rita’s *āmā* (mother) blessed me during

*Daśaim*⁴⁷, in the hope I would be granted “many sons”. In Bhaktanagar, I noted son preference in the ways parents fed and cared for their children. For example, at the Maya Garden Women’s Centre, when I conducted a survey amongst its members, some women fed meat only to sons and bathed their daughters less frequently, only once per week as opposed to three times or more per week for their sons. From an early age daughters are aware of this preferential treatment (Skinner 1990: 72; Skinner & Holland 1998: 94). Ahearn noted in her field site the birth of sons was met with revelry and the birth of daughters with solemn resignation. As stark as the contrast may be, this only addresses part of the gendered dynamics within families. Ahearn acknowledges that while there are some roles women fulfill which are devalued, particularly that of daughter-in-law, women are also embedded in a matrix of other kinships ties, and so concurrently may also be a beloved sister and/or daughter (see Bennett, Lynn 1983; Ahearn 2001: 67). I would further add this changes over time, as she grows older and becomes a mother or mother-in-law.

Skinner argues that the prototypical female in the first phase of her life, pre-puberty, is purported to be an “obedient and hardworking daughter and sister” (Skinner 1990: 75). At this time her kin teaches her ‘good habits’, which will signify her as a ‘good’ woman, wife and daughter-in-law: Basanti referred to this process as “the orientation session” before marriage. Before puberty a girl is considered ‘pure’, but when she reaches its onset she turns from an innocent and non-sexual person to one who is thought of as polluting, sexual and threatening (see Chapter 4). It is expected that young women will marry soon after they first menstruate and this is a time supposedly spent practising and perfecting the habits of a ‘good’ woman, as they assume the most important structural roles of wife, daughter-in-law (Bennett, Lynn 1983: 169) and mother (Stone 1978: 9).

The women in my study were particularly occupied with what people thought of them, hoped to avoid negative evaluations from the community and expressed that they did not want to dishonour their families with “bad behaviour”. Caring about what other people thought meant my informants were particularly preoccupied with enacting good behaviour (or at least being seen to in certain contexts; see Chapter 3), and avoiding bad

⁴⁷ *Daśaim* is the longest Hindu festival in Nepal.

behaviour. In doing this, the women generally embraced locally valued, idealised identities for the *ijjat* it would afford them. However, this does not suggest a lack of contestation or criticism and sentiments also conveyed a critique of their unequal treatment comparative to men. Many informants asserted their marriage to be a most important endeavour in the processes of womanhood. I discuss the dimensions of marriage more generally and utilise the case studies of two married informants and also examples of single women, both unmarried and widowed, to demonstrate the importance of marriage in the figured world of the ‘good woman’.

Marriage: the making of a wife and daughter-in-law

“Why don’t the bride and groom smile when their photos are being taken? Shouldn’t they be happy?” I wondered out loud as I watched my friend Rita, seated next to her new husband Deepak high up on a dais on their wedding day. They were solemnly posing for dozens of relatives taking photographs. Her friend Mela explained, “Marriage is serious. You can’t be seen to be taking it lightly or as a joke. Even if you are happy, people will look at these photos and say ‘why aren’t they taking this seriously?’ You can only smile with each other after you are married.” After a day full of long and intricate rituals I expect there to finally be some smiling and there are some shy smiles exchanged between the bride and groom as they near the end of the last ritual. But soon after, proceedings grow serious again as the time draws near for Rita and Deepak to depart. Rita’s mother, sister and sister-in-law all bend down to speak to her and cry under her red veil. They are speaking quickly and in low hushed tones, interspersed by sobs and wiping tears. They are sad they won’t live together anymore. The day ends in contrast, with guests dancing and singing joyously next to the car that will take Rita to her new marital home and a lot of serious expressions and tears from the bride’s family. Mela is right; all things considered, marriage here is taken very seriously.

Field Diary, excerpt

Given Nepal's diverse population it is difficult to detail an absolute and common practice for marriage, even in demarcated locations such as Kathmandu or Bhaktanagar. Demographic differences such as religion and ethnic background make marriage ritual in these locales distinct. However, for this thesis, it is less important to look into the various rituals of marriage, and rather identify common threads in my informants' sentiments on marriage and how they felt and negotiated a new set of relationships.

It would not be an understatement to assert that marriage is a defining experience for women in Nepal (Leve 2007: 153). As Acharya notes, "Marriage becomes the overwhelming factor determining all her life options. This is reinforced by all social norms and legal structures, everything else is secondary to marriage" (Acharya, M 2003). March says, even for Buddhist Tamang communities, "It is collectively inconceivable to Tamang not to marry"⁴⁸ (1990: 8). Early marriage has been a common cultural practice of both Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman Nepalis; however, the median age of marriage for Nepal has risen steadily over the past three decades from 16.8 years to 19.5 years for females and from 20.8 years to 21.9 years for males (UNDP 2004; National Planning Commission Secretariat 2012), suggesting gradual social change in the perceptions of child marriage, which was historically common and still exists today (see Thapa, S 1996). Given the importance placed on marriage in Nepal across many groups, an obvious role for women to take up is that of wife and daughter-in-law. In the literature, daughters-in-law are discussed as experiencing much suffering and as being lowly (Ahearn 2001: 68; 11) untrustworthy (Bennett, Lynn 1983: 170-171), and in an "unfavourable position" (Des Chene 1998: 20).

The relationship between wives and husbands was varied in my research; many of my informants had supportive and loving husbands. Just as many others had antagonistic ones. Whether love or arranged, marriage is shaped by multiple factors over time, such as personalities, children, economics and family support. More often than not, the husband would be in control of the relationship's dynamics, such as his wife's freedom of mobility, financial dependence, and chores and, with only a few exceptions, her role would necessitate obedience and subservience to him. This could take form in numerous

⁴⁸ March suggests the importance of marriage in Tamang communities is tied strongly to bearing children and that parent-child intimacy is a relational space in which Tamang "anchor their emotional identity" (1990: 8).

ways, including eating after him, walking behind him, never calling him by name⁴⁹ and bowing to touch her head to his feet (Cameron 2004: 739). They are not expected to show affection in public, but many informants spoke of loving sentiment and affection in private. For many, intimate partner violence was a reality and concern. There is still widespread acceptance of physical abuse against wives (Cameron 2004: 739), though this is changing through activism, development and law-making in the new constitution (Nepal Law Commission 2009; FWLD & Sub-Committee 2011; Pradhananga & Shrestha Undated).

Sentiments on becoming a wife were also discussed amongst my informants, both positively and negatively. Many were excited and hopeful about the prospect of marriage, expressing gleeful anticipation for what it might be like. One informant in Bhaktanagar, a teacher, said to me, “I spend a lot of time thinking about who he [her future husband] will be and I just hope he is kind.” Some arrange a ‘love marriage’, and if it is found to be unacceptable by the parents, they might persist anyway, as Basanti and Vishnu did. Some may dissolve the marriage and acquiesce to their parents’ wishes or sometimes ‘go’ *poila* (elope) (see Stirr 2010). Others, like Rita, acquiesced to the desires of family. She said to me once, “I think to myself yes. It’s time [to get married] and my mother is getting old and my brothers want me to settle down. I will try for them.” Dr Maya felt that within marriage a woman became much like a slave, because she discovered in her field work “that [the] marriage relationship is much more complicated and abusive than trafficking.” She argued this was because of the expectations placed on women to be “the good wife” and produce children. One informant, Sirjana, from Bhaktanagar, was particularly adamant she would not get married due to a love affair gone wrong. The relationship was violent and disappointing, leaving her feeling that intimate relationships were primarily negative. She was constantly worried about having to say no to suitors her parents presented. In an attempt to circumvent marriage she kept insisting she needed more education, and she admitted this was a tactic to put off marriage as long as possible.

⁴⁹ While a few Kathmandu couples I knew addressed each other with the familiar pronoun *timī* (you), expressing a more egalitarian relationship, I more often encountered women who addressed their husbands in the highest honorific pronoun form, *hajūr* (you). However, in those instances, the husbands would address their wives with the lower familiar pronoun *timī*.

All women I worked with were acutely aware of how marriage placed them in a matrix of relationships, not simply the one with their husband. The key one for many informants, not simply Basanti, was of becoming a daughter-in-law. As a woman after marriage leaves her *māiti*, her natal home, to live with her husband and his parents, it became evident that this was a focal point for women's hopes and concerns. Would she have to follow traditional customs, such as bowing every morning? Would they pressure her to have sons? Would they let her continue education and/or work outside the home? These were questions my informants asked and many had answered. The answers were of course never definitively one way or another; the dynamic of negotiating relationships with in-laws is complex and varied. However, the tension is clear. For example, Rita spoke to me of her refusal to wear *curā*, the glass bangles associated with marriage. She told me of their inconvenience in doing most activities. She fought the battle to not wear them and won, but told me, "it was hard to convince her [mother-in-law] as to why I should not have to wear these."



Figure 6: Married women, Bhaktanagar, wearing the symbols of marriage; *sindūr* at the hairline or red *bimḍī*, red or green *pōṭē* (wedding necklace) and *curā* (red glass bangles).

Basanti's Marriage

Basanti and Vishnu, from Kathmandu, were married in early 2009, after having dated for almost five years. This was unusual amongst my informants, but they consciously chose this path, despite pressure from both parents first to break up and then, when they became more accepting, to marry as soon as possible. Despite both being Nēwār, Basanti was Hindu and Vishnu was Buddhist, and their parents would have preferred an intra-caste marriage for them both. However, they maintained their decision to get married. Upon marriage, it became apparent to Basanti that she was tense in her affinal home, due to expectations on her as a daughter-in-law, despite greatly respecting her mother-in-law and Vishnu's family. She said:

Vishnu, he's the best gift for me from his mother and father, so I do respect them for that. Without them I wouldn't have him in my life. I have big respect for them. But it doesn't mean I shouldn't be allowed to live my life just because of that. I need to have that freedom. The thing is when you are there [affinal home] it's not possible to have that balance.

She went on to speak more of the tension she felt of the expectation to live with her in-laws, expressing how tough it would feel if she were to “*just* think of cooking” from when she wakes up to when she goes to sleep. While it was never implied that Basanti fought with her in-laws, she acknowledged there was gentle pressure to behave like a “traditional daughter-in-law”. When I asked her about this she said, “I would just wear jeans and a sweater if it were up to me; however, for my in-laws, I must at very least wear *kutār*⁵⁰ or more appropriately a *sārī*⁵¹. You have no idea it's such a pain getting dressed so formal just for your own home!” In the morning she was expected to bow to them. Traditionally this would have included Vishnu, her husband, though she did not do this. Of bowing to her in-laws she said, “I bow to them and touch my head near to their feet. It's a sign of respect.” After cooking a meal of at least three dishes and

⁵⁰ A *kutār* is the short form of *kutār sewal*, a traditional style of suit, whereby a woman wears a long top over matching pants. It is worn with a matching shawl, draped over the chest with the ends hanging over the shoulders. See Figure 9 (Chapter 3).

⁵¹ A *sārī*, is a traditional woman's clothing, consisting of a blouse cropped above the navel with short capped sleeves and at least five metres of fabric, which is then wrapped around the wearer's body to form the skirt, before draping over the front of the woman to conceal the stomach, then hanging over the shoulder. It is worn for more formal occasions and festivals. See Figure 8 (Chapter 3).

assorted accompaniments she would serve her family but would eat last. “Traditionally I must eat last, even after my husband. But Vishnu and I eat together after his parents and brother have eaten.” This is more or less a ritual I either witnessed or heard about many times over the course of my research. For some, their households were more liberal, for others, much less. Over time, the idea that she must dress in certain ways, be restricted from certain activities and might be in the “kitchen for whole day, feeding people” was something she really resisted.

As a result of this tension, which Basanti said she felt directly in relation to *ijjat* and the expectations placed on her as a daughter-in-law, they emigrated to a large city in America, specifically to prioritise her freedom and greater opportunities. As she says, “When it comes to compromising my freedom, I can’t always compromise my freedom to respect them [her in-laws] and for my *ijjat*. It becomes tough in the long run.” Basanti was emphatic that a daughter-in-law who practises more traditional behaviours according to expectations, compromises individual freedom in order to gain *ijjat*, which she described as being an understandable sacrifice for many women. For her, there were lots of elements involved in the dynamic of respect and *ijjat* when a woman becomes a daughter-in-law. She said, “There’s a lot going on in there, to compromise the freedom. You just don’t want to compromise your freedom for nothing. You are doing that for some reason [*ijjat*].” However, she believed there is only so long a woman can make concessions, and she felt that being a daughter-in-law in Nepal brought her too much tension. She said, “Partly we’re here [America] because I love my freedom, I love to do what I want to do, which I can’t do in Nepal. I mean I *can* do, but I don’t want to spoil my family’s name. It’s not only about me.”

Rita’s Marriage

Another example of the dynamics of negotiating *ijjat* and marriage was that of informant, Rita from Kathmandu. Rita, a Chētrī woman, was twenty-five at the time of her engagement. She exhibited many features that could be described as being modern, having had a pre-marital relationship, being well educated, having a preference for Western dress, being employed and highly paid, and having excellent English. She

considered herself a feminist, telling me “Yes, because I believe in women’s rights. Rights to their freedom, to make choices.” She engaged in activities that labelled her a feminist to outsiders. Sometimes this was positive as I came to know many of her colleagues respected her for her outspoken ways. However, not all her experiences were always positive. A public health worker, she recounted to me once she was yelled and spat at in a village for handing out condoms to people during a sexual health campaign. However, she explained that she was so passionate about public and sexual health and the women’s movement that she was willing to do it anyway. She also acted in the first Nepali production of Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*, something she said to me was “quite radical” for Nepali audiences and she was pleased to be a part of it. Throughout her courtship and marriage to Deepak I came to see her positioning as dynamic as she consistently negotiated and reconfigured herself as a feminist, whilst going through the process of becoming a wife and daughter-in-law.

Rita’s marriage was decidedly different from Basanti’s, although tension in going from a daughter to a daughter-in-law was a noticeable theme for her also. When Rita excitedly told me she was getting married, my initial thought was about the hurried nature of the nuptials; they had been dating four months and their introduction was arranged. I had not expected this of Rita as, before meeting Deepak, she had demonstrated she was intent on a love marriage. Over time, however, she began to display a tentative willingness to meeting a man of her family’s choosing, “just to try and see”. She plainly admitted she at first met him because her family were worried for her future and she did not want them to worry. They did fall in love and she was always quick to correct me when I made mention of her arranged marriage, insisting it was an “arranged meeting, not an arranged marriage” and she had, in the end, “arranged it herself”. Her wedding took place at the end of my initial period of fieldwork in mid-2010. We stayed in touch and I learned that her relationship with her in-laws was a polite one and that she thought they were a lot of fun to be around.

Two years later I had the opportunity to re-interview Rita. When we met again I learnt she was working full time for an INGO and earning an excellent income. She chose to wear a simple gold ring on her fourth, left finger, and sometimes a simple red *bimḍī*

between her eyebrows, instead of the *sindūr*⁵² and red of a traditionally dressed married woman. She had even permed and cut her hair quite short to above her shoulders, something I had not seen commonly in Bhaktanagar or Kathmandu. She had a daughter who was starting nursery, a type of pre-school, which some children in Nepal start before the age of three. When I asked her how her marriage was, she told me that, despite being happy “enough”, her *sāsū*, mother-in-law, was at times making her life “some kind of crisis or misery”. She told me her mother-in-law “back bites” her, making remarks about a perceived superiority Rita had over her. Rita believed her mother-in-law was perhaps jealous of her education and success, as she complained, “You never teach me English”, despite never having asked for tuition. With sarcasm she referred to Rita as a “queen”, implying she perceived her to dominate over the household, perhaps with her better education and job. It was a goal of Rita to educate herself further outside of Nepal, and at the time of our follow up interviews, part of the reason for this decision was because she no longer wished to live with her *sāsū*. When I asked her if she and Deepak could move out to start a nuclear-style household, without the in-laws, she replied, “No, she helps with my daughter and he [Deepak] won’t like that. It’s too hard to do that here. It’s easier to leave Nepal than do this.”

There is a dearth of anthropological literature on the relationship between women and their mothers-in-law in Nepal⁵³. Research uncovers work conducted into the positive role an amicable relationship with in-laws and husbands can play in improved antenatal care and maternal health outcomes⁵⁴ (see Mullany 2006 ; Simkhada, B, Porter & van Teijlingen 2010). Traditionally, in Nepal the most senior role a woman can occupy in the family is that of mother-in-law. For women this is the top position in a hierarchical family network, and in this role she will exercise authority and power over daughters-in-law (Simkhada, B, Porter & van Teijlingen 2010: 2). In a study into access to antenatal health care, Simkhada *et al* suggested, “that mothers-in-law usually played an unsupportive role, providing much work which had to be completed before they considered (antenatal care) attendance” (2010: 3).

⁵² A red powder applied daily, at the centre hairline of a married Hindu woman’s forehead.

⁵³ Some works look at aspects of the relationships between Hindu mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in wider South Asian contexts (see Kandiyoti 1988; Vera-Sanso 1999).

⁵⁴ This does indicate that oftentimes relationships might not be amicable.

What has become clear in my fieldwork is that the relationship between a woman and her mother-in-law is a site where daughters-in-law can feel great tension. Indira from *Swar* even said many mothers-in-law figuratively “torture” their daughters-in-law. For women who want to have freedom in their lives, this relationship proves challenging and is a site where the slippage between modern desires and traditional roles is clearly visible. A consequence of *ijjat*, therefore, is the production of tension. When Basanti once returned to Nepal from America for a home visit, she told me how hurt she was when her father said to her, “Don’t forget now, you must go and visit your in-laws first. You don’t want them to think that it’s more important to visit us first.” She felt she did not need to be reminded how she ‘must’ behave. Moreover, this so-called ‘honourable action’ went directly against her wishes of seeing her own parents and siblings first.

Being single: Off the idealised life-path

Nothing is going to replace that kind of wife or ‘good women’ things.

Dr Maya, Formal interview

The attitude toward single⁵⁵, divorced and widowed women conveys a great deal about the idealised life-path for women in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu. While I met a woman who was “separated”, I did not meet any divorced women, as the rates in Nepal are low due to high stigmatisation, especially amongst high-caste Hindus (World Bank 1999: 8)⁵⁶. Many women I came into contact with had husbands from whom they were estranged for reasons pertaining to the husband never or rarely returning from migratory work, taking a second wife (see Weiss 1999: 248) or presumably having gone *poila*. These women still referred to themselves as married rather than single, however. For the

⁵⁵ I use ‘single women’ to refer to those women not yet married. It becomes problematic when the woman is over the age that was widely considered acceptable. While no definite age could ever be directly given to me, certainly parents worried about a daughter if she remained unmarried as of her late twenties.

⁵⁶ To my knowledge, I also never met any openly lesbian women. Though homosexuality in Nepal is not illegal, the *Being LGBT in Asia: Nepal Country Report* states that family acceptance is “severely limited due to overwhelming social and cultural pressures to enter a heterosexual marriage and create a family, as well as by rigid conventional expectations of gender roles. Most LGBT people simply do not ‘come out’... due to the stigma, confusion and the loss of face this could create for their families” (UNDP & USAID 2014: 10).

purposes of this next section I will discuss some of the informants who were unmarried over the age that was widely considered acceptable and those who were widowed.

Single women

While I did not meet many older single women in my field sites, there was a general sense that these single women were often considered an anomaly due to the general idealisation of the married Hindu women. There was no prominent desire amongst most women to remain single. In terms of *ijjat*, informants would go so far to say that single women were generally considered *ijjat*-less. This, however, can differ from respect and the single women I met amassed respect and status in other facets of their life, particularly through work. For example, two Thakuri⁵⁷ sisters I came to know in Bhaktanagar were both unmarried, well past the median age of marriage. Their mother and another younger sister had both committed suicide and they had no contact with their father. The eldest sister was over thirty-five and so had inherited the family home and was a dedicated yoga practitioner. The younger was in her late twenties and they supported another sister completing her School Leaving Certificate (SLC)⁵⁸. Yet, by all accounts they were respected enough in Bhaktanagar as they operated the only Montessori pre-school in the district and it was a highly sought after and profitable childcare centre in town. One could argue in this case that, while they may have diminished *ijjat* for remaining unmarried, having no parents and two suicides in the family, they acquired (see Moxnes 1996) enough respect and standing through their hard work and their religious dedication.

One key informant Dr Maya, a Bāhun academic from Kathmandu, had very emphatic ideas on her position in the family and her relationship with her own *ijjat*. Jailed in 1990 for protesting in the *jana āndōlan* I she met women who had been imprisoned on grounds of sex work, or more accurately, trafficking. She dedicated her academic career to working for INGOs on related issues. In her personal life, she remained unmarried at the time of our interview and was in her mid-forties. I had casually mentioned to her

⁵⁷ Thakuri, is a caste belonging to the Kshatriya, or “second tier” in the caste hierarchy of Nepal (see Höfer 2004).

⁵⁸ The SLC refers to the final two years of secondary school.

that I had spoken to a well-known widows' activist and that she had felt she had no *ijjat* because of her widowed status. Dr Maya replied, "Yes, *ijjat* is always linked with the married women. Even I have no *ijjat* because I am single." When I queried this she said her experiences in her *māiti* showed this very well as she stood in juxtaposition to her married brothers and especially her younger sister as the only single child of the household. When all the children would go home to visit their parents, Dr Maya said, "the respect and privilege they get at home, I don't! Because I have no man with me, who will protect me, who will give me the *ijjat* [of being a wife/daughter-in-law]?" She admitted sometimes she fought with her father as to what her "profile" was in the family. As a well-paid and highly educated woman she garnered some value as she supported them financially but she sometimes felt that her relationship with them was based on money. She felt "intimidated sometimes" because she felt she had "no kind of emotional relationship" because her "position [was] very different than theirs [siblings]". In her early twenties her parents tried to arrange her marriage but she resisted and they had stopped asking. She felt her mother especially still wanted her to marry because she wanted someone to take care of Maya in her old age. I commented that there were interesting correlations with other informants and stories I had heard and that there was a sense that women were not capable of protecting themselves. Dr Maya agreed, saying, "Yeah that's the whole agency. Because for women there is no agency at all, because your identity is linked with your husband. Or with man, father, husband, brother, son. Whatever. And you are not an agent because you are half. If I am not married, I am not whole."

Widows

A good and virtuous woman, through ritual observance and daily practice, ensures the health and long life of her husband and dies before him.

(Holland *et al.* 1998: 217)

In Nepal there is a strong political movement for the rights of widows. Due to the stigma attached to widows, this movement has gained popularity and success in changing the term *bidhavā*, 'widow', to *ēklai mahilā*, 'single woman'. *Ēklai* also means

'alone', and therefore this term has the connotation of referring to "a woman who is alone". This term was gaining traction in people's everyday speech, and many widows preferred the term. However, it was also criticised for two reasons. Firstly, those opposing the change felt it sidestepped the stigma by labelling widows something different. As Pratima told me, "it's silly, we need to change society's view, not one word!" Secondly, as *ēklai mahilā* became synonymous with *bidhavā*, many women who were single but had never been married, such as Dr Maya, felt it did not adequately depict their experiences. As such, I use the term *bidhavā* here for its clearer depiction of circumstance, except when directly quoting informants who favoured *ēklai mahilā*.

Becoming a widow for Hindu women in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu is in many ways akin to social death. Highly stigmatised, the loss of a husband signals a loss of the desirable status of a wife. In terms of the idealised life path of a 'good' Hindu woman, a woman preferably never becomes a widow and it is said that "widows have fallen off the life path" (Skinner 1990: 76). Practices pertaining to widowhood vary between caste, religion and ethnicity. When I worked with widows in Bhaktanagar, many of whom were Hindu, it seemed they were treated with pity, suspicion and had all felt excluded in various ways. When a Hindu woman's husband dies she is stripped of the symbols of marriage; her *sindūr* is wiped from her forehead and her gold jewellery, *pōtē* (wedding necklace), red *cōlō* (blouse) and *curā* (bangles) are taken off and she is never to put them back on, signifying her loss in status as a married woman (see Bennett, Lynn 1983; Cameron 1998; Des Chene 1998). She is then to don specific clothing and adhere to strict conditions. Whether the restrictions are enforced on individuals varies according to context and subjective variables. There are three different mourning periods, thirteen days, forty-five days and one year. It is said a widow must wear white for the one-year period of mourning⁵⁹. After this she can wear colour again but red, the sacred colour of marriage, is forbidden. It was explained to me that when women wear red "there is a glow in [one's] face, which makes [a woman] look attractive, but if a widow wears red and has this glow, other men can be attracted to her and this is not allowed." This is because her sexuality reportedly must be contained. When a woman's husband dies, her sexuality is obscurely connected with the destruction of life and she presents a potential problem to her family, particularly her affines. She is blamed for his

⁵⁹ The mourning rituals for widows are aligned similarly with the 'chief mourner', usually the eldest son of the household when his father or mother dies (Bennett, Lynn 1983: 98).

death, and widows' activist, Leela, told me the term, *pōi tōkuvā* or 'husband eater' is often used to describe widows. Her affines can no longer make legitimate use of her fertility and are obligated to support her and her children for the rest of her life. This can lead to resentment from her in-laws, especially if she is childless (Bennett, Lynn 1983: 243-244). In line with this control of her sexuality is the restriction of certain foods, and she is not allowed to eat meat, onion, tomato, garlic, fish, cucumber and spinach, as they are said to be "hot foods" that generate passion (Cameron 1998: 149-150). When a woman is in her one-year mourning period she is not allowed to visit her father and brothers in her *māitī*, even if they die (Bennett, Lynn 1983: 244-245).

High and low caste Hindu women practise these restrictions for different lengths of time, with high-caste women expected to take on longer periods of mourning. While widows of any caste are considered inauspicious, the strictures on low-caste women re-marrying are not as severe as high-caste women who are never to re-marry. Low-caste women can therefore remove this unlucky state by finding a new husband (Cameron 1998: 150). The strictures on men re-marrying are not harsh at all; in fact, remarriage is encouraged. I heard often in Bhaktanagar, when a man's wife, died he was "kicking off his shoes" or he was simply "changing shoes". When I queried this I was told a Nepali saying "*khutṭā bhaye juttā kati*", which literally translates as "A foot can have (buy) lots of shoes".

Mahima

Mahima, a Hindu Magar, lived next door to Amy. I happened to arrive in Bhaktanagar the day her husband died, as the wailing of women's voices attested to on my first day. When we met in 2009, Mahima was twenty-four years old and had two young sons, aged five and two. Her marriage, though a love match, was "full of suffering". Her mother-in-law, she told me, was especially "mean", first due to her disapproval of their love marriage and especially when Mahima's husband died as she emphatically blamed Mahima for his death. When he was alive, Mahima fought with her husband on a daily basis and he was a violent alcoholic. One day during a fight, she recounted, he had picked up a wheat sickle and held it to her throat, yelling and threatening to kill her. The

day he died, he had been drinking all afternoon and as he prepared to go meet his friends and drink more, he decided to take his eldest son. Mahima, knowing he was drunk, fought with him, begging him not to leave. He yelled and belittled her as he placed their son on the back of the motorbike and started to climb on. Mahima recalled acquiescing to his departure, but firmly lifted her boy off the back of the motorbike. Her husband sped off enraged. It was the last time she saw him alive, as he died shortly after, having driven himself, speeding, into the path of an oncoming truck.

Mahima's experience confirms the practices around widowhood are adhered to in Bhaktanagar. She was not allowed to visit people's houses or go to ceremonies because she was considered *aśubha* (inauspicious). Her father and brothers refused to see her until the one-year mourning was finished and she was told she could not marry again. Her mother-in-law policed her eating, forbidding her to eat meat because she did not want Mahima to increase her 'sexual potency' and she could not wear bright warm colours in case they incited attraction from other men. In my ignorance, I one day gave her some orange-red cloth from the market to make clothes with, and while she smiled and accepted it, I was told later, although it was not the same red of marriage, it would not be used as it was "too colourful" for a widow to wear. When querying the concept of *aśubha*, Mahima told me once, "Oh yes, widows are bad luck. It is bad luck to even see a widow's face first thing in the morning. If people see me on the road early, they turn around and finish their journey on another road or even another day. It's a bad omen. "

Conclusion

Many women were not always content with fulfilling every aspect of *ijjat* with regard to the idealised woman, as figured in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, because it gave them 'tension'⁶⁰. Indeed, many of the women I spoke to were resentful, upset or angered by how the narrativised world defined them as women. As a result, many found ways

⁶⁰ It should be noted that, while the Nepali word for 'tension' is *tanāu*, the English was used more often than not (see Chapter Five).

individually and collectively to speak out against this idealisation of womanhood (see Chapter Six).

Ijjat provides the framework of the figured world of Nepali womanhood in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, in which prototypical events unfold. As Jyoti lamented at the beginning of this chapter, women cannot have a dream separate from men, indeed it seems a woman cannot be figured separate from men, particularly in relationships which are formed through or come out of marriage. In the examples above it can be clearly seen all informants had a commonly figured notion of what did and did not constitute womanhood. *Ijjat* was a central concern, which helped to construct this figured world, as well as constrain and enable behaviour within it. *Ijjat* was also a material asset utilised within it, exchanged, accumulated and lost by actors. A major part in both locales of legitimately accumulating *ijjat* was to keep on the idealised life path of a Hindu woman. Due to a desire for freedom and choice amongst my informants, however, tension was an evident feature in many informants' lives. In the following chapter, I look at negotiations with space and comportment, arguing that, for many women, it became important not simply to 'be' the 'good' woman, but to be 'seen to be' one.

CHAPTER THREE

“EVERYONE SEES”: *IJJAT*, SURVEILLANCE AND GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY

Introduction

‘Can you drop me on the back road please?’ my translator Priya said to me from behind me on my scooter. ‘Sure, but isn’t this road in the market place quicker?’ I ask her, yelling back over my shoulder. ‘Yes but I don’t want to go that way. I don’t want people to see me in the market place twice in one day and I was already here this morning. I don’t want them thinking “What is she doing outside her home twice in one day?”’

Informal exchange

Priya was the first woman to bring the issue of visibility to my attention, but once she had, I saw concern for it amongst most of my informants. Priya became my second translator after Bindu was offered work in Kathmandu. Priya’s English was exceptional. A quiet young girl of twenty, she had lived in Singapore with her family until she was twelve years old. With glasses and a quiet demeanour she came from a loving and supportive family, whom I came to know well. Of the Magar caste, they were devout, practising Buddhists and Priya provided me with further insight into the ‘good’ Nepali woman. Even from within her Buddhist roots, she had specific ideas on the ‘ideal’ behaviour of women that were similar to those of my Hindu informants. On this day, coming back on my scooter from an afternoon of work outside the Bhaktanagar municipality, Priya demonstrated to me that even Buddhist women were concerned for their *ijjat* and what others thought of them. She was concerned what community members of Bhaktanagar would think of her, particularly if they were to witness her outside her home twice in the same day.

Having explored the expected life path of women in the previous chapter, I have argued that in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu it was important for my informants to follow a prescribed life trajectory, which ideally included marriage. As this chapter will show, while informants sometimes adhered to these idealised prescriptions, I found they would also often negotiate certain contexts and strategies, in order to achieve specific desires. Priya did this in order to go out twice in one day. Normally she only left the house for specific reasons, such as school. Although, it was considered acceptable by Priya and her family that she come to work with me *and* go to the market in the same day, this would not prevent gossip or others imagining activities she might have been engaging in, for example meeting a man. So, in order to prevent damage to her family's *ijjat*, she employed strategy to circumvent the marketplace, the space in which she would be surveilled and have her *ijjat* evaluated by other community members. It is pertinent to acknowledge the key role negotiation plays here. By negotiation I mean the interpretations and improvisations people develop in relation to community values and aesthetics, the desires and interpretations of other practitioners, and in association to the materiality of objects, technologies and spaces (Langsford 2014: 15). Negotiation also signifies the creativity employed by individuals who respond and adapt continuously to new situations through practices of improvisation (see Holland & Lave 2001b).

This chapter highlights negotiation as a practice of womanhood in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu by looking at the intersection of gender and comportment, and how these are managed to express different subjectivities and to obtain and maintain *ijjat*. First, I look at gendered subjectivity and how this is variously shaped, specifically through gender performativity, and influenced by surveillance. Gender performativity, a theoretical proposition articulated by De Beauvoir (1973) and Butler (1999), asserts that gender is something one 'does' as opposed to something one 'is'. If we take gender then, to be 'something one does' it becomes important to look at what is considered socially important for women to do with their bodies. Being seen in certain spaces carried with it the responsibility of being seen in the 'right' ways, which included not only demeanour but also appropriate dress; women were expected to dress modestly by covering their bodies. The concept of being 'covered up', both literally and figuratively, in the Nepali context are termed *dhāknū* or *chōpnu*, which correlates with the ideal of *pardāh*. *Pardāh* is an idea, pervasive in South Asia, that a woman should be 'covered' or restricted. While it is not used specifically as a term in Nepal, I draw connections

between the literature on *purdāh* and the Nepali concept of *dhāknu* and *chōpnu*, as well as my own field examples, to convey it is clear that covering is an important practice women undertake in order to be perceived as *ijjatdār*.

Next, I explore the concept of surveillance as a means that shapes gendered subjectivity. In Nepali surveillance translates to *nigarānī*; however, in the context of *ijjat* and the monitoring of women's behaviour, it would need further clarification with the phrase, *samājalē mahilālālāi hērnē dṛṣṭikōṇ*, or 'society's perception of women'. Women are aware that when outside the home, other community members could observe them at any moment. These observers might then gossip about a woman to others or her family, if she were seen behaving in ways that are not *ijjatdār*. Several scholars argue that gendered subjectivity is shaped through gendered performance (Butler 1988, 1999; Morris 1995; Abu-Lughod 1999). However, not only is womanhood performative but also it is vital for that performance to be seen, because *ijjat* accumulation is evaluated by others. Therefore, surveillance is of great concern for women regarding their *ijjat*. Surveillance makes a woman more conscious of her *ijjat* and, like Foucault's panopticon (1977), influences women to behave and move in certain ways. Community observation disciplines them into having docile bodies, which in turn gains *ijjat* for their families. Docility is relevant here because subjecting women's bodies to discipline (see Foucault 1977)⁶¹, serves to inculcate the gendered norm of the 'good woman' (see Skinner 1989, 1990) and *ijjat*. Women are aware of being watched and talked about it often. While it renders their bodies docile in many ways, I also noticed that women moved around this in order to achieve certain desires, such as the ability to have access to spaces, activities or items of their choosing, when they wanted. These desires could often be in opposition to the tenets prescribed for the 'good' woman and women could risk losing *ijjat* in the eyes of the community if they were seen to do such things. This is why women negotiated space and practice to avoid surveillance. Finally, I utilise a case study to exemplify how and why women might subvert the public gaze. I look at one key informant in Bhaktanagar and how she seized on my presence to help her circumvent the community's gaze with regard to her sexual health.

⁶¹ A discussion of the 'bio-power' exercised over 'docile bodies' in a wider sense is discussed later in this chapter.

Gendered subjectivity

Through the ethnographic study of subjectivity, we attempt to explore what matters most in people's lives in the making and unmaking of meaning. Values and emotions are closely connected and are embodied and projected into domestic spaces, public life, and interpersonal struggles.

(Biehl, Good & Kleinman 2007a: 15)

Gendered subjectivities provide a useful framework for my analysis of Nepali womanhood because it focuses on the various emotions and experiences that shape a person's experience of gender (Albanesi 2007, 2009). It also accounts for the diversities and nuances in women's experiences because it acknowledges that selves are multiple, fractured, portable, porous and externally created (see Jenkins 2004; Biehl, Good & Kleinman 2007a; Kleinman & Fitz-Henry 2007; Barnard-Wills 2012). Therefore, subjectivity can be more specifically understood as the consequences of behaviour, actions or a person's 'performativity' (Biehl, Good & Kleinman 2007a: 13; Keller 2007).

Anthropology regards the subject and subjectivity as not merely original forms but as dynamically formed and transformed entities, with subjects being formulated by broad, culturally specific regimes that are represented by factors such as, but not limited to, gender, race, sexuality (Biehl, Good & Kleinman 2007a: 10). The 'subject' suggests an important point about personhood with regard to power. The subject does not precede power relations (Mahmood 2005: 17), in the sense that there is no pre-determined conscience or self-knowledge. The subject is produced through the very power relations that provide the necessary environment for its possibility (Foucault 1982: 212). As Mahmood (2005: 17) argues, "The very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent" (see Foucault 1980, 1982; Butler 1993, 1997).

Subjectivities are forged through experience; the space "where things *happen*" (James 1977: 96). Experience, the medium within which collective and subjective processes are mutually constituted, involves negotiations, practices and contestations between

connected subjects (Kleinman & Fitz-Henry 2007: 53). Experience occurs in particular social spaces, and so it is impossible to separate experience from the demands of everyday life. As a result, people are aware that specific practical considerations matter very much (for example, honour and shame) and will act in ways so as to protect or manage those things (2007: 54). Kleinman and Fitz-Henry argue people are born into “the flow of palpable experience, where our senses are first patterned by the symbols and social interactions of our local worlds” (2007: 53). However, subjectivities are not merely developed by symbols and interaction, but simultaneously reshaped and completely reinterpreted by individuals as well as collectives (2007: 53).

Subjectivity encompasses both the subject, and the cultural framework in which the subject sits. Ortner argues it is “The ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects. But I always mean as well the cultural and social formations that shape, organise, and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on” (Ortner 2005: 31). Biehl *et al* (2007a: 7) argue that culture influences the ‘behavioural environment’ as much as it does the individuals within it and Geertz tells us that people embody culture because they live in a distinct phenomenal world that they access through various embodied practices (see Geertz 1973, 1983). Holland and Leander argue that understanding subjectivity of informants is perhaps one of the most important questions an anthropologist can pursue, asking, “What more is there to learn about *how* – how subjectivities are created by experiences of being positioned and, in turn, contribute to the production of cultural forms that mediate subsequent experiences?” (2004: 127). These processes of positioning and their connection to individual subjectivity and agency are pivotal for understanding the motivations of informants. As Biehl *et al* emphasise, in order to understand an act, one needs “to see the act as rooted in a particular constellation that connects cultural representations and political economy with collective experience and the individual’s subjectivity” (Biehl, Good & Kleinman 2007a: 3). Barnard-Wills further distils the relationship between subject positions, representation and subjectivity. He argues that subject positions are multiple, overlapping and relational social roles and identities (2012: 128), with which an individual may identify, that are determined within various discourses (2012: 127). Davies and Harre argue subject positions involve conceptual repertoires as well as the locations in which these repertoires are enacted. Upon taking up a specific position and claiming it as one’s own, “a person inevitably sees the world

from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned” (Davies and Harre 1990: 46). Included here is also at least a possibility that the person may be able to choose a different position, because there are multiple and contradictory discursive practices that an individual could engage in (1990: 46). Furthermore, representation is the means by which subject positions are presented across various discourses and the features associated with them. In this sense, subjects understand themselves as a particular identity, through which others also recognise them. Through this understanding a person suddenly recognises she is, for example, a ‘woman’ and so called to perform in a specific way that sustains that identity (Kunreuther 2014: 35). Connected to this are the ways others evaluate subject positions, such as whether or not a particular identity is seen as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (Barnard-Wills 2012: 128), much like evaluations of the ‘good’ Nepali woman. Subjectivity, while related, is different from subject positions. For Barnard-Wills, “subjectivity arises when an individual identifies with an available subject position, when they recognise something about themselves in that representation and adopt the identity” (2012: 128).

Gender, as well as, for example, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, or class, is one of many subject positions through which subjectivity can be viewed, shaped and experienced. While gender is the primary concern of this thesis, it would be remiss to ignore intersectionality here. Intersectionality acknowledges the inter-relationship of multiple subject positions; that how people are variously subjected through the lenses of gender, race, ethnicity, class and caste or indeed any other form of social difference, must be seen as simultaneous (Nightingale 2011: 153). For example, a person might well identify not merely as a ‘woman’ or a ‘Bāhun’, but as a ‘Bāhun woman’. How these subjectivities interact and combine is as important as any that might stand in isolation. While all these subject positions contribute to the rich tapestries of varieties of Nepali women’s subjectivities and experiences, the gender position of ‘woman’ is ubiquitous when considering discourses of development, feminism and rights. Albanesi argues it is necessary “to examine how a subject creates his or her own personal sense of gender through an emotional attachment to and investment in certain gender images while rejecting others” (Albanesi 2009: 129). Women’s expressions of their lived experiences can be conceptualised as embodied consciousness (Johnson 1997: 145). ‘Embodied

consciousness' opens discussion about gendered subjectivity by examining the ways in which understandings of 'womanhood' are established through perceptions of women's bodies as being 'female' (Sunder Rajan 1993). 'Culture' is strongly coercive when it comes to shaping people's subject positions (Johnson 1997; Ortner 2005; Biehl, Good & Kleinman 2007b) because culture is both a "product of the beliefs and conceptual models of society" and also a "destination where the trajectory of its desires take shape, as well as the everyday practices, the contingent realities, and the complex processes by which these are structured" (Sunder Rajan 1993: 10).

Like Sunder Rajan, I was interested in women's practices and representations as key part of the process by which female subjects are constituted in response to "a variety of ideological imperatives" (Sunder Rajan 1993: 5), of which I argue *ijjat* is primary. In Nepal of particular concern to me was focussing on the ways gendered subjectivities were shaped in my field sites, and also the "internal re-workings of the world and the consequences of people's actions towards themselves and toward others" (Biehl, Good & Kleinman 2007a: 15).

Gendered subjectivities can be shaped, inscribed and contested in a multitude of ways. One of the key ways to conceptualise subjectivity and how it is variously shaped is to think of it in terms of practice, or specifically as performativity (Biehl, Good & Kleinman 2007a: 7). With regard to practice more generally, Ortner argues that practice theory is centred on the subject (2005: 33). Picking up Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977), she says the subject internalises structures found in the outside world, those objectively real and also culturally defined (Ortner 2005: 33). This forms a network of dispositions, a habitus, which predispose subjects to act, feel and think in ways that are reconcilable with the parameters of the structure (see Bourdieu 1977, 1984). Bourdieu's argument emphasises how the habitus establishes a variety of choices and restrictions for the subject (Ortner 2005: 33). This however, does not imply the subject is acting out of subconscious instinct, but is always "partially knowing" and therefore can act on or against the structures that help shape it (see Giddens 1979; Ortner 2005: 33; 2006: 7). It is in "partially knowing" that self-reflexive practices help to shape the subject as well as contribute to processes of cultural change (Johnson 1997: 148). I argue that it is in

“partially knowing” that individuals approach practice as a type of performance, which in turn shapes gendered subjectivities.

Gender as performative practice

People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are.

(Holland *et al.* 1998: 3)

One day, I was interviewing Manisha, a Thakurī woman, in her home and she made the suggestion that being a Nepali woman meant having ‘good’ behaviour and character.

Sarah: What does it mean to be a woman [in Nepal]?

Manisha: I thank to God for being a woman, and it depends on the woman, but because I am good I am thankful.

Sarah: What does that mean to you?

Manisha: If you are good, society will respect you. If you aren’t then they won’t respect you. Being a woman, her good character, is about doing good things.

When I pressed her on what this meant, she smiled, poured me some fresh milk and said, “Well serving you in my home is one good thing I can do.” When my vegetarianism meant I did not eat the meat she had cooked for me, she went straight to her older brother’s plate and put it on his. This sense of hospitality and deference to the appropriate male highlighted what ‘good’ behaviour meant in terms of practice to her. It is not only in acts of a grander scale or public in nature in which performativity of womanhood should be conceived. It is in the nuanced, repetitious and mundane

activities that womanhood is produced. This simple, everyday act exemplified the types of practices women would do to consolidate themselves as ‘good’ women.

Gender is culturally formed, and people act in ways that consolidate an impression of being a particular gender. Gender is not an innate truth related to one’s sex, but is produced and reproduced by different socially prescribed performances (Butler 1988, 1999). For Butler, a gendered identity is “instituted through a *stylised repetition of acts*” (Butler 1988: 519). This is done to the extent where people forget they learned to perform gender, and instead remain under the impression that gender is pre-existing (Butler 1999: 44). Women in my field sites, oftentimes occupied with gaining and conserving *ijjat*, would repetitiously go about ‘appropriate’ gendered activities, especially those considered to gain *ijjat*, as acts of becoming ‘women’.

Not only does a woman become her gender through continual practice but her gender is also ‘done to’ her to by other actors within a structural framework. Skinner’s dissertation (1990) uncovers the processes by which Nepali children come to understand themselves within their social world. She focuses on girls, as they learn their gendered role, and have it ‘done’ to them as a mode of imparting that knowledge. In her thesis, Skinner tells of Ramesh’s six-year-old sister Gyanumaya, looking at the means by which Gyanumaya is taught appropriate gendered behaviour. At a time when Skinner’s husband was learning to plough the fields, Gyanumaya touched the plough, knowing it was forbidden for females. Ploughing the field is men’s work and it is forbidden for women to touch a plough because it is a metaphor for sexual intercourse and has phallic connotations. Touching it is a serious transgression for females. Immediately her father and brother rushed to scold and beat her for this act and weeks later she recounted to Skinner the promise she made to her father to never touch it again (Skinner 1990: 72). Skinner says of this incident:

Although Gyanumaya did not understand the wider moral universe in which her act was defined as a sin, she did learn in a dramatic way that because she was female, she was restricted from acts her brothers could freely perform. As Gyanumaya grows older, she will acquire a vast body of gender-related knowledge that she could not learn solely in early childhood. Some of this knowledge relates to an expected life path for females- to the set of rules girls

and women are expected to play during their lives. These roles are envisioned as part of a taken for granted world that cognitively organises cultural knowledge [...] describe[d] as a ‘cultural model’. As such the cultural model provides the background for girls’ understandings and potential renegotiations of gender roles and expectations.

(Skinner 1990: 73)

Dr Gita asserts that women are schooled in the ways they should be through modes of control. She says women in Nepal are “controlled in three ways; through their production, sexuality and mobility”. She brought up this idea during one of our interviews, claiming:

Like first time when I menstruated then I was kept in a small dark cowshed for twelve days. Ha! ...So what it means that is ‘OK, you are growing’, you need to be under control... This is control over sexuality... mobility...I don’t know I actually hate this (*holds up the shawl around her shoulders*). Because without knowing, our family say to us ‘Okay, you are a woman so you cannot walk like this’ (*sticks her chest out*) you know? It means you can’t show your boobs! Because this is kind of sexual, provocative. All the time don’t do this, and wear this type of clothes and do this type of thing and then don’t do this... This is what I meant by control - patriarchy has different norms, values in order to control my sexuality...

Dr Gita, Formal Interview

Being a Nepali woman is more nuanced than simply following social norms or being ‘controlled’. It also means to embody these social rules through the comportment of the body, conceptualised here as ‘bearing’ or ‘behaviour’. In Nepal the notion of being a woman and what it means to be seen as feminine is centrally focussed on where and how one moves and the comportment of the gendered body within that movement. Young contrasts the category of ‘female’ with that of ‘femininity’ in that the ‘feminine’ is a set of ‘normatively disciplined expectations imposed on female bodies by male-dominated society’ (2005: 5). Young grounds this notion within the framework in which bodies learn such behaviours, telling us “there is no situation however, without

embodied location and interaction” (Young 2005: 7). This is significant because, for Nepali women, there is also no situation, in which *ijjat* is not imbued in the nuances of women’s bodily comportment. I acknowledge Young’s points are raised in an American context, and do not presume women’s bodies are docile in the same ways across cultures. However, her work has resonance for Nepali women, as daily practices are expressly grounded in patriarchy and affect their daily bodily praxis. As Young suggests, “the body as lived is always layered with social and historical meaning and is not some primitive matter prior to or underlying economic and political relations or cultural meanings” (Young 2005: 7).

Women in my field sites engaged predominantly in activities and spaces that were granted ‘legitimacy’ by family and the wider community. In other words, there was a sense that some spaces and activities were deemed inappropriate for women, because it would affect their *ijjat*. My female informants widely agreed that spaces such as nightclubs, bars, and teahouses, with predominantly male customers, were all generally unacceptable for women if they wished to be viewed as *ijjtdār*. More complex criteria however, were also considered, such as frequency, time spent, who might accompany them and their comportment within spaces. For example, in Priya’s case, the market was sanctioned territory; however, the frequency with which she visited it, what she did there, the time of day and with whom, were not. The most ‘legitimate’ space for a woman in my field sites was generally the home. Women necessarily accessed public space, but always within the bounds of what was deemed socially acceptable for *ijjtdār* women, such as shopping in the daytime or attending school. For employed women, going to the office was acceptable too. For many of my employed informants however, it was agreed they would cook, clean and send the children to school before arriving at the office, but wasting time after the workday had finished was frowned upon. Going out after dark, especially alone, was almost uniformly thought to be dangerous both physically and for a woman’s *ijjat*.

One fundamental way for women to be seen as ‘good’ is to consciously maintain a marked separation between the sexes (see Mandelbaum 1988). A common practice of women in my field sites was the act of covering and segregating themselves from males, and this would occur in different ways. Noticeably women’s practice of covering was

distinctive from men's, who could afford to be much freer in terms of dress, as Figure 7 exemplifies.



Figure 7: Local water source in Bhaktanagar, where families wash themselves.⁶²

One such practice is that of *purdāh*, which is prominent across much of South Asia. *Purdāh*, meaning ‘curtain’ (Papanek 1973: 289) denotes the physical veiling of a woman’s face or her spatial enclosure, as much as it does a broader usage of the term, which would include beliefs and values pertaining to the behaviour of women, restrictions on movement outside a domestic space and the respectful demeanour required when in contact with men (Mandelbaum 1988: 2). To practise *purdāh*, women veil, cover and seclude themselves in the public sphere and in front of men. This is practised across various cultural groups across much of South Asia; Mandelbaum references both Hindu and Muslim groups particularly in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh (Mandelbaum 1988).

⁶² Locals washing clothes and bathing at the local water source in Bhaktanagar. On the left, men bathe in their underwear. On the right, women wash clothes and bathe children. Women bathe themselves by reaching underneath their clothes. (Photo: Orr Niv).

The objective of *purdāh*, Papanek argues is related, in a broad sense, to division of labour, social status, interpersonal dependency, social distance and the maintenance of moral standards identified by a given society (1973: 292). There is a variety of literature on the topic, which confirms that, above all, most women observe a particular type of demeanour (see Vatuk 1971; Papanek 1973; Fox 1977; Sharma, UM 1978; Mandelbaum 1988). A woman is compelled to behave with modesty, to avoid eye contact with men, not speak or laugh loudly, and she must follow certain practices that denote respect before male visitors or older men in her family, such as rising to acknowledge their presence (Vatuk 1982: 70). In keeping with behaviour that is *ijjtdār*, women's movements are subject to restrictions outside of the family home; they are allowed outside only so far, for a limited amount of time and only for particular purposes. Outside tasks "should be carried out expeditiously, with as little tarrying as possible" (Jacobson in Mandelbaum 1988: 6). If women are seen to go against the 'rules' of *purdāh*⁶³, penalties are often severe. Unmarried girls could weaken their chances of marriage, while women who are seen to undermine their husbands and in-laws are often the subject of harassment and violence (Mandelbaum 1988: 8). This is not dissimilar to transgressions where *ijjat* is concerned and appropriate demeanour and covering are considered *ijjtdār*.

Women adhere to this practice of spatial and bodily seclusion for at least two reasons. Firstly, it is followed for reasons of safety. A Bengali woman told Beech that she enjoyed staying in the home, saying, "Outside there is a lack of protection, a sense of potential danger, an insecurity. One takes risks in going outside" (1982: 111-112). Primarily however, women seclude themselves not only to protect their bodies but their honour as well. If a woman were to have a sexual encounter, perceived or actual, consensual or by force, and it were to become known in the community, the impact of that shame may ruin her *ijjat*. This would not only affect her but her family as well (Mandelbaum 1988: 10). In extreme cases of *ijjat* and *purdāh* transgression, women have been known to be killed in 'honour killings' by male family members (see Wikan

⁶³ *Purdāh*, while ingrained and widely observed, is certainly being challenged across South Asia as people come more and more in contact with modern and alternate influences. Certainly this dispute with *purdāh* is most prominent amongst urban and educated families (Mandelbaum 1988: 4). Furthermore, there have been different experiences in the field, which have brought up different and valid interpretations of the complexity of the issue. Vreede de Stuers when discussing the segregation of women, observed of Muslim men in Delhi, "curiously enough, I had more the impression that the men were excluded than that the women were secluded" (1968: 42).

2008), ostracised from their husband's family and unable to see their children (Mandelbaum 1988: 10), or burned in acid or stove attacks.

McHugh's Buddhist informants in the Annapurna region discussed *purdāh*, or rather, the Nepali *pardāh*. McHugh remembers one day venturing out without her shawl. A woman stopped her, reminding her to take it. When she protested due to the heat, the woman said, "To go out without a shawl is a matter of shame... It is your *pardāh* ... Here take a light one. And you don't need to wrap it. Just drape it over your shoulder, like so. Then people will know you are modest" (2001: 27). People would readily refer to this practice in my field sites with the Nepali words, *chōpnu* or *dhāknu*, meaning 'to cover'. When phrased as '*dhāk chōp*', it formed the command 'cover up'. As Binita explained to me, this could often entail something shameful, such as a woman showing too much skin or even parents covering up an inter-caste marriage. *Lāj chōpnu* is another phrase including the words 'shame' and 'to cover' and means to cover up the parts of the body deemed indecent to expose. This could be used in various contexts, usually when a woman was seen in public wearing immodest or even scant Western clothing.

Women would 'cover' in a variety of ways and while different ethnic dress or even so-called 'Western dress'⁶⁴ varied, modesty was a common feature of women's clothing. Women usually covered themselves from their shoulders to at least their knees, if not their ankles. *Sārī* and *kutār salwar* were the most common forms of dress (see Images 8 and 9). While interviewing a young, low-caste Hindu woman in Bhaktanagar, I noticed she had a small handkerchief-sized piece of cloth attached to the crown of her head with hair clips. When she came into a private room for our interview she removed it, replacing it later when she left. I asked her what it was for and she replied simply, "It's my modesty. I wear it for respect. If I didn't wear it, I would lose respect." She further noted that she wore it for her *jēthāju*, her husband's older brother, who was the senior male in her household. What was striking about this was the size, for it seemed to offer a more symbolic modesty than any meaningful covering. She mentioned that if she

⁶⁴ 'Western dress' usually entailed jeans, t-shirts, long-sleeved tops or sweaters and cardigans; however, I did occasionally witness some young women in Kathmandu wearing short skirts, singlets, dresses and sunglasses.

stopped wearing it, people would not respect her. To be seen covering up even in this symbolic form marked her as a respectable woman.



Figure 8: Women dressed in sārī for Tīj, Bhaktanagar.



Figure 9: Young woman in *kutār salwar* and shawl, Bhaktanagar.

Dr Gita previously mentioned the taboo against not wearing a shawl and sticking out one's chest. I had an experience with this one hot August day in Bhaktanagar, in 2011, when attending an event organised by *Swar*. It is considered necessary and customary to wear a shawl at all times with a woman's *kutār salwar*. It was *Tij*, the Hindu women's festival. During the festival many Hindu women come out to the temple, dressed in their best red *sārī* and lots of jewellery, for *pūjā* (ritual). Ritual aspects of the festival include women fasting and doing *pūjā* for the good health of their husbands (Holland & Skinner 1995: 279). Songs are sung and predominantly speak to the *duḥkha* (suffering) in

women's lives (Ahearn 1999: 60). It was my second *tīj* and I was by then accustomed to the masses of people out in the streets, wearing their finery, the loud music and singing. This particular event was for a public protest, whereby *Swar* overturned the traditional celebrations for a political campaign (see Chapter Six). I was invited to dance in front of the crowd, partly so to include me, but mostly because my foreignness would attract a crowd for the cause. As I danced, my shawl hindered my movements. I stopped momentarily to fling it off to the side of the stage. As I did, I heard an uproar from the crowd of mostly men, exclaiming, "Oh ho!", a common exclamation of surprise that also, as I came to understand was particularly piqued by something amusing or titillating. I had essentially cast off my modesty and thereby had unwittingly aroused the interest of dozens of smiling men, who moved within two metres of me to closely film the spectacle I had created. No other woman would be witnessed doing this on that day (see Figures 10 and 11).



Figure 10: Me dancing in kutār salwar at Tij, without my shawl (Bhaktanagar).



Figure 11: Predominantly male crowd watching me and other ladies dance at Tīj (Bhaktanagar).

In light of practices like covering up or avoiding certain public spaces, I originally thought that the importance attached to ‘being seen’ seemed contradictory. I first wondered, if *purdāh* was so pivotal a part of a woman’s life, why then was ‘being seen’ equally important? Would it not cancel out the act of *purdāh*? Upon reflection, I realised *purdāh* was in itself a gendered performance and also formed a specific way to be seen. Part of ‘being seen’ as a ‘good’ woman includes, first and foremost, *not* being seen. By virtue of her lack of visibility in public spaces, a woman is considered *ijjaddār* because she is presumed to be in her home. If she must be seen, in order to perform tasks outside the home, she must be seen to be doing so in ways consistent with being *ijjaddār*. If she decides to engage in activities that may call her *ijjat* into question, it is best to circumvent the community gaze. As my translator Priya demonstrated on returning from work via a different route, if she needed to be outside her home, which indeed she did, it was best not to be *seen* to be out twice in one day. Surveillance, as much as comportment, is therefore an integral part of being and becoming a ‘good’ woman.

Surveillance

Female sexuality has been perceived in all patriarchal cultures worldwide as threatening to social norms and order. This is one of the areas chosen by patriarchy for *intense surveillance and regulation* [emphasis added].

(FWLD & Sub-Committee 2011: 77)

Whilst being seen in the ‘right’ ways certainly ensured women would gain and maintain their *ijjat*, it also made it difficult to act in ways other than in the role of the ‘good’ woman. In the context of a wider discussion on gossip and judgement, Chandani, a Sunār⁶⁵ woman, told me, “We [women] can’t live our life freely.” If women’s bodies are surveilled and regulated as Chandani and the above report suggests, and this in turn helps to govern women’s practice, it is appropriate to look at how power and control operate over bodies. Foucault’s work on bio-power, docile bodies and discipline is a useful tool for analysis in this context. *Ijjat* presents as a constraint that governs and curtails women’s behaviour due to the fact that surveillance governs *ijjat*. However, this is not to say that women are without agency⁶⁶; on the contrary, surveillance of women’s bodies in my field sites provided a useful space for analysing concepts of agency, as one case study will exemplify later in this chapter.

During my fieldwork, surveillance was partially responsible for shaping performative aspects of gendered subjectivity because people would change their practice depending on whether or not they were being observed and by whom. In Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, it was a vital component of *ijjat* and its accumulation and maintenance because *ijjat* was seen as a person’s good reputation in the eyes of the community; other people were required to deem a person honourable (see Lindisfarne 1998). Through the medium of information, surveillance involves the control, influence and management of subjectivities and what people think about them. By means of surveillance, people are able to categorise people for differential treatment (Barnard-Wills 2012: 2). In other

⁶⁵ Sunār are a Hindu *dalit* caste, meaning ‘goldsmith’.

⁶⁶ Ahearn reminds us not to render agency as being synonymous with resistance and can encompass “complicity with, accommodation to, or reinforcement of the status quo” (Ahearn 2001: 55), oftentimes simultaneously.

words, surveillance is the means by which a community can sort the *kharāb* women from those considered *ijjtdār*. This changes over time, as the pursuit of *ijjat* is a constant process. Depending on her behaviour, and because *ijjat* is largely ascribed, a woman can move in and out of favour in the eyes of the community across her lifetime⁶⁷. Therefore, a woman *must* be seen performing the gendered actions of a ‘good’ woman continuously if she is to accumulate and maintain her and her family’s *ijjat*. This was not without anxiety, however, and women oftentimes find ways to make themselves invisible and circumvent the community’s gaze in order to act in ways that might not be considered honourable by their family or the wider community.

One of Foucault’s essential concepts from *Discipline and Punish* (1977) is that of bio-power⁶⁸. Bio-power is the generalised regulation of a population (Ramazanoğlu 1993: 22) and relates to a structured environment whereby certain themes and tactics are employed to produce a desired behavioural pattern from a given populace (Foucault 1977: 139). In other words, power is embodied in certain institutions, social structures or common behaviours and this in turn constrains what members of the population feel they can and cannot do. In these structures, power is exercised as discipline through various techniques, such as surveillance (Ramazanoğlu 1993: 22). However, it is not solely the social context in which power is present that is responsible for behaviour, but the potentiality for action to be ascribed into the body. To fully understand how this climate exerts power over people’s behaviour, Foucault presents the ‘docile body’. As social structures have bio-power, so must the bodies within that structure be pliable in order for its influence to take effect. Docility of a body refers to bodies of those ‘practised’ or subjected to disciplinary procedures, which create the obedience of the bodies. Furthermore, “discipline increases the forces of the body...” (Foucault 1977: 136), meaning that a disciplined body would have a greater ability to function than an undisciplined body, and would therefore operate toward a trend of increased production and obedience. When the body is constantly exposed to the restrictions of its environment it is trained and manipulated to behave in a desired manner. Therefore, those who control the structures of bio-power, control the docile bodies as well.

⁶⁷ Fluctuation of reputation can also occur for men: see the account about Binita’s father in Chapter Two.

⁶⁸ Foucault’s work in *Discipline and Punish* comes out of an historical analysis concerned with the birth of disciplinary institutions and practices, which emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe. However, as is widely acknowledged, it has far wider implications for the everyday lives of ordinary citizens (Danaher, Schirato & Webb 2000), and I argue it is relevant for the Nepali context.

For discipline to be enabled it needs to proceed from the distribution of individuals in a social space, which has meaning for those within that space who are subject to discipline. Foucault terms this “the art of distributions” (1977: 140). One of the key elements of this occupation of space is that there is a point of “enclosure”; a “protected space of disciplinary monotony” (1977: 141). This is a space where repetitive practices are exerted on individuals as a part of their ‘learning’. As Basanti found in the ‘orientation programme’ before marriage, or Dr Gita found sleeping in the cowshed upon her menstruation, there are countless repetitive disciplines taking place on women’s bodies in order to shape their learning to be *ijjatdār*.

One such method for disciplining and managing docile bodies is through surveillance (Danaher, Schirato & Webb 2000: 53). Surveillance entails the close observation of people, especially those already under suspicion of a dubious act or crime. Furthermore, “it is not the act of simply looking at others, but by definition is ideologically motivated” (Pinnow 2013: 253). Those being observed are pre-constructed as suspicious and guilty of some wrongdoing (2013: 253). In order to explain this, Foucault calls on the ‘panopticon’ as an analogy to refer to discipline through surveillance. The panopticon, designed by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century, was a tower placed in a central position within a prison.

From this tower, the guards would be able to observe every cell and the prisoners inside them, but it was designed in such a way that the prisoners would never know whether they were being observed or not. Prisoners would assume they could be observed at any moment and would adjust their behaviour accordingly.

(Danaher, Schirato & Webb 2000: 53-54)

Elmer makes a distinction between surveillance that focuses on the reality of monitoring against the more Foucauldian emphasis on the *likelihood* of being watched (see Elmer 2012). He argues that Foucault’s contribution was to highlight discipline “which entails a kind of automatic docility and self-government” (see Ball, Haggerty & Lyon 2012b: 15; Elmer 2012). For the women of my field sites, both the reality of being monitored and the likelihood of it were present. Women governed their own behaviour and

movement in reaction to the likelihood of being seen, but they were also at times most certainly seen by others who, in turn, considered them *ijjatdār* or not⁶⁹. Surveillance thus encourages self-constraint as a powerful form of behaviour control. The judgements formed by observers further link to the concept of ‘social sorting’, which is facilitated by surveillance (Ball, Haggerty & Lyon 2012a: 119). Gandy (2012) suggests of surveillance technologies that ‘who’ and ‘what’ you are have become vital elements of ‘actionable intelligence’ and it is through this that people are evaluated for various purposes. While ‘social sorting’ is readily applied to surveillance technologies (Ball, Haggerty & Lyon 2012a), it is also applicable to community surveillance, particularly where subjects are sorted into categories deemed ‘honourable’ and ‘shameful’.

In terms of shaping the performativity of womanhood, surveillance can be conceptualised as ‘labelling’ people of one type or another (Jenkins 2004). Jenkins argues labelling can significantly constrain subjects’ lives and experiences because it affects others’ responses to the individual and some subjectivities/identities are considered more socially valuable than others (Jenkins 2004: 96). Young also makes the point that women’s bodily comportment, spatiality and motility do not find their origination in biology or some “mysterious feminine essence” (Young 2005: 42) but rather in the “particular situation of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society” (Young 2005: 42). In Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, women’s bodies are repetitiously labelled and conditioned through religious, state, societal and familial networks to behave in ways that garner *ijjat*. This shows in the ways they cover themselves, the way they often look down, especially in the company of males, and the way they speak and do not speak. As argued previously, the ‘rules’ of *ijjat* provide a good understanding for so-called ‘feminine’ behaviour. One manner in which women’s bodies become docile and conditioned is expressly linked to the idea of being seen, which directly links back to *ijjat*. Foucault’s work on the Panopticon provides a framework for understanding the impacts of surveillance Nepali women experience. This is because, like the Panopticon of Foucault’s prison (Foucault 1977), women feel anxiety and tension from never knowing when they might be seen, or who might see them.

⁶⁹ It should also be pointed out that men were, of course, also seen in the community; however, the expectations and suspicions placed on men were different to those placed on women and there was not a sense they needed to modify their behaviour to the degree women felt they did. In this sense, men can be thought of as being seen, but perhaps not surveilled.

Pratima's neighbour, a young unmarried woman in Bhaktanagar, was speaking with a male student colleague from her university in the marketplace. The afternoon was turning into evening and a relative of the woman happened to observe this interaction. The relative alerted the young woman's father. When she returned home, she was met with an aggressive and embarrassed reaction from her father who poured a harsh toilet cleaner down her throat, causing chemical burns. Pratima felt this act was directly related to her neighbour's father's *ijjat*. Not only was it dishonourable for the young woman to speak to the young man but also she spoke to him openly in the marketplace where people could, and did, see. Pratima went on to explain how difficult it is for women to go out alone for fear of what people might say. "For example," she said, "I might like to go on a holiday just by myself, without [my] husband and children." Yet, she expressed how strange this would seem to the wider community, who would question her motives, imagining she might be having an affair. "How could I go away? No one will understand this need for a holiday as a woman alone. And *everyone sees*."

Resistance to surveillance was not overt, precisely because women should not be seen to be resisting the structures that influence them to be *ijjatlādār*; this would render them *ijjat-less*. However, it was subtly present in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu. Lyon argues that a crucial point of understanding resistance to surveillance is focussing on the subjectivities of those resisting, in particular "alternative identities, which can be mobilised against and imposed and attributed surveillant representations" (Lyon 2007: 67). Resistance took different forms. The next case study will analyse the ways one woman negotiated space and behaviour to circumvent surveillance (and therefore, judgement of her *ijjat*) to obtain the Contraceptive Pill.

The Contraceptive Pill

In the early stages of my field work, I was at an EMFN training in Kathmandu where a prominent, Bāhun man emphatically said, "The [Contraceptive] Pill has given women *a lot* of freedom." Dr Gita, the activist running the event, wholeheartedly disagreed and a short argument ensued. I recalled this interaction months later when I met Chandani, a

friend and informant in Bhaktanagar, and she asked me to help her negotiate her purchase of the Contraceptive Pill in the market.

Chandani, a Hindu Sunār, received an international mission scholarship for her schooling and spoke fluent English. When we met she was completing her tertiary education in teaching and working as Amy's children's tutor. An educated and vivacious woman of eighteen, she was also married to an army officer. Her marriage was a love marriage, and though not inter-caste, it was a marriage neither her mother nor in-laws supported. Her mother-in-law wanted to know where she was at all times. Chandani, in her mother-in-law's view, was from a 'bad' family, because her father ran away when she was just a baby. Having a single mother meant grave repercussions for Chandani, as without a dominant male in her life⁷⁰, she was awarded little status and *ijjat*, at least in the eyes of her mother-in-law. As a result, Chandani was at pains to act in certain ways in her marital home to mitigate negative attention from her mother-in-law. She spoke often of being slapped and verbally tormented by her mother-in-law. However, outside her home, she said she "felt more free".

One day she came to me with a problem. She was extremely worried because she had been married for over two years and her family was beginning to question why she was not falling pregnant. For them, this time period was becoming unacceptable and there was more talk of her honour diminishing further if she were infertile. Not falling pregnant was mere chance, as Chandani's husband was posted in Kathmandu year round, making short and infrequent trips to Bhaktanagar. She and her husband did not use any formal contraception but she expressed to me she wanted to use it in order to "be really certain" she would not fall pregnant so she could focus on her studies. He would not use condoms and she felt the Contraceptive Pill was the best and most discreet method for her⁷¹. However, Chandani felt obtaining the Pill was going to be challenging, as she did not want her mother-in-law to find out from people who might

⁷⁰ The *Manusmriti* suggests, "girls are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, women must be under the custody of their husband when married and under the custody of her son as widows. In no circumstances is she allowed to assert herself independently" (Doniger & Smith 1991: Chapter 9, Law 3).

⁷¹ In 2009 the most common forms of contraception were condoms and the Contraceptive Pill. At the local family planning clinic I learned terminations and sterilisations were also common methods of contraception. More recently, injectable contraception is readily available, though it was not available or commonly used to my knowledge in 2009. The Emergency Contraceptive Pill is also being utilised in recent years (KC, U & Bhattarai 2014).

see her at the pharmacy. She asked me to accompany her and purchase the contraception on her behalf.

The next day we met in the marketplace. She was anxious because of the lack of privacy at the pharmacy, where she would likely come into contact with people who knew her or would observe she was a married woman. I came to understand that, even as a married woman, she felt people would not automatically presume she was being faithful to her husband. Another common belief she had heard was that the Contraceptive Pill harmed a woman's chances of falling pregnant when she wanted to, and young women in Bhaktanagar thought it was safest to take once they had had all the children they wanted. Having been highly educated and exposed to many Westerners through her schooling, this was not a belief she held. However, she was worried what others would think of her, as many other community members did. She thanked me again for buying it for her and said, "I can't be seen to be buying this; it's not really acceptable to take this before you have children, especially if your husband is away. People will talk. I don't want my mother-in-law or husband to find out."



Figure 12: Typical pharmacy in Bhaktanagar.

Pharmacies in Nepal are visible and public spaces. The one Chandani selected, between a teashop and an electronics shop, had people seated out the front, as well as many walking past while shopping and socialising. I had researched the available brands and, with the names written down, I stepped up to the counter and showed it to the woman

serving. Three young men were standing to the right of the counter, huddled in a group. She did not know what I was asking for and had not understood my attempt at subtlety and asked loudly, “What’s this?” and I was forced to say out loud, “the Contraceptive Pill”. The three young men understood the English I had just spoken. Simultaneously, they burst out laughing, making sexually suggestive remarks, which I only vaguely grasped. As we received the bottle and paid, we ignored them and left to discuss the experience in private.

The complete lack of privacy at the pharmacy demonstrated that anybody could have been present, perhaps someone known to Chandani. They could not only have told her mother-in-law what she was buying but also may have formed a very specific opinion of her. When I asked her later what people would think of her, she confirmed, “they would say ‘Why is she taking these things? Doesn’t she want children? And her husband is not in town, oh my God!’” She inferred people would presume she was having an extra-marital affair and would certainly lose *ijjat*. Another concern was people thinking she and her husband had sex for pleasure, without intending to have children. This also falls outside of the realms of acceptability for a ‘good’ woman (see Bennett, Lynn 1976, 1983). In either case, the *ijjat* of her family would be questioned (see Chapter Four on sexuality and *ijjat*).

Chandani’s mother-in-law and husband never found out about her seeking contraception, but her concerns were real. She knew the risks of obtaining the Contraceptive Pill from a place as public as a pharmacy and understood it was not sanctioned for her to use it at this stage in her marriage. To be seen purchasing contraception, she would have chanced being judged as a woman having sex for pleasure, rather than conceiving children – the appropriate purpose of sex (see Chapter Four). She was surveilled in a public space to the extent that she could not take that course of action. She saw these risks as potentially damaging to her reputation and that of her family and felt that she would be punished with violence, gossip and public shame. However, the risks did not stop her from deciding to use the Contraceptive Pill and creatively finding a way to access it. She found a way, in that moment, to step outside of the figured world of a ‘daughter-in-law’ to appropriate what she considered a modern resource. She negotiated a way to enact her desire to not bear children in the

present, yet could still be seen to maintain her chastity under the watchful eyes of her community.

For Nepali women, this idea of ‘being observed at any moment’ is a central part of lived experience. At the beginning of this chapter, Priya demonstrated her fear of being seen in the market twice in one day. Similarly for Chandani, there was a feeling of being watched and behaving accordingly. These cases elicited not simply an example of discipline through surveillance, but the agency employed to negotiate and evade that surveillance, something I observed women do often. It was important to Chandani that she managed her *ijjat*; however, she still desired to exercise freedom of choice over her own body. She needed to be seen to conform to prescribed gender norms because of the surveillance in the marketplace but the very evident tension and constraint of being watched did not ultimately stop her negotiating a way to achieve her goal of obtaining the Contraceptive Pill.

Conclusion

Surveillance fulfils a necessary process of womanhood, both in terms of the production and the experience of it. Furthermore, the act of seeing a woman’s gendered performance is constitutive both of *ijjat* and her gender. On the one hand, it is a vital part of *ijjat* creation and accumulation because it is the observation of others seeing her as the ‘good’ Hindu woman which garners a woman *ijjat* in their eyes. The likelihood (or even merely the possibility) of her being seen and judged positively encourages her to perform in ways that would gain *ijjat*. As activities that gain *ijjat* are ways deemed appropriate for women to behave, their gender is simultaneously produced as they perform to create and maintain their *ijjat*. At the same time, surveillance also creates tension for women, as they increasingly desire to engage in activities not in keeping with the ‘good’ woman. My informants were concerned about this constraint but found ways to improvise their practice, so as to negotiate their daily movements and behaviours in order to be seen as honourable, and yet achieve their own desires. This utilised many creative strategies. Priya needed to be outside the house twice in one day, but felt people would gossip about her if they saw her. She simply went home on

another, less populated route to avoid being seen. Chandani wanted to purchase the Contraceptive Pill, but could not do it in plain sight of people in the marketplace. So she took advantage of my presence to purchase it, for I was not subject to the same standards and expectations of *ijjat* as she.

As I pondered what lay at the heart of surveillance and *ijjat*, I realised that people's greatest fears were that a woman would be viewed as sexually promiscuous, something not permitted if she were to be considered *ijjardār*. Sexuality for Nepali women is a prominent issue, because it is central to gaining *ijjat*. For women, chastity is highly important and they must avoid overt sexual behaviour, especially outside marriage (see Bennett, Lynn 1976, 1983). Surveillance then, is a mode for monitoring and curtailing a woman's sexuality as a means to ensure her, and her family's, *ijjat*. Having provided the background on surveillance and gendered subjectivity, the next chapter looks more specifically at the theme of sexuality, and explores how sexuality is practised and experienced in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, with regard to *ijjat*.

CHAPTER 4

“‘GOOD’ SEXUALITY IS *IJJAT*”

Introduction

I had known Goma, the mother of one of Amy’s school children, for a long time and I passed her home daily on the road to my house. From the Dalit caste of metalworkers, she did not have a husband; he had ‘gone *poila*’ (eloped) nine years earlier. Her only source of income was breaking river stones for local construction. I would pass her either breaking stones in the dry riverbed, or having just finished her work. She was always dusty, smiling and kind and I received an unfailing ‘*namastē*’ from her. One day I found myself talking with her after her sewing class. She asked me what I was “asking about today”. When I told her I was interested in *ijjat* and what constitutes good *ijjat*, especially for a woman, she answered, “Well, of course, having *ijjat* means you have good behaviour to others, so they will respect you. I am illiterate, I break stones, but I don’t do ‘bad things’.” When I asked her what sort of ‘bad things’ she meant, she replied, “You know, not to be a *randī*⁷² or no one will respect you. *Every* woman’s respect depends on not doing *that* kind of behaviour.”

I had been working for nine months on *ijjat*, looking at it primarily from the perspective of honour, prestige and status. It was not until I was in a meeting with the two managers *from Swar* in Bhaktanagar that I heard a different translation that prompted me to look at *ijjat* as more nuanced than simply one’s relative placement in a hierarchy of reputations. The *Swar* manager, district supervisor and I were speaking in English and I happened to mention *ijjat* in passing. Pratima, the district supervisor, did not understand my pronunciation, so Indira, the manager, turned to her and said, ‘*Ijjat*. You know, your chastity’. I was struck by the connotation of this new translation. Months later, in an interview in Kathmandu, widows’ rights activist Leela also translated it to mean chastity. For these women, chastity was so clearly linked to *ijjat* that they saw fit to translate it in these terms.

⁷² *Randī* is the Nepali for prostitute.

Sexuality is a complex issue for Nepali women. All women recognise there are certain social behaviours to abide by with their sexuality and yet no one experience could be said to signify sexuality for all women. Nonetheless, there are recurring themes and issues for women in terms of their sexual bodies and their honour.

This chapter examines how women's sexuality is conceptualised and practised in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, with regard to *ijjat*. Firstly, I link sexuality with *ijjat*, both in the literature and in local understandings as expressed by my informants. As already established, there are tightly prescribed gender norms for Nepali women. Here I discuss these norms with a stronger focus on sexuality and women's relationships with men. Next, I address the ways in which women's sexuality is related to various stages in their life cycle, such as virginity, menstruation and pregnancy. Each of these life events are associated with social, and particularly Hindu, cultural regulations around women's bodies and how much these are controlled and comported. The extent to which these are taken up or rejected relates directly to sexuality and has consequences regarding the acquisition or loss of women's *ijjat*. I then turn to sexual risk and assault, particularly trafficking, as these demonstrate a perilous side of women's sexual experiences in Nepal. This necessarily highlights differences in experience but also focuses on the ways sex itself plays a role in *ijjat* production and negotiations of women's 'idealised' sexuality in marriage and for the purposes of having children.

Without seeking to be dichotomous, I conclude by noting how modern influences on sexuality in Nepal have begun to alter practice, understandings and perceptions of women's sexuality. While women's sexuality is still very much bound by chastity and monogamy, there is some evidence to suggest that attitudes towards women's sexuality is changing, especially in urban areas with younger generations, to include pre-marital dating, female contraception, marrying later and love marriages (see Coltabiano & Castiglioni 2008; Adhikari, R & Tamang 2009; KC, U & Bhattarai 2014). However, much like surveillance in the previous chapter, women circumvent the public gaze when it comes to such expressions of their sexuality. It is in this space, I suggest, that womanhood is being reforged, defined by the practice of negotiation. Being a woman in Nepal means negotiating between modern and traditional influences in sites such as sexuality.

***Ijjat* and sexuality**

Ijjat! Definitely! Yeah, yeah, yeah! So *ijjat* is control over sexuality. The whole thing, that's why I tell you, you know, patriarchy controls. *Ijjat* is a very nice terminology that has been fraught. It's saying that the way, you *are* the person who has to take care of *ijjat* of the family. Women are *overburdened* with this notion. This whole notion is just because women have to behave in a certain way; what patriarchy wants. And these are the rules perpetuated by society in the name of *ijjat*. Saying that you have to behave in this way, so that man can have control over you. So that man can 'enjoy' you. And that man can have the unspoiled single piece [of] nice lady.

Dr Gita, Formal interview

The construction and understanding of womanhood in Nepal are chiefly determined by assumptions about a woman's perceived sexuality and her socially defined role, which includes preserving the *ijjat* of her family (Poudel 2009: 57). *Ijjat* and sexuality have a closely reflexive and dialectical relationship (see Bennett, Lynn 1976; Cameron 1998; Poudel 2009; Liechty 2010). Sexuality is considered a central source of *ijjat*: women must avoid sexual behaviour outside of marriage (Poudel 2009: 59) in order to increase their family's honour. As Dr Gita suggests above, *ijjat* dictates how a woman should behave sexually. The 2011 Shadow Report for CEDAW in Nepal states, under critical areas of concern:

Sexuality and sexual behaviour are not just biological and physical issues but also social constructs. Nepalese society has enforced behavioural norms for women, which emphasises suppressing sexuality and prescribing codes for keeping their bodies 'pure'... Women have no control over their sexuality.

(FWLD & Sub-Committee 2011: 77)

While this quote conveys women's lack of control⁷³ over sexuality, I found issues surrounding women's sexuality are more nuanced than a patriarchal oppression of women's sexual bodies and expressions. Certainly, there are themes of constraint, but women negotiate their subjectivities in different spaces, and logically their sexuality is similarly negotiated. In terms of any 'regulation' over women's bodies, sexuality in a Bhaktanagari or Kathmandu woman's life was often managed by others, especially her kin and even more widely by her community.⁷⁴ This contributed to tensions in women's lives, as attested to by various informants.

In my field sites, chastity was understood as the practice of refraining from sexual activity, both extra-maritally and before marriage. For women, upholding their chastity was a primary concern. Furthermore, women's sexual bodies were seen as more conspicuous than men's, and therefore deemed necessary to be covered, exemplified in the ways women cover their bodies for reasons of modesty (see Chapter Three).

While it has been posited that men's sexuality can be seen as tied to their right to dominate and control women's sexuality (see Pateman 1988; Bhasin 1994), Jyoti told me that men do not experience the same social restrictions with regard to sexuality that women do. For example, widows from EMA told me if a woman remarried after the death of her husband she would erode her *ijjat*. However, a man's *ijjat* will largely remain intact if he marries after being widowed or even if he takes a second wife (see FWLD & Sub-Committee 2011: 60). As it ties them to significant social and familial relationships and cultural processes, women and men are both dependent on marriage for the construction of their personhood, but in different ways. There was a common understanding amongst my informants that, while men should settle down and marry after a time, there seemed little shame in marrying at an older age than women (see Skinner 1990: 77-78) and taking more than one wife was still relatively common (Asian Development Bank 1999: 20), especially in Bhaktanagar⁷⁵. Further, studies show that

⁷³ Pope argues control over women's sexuality comes from a male desire to guarantee the paternity of men's heirs. "Controlling women's sexuality and making sure they did not marry outside the tribal group was therefore crucial to the bloodline. Notions of honour and shame, drummed into young boys and girls, acted as social safeguards" (Pope 2012: 17).

⁷⁴ One of the ways women's sexuality is managed is through surveillance (see Chapter Three). Violence as a consequence for 'immoral' behaviour, which occurred frequently in my field sites, was another way to manage it (see Chapter Five).

⁷⁵ There are no concrete statistics on how many instances of polygamy exist in Bhaktanagar; however, anecdotal evidence clearly presented it as relatively commonplace. The Asian Development Bank in a

more men engage in pre-marital sexual relations than women (Adhikari, R & Tamang 2009: 2). Women, on the other hand, relied on marriage to frame ‘appropriate’ behaviour between the sexes and legitimate their sexuality (Poudel 2009: 60), because any sexual relations outside of marriage, actual or perceived, would not gain them *ijjat*, and in some circumstances could make them more vulnerable to violence.

Women’s sexuality parallels dominant Hindu notions of ‘pollution-purity’, which are linked with overarching concepts of ‘bad’ and ‘good’ womanhood⁷⁶. These themes, and therefore sexuality, have a significant meaning and impact on women’s lives (Poudel 2009: 63). Some sources suggest women are perceived as lesser than men because they are associated with their ‘polluted’, world-based, reproductive role (Bennett, Lynn 1976; Poudel 2009: 62) and data in my field sites confirmed similar sentiments. As women seek ways to accumulate *ijjat* and be considered *ijjatdār*, striving for idealised sexual behaviour within these parameters becomes an obvious pursuit. The ‘right’ kind of sexual behaviour can increase one’s *ijjat*. By this reasoning, the ‘wrong’ kind of sexual behaviour can deplete it. This does not mean, however, women will not pursue sexual activity outside the confines of marriage. On the contrary, I came to hear of multiple examples of extra-marital affairs and flirtations. However, women needed to be careful when conducting social interactions or romances with men because “social intercourse between unrelated men and women is considered almost the same as sexual intercourse” (Akpinar 2003: 432). I found women therefore went to extensive measures to be discreet, in order to maintain the impression of being the ‘good’ woman. Whether it was maintaining an actual or imaginary sense of chastity, the outcome was clear: in order to be considered ‘good’, a woman must not have sex before or outside of marriage, or at least give that impression. It also meant behaving in ways that precluded any inference of sexual conduct in the future. This would include, dressing modestly, not going out at night or travelling alone (see Chapter Three). For this reason, *ijjat* and sexuality are inseparable. As one informant said to me, “You can’t even actually separate this. *Good* sexuality is *ijjat*.”

study across select districts named polygamy the “most common traditional form of violence against women in Nepal” (1999: 20).

⁷⁶ A parallel can be drawn with the ‘pollution-purity’ divide between higher and lower castes (Poudel 2009: 63).

The Sexual body

Sex is an important part of a Nepali woman's life, although the topic is considered largely taboo⁷⁷ (Adhikari, R & Tamang 2009: 2). Despite this, Nepalis are preoccupied with women's sexuality in a variety of ways, particularly around women *not* having sex or having sex only with their husbands. I found sexuality was a topic often difficult to broach, though readily brought up by my informants in the company of female friends and, sometimes, female family members. As time went on I realised sex was a complex dynamic in people's lives that did not fit a single standard, with the exception of a fairly constant notion that some sex was 'good' and some 'bad' or 'disgraceful'. To some women, discussing sex was embarrassing (see Ahearn 2001: 73). Some admitted they enjoyed sex while others found it traumatic. Many women were quite prepared to joke, gossip and even talk with candid earnestness about sex in the absence of men, but there were many informants and personal experiences which confirmed for me that sex was not an open or comfortable topic for discussion. For others, the topic was a joke and caused much laughter (see Bennett, Lynn 1983: 176-177), although this could also in part have been symptomatic of embarrassment. Women were often slightly irreverent and they would grin and stick their tongue out after making a sexual remark; a Nepali expression I came to know as acknowledging one's own brazenness. Kriti, a Chētrī Bhaktanagari woman of 38, told me how her husband, a kind man with whom she shared a happy marriage, would joke about how she was too old to have sex with anymore. With a grin she said, "He says to me, 'you're getting old, I better find someone younger who is more attractive than you to sleep with!'" I grinned back and said, "You could just say 'OK, me too!'" She could not stop laughing, demonstrating that equating her sexuality to a man's was absurd.

The longer my fieldwork continued, the more I realised the variety of ways informants viewed sex. I further understood that, across the spectrum of these attitudes, *ijjat* was still firmly related to sexuality, regardless of whether attitudes were relatively positive, negative or ambivalent. While some women indicated they did not find sex pleasurable (see Ahearn 2001: 74), it was not, however, universally the case. Conversations with

⁷⁷ For this thesis, I take taboo to mean a religious or social custom that prohibits a practice or forbids association with a specific person, thing or place (Sabiri, Manceau & Pras 2010: 60).

Chandani taught me that women do enjoy sex, though they feel they must be discreet about it. One day, I asked her about sex and women's sexuality. She giggled and said, "Yeah, I actually like sex, but don't say to anyone!" I asked Chandani what she felt she could and could not talk about with regard to sex, and with whom she could speak about it freely. For Chandani, any degree of sexual freedom was not possible and she found a lot of pressure to conform, to behave chastely in her community and within her family unit. I asked her if she was even allowed to talk about sex with her husband. She exclaimed, "No! If we show too much we like it or ask for it, he will think I want it with someone else! So only he is ever starting it."

For some married women there was a sense that sex was approached with similar attitudes to work (see Ahearn 2001: 74). In Bhaktanagar I was invited to attend a community gender sensitivity training with *Swar*, conducted by the Red Cross. In the workshop the men and women formed two groups according to gender and wrote on large pieces of paper the daily tasks men traditionally do and the daily tasks traditionally assigned to women. I presumed the objective was to glean a sense of appreciation for the demands on the opposite sex. I sat with the women. They wrote in Nepali and I asked my translator Bindu what they had written. She went through the list in order. It consisted of the household chores as follows:

Figure 13: Activity - Gendered task distribution, Red Cross (Bhaktanagar).

- 1. Wake up**
- 2. Cleaning the courtyard/floor with fresh mud, by hand**
- 3. Collect water (sometimes far away)**
- 4. Cook breakfast (a snack and *ciyā*⁷⁸)**
- 5. Cook 'lunch'⁷⁹**
- 6. Cut grass (for animal feed)**
- 7. Feed the cattle (animals)**
- 8. Clean the cattle home (shed) and milking**
- 9. Get children ready for school**

⁷⁸ Nepali for 'tea'.

⁷⁹ 'Lunch' was eaten in the morning, approximately 9.00am, and was considered a main meal of the day. The portions were large and consisted of a full *thālī* (large plate with a flat bottom and raised brim) of *dāl-bhāt tarakārī* (lentils, rice and curried vegetables).

My reaction to point 9 was one of shock. The women were stating they had at least eight chores before the children even went to school at nine o'clock in the morning, after which they still had more to do until the evening. By comparison, the men's list read: 'wake up, wash (self), dress and go to work (either at office or in field)'. By this time the whole group was laughing at my amazement at how many tasks women performed compared to men. Then one woman loudly quipped, "But even at the end of the day, a woman's work is never done! We go to bed and have to open our legs for more work!" This was met with uproarious laughter, which I took to mean the rest of the group could see an element of truth in the joke.

Women reported to me they were encouraged never to refuse sex from their husbands and through this I came to see that for many women sex was used strategically in marital relationships to maintain harmony and avoid violence. Bennett argues that once the fulfillment of a woman's sexuality is reached, that is, bearing children, the legitimacy for sex decreases. While few of the women in Bennett's field site in the eastern-central part of Nepal admitted to feeling pleasure during sex, they did acknowledge it as an important element in maintaining their husband's affections. She quotes, "If you allow them to 'sleep' with you then they love you. Otherwise they don't" (Bennett, Lynn 1976: 14). Some informants mentioned on occasion that sex with one's husband would be performed to preserve personal safety. One study showed that unmarried women experienced violence from families in response to pre-marital sex (Paudel 2007: 210). For married women, their own husbands were the most common perpetrators of sexual violence (2007: 216).

Maintenance of virtue for high caste women is well documented as having great importance (see Bennett, Lynn 1983; Sharma, M 1985; Kondos 2004). Even in my field site there were countless examples of high caste, Hindu women protecting their *ijjat* by maintaining a sense of decorum around their bodies and sexuality. Some scholars further posit there is a degree more sexual freedom for lower castes than high castes (see Sharma, U 1980; Allen 1982; Kolenda 1982; Bennett, Lynn 1983). I found evidence this sentiment was shared in my field sites, but it was not universally the case, with myriad examples that maintaining sexual decorum was important across caste groups. One day in the *Śital Dairy*, a popular teashop in Bhaktanagar, I was sitting with my translator, Priya, whose family are devout Magar Buddhists. We were discussing a

case reported to EMA, regarding a widow flirting with a male neighbour. It seemed from the report she had been in trouble with her community because of her alleged sexual behaviour. Priya surprised me by seeming to pass judgment on the woman, saying, “Come on! What treatment does she expect [from neighbours]? I mean I am open minded but even *I* think you can’t go around doing that [behaving flirtatiously]!”

For the *dalit* caste Bādi, the women are socially ascribed the ‘occupation’ of prostitution, (Cox 1992) which could partially explain the perception that low-caste women are more promiscuous. The view that low-caste or specifically Bādi women had more sexual freedom was confirmed in several interviews, notably with informants Dr Gita and Jyoti. Dr Gita said, “At lower class and caste level you will see they are much more sexually active. And they go out and they are much more stronger than us⁸⁰.” Jyoti conducted a radio interview with low-caste Bādi women about experiences with high-caste men. One interviewee was particularly upset with the way high-caste men sexually exploited her, and spoke about their contradictory behaviour with regard to sexuality and inter-caste relations. Jyoti recounted,

You know one day I was on *Radio Sagaramāthā*⁸¹ and I was talking with low-caste women on their sexuality. I was very surprised because many of them told me high-caste men would meet them in secret for, you know, sex. I was so surprised! I thought caste would be more powerful and high-caste men wouldn’t, you know, ‘touch’. But the woman said to me “during the daylight, they won’t take water from us⁸² but when darkness comes they don’t hesitate to kiss us⁸³.”

Sharma offers economic explanations for this difference in approach to sexuality between castes, arguing that economic vulnerability generally makes women also vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation, to the point of exchanging sex for economic benefits with upper-caste landowners (1985: 79). Conversely, Cameron proposes that low-caste women are more autonomous and powerful than Sharma

⁸⁰ Communicating her position as a high-caste Nēwār woman.

⁸¹ *Radio Sagaramāthā* is a popular radio station in Nepal, based in the Kathmandu Valley. Established in 1997, it was the first independent community radio in South Asia (Radio Sagarmatha 2013).

⁸² Indicating that the acceptance of water for a high caste person from a low caste person is considered prohibited because it is *juthō*, or impure (see Höfer 2004).

⁸³ I understood ‘kiss’ was a euphemism for sex. March notes amongst her Tamang informants that ‘talk’ was also a euphemism for sex (March 2002: 212). This indicates a level of shyness when discussing sex.

describes. She argues that, in her field site, because women of lower castes were active income earners, their economic independence was responsible for a degree of independence and freedom in other domains of daily life, including their sexuality (Cameron 1998: 150). I noted during my fieldwork that lower-caste women did not necessarily see it this way and oftentimes felt constrained by the expectation to be *ijjatdār* as exemplified by Goma's quote at the start of the chapter or Chandani's concern I would share with others that she enjoyed sex with her husband.

For married women, another significant factor in the processes by which *ijjat* accumulates, lies in the practices undertaken with regard to major events in their life cycle. These include virginity prior to marriage, menstrual practices, pregnancy and childbirth. Her *ijjat* will either grow or diminish depending on her demeanour throughout these events. Next, I look at how these lifecycle events were conceptualised in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu by my informants.

Virginity

(There is) so much of social pressure to be virgin! And this is not for a woman. I never think this – this is for a man. He gets some, unspoiled or unbroken piece of person. Right?

Dr Gita, Formal interview

A large part of the preoccupation with Nepali women and sex focuses on them *not* having sex until it is socially deemed acceptable. In a woman's expected life path, it is anticipated she will be a virgin until she marries. For Hindus across South Asia, not only Nepal, the most prestigious form of marriage is termed '*kanyadān*', which translates to mean the 'gift of a virgin' (Cameron 1999: 219). Vishnu and Basanti explained that, while the expectation is the same for young men, it is not seen as a serious offence if he is not a virgin, more of an acceptable misdemeanour. To a great extent, before marriage, women's activities and behaviour are managed and protected

by their families to avoid any perceptions of dishonour (see Skinner 1990; Ahearn 2001: 11). If they are honourable, they reflect the high *ijjat* of their *māitī*, the maternal home, which makes them marriageable. If they dishonour the family in some way related to their sexuality, their *ijjat* is jeopardised. One common concern is the elopement of a daughter (see Stirr 2010). If she were to go *poila*, community members would say all kinds of things about her family's reputation. As mentioned in Chapter Two, it is common for a person, especially a man, to be told he has 'no nose', when others are assessing him to have low *ijjat*. Jyoti mentioned just how important this discourse around noses is, with relation to a daughter and the honour of her father.

Jyoti: Always if a girl elopes-

Sarah: Went *poila*?

Jyoti: (laughs) Yes, yes, see you know the word! So if [for example] I go *poila* my father would say, *Mero chorīle mero nāk kātyō*.

Sarah: OK. She [daughter] cut off my nose?

Jyoti: She cut off my nose.

Sarah: Which means his *ijjat* has been destroyed?

Jyoti: Yep, destroyed. And other people will say, 'what kind of *chorī* [daughter] is that? She cut off her father's nose.

This is an important indicator of *ijjat* as it alludes to status and hierarchy through subtle references to caste and ethnicity. Jyoti says:

And again you know if you look at the issue of diversity and ethnicity, cutting off nose is like those people who have pointed nose, [and] those who have a flat nose, like Gurungs. It doesn't matter, like you know, because you [already] had a flat nose so cutting [it] off doesn't matter. Cutting off a Brahmin nose - again if you look at the caste and everything, so Bāhun-Chētrī they have mostly pointed nose. If you chop off the nose then it will be like flat and you will be

like a Gurung and you will be like a lower caste or ethnicity. You don't have that *ijjat* again.

This plays into profound notions of Bāhun-Chētrī superiority in the caste hierarchy of Nepal. To say someone has had their 'nose cut off' is akin to calling them a low caste, which has implicit ties to impurity and, therefore, dishonour. Furthermore, this concept of cutting off one's father's nose, she explained to me, only ever has to do with the daughter and her father, not her father-in-law, as it is the role of the *māitī* to ensure she stays a virgin. As Jyoti says, "A daughter is *supposed* to be a virgin." If this is not ensured, not only has she diminished the *ijjat* of her family but also any chance she may have of marrying and bringing honour to her in-laws as well.

This idea that a virgin daughter reflects the honour of the *māitī* is held very dear to Bhaktanagaris. A friend and colleague, Kamala, from *Swar* related some of the recent 'success stories' in order to demonstrate the type of work *Swar* was doing. One recently resolved counselling case came up. It came to their attention that a local family had abandoned their four-year-old daughter. This was not uncommon in Bhaktanagar, and oftentimes, it was unclear who the child's parents were. However, in this case the person who reported the girl knew she belonged to a local family. *Swar*, while caring for the girl, approached the family for their story. They explained they could not have her in the home anymore because she had 'disgraced' them. Kamala explained:

They told us that the father's brother had raped the little girl. The man, I think he ran away. And we said, 'My god this is terrible, why did you put *her* out?' But they said that they had to, because they had no choice. They said 'who will want her now?' because even at four years old they thought that she could not be married because she was no longer a virgin.

Swar counselled the family who eventually changed their mind and took their daughter back into their home. This displays the social importance of virginity for women and girls. Even though the girl was raped, due to the sexual nature of the experience, it was her *ijjat* that diminished, and therefore the family's *ijjat* was also tarnished.

Menstruation

When I was in Bhaktanagar for the first time, my EMFN colleague Binod and I conducted an FGD at a small community organisation. All of us except one woman sat on the veranda. She sat in a white plastic chair with the front legs just touching the front of the step, but did not join us under the awning out of the hot sun. I beckoned her, smiling, thinking she was shy. Binod smiled but discouraged me from welcoming her, saying, “No, Sarah she won’t come. She is on her periods.” I smiled to let her know that was fine, but felt personally troubled by her ostracism, even if it were self-imposed. When we arrived in the next district on our itinerary, a week later, it happened again and I found it a regular occurrence I became accustomed to.

In Nepal it is common amongst Hindu populations to restrict menstruating women from the home and certain activities⁸⁴. The Nepali words for menstruation are *rajasvalā* and *mahinawari*. Other informal terms I came to know of in the western districts are *chui* and *mens*, derived from the English ‘menses’. Another informal term is *nachune*, translated as ‘do not touch’ or ‘untouchable’, which emphasises restrictions on women touching certain items and also the untouchability of low castes. During menstruation, women are traditionally kept in isolation, both physically and symbolically. *Pānī bārnu*, the Nepali term for women staying in isolation while menstruating, literally means, ‘to restrict water’. This does not mean women cannot touch any water, but there are restrictions (Schmidt 1994). The practice is also commonly referred to as *chhāupadi*⁸⁵. It is undertaken because menstruating women are considered *juṭhō*, ‘polluted’ or ‘impure’ (Nightingale 2011: 156). From a young age a Hindu Nepali girl learns about *juṭhō* with reference to body emissions and proper eating etiquette, denoting she does not touch others’ utensils, eat with her left hand or stray into the cooking area unless requested. It explains her mother’s monthly absence from the family home and it is impressed on her that certain people are not to be touched, such as menstruating women and people of lower caste (see Skinner 1990).

⁸⁴ I am mindful that just as many, if not more, ethnic populations of Nepal do not enforce menstruation restrictions, such as the Tamang and the Sherpa.

⁸⁵ In dialects from the west of Nepal, ‘*chhāu*’ means menstruation and ‘*padi*’ is another word for woman (Kandel 2010: 3). The restrictive practice of *chhāupadi* is also known by other names across different districts in the Western part of Nepal, including *chhue*, *bahirhunu*, *chaukulla* or *chāukudi*. *Chhāupadi* is commonly spoken about and acknowledged in Bhaktanagar as well as the literature, hence my preference for this term over the others.

When a Hindu girl⁸⁶ reaches puberty and begins to menstruate, every month she menstruates, she is considered impure for the duration of her menstruation (Kandel 2010: 1). There are several practices deemed necessary to undertake. Predominantly these pivot around a woman's exclusion and restriction. Scholars acknowledge the issues around isolation are more endemic in the Far Western and Mid-Western regions of Nepal where *chhāupadi* is practised (Koirala & G.C. 2013: 5), though I noted many women in Kathmandu practised behavioural restrictions as well. In the western part of Nepal, it is traditional for a young woman undergoing her first menstruation to stay inside a separate room or building for twelve days⁸⁷ (Majupuria 2007: 170), often a cowshed or a *chhāupadi goth*⁸⁸. She is not permitted to talk to anybody, especially men, and is particularly separated from her father and brothers (Koirala & G.C. 2013: 3).

I found that women in both Kathmandu and Bhaktanagar adhered to at least some of the restrictions surrounding menstruation. Only in Bhaktanagar did I meet women who slept in a *chhāupadi goth* (FWLD & Sub-Committee 2011: 13); however, various informants from both field sites would refrain from religious ceremonies and touching statues of the Hindu gods. They would further only use a separate water supply, not enter the house or kitchen, not cook or eat with the family, not take water from people, not touch children, family members, fruit trees or livestock, and not drink milk or consume other dairy products (see Adhikari, P *et al.* 2007; Majupuria 2007; Kandel 2010; OHCHR 2011; Koirala & G.C. 2013). It was explained to me that if a menstruating woman did any of these things, her husband, children or even she could become sick or even die (see Skinner 1990: 75). Other expected fates include the spoiling of fruit from crops or the souring of a prized cow's milk (OHCHR 2011: 1). At the end of her four days of 'impurity', a menstruating woman bathes, changes her clothing and when she has sprinkled some cow's urine on her body, she is fully

⁸⁶ The practices detailed here regarding women's menstrual practices are tied to Hindu ritual practices and beliefs. However, many Hindu beliefs have carried over to into some aspects of Buddhist culture (Guterman, Mehta & Gibbs 2007). Among my few Buddhist informants menstruation was thought of as "dirty" and some level of "shyness" was practised. McHugh also found reference to ritual cleansing and separation in Buddhist societies (2001: 31), but not to the extent of Hindu practices such as *chhāupadi*. Furthermore, Hindus comprise 81.3% of Nepal's population (National Planning Commission Secretariat 2012: 4) and therefore a large number of the population is affected by this in some way.

⁸⁷ Some sources note it can be fourteen (OHCHR 2011: 1) or sixteen days (Kandel 2010: 1).

⁸⁸ A *chhāupadi goth* is an outside hut, often made of mud, wood and straw and is the designated place for a woman to stay for the days she is menstruating. It often only measures 2 or 3 feet squared (FWLD & Sub-Committee 2011: 13).

cleansed and ready to participate fully in social and religious life once again (Majupuria 2007: 171).



Figure 14: Typical cowshed, used for menstruation separation (Bhaktanagar).

While I never admitted to my informants when I was menstruating, foreigner friends of mine staying with Nepali families had to undergo such restrictions as well. Lana, an American volunteer, told me that while she was staying in the Western *Tarāī*, she was restricted from the bedroom with the god statue and the kitchen, had to drink and eat from separate plates, wash at a certain hand pump further away, where she says, “everyone would stare and know I had my period, which is kind of embarrassing you know? I don’t tell people back home that I have my period so I found it hard to get used to.” Even the mother of her ‘family’ was oversensitive to Lana touching the baby and would hold the baby close, not allowing Lana near when she was menstruating. She even had to sleep in a relative’s cowshed. When I asked how her hosts explained it to her she replied:

It wasn’t. We were visiting relatives in the hills and when the sun went down they took me outside and showed me the cowshed. The gestures were clear I

was to sleep there, up the ladder and on the boards of the loft. I could see the cows through the cracks in the wood, you know, just shitting below me.

This exemplifies that the ‘problem’ of *juthō* with regard to menstruation does not simply pertain to Nepali women; the ‘problem’ is with the blood itself.

In the past, much anthropology focussed on menstruation centred on the concepts of taboo and pollution (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988b: 4) as many accounts depict menstruating women and menstrual blood being associated with uncleanness (Britton 1996: 648) and being considered dangerous (see Delaney, Lupton & Toth 1976). While in recent years the notion that menstruation is universally considered taboo and/or polluting has been questioned (see Meigs 1983; Buckley & Gottlieb 1988a), the pollution model of menstruation nevertheless resonates with the Nepali context. Due to the perception that menstrual blood and menstruating women pose a threat to those around them, taboos have been constructed to “contain their energies and keep these from spreading beyond a limited place in the order of things” (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988b: 25). Douglas gave importance to the notions of purity and pollution in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966). In it she connected notions of maintaining purity and restricting or cleansing pollution to a culture’s notion that to do so maintains social order and averts any danger inherent in proper maintenance and reproduction. Substances can be culturally coded as a pollutant based on a shared perception of that substance being irregular to the symbolic and cultural order. Pollutants are therefore coded as ‘dirt’ and symbolically deemed ‘matter out of place’, and as such pollutants are simultaneously a product of a specific symbolic order and a threat to it (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988b: 26). Douglas asserts that biological processes like menstruation become culturally entangled with notions of purity and pollution because “the laws of nature are dragged in to sanction the moral code” (1966: 3).

In Nepal it is believed that women go in and out of states of purity and pollution and this is dependent on several factors; namely caste, virginity (or not), where she sits in her menstrual cycle and whether or not she has had children, particularly recently (see Bennett, Lynn 1976, 1983; Cameron 1998). Cameron (1998) notes that understanding

pollution beliefs is key to understanding the life world of Nepalis at Bhalara in Far Western Nepal. One example is that people believe natural disasters, such as landslides, earthquakes, or livestock illnesses may be caused by ‘pollution transgressions’. She notes that in order to avoid such catastrophes people, particularly women and low-caste individuals should take special care not to violate the codes of conduct pertaining to pollution transgression (1998: 246). Cameron states:

Pollution beliefs associated with the basic functions of procreation, sexuality and eating, operate both instrumentally and expressively to control the behaviour of various categories of people, to differentiate them accordingly, and ultimately to hierarchise them. The impurity of women’s menstruation and the impurity of sexual relations are controlled through the moral order of dharma (duty) and the honour of the patriline.

(1998: 247)

This paralleled what I observed in both Kathmandu and Bhaktanagar, regarding menstruation practices. One of Amy’s staff members felt the fruit trees had not yielded a bountiful crop one year because the older girls of the children’s home would climb in the trees when they had their period. It was her belief their being *juṭhō* caused the trees to stunt the fruit.

Despite the government in 2005 outlawing the practice of strict *chhāupadi* (OHCHR 2011: 3), the feelings women have about menstruation are still prevalent today. As Jyoti mentioned the “people’s hearts are socialised” and this has been an almost impossible tradition to break. Of course, the differing subjectivities of women mean the gamut of experience for women during menstruation is vast. Not every woman’s experience of her first period is traumatic, although certainly the majority of women I spoke to mentioned a level of stress and confusion. Basanti described her first experience of her menstruation ritual as pleasant. When Basanti reached puberty she underwent twelve days of seclusion as well. She describes the time she spent twelve days in the dark just before her first menstruation as being a really “fun time”, something she enjoyed because she socialised with only her mother, aunties and sisters. Admittedly this changed somewhat after her first menstruation, and while - being from Kathmandu - she

did not adopt strict restriction, she still observed some limitations, until she told her family she would not follow these practices anymore or she would leave.

They [her parents] used to make me eat last and on separate plates. One day I finally told them, “If you’re going to continue to make me do this I’m going to go out of home for five days and eat elsewhere. It doesn’t make me feel good and it’s wrong, there’s nothing wrong with me!” and after that they thought and they allowed me to stay and eat with them.

Other women did not have such affirming experiences. Rita told me one day when she was around fourteen she noticed some blood in her underwear. She was terrified. “It was monsoon and I thought I had been bitten by a leech!” After confirming from an elder sister that this was not the case and that she had commenced her period, she was informed of the rituals and restrictions placed on her. She told me she resented having to incorporate this monthly practice into her routine.

It was, you know, something like a hassle, and I hated not being able to go in kitchen, get and touch what I wanted. So I read up on puberty and periods and found out that for young women first starting their periods it could be sort of you know, sometimes come, sometimes not. So I faked not having it for six months, even though I did have it. My family didn’t know and I didn’t tell them, and I did everything without them knowing I had it.

Practising *chhāupadi* in rural areas, has been known to be directly related to women’s deaths (see Dahal, Khagendra 2008; FWLD & Sub-Committee 2011; OHCHR 2011), which, as well as discriminating against women and controlling their bodies and sexuality, is a key reason for its abolishment in law. I read in the newspapers about women dying across the country because of complications related to the practice of *chhāupadi*. Women can be attacked and raped, sometimes killed, die of snakebites in summer, exposure in winter and chest and gastrointestinal infections anytime of the year (FWLD & Sub-Committee 2011; OHCHR 2011). Another aspect to the practice is that reportedly women are not supposed to seek medical care during this time (Dahal, Kagendra 2008: 1194), presumably because coming out of isolation to visit a medical clinic or doctor would break various taboos, especially touching other persons. Women

from EMA told me that when a woman dies during her period⁸⁹ sometimes she is not cremated according to the proper rituals, for even in death she is still impure to touch. One informant from EMA, Ramila, spoke of the dangers she had experienced by spending time in the *chhāupadi goth*, which doubled as a goat shed in her family home.

One time I was sleeping on top of the goats shed [loft], and late at night a tiger came and started fighting with our housedog. I woke up due to the noise, I felt so scared I couldn't see but I slept still in my bed. That night, the tiger took one goat and the other goat ran away to our neighbour's house. Then the neighbour came to our house bringing our goat and in the morning I found that the creature creating noise was the tiger, which was found out by its paw prints in the mud.

Pregnancy

There is a distinct tension many Nepali women experience, especially Hindu women, when they fall pregnant because it is considered both the fulfilment of their womanhood and role as wife and daughter-in-law (see Bennett, Lynn 1976), yet also deeply shameful (Cameron 1998: 252; Furuta & Salway 2006: 17). Many informants explained that marriage provides socially sanctioned opportunities for activities including the pleasing of a husband and providing labour for the household, which are important for maintaining and increasing family honour. Historically, the ultimate reason for sex and marriage in Nepal is the production of, preferably male, offspring (Bennett, Lynn 1976: 2). The importance of childbearing, and the correlation that this is the only legitimate reason for sex, is clear in my fieldwork as well as the literature. While no one overtly *talks* about pregnancy, people, especially mothers-in-law, watch daughters-in-law for signs of pregnancy with much anticipation (Bennett, Lynn 1976: 2). Dr Gita vehemently believed it is the wider affinal family that would dictate a daughter-in-law's childbearing, such as how many children she should have, when and what sex the children should be.

⁸⁹ Women told me widows are also not commonly cremated either, as widows are considered *aśubha*, inauspicious, or polluted, similarly to menstruating women.

It is commonplace for women to conceal their pregnancies from family and outsiders for as long as possible, all the while maintaining work responsibilities (Cameron 2004: 735). Early in my fieldwork, in the EMFN office in Kathmandu, Sabitra, a Chētrī woman, came in for some paperwork and we were introduced by Jyoti. Sabitra was heavily pregnant and was looking forward to the arrival of her first child. I congratulated her on her pregnancy and she shyly smiled, looked downwards and said nothing. When she left the room, Jyoti whispered:

You know, it's fine for you to congratulate her. It shouldn't be a problem really, but no one in her extended family will talk about her pregnancy or congratulate her or these things. No one will acknowledge her pregnancy directly very much at all until her child is born. She didn't even tell them she was pregnant until she was six months!

I asked, "But why? Isn't she happy?" Jyoti replied, "Of course she is. But admitting she's pregnant means admitting she and her husband have sex. Normally no one talks about that. If they do it's indirect." Bennett touches on this with the many euphemisms used to call a woman pregnant, some of which I also encountered in the field. While the dictionary translation for pregnant is *pēt bōknu*, literally the conflating of the words 'stomach' and 'to carry' (Schmidt 1994), other phrases were commonly used. Euphemisms such as *duī jūko hunne*, meaning 'being with two bodies', *nasakne jūko*, meaning 'with an 'un-able' body' (Bennett, Lynn 1976: 20) and *pēt mā baccā chā*, 'in the stomach there is a child' are some of the phrases used. Bennett also confirms what I encountered with Sabitra. Conversationally, many women expressed feeling conflicted about pregnancy, in some circumstances, proud to be bearing children, but also shy throughout their pregnancy, especially a first pregnancy. One of Bennett's informants told her, "We feel ashamed because what we did in the dark with our husbands now puffs out for all to see" (Bennett, Lynn 1976: 20). Shame was a feature amongst information I collected, as Basanti once informed me that even in modern Kathmandu hospitals when giving birth women are not given any type of pain relief. Basanti said the midwives and nurses would often shame the women instead of offering encouragement, telling them, "Stop screaming! You weren't complaining when you made the baby with your husband!" For high-caste Hindu's, due to a traditional

adherence to a respect-avoidance relationship with fathers-in-law and their husband's older brother, some women expressed it was difficult to feel comfortable while pregnant around these male figures. Jyoti noted to me that, for her first pregnancy, she was shy in front of her father-in-law and covered her pregnant belly with "many loose tops and shawls". On reflection, she told me, she wondered why she felt she had to do that. When she was pregnant with her second child she made a conscious effort not to cover up as much.

Aside from the shyness many women expressed feeling during pregnancy, once the baby is born there are practices once again pertaining to purity and pollution of the woman's state. Particularly in rural areas, women undergo ten days of separation from the house (Majupuria 2007: 167), similar to the menstrual separation, for they are also in a perceived state of pollution in the postpartum period.



Figure 15: A Bhaktanagari woman practices post-partum restrictions.⁹⁰

Skinner also notes that when children are born, especially sons, an ‘ideal’ woman obtains the prototypical identity of women: mother (Stone 1978: 10). With the birth of children, a woman becomes a more central household member, because she has “proven herself in part as a good woman with a good fate because of her ability to bear children” (Skinner 1990: 76). Of the Bāhun-Chētrī women in her field site, Bennett argued, “For these women childbearing is the paramount test of their identity and worth as human

⁹⁰ The woman’s newborn son is wrapped, unseen beneath the blankets. Even though it was the middle of winter, she had not entered the house since his birth, eight days prior to this photo being taken.

beings and child rearing the most enjoyable and rewarding of their many tasks” (1976: 1). While sentiments around employment, education and other aspirations have altered this expectation for women somewhat, especially in urban areas like Kathmandu and Bhaktanagar, the sentiment about centrality of motherhood and marriage in women’s lives is still a persistent one. Anisha, a Bāhun woman from EMFN lamented on Facebook:

This evening: It was almost 6 [pm] and I was picking my daughter up from her school. A middle-aged woman, who was passing by the school gate, looked at both of us and asked, 'Oh, does this child stay till this long in school?' I said 'Yes, she has to wait until her Momma comes from work to pick her [up].' She remarked, 'Oh poor child! Well, it is obvious that it is a child who has to suffer when her Mum chooses to collect money rather than staying back home taking care of her children'. I chose to smile back at her and walk away rather than trying to justify my reasons to her. And this was not first time I came across such situation. It is fine until you don't appreciate working mothers for their dual/triple responsibilities, but it is not fine when you make such rude remarks without truly understanding the situation.

In the next section I explore the themes of trafficking and rape in order to look at another aspect of women’s sexuality and *ijjat* in Nepal. These are important facets of women’s experiences with sexuality and their bodies due to the magnitude of these issues across the country and people’s perceptions of them. When considering trafficking and rape in relation to *ijjat* it is the act of sexual intercourse itself that is seen as shameful and women’s consent, choice or willingness are not considered factors in the accumulation and maintenance of *ijjat* in this context. If a sex act occurs, even an illegal one against a woman’s wishes, *ijjat* is damaged.

Trafficking and Rape

In Nepal, once a woman had been wittingly or unwittingly forced into prostitution, there is no going home. Once she has been trafficked, a family's moral code means that even a daughter or a wife is rejected.

(Poudel & Shrestha 1996: 352)

Sex crimes such as sexual assault, rape and trafficking are difficult issues in Nepal. Urban and village women alike are aware of the high instances of assault and trafficking. All my informants said they had experienced sexual discrimination, harassment or assault of some kind. Their sentiments and the statistics (FWLD & Sub-Committee 2011: 15) of women who fall victim to assault, rape and trafficking express a stark reality; that women's rights, particularly to bodily and sexual autonomy, are generally not respected, or even acknowledged. As a result, the topics of rape, trafficking and prostitution⁹¹ are appropriate for analysis. When women experience rape, trafficking or prostitution not only are they exposed to violence they are also often subject to a particular social stigma that has close ties to their *ijjat*. When I asked Binita what people might say about a woman who had been raped, she replied, "She would be perceived different to others as she has lost her *ijjat* but also her family will be looked down [on]. She would be perceived as somebody who will not or should not get married due to this publicly insulting event." When a woman engages in an activity that she knows may threaten her *ijjat*, for example staying out late, she is aware of the repercussions, and may negotiate ways to mitigate those consequences. However, in situations of rape, trafficking and sometimes prostitution, her ability to influence her own *ijjat* is diminished.

Definitive statistics on rape and sexual assault are difficult to uncover (WOREC 2013b: 5), due to high levels of under-reporting (Shrestha, Subina 2013) and the fact that laws

⁹¹ Dr Gita spoke about the rights of 'sex workers', another term gaining traction in the discourse. Redefining 'prostitution' as 'sex work', it is argued, legitimises the work and calls for rights and recognition for sex workers, reframing prostitution in a labour-based framework (see Worthen 2011). I am aware of the politics of the terms, and acknowledge that a labour-based framework allows for agency by positing not all prostitution is forced. However, 'sex work' was a term rarely used in my field so in order to reflect the terms used by informants I will predominantly use 'prostitution' unless appropriate to do otherwise.

concerning rape are inadequate and discriminatory (WOREC 2013a). Oftentimes legal avenues are difficult to pursue due to a thirty-five day statute of limitations (HRW 2014: 3)⁹², degrees of impunity across all sectors in Nepal and lack of police consistency in taking appropriate action, often insisting it is a family or community issue. One woman told Shrestha the police said she needed to, “Get it fixed in the village, but even the villagers wouldn’t support me” and her rapist went unpunished (2013). For the most part, rape came up pertaining to other people or in cases brought in by *Swar*. The attitude towards women, who are raped, as with the prior case of the four-year-old girl, is that they are to blame and bring shame to themselves and their family.

Trafficking⁹³ is defined as “the transportation, selling or buying of women and children for [forced] prostitution within and outside a country for monetary or other considerations with or without the consent of the person subjected to trafficking” (SAARC 2002)⁹⁴. Trafficking, a modern form of slavery, utilises coercive techniques, fraud, and/or abduction (Simkhada, P 2008: 235) for forced labour (Butcher 2003: 1983). Prostitution deals with the sale of sex, and can be a transaction made with or without the consent of the prostitute (Butcher 2003: 1983). A trafficked person can be trafficked into prostitution. Trafficking is an endemic problem for Nepal. Figures vary as to how many women and girls are trafficked out of Nepal every year. Some sources estimate 5000 to 7000 girls and women are trafficked annually into prostitution in Nepal and India (Worthen 2011: 87), while other sources such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimate there could be as many as 12 000 (KC, BK et al. 2001: 1). O’Dea posits that, in 1993, approximately 200 000 Nepali women and girls were working in the Indian sex trade (O’Dea 1993); Maiti Nepal, an anti-trafficking NGO, suggests numbers could be similar or much higher in 2014 (see Maiti Nepal, M 2014). There is also a growing trend in women being trafficked to the Persian Gulf,

⁹² The limitations on reporting instances of rape differ from other instances of domestic violence, in which victims have ninety days to report abuse (Nepal Law Commission 2009: 9).

⁹³ I acknowledge that in the discourse of trafficking and sex work the terms are sometimes conflated to mean one and the same. Åsman (2016) worked to the north of Kathmandu and found that many Tamang women entered the sex industry in Mumbai understanding the extent of what their work entailed and also found that this work contributed to significant social and structural changes in their lives. The women I encountered however were coerced into sex slavery and as such, I do not use the term sex work to depict their situation.

⁹⁴ The SAARC is the definition most commonly adopted by Nepali NGOs and does not mention men in its interpretation; however, the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime definition of trafficking extends to all ‘persons’, regardless of sex or gender (UNDOC 2016). During my fieldwork, I did not hear of any men being trafficked.

with over 225 000 female migrant workers in the region, though only 60 000 officially documented since 2007 (Kaphle 2014).

Sex trafficking in Nepal cannot be separated from the ‘pollution-purity’ dichotomy attached to women’s sexuality and bodies (see Bennett, Lynn 1983) and this is salient in the types of activities returned trafficked women can undertake. Being considered *juṭhō* leads to the exclusion of trafficked women from religious and social life. Besides the terrible abuse experienced during the crime, it is this social exclusion and shame which are perhaps the most salient features for a returned trafficked woman as she grapples with issues of acceptance, honour and reintegration into community life. For example, Poudel found that while women would normally be permitted to partake in religious life, trafficked women from her study were not permitted to visit temples or attend any family rituals or religious performances due to issues surrounding social rejection (2009: 64).

To understand this aspect I interviewed three trafficked women and two anti-trafficking experts, all of whom identified the stigma and shame as the most difficult aspects of such an experience. Bhaktanagari woman, Latika Nepali, seemed a pained and nervous woman. Shuffling about, she often winced as if in pain, though whether this was strictly physical I could not be sure. Latika was trafficked to India two years before I met her in 2009. Making a miraculous return, she had become a client of *Swar* and underwent extensive therapy with the resident counsellor, Nanda. When my translator, Bindu, Nanda and I visited Latika’s home, she was in the courtyard of her simple two-storey mud house, sweeping the dust off the steps. Shyly, she welcomed us inside, served lukewarm black tea and our formal discussions commenced. An uneducated woman of twenty-six from an untouchable caste, Latika had three children with her husband, Ganesh. Their marriage was a love marriage in the sense their parents did not arrange it, but Latika acknowledged difficulties in their relationship, which meant it was no longer amicable.

After much quarrelling with and being beaten by her husband she ran away to her *māiti* in the hills north of Bhaktanagar with her eight-year-old daughter. Three of her neighbours, two women and a man, followed soon after to tell her Ganesh had called her back. She recalled one of the women telling her, “Your husband beats you and have

a bad relationship. You should get a job and then he will be understanding and treat you better.” The other told her she had a household in the town at the border crossing with India. “You can work for me as my live-in housekeeper and be paid a good salary”, the woman said.

She had never been to the border, so they took the long bus ride together, not even stopping to pick up her belongings in Bhaktanagar. This also meant her eight-year-old daughter was accompanying her. Unbeknownst to her, a drink of bottled water filled with tranquillisers was used to sedate her and she slept for most of the journey. Some hours later she woke in an unfamiliar town, her companions announcing it as their final destination. She found out some days later, when it was too late, that she was well into the countryside of Northern India. They took her to the home of an older man of about fifty. One of the women told Latika the man was her father-in-law and said they would stay at his house for a couple of days before going to her home. Latika’s three neighbours said they would go to the markets and she and her daughter were to stay and get settled in the house. They never returned. The man spoke little Nepali but basic communication with him was possible. When the three others had left, his demeanour became immediately aggressive. He put Latika and her daughter into a room and she was surprised to discover four other youths, two girls and two boys, who, he said, were his children though they were not. On the second evening she tried to leave. He laughed and told her that was not possible because he had paid 20 000 Indian Rupees for her and he ‘owned’ her. He cornered her and said, “If you want to leave you need to pay me another 30 000 rupees.” Having no idea what to do and unable to leave, she stayed and endured several weeks there. During that time she was made to do housework, forced to dress up in beautiful saris and make-up and made to bathe daily. At first she insisted, “He didn’t ‘misbehave’, he just made me work.” After some time she told me that in addition to the domestic labour and dressing up, she was raped daily and he frequently prostituted her to other men. One time she was severely beaten by him and some other men and had cigarettes put out on her body, for. She was never allowed out to speak to anyone. Whenever he went out, he always locked the door, latched from the outside. She suspected he was bargaining with other men in the market to sell her again. One day the man went out before dawn and Latika’s daughter also woke without his knowledge. Discreetly, she followed him outside and waited in the dark as he locked the door. When he left, she opened the door from the outside, letting her mother out, and

they managed to escape. Unfamiliar with the town, they walked for some time, then came to a marketplace. They fortunately met a Nepali ‘family member’⁹⁵ there, told him what had happened and he kindly helped them. He was a remittance worker from Nepal and took Latika and her daughter to his home where they stayed for twelve days. Here they found shelter and safety as he consulted with various trafficking organisations about how to repatriate her to Nepal. With the help of two anti-trafficking NGOs, Latika and her daughter were safely returned to Bhaktanagar and her case handed over to *Swar*, who looked after her court case and counselling. Her return was challenging and her husband did not accept her home for several weeks. The stigma she had from being trafficked was notable and still existed at the time of the interview, although *Swar* had managed to counsel the husband to take her home. However, her husband, an alcoholic, was resentful of her, often beating her and calling her *randī*. Further adding to her stress was that her traffickers had been recently released from jail and she was fearful of repercussions from them or their family members for presenting a case against them.

The most prominent thing about her experiences, despite the trauma of the abuse, was her shame at not being fully welcomed back into her household. When we discussed her abuse, she used euphemisms for the sexual assault like ‘misbehave’ and had discussed with Nanda the issue of reintegration with her community as the larger challenge, saying, “How am I going to be taken in now?” implying her status as a dishonoured woman. Issues of abuse from her husband and surrounding community at the time of our interview were still high. She despaired because even though she said she tried her best to act in ways to gain honour, she felt this event had marked her a ‘bad woman’ and no amount of “good works and tolerating her husband and karma” seemed to change people’s minds about her.

Another mother and daughter pair also expressed this when I interviewed them. Having both been trafficked by the same people but to different countries in the Persian Gulf, their reintegration into the Bhaktanagari community was fraught. At the time of our interview they were both deeply distressed to be living under a corrugated iron sheet with tarp for walls, as no family support was forthcoming because of the shame they

⁹⁵ This person was not physically related, but happened to be from north of Bhaktanagar and had come across the border into India for work, as was the trend at the time in work-based migration. It is common for Nepalis to call people ‘family’ if they are from the same caste group, district or village.

brought. The mother, unable to find a job, felt she could not find work due to the stigma attached to her as ‘*randī*,’ and was unable to put her fourteen-year-old daughter in school. The daughter felt she could not go anyway because people knew and gossiped about her forced prostitution. The daughter’s trauma was so terrible she contemplated suicide on several occasions. This level of social intolerance towards trafficked woman and girls is only changing slowly, according to Bharani, Secretary of a prominent anti-trafficking organisation, north of Kathmandu. She notes it is difficult even for parents to welcome a trafficked daughter home.

This perception of parents regarding trafficked daughter can be linked with sexuality... That means, the number of sexual partners she was engaged with when she was trafficked determines the women’s degree of ‘badness’ by the society in general and family in particular. Males are considered good even though he engages in sexual relationships with 5 women [for example]. With their own will and happiness males are engaged in sexual relationships and are considered ‘good’ by society but women who are forced into trafficking unconsciously are considered ‘bad’. Parents also don’t accept the trafficked daughter because of the threat of society [to dishonour them].

As outlined previously, women are granted honour if they are chaste and ‘well behaved’ before marriage and are faithful wives who fulfil certain roles and obligations. However, as Poudel puts it, “In the context of trafficking, particularly for sexual purposes, there is often no marriage, and women are consequently not in a situation to fulfill their prescribed roles. In this circumstance, women are not eligible to be honoured by their family and kin” (Poudel 2009: 60). Due to an association between *ijjat*, chastity and marriage, the legitimacy with which trafficked women can claim their womanhood is challenged, as they are often viewed in the community as ‘bad’ women. Having worked extensively with trafficked women, Poudel is emphatic that *ijjat* and marriage are vital to the construction of ‘good’ womanhood (2009: 60). Another informant and sociologist, Dr Maya, also argues this and has worked for over two decades with returned trafficked women. An academic who had dedicated her professional career to researching trafficking, she was, at the time of our interview, working with a prominent INGO. After being jailed for her participation in the 1990 *jana andolān*, she met a twenty-two-year-old woman who was jailed because she had

been trafficked. This woman affected her greatly, as her parents had died and her siblings refused to take her back home. When Dr Maya was released from jail, the first thing she did was return to get that woman out of jail and they began an NGO, which was a catalyst for another NGO, run for, and by, survivors of trafficking. Dr Maya decided she wanted to look deeper into the academic themes of trafficking, saying,

I started thinking...what are the processes of social construction of social rejection, because there was *so much*. Because I was so much affected by the women's experience and their views on stigma and their views on trauma... And my research was I tried to explore social stigma, processes and consequences of social stigma attached to trafficked identity.

She found that to combat stigma, these women went through processes of trying to rebuild their *ijjat*, by way of reconstructing their identities. She explained a trafficked woman, prior to being trafficked, once fulfilled the role of 'daughter' and sometimes 'wife' and she would have likely executed that role so far as prescribed gender norms go, following rituals and behaviours, which would have ascribed her *ijjat*. Once being trafficked, these women were seen as tarnished, 'polluted' and shamed, as they had engaged in sexual activity that is socially framed as unacceptable for a 'good' woman. On returning, however, they were faced with an opportunity to be seen as *ijjatlādār* once more.

I found that when I was interviewing women and children, women forced themselves to go for marriage or remarriage things. Marriage, they took marriage as a *tool* to get citizenship that means to get identity, to reconstruct their identity from trafficked to ordinary woman. And a livelihood. So they are commoditised... And see the whole cycle of reconstructing their identity and you were somebody's daughter, somebody's sister, and you become a trafficked woman, a prostitute and now you are 'bad'. And you started reconstructing your identity going back to the situation you were. And you choose marriage to reconstruct you from 'bad' woman to 'good' woman.

Dr Maya stated that marriage as a tool was clever because it served as a way for women to make the transition from being seen as '*randī*', to being seen once again as a 'good'

woman. However, she found this was rarely the case, as many of her informants ended up in abusive relationships with their new husbands as she states, “when husbands [come to] know that they are trafficked they start calling them ‘prostitute’ and they use them sexually. Also they use their labour, money, income, everything. And now they start beating them...so they are commoditised all over again.” Dr Maya further discussed *ijjat* and the different dynamic it plays in married and trafficked women’s lives, saying that in some ways she found the married woman’s relationship to *ijjat* “More complicated and abusive than trafficking.” She went on to explain:

Trafficked women, when they escape trafficking, yes they are stigmatised. But when you compare the trafficked returned women, the stigmatised, trafficked returned women, and ah a very honest, very pure, very- what you call that? ‘Good wife’. I think the good wife maybe she’s experiencing *more* violence, and more stigma and more restriction than that trafficked, stigmatised, prostitute, trafficked women. So you see the point that because of the expectation, because of the public exposure, because of some kind of autonomy. Yeah. There is a sense of responsibility maybe to uphold that image. And in house if you are wife, then you are [responsible] to produce children. At least in trafficking they are not. Yeah even they are serving god knows how many men? But they are not, well they are practical, to produce pleasure for man. But here at home you are a slave to both. To produce pleasure to men and also to produce children, *his* generation. So it’s *so* complicated. And both are linked with the same stigma and their *ijjat*. And yes, if you are wife, if you are a good woman you are a source of *ijjat*. But if you are a bad woman you are a source of shame. That the only difference I could see.

Dr Maya illustrates in this conversation just how burdensome the social responsibility is on married women to produce *ijjat*. While women’s experiences with sexuality vary considerably, Dr Maya felt that in many cases married women’s *ijjat* was more intricate and difficult to negotiate because of the “overwhelming responsibility and constant pressure” to create and maintain *ijjat* through various practices. However, her observations, as well as my own, make it clear that *ijjat* has a complicated relationship with Nepali women’s sexuality and furthermore manifests in different, complex and nuanced ways in the lives of married and trafficked women.

Conclusion

Despite the complexity of lived sexuality, my exploration of this area and its links to *ijjat* identify some distinct features. Firstly, in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, gender norms associated with milestones along the expected life path linked to sexuality, such as virginity, marriage, menstruation and pregnancy, are used to evaluate women's honour, even to an extent for those who are not from high Hindu castes. Secondly, a woman who expresses her sexuality in the 'wrong' way, be it the assumption of or an actual extramarital affair, or because of sex work or trafficking, is often labelled *randī* and therefore seen by the community to be without *ijjat* for herself and her family. As established in previous chapters, choice and effort are not sole contributing factors when it comes to *ijjat* accumulation. In fact, any woman who sits outside the normative model of an idealised sexuality, that is of being or becoming married, is generally considered by the community to be without *ijjat*.

Finally, women's sexuality is shifting as people, especially younger generations, re-frame definitions of sexual practice and experience to reflect a sexuality that is less influenced by so-called traditional practices, and more influenced by the promises held out by modernity and development. For example, women's rights organisations and activists, in particular, are engaging in programming which promotes women's sexual and reproductive education and rights. Maya Garden in Bhaktanagar successfully ran menstruation information workshops with hundreds of women and teenage girls in the municipality, also distributing homemade, re-usable menstrual pads. Through these workshops, women and girls reported having more confidence and less shame around their bodies' natural processes and some were able to engage in conversations with their families around changing their practices of seclusion.

However, there is some backlash surrounding these changes. Dr Gita told me that she had once tried to run a health workshop on women's sexual pleasure, with the view to educating women that feeling gratification during sexual intercourse was normal and not shameful. However, the dropout rate by the second day was more than fifty per cent, as the participants felt that this type of sex was in some way "abnormal" and, due to the focus on female pleasure and anatomy, believed that she was "trying to convert them

into lesbians”. Rita, well known for her work and stances on freedom of sexual and maternal health, also experienced community criticism when she handed out condoms in her village, promoting safe sex practices. “But people would spit on me and call me ‘*Randi*’” she told me.

There was also more noticeable freedom regarding dating culture in urban areas, particularly Kathmandu. Several of my female informants had boyfriends before marriage and/or maintained platonic friendships with males. Not only did they value these interactions, they exhibited a determination to engage in them despite family reservations. In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in young women relying on the ‘morning-after pill’ for emergency contraception, indicating pre-marital sex is common (KC, U & Bhattarai 2014). Brunson (2013) also found a drastic change between 2005 and 2009, with regard to dating and marriage. In 2005 she found her informants reported arranged marriage with more regularity, meeting their husbands either just before or at their wedding. By 2009, her college-aged informants reported they frequently mixed with potential partners at university, cafes, parks, offices, temples and stupas (see Figure 16), as well as engaging through telecommunication technologies and social media (2013: 612). While these changes are undoubtedly occurring, there is evidence to suggest they are still difficult to adopt openly in terms of reputation management and *ijjat*. My informants, as well as Brunson’s, actively negotiated times and spaces for engaging in these relationships and behaviours away from the gaze of parents and community. Brunson argues women’s use of scooters has made the negotiation of space easier for young, urban, middle-class women, opening up access to spaces where they can engage in relationships with men away from the surveillance they would otherwise experience closer to home (2013).



Figure 16: A common scene in Kathmandu Durbar Square, where friends and couples socialise.

These changes remain small, as the dominant framework of *ijjat* has proven strong thus far, keeping women's sexuality largely within the strictly prescribed norm of 'good' and 'bad'. There does not seem to be much general distinction between women who actively instigate consensual sexual relationships and women who are assaulted and forced into sexual activity and abuse. A desirable womanhood encompasses only the 'right kind' of sexual activity - commonly held to be sexual activity that observes the social norms, does not occur before marriage and has the intent of conceiving children. Anything outside these parameters has the opposite effect; it constructs the wrong kind of womanhood, creating a *kharāb māhila* (immoral woman).

I came to understand women's sexuality as a site of tension between traditional notions and practices of womanhood (what it means to be thought of as *ijjatdār*) and modern ones (such as dating or choosing one's own husband). Sexuality is a site where the promises of modernity are played out - bodily autonomy, access to contraception or dating before marriage. It is a space where people articulate their anxiety about modernity and tradition as they choose to enact different subjectivities in different

contexts. Knauft asks, “What new social formations arise?” I argue that *practices of negotiation* are the *new social formations* that have arisen in this social landscape, in response to the complex pull of traditional and modern influences.

Sexuality is not the only social space in which the promises of modernity are visible, nor is it the only space for constructing new social formations. The next chapter looks at women’s discontents, particularly within the space of gendered violence, before moving on to how women are taking up the mantle of the ‘feminist’ character.

CHAPTER FIVE

“TENSION COMES”: *IJJAT* AND ITS DISCONTENTS

You know they say one in three women suffer violence. But in Nepal I wonder if you ask *any* woman if they would even say no, I don't suffer?

Manager at UNIFEM Nepal (later UNWOMEN), Formal Interview

Introduction

Women experience violence every day, with an estimated one in three women globally experiencing violence in their life time (Bustreo 2015). They are subject to various forms of discrimination and abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional, and structural. In tackling the issue of Violence Against Women (VAW), statistics and key performance indicators drive the development sector in Nepal. Statistics made me ponder the scale but not the experiences of the problem. Statistics are not as sobering as are the stories of everyday violence. I was chatting with Amy, when a woman knocked forcefully on the double gates of the compound. I guessed her age to be about forty as she fell through the gates wailing for assistance. Amy and her staff rushed to her side as the woman told them she believed her “blood was poisoned”. One of the volunteers had medical experience and quickly assessed the woman’s health as she wept and held Amy’s hand. The diagnosis was dehydration, which the woman challenged immediately, saying her blood must be poisoned because of her *‘thūlō thūlō duḥkha’*, her ‘big, big suffering’. The story came from her in staccato bursts as she tried to convince us, or maybe herself, that ‘bad blood’ was her *karma* for her miserable situation. Not understanding the language fully at the time, I pieced bits together from her halting testimony and Amy’s later translation. The woman, poor and low-caste, was a wife and mother of two teenage daughters. She and her husband had recently married their elder child to a local Maoist and it came to light he was abusive to her. The week before, the daughter had been in the jungle collecting grass for the animals on their subsistence plot. The husband had quietly stalked her amongst the trees and when he was sure they were alone, he attacked her with a machete. After beating and slicing her,

certain she would die, he left her there, bleeding, amongst the cut grass. Miraculously, she did not die, and instead crawled home to her *māitī*, into the arms of her distraught parents. Refusing to go back, she recovered in her parents' home, until word reached her husband that she had survived. Angry, he went to retrieve her, claiming they had "stolen" his wife. She refused to leave her parents' home and her parents also refused his demands to return her. The husband became enraged and demanded they give him either their younger daughter or four *lākha* compensation, an equivalent of \$US4000. Failure to do either, he said, would result in their deaths. Begging him, they stated they were unable to afford his request. Her story ended with her admitting they gave him their younger daughter.

I do not have a complete understanding of this woman's story. We did not know if the husband was ever convicted or the fate of either of the daughters. However, hearing stories like this became commonplace in Bhaktanagar. I often felt I had arrived halfway through a narrative that alluded to, but did not make clear, the intersections between honour, shame, suffering and violence. The stories, told by my informants, illustrated that violence is an undeniable part of daily life for many Nepali women. Thus, VAW is a pertinent topic of enquiry for this thesis, not only for its prominence in women's lives but also because it is fundamentally linked to *ijjat*⁹⁶.

This chapter argues that violence is a prominent feature in Nepali women's lives. Violence can be understood in at least two ways. Firstly, according to development frameworks, gendered violence is positioned within physical, psychological, structural, sexual, economic definitions of abuse and discrimination (Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights 1998; The Asia Foundation 2010; Government of Nepal 2012). However, Nepali women I spoke to more readily identified a pervasive sense of suffering, or *duḥkha*, in their lives. *Duḥkha* is a central cosmological concept for Nepalis, and especially women (Leve 2007: 153), because of its centrality to both Hinduism and Buddhism (see Gächter 1998). As suffering is to a large extent

⁹⁶ Nepal has recently emerged from a ten-year civil war. Analysing the gender violence specifically related to the Civil War is beyond the scope of this thesis; however, I acknowledge that the threat and/or reality of physical violence and death became a daily norm for men and women alike. I do not suggest the war had any causative links to VAW in Nepal, or that VAW in Nepal increased because of it, but it would be remiss not to acknowledge the Civil War when considering themes of 'everyday violence' (Galtung 1969; Farmer 2004; Wells & Montgomery 2014) for Nepalis more generally.

normalised amongst Nepalis, it is logical that suffering constructs particular forms of gendered subjectivity (Leve 2007). Violence and *duḥkha* formulate a significant basis for women's discontents and they tackle these in different ways. *Ijjat* is also fundamentally linked for various reasons. Traditionally, *ijjat* can be linked to violence because it is often rationalised as integral to the management of *ijjat* and reputation. It is also largely why women keep their discontents to themselves, opting for silence in order to maintain the *ijjat* of the family. In this chapter, I first address a brief anthropology of violence, structural violence and how gender violence is theoretically framed. I look at the ways in which violence is understood in the Nepali context and how Nepali *ijjat* is related to violence as a means of managing *ijjat*. I then discuss the extent to which violence is normalised through local expectations and language, which causes women to discuss violence in terms of 'difficulty', 'tension' and 'suffering'. Suffering, in particular, is contextualised in terms of the cosmological understandings of *duḥkha*. To exemplify the extent to which some women suffer violence, I discuss the prevalence of suicide and one case study, in which an informant's colleague was murdered by her own husband. I argue that even in the face of such suffering or danger, women experience difficulty in speaking out against VAW because the preservation of *ijjat* is of paramount concern. In this sense, I see silence as one of the traditional ways women not only manage their *ijjat*, but come to manage their discontents as well. For some, when remaining silent becomes unbearable, suicide is seen as a viable option out of that suffering. I see the issues of suffering and silence to be related to the ways that women might traditionally have managed their discontents and certainly many still do. This forms a necessary background for the final chapter, where I discuss emerging ways women are responding to *ijjat* and their discontents by engaging with other, feminist subjectivities of 'boldness' and 'raising voice'.

Anthropology and violence

Violence means different things in different parts of the world, but violence also means different things when examined from different vantage points within a particular cultural context.

(Plesset 2006: 3)

Anthropological studies of violence grapple with at least two aspects in particular: problems in defining the varied manifestations of violence, and the ubiquity of violent phenomena (Rapport & Overing 2000b: 380). It is outside the scope of this thesis to evaluate in depth the vast anthropology on violence and its relationship to socio-cultural order. What can be derived from surveying the literature is that there are many useful and varied contributions as to why and how violence is a salient feature across cultures (see Riches 1986; Aijmer & Abbink 2000; Das, Veena et al. 2000; Warren 2001; Stewart & Strathern 2002; Hastrup 2003; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004b; Das, Veena 2007). Key here is that violence must be grasped through the cultural world, as a system of meanings (Krohn-Hansen 1994: 368) that can only be understood and approached as a significant, ‘experienced reality’ (Aijmer 2000: 8). As Rapport and Overing state:

Violence cannot be regarded as a thing-in-itself, as an ideal-typical act, an inherently meaningful sociological condition or category of behaviour, which is directly investigable; it cannot be defined as abnormal or pathological, or as any one thing at all...Rather violence must be seen in the context of socio-cultural interaction, and defined in terms of all the complexities of particular situations.

(Rapport & Overing 2000b: 382)

As such, violence is a difficult concept to articulate as language can fail to express its nature (see Das, Veena 1996, 2000) and anthropology of violence is “trapped in its very unintelligibility” (Hastrup 2003: 309). Conceptually, it belongs to “a family of curious and often embarrassing concepts which one perfectly understands until one wants to define them” (Bauman, Z 1997: 165). Accordingly, violence is that which can only be

grasped contextually by looking further than the physicality of violence to the assaults on self-esteem and personhood (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004a: 1). Violence also functions at various levels of the 'social ecology'; at individual, household, community and societal levels (see Heise 1998). Furthermore, anthropologists posit that social and cultural contexts give violence meaning and power (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004a: 1), which can render it justified, heroic, reasonable and acceptable (Merry 2009: 4). For example, in some contexts, beating a child might be viewed as a demonstration of violence, and thus be seen as unacceptable by the wider community, perhaps even legally punishable. The same act in another context may be perceived as merely discipline and therefore culturally acceptable, understood or even encouraged.

Many examinations of violence focus attention on overt forms, such as physical assault, warfare, genocide and revolutions (Anglin 1998: 145). However, there is also violence to be found in structures, as well as the violence that is legitimised by culture (Galtung 1996: viii). Anthropologists have long acknowledged the presence of structural violence across societies (see Anglin 1998; Aijmer & Abbink 2000; Bourdieu & Wacquant 2004; Farmer 2004; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004b; Bourgois 2009; Merry 2009; Wells & Montgomery 2014). Structural violence, as a term, originated with the work of Galtung⁹⁷ (1969) in the 1960s. It can be defined as the harm experienced by people or groups that is caused by normalised inequalities embedded in social structures. It is normalised due to the ubiquity and stability of social structures and the regularity with which people or groups experience such harm (see Galtung 1969; Farmer *et al.* 2006: 1686). As a result of structural violence, people are rendered "socially and culturally marginalised in ways that deny them the opportunity for emotional and physical well-being, or expose them to assault or rape, or subject them to hazards that can cause sickness and death" (Anglin 1998: 145). For instance, as Galtung says, "when one husband beats his wife there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance there is structural violence" (Galtung 1969: 171). Wells and Montgomery (2014) also term structural violence 'everyday violence', as do several others (see Scott 1987; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Banerjee *et al.* 2004; Pettigrew, Judith & Adhikari 2009). Structural violence has an 'everyday' quality to it because the contextual, normalised experiences are largely viewed as routine,

⁹⁷ Galtung (1969) also conceptualised 'structural violence' as being synonymous with 'social injustice'.

inescapable and mundane (Wells & Montgomery 2014: 1). Merry (2009: 5) argues similarly that structural violence has this everyday quality because it is “usually concealed within the hegemony of ordinariness, hidden in the mundane details of everyday life”. This suggests that the limitations and burdens that inequality puts on the lives of certain people *are* a form of violence. Therefore, structural violence is imbricated with everyday life (Wells & Montgomery 2014: 5). Farmer points out, however, that it is important not to move away from impacts on the body when considering structural violence. This avoids “undue romanticism” and sharply focuses the outcomes of structural violence as having their “‘final common pathway’ in the material”, embodied as experience in the lives of the people studied (Farmer 2004: 308).

Gender violence

Gender violence, along with associated terms⁹⁸, has become a prominent focus of the global women’s rights movement since the 1970s (Merry 2009: 1; Dauer 2014: 2). Like definitions of violence more generally, local manifestations of gender violence are also highly variable, dependant on how gender is defined, socio-cultural frameworks and inequalities and the levels of violence in the wider society (Merry 2009: 1). Violence is defined as gender violence when the violent act depends on the gendered relationships in which it is embedded (2009: 3). While gender violence occurs the world over, it manifests differently in different social contexts. It is situated in contextual meanings of gender, specific relationships and structures of power (2009: 3). In terms of structural violence, Anglin says that, when examining expressions of violent state processes, gender violence can be located by focussing on the ways in which violence is produced, experienced and challenged within gender categories (1998: 147). Gender violence is dependent on the gender identities of the individuals or groups involved, in that, “the

⁹⁸ Merry is critical of a host of the popular terms used to describe gender violence. She argues that “naming the problem” develops a “framework that explains it and offers solutions” (Merry 2009: 27). Two such terms are Violence Against Women (VAW) and Gender Based Violence (GBV). However, Merry argues these terms are problematic. While VAW importantly acknowledges the disproportionate victimisation of women, it also simultaneously ignores other gendered victims and relationships. GBV, which has historical and political resonance, broadens the definition to emphasise the importance of gendered relationships, but fails to emphasise the fact that women are more likely to be victims (2009: 27). I acknowledge Merry’s term of ‘Gender Violence’ in order to take these complexities into consideration, however, the common terms in the Nepali and International Development discourse are VAW and GBV, and I will also utilise these in accordance with my informants’ usage and the literature.

meaning of the violence depends on the gendered relationship in which it is embedded. These relationships are used to explain and even justify the violence” (Merry 2009: 3). The violence individuals may experience in families and intimate relationships is inseparable from structural violence and societal conflict for the conditions which create gender violence are the very conditions of structural violence, such as famine, poverty, warfare, colonialism and economic disruptions (Merry 2009: 2). Bourdieu also examines structures of violence, building on the relationship between gender and violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 2004). He terms the domination of power over victims as ‘symbolic violence’, which he defines as “the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 167). Tied to structural violence, Bourdieu’s symbolic violence occurs when women are treated as inferior and denied resources because men’s dominance is legitimated as part of normal social order (Durey 2008: 74). Male authority over women is further legitimised and strengthened with the assistance of language, symbols and ideas that are utilised in daily habits (see Bourdieu 2004).

Gender violence is also a form of gender performance (see Chapter Three), as “from a performative perspective, doing violence is a way of doing gender” (Merry 2009: 11). Merry calls this ‘accomplishing’ gender, and both men and women in certain contexts ‘perform’ certain acts to further consolidate their gender. For example, women in some situations may minimise violence or endure assault without complaint, while men may perform their masculinity through acts of violence against women to portray they are “a person of power and authority” (2009: 10-11). They do this, not only for members of the opposite sex and gender, but also for those members of the same, who assess their femininity or masculinity through the given performance (2009: 12). Furthermore, as *ijjat* is also fundamentally gendered and related to gendered performance, I came to understand that if violence can be seen as a performance of gender, as Merry argues (2009: 11), so too can it be seen as a performance of *ijjat*, especially with regard to local definitions of masculinity, as discussed later in this chapter.

One common argument for the cause of women’s subordination and gender violence across the globe is that it is a product of patriarchy, which is superficially understood as a problem in societies when men are placed in superior positions to women (see Millet 1970; Lerner 1986; Uberoi 1995; Sechiyama 2013). Uberoi raises the point, however,

that there has been little attention paid to what patriarchy actually is and that rather its usages are so different or contradictory across various disciplines, feminisms and authors, that she questions its “utility as an analytical construct” (1995: 195-196). Rubin highlights it is much more useful to think of patriarchy in terms of a ‘sex/gender system’, which she defines as “a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (1975: 159). She argues that ‘patriarchy’ has been used to differentiate the forces that maintain sexism from other social forces, like capitalism. The problem lies in the obstruction of other distinctions. All societies have a framework for a ‘political economy’ that may be egalitarian or may be stratified. In the latter case, the oppressed class may be peasants or slaves or they may be wage labourers, in which case the framework would be classed as ‘capitalist’. The power in this term however, lies in the fact that there be alternatives. This is similar in societies that operate in ways to deal with sex and gender. Similarly, a given society may be sexually egalitarian or it may be ‘gender stratified’. Rubin maintains it is important to distinguish between “the human capacity and necessity to create a sexual world, and the empirically oppressive ways in which sexual worlds have been organised” (1975: 167-168, however patriarchy absorbs both meanings under the one term. A sex/gender system, however, “refers to the domain and indicates that oppression is not inevitable in that domain, but is the product of the specific social relations which organise it” (1975: 167-168).

Merry notes, while patriarchy is used to enable and justify gender violence, many other factors account for it as well⁹⁹. It is deeply rooted in local cultural understandings of gender and power, no matter where it occurs (2009: 16). In practice, what actions are considered violence depends on how those actions are made meaningful. For instance, in one context an action may be considered discipline not violence and what constitutes that can and does also change over time (2009: 22). The anthropological perspective emphasises that culture and context are the key for analysis of gender violence. While there are many manifestations of gender violence, all are embedded in larger structures of physical and symbolic violence and power and are shaped by local, cultural meanings of gender, and also of race, nationality, class, caste, religion and family (Bennett, Linda

⁹⁹ Merry says that to view patriarchy as the primary cause of gender violence is too simplistic, as it presumes a hetero-normative view. She further notes that this explanation relies on a binary whereby men are ‘powerful’ and women are ‘powerless’ and says this does little to describe the complexities of violence within gendered relationships (2009: 17-18).

& Manderson 2003: 1). For that reason, in order to understand gender violence, “it is necessary to understand the world” (Merry 2009: 19).

‘Woman Violence’ in Nepal

In South Asia there exist particular cultural and religious practices that accentuate the problem of gender violence in the region. It is important that the subordinate status of women in Nepal is “seen as a common thread that runs through the lives of all women, and that it is not the experience of some women due to their unfortunate individual circumstances” (Pradhananga & Shrestha Undated: 10). The general low status of women in the region and entrenched social structures have led to what is seen as a “lifecycle of VAW” (Government of Nepal, 2012: vi). Sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, female child mortality, early marriage, intimate partner violence, sexual violence and widow violence are all features of the lifecycle of gender violence for South Asian women (Ellsberg & Heise 2005: 10; Solataroff & Pande 2014: xxvi-xxviii). The Nepali word for violence is *hiṃsā*. For indicating violence against women more specifically, Nepalis will say *mahilā hiṃsā*, meaning ‘woman violence’. When I told people in my field sites I was studying ‘*mahilā hiṃsā*’, I was met with a knowing nod, and many said, “Oh yes, that’s a problem here.” The Nepali NGO *Saathi* suggests the most useful definition of VAW in Nepal can be adopted from the UN Commission on the Status of Women Declaration (see Solataroff & Pande 2014), which states that VAW is “any act of gender based violence that results or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or *suffering* to women including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (see UN 1993) (emphasis added). *Saathi* also suggests that VAW is a violation of a woman’s personhood and includes traditional forms of violence that result from unequal power relations between men and women (Rana-Deuba et al. 1997: i). In recent years, Nepal has attempted to make legal and normative initiatives aimed at ending VAW, holding multiple conferences, ratifying international conventions and treaties, and discussing VAW and women’s rights at length in drawing up Nepal’s new Constitution. In 2009, the Government of Nepal passed the *Domestic Violence (crime and punishment) Act, 2066 (2009)*. This act defines domestic violence in Nepal as

constituting “any form of physical, mental, sexual and economic harm perpetrated by a person to a person with whom he/she has a family relationship and this word also includes any acts of reprimand or emotional harm” (Nepal Law Commission 2009: 1). While this has meant better legal protections for women and children against domestic violence, many are critical of gaps in the legislation and doubtful of effective implementation at the community level. For example, Pratima and Indira from *Swar* were vocal about community members not knowing about women’s rights or police not taking cases seriously and openly accepting bribes for manipulating the case in a perpetrator’s favour. In the law itself, there are barriers to effective implementation such as the ninety-day statute of limitations for a victim to press charges (Nepal Law Commission 2009: 9). Further, everyday events of polygamy, child marriage, trafficking and suicide illustrate that reinforcement and consistency are lacking in implementation of laws and that attitudinal change is slow (Sanjel 2013: 179). While violence is a common feature for all Nepalis regardless of age or gender, statistically, there is much evidence to suggest that violence is disproportionately more evident in women’s lives (Rana-Deuba *et al.* 1997: i).

The ways in which violence was categorised by Nepalis of different backgrounds varied. Dr Gita, as an educated, high-caste feminist, understood violence to be the physical and emotional abuse of women that flourished within a framework of structural violence. She argued, “the whole structure, if you really look at Nepal’s structure and in-built system, tradition, culture, values and everything; *everything* is discriminatory. So kind of, you, you can’t find any single woman here who is not suffering violence against her.” This was a common point amongst the activists and educated women I worked with. One day in the *Swar* office in Bhaktanagar, Pratima claimed that structural inequality is violence. Pratima argued:

It is *all* based on violence! It is how you *look* at women and what’s your perspective on women. It doesn’t matter if a man looks handsome, or whether he comes home late or goes around with different girls. People don’t talk about that. They never gossip about that. It’s rare that you hear gossip related to men regarding these issues. Based on how you look on women in this society and their role; it is all *structural*. Everywhere it is *all* due to violence, it is due to disparity... It doesn’t matter whether you’re educated, earn money or have a

good husband. Anything, it doesn't matter. It depends on how you *take* women. Do you take women as the members of family, or as outsiders in the family? Do her earnings make a difference in the household? Or do they think I'm earning just for me? The way the parents take the earnings of the son, do they take similar of the daughter-in-law, the weight? Do they give importance? It's not just the "normal", hitting. It has an impact on the psychology, and you don't get respect.

Subedi attributes VAW in Nepal to religious, political, legislative, cultural and economic practices. She is emphatic that most women "do not even realise they are being exploited" (Subedi 2010: 56) and that this should change. This is what Farmer (2004) terms 'erasing history' and he argues it serves a purpose.

Erasing history is perhaps the most common explanatory sleight of hand relied upon by the architects of structural violence. Erasure or distortion of history is part of the process of de-socialisation necessary for the emergence of hegemonic accounts of what happened and why.

(2004: 308)

Other informants, most of whom were lower-caste and/or lower-class, with little formal education, chiefly understood violence in terms of domestic and physical abuse, although this was changing, as more women were becoming recipients of development and education programmes. Over 80% of the violence Nepali women face is within the domestic sphere and these include physical, sexual and mental abuse, disputes over dowry, polygamy, property disputes, and accusations of witchcraft (Dhakal 2008: 547; Asia Foundation 2010). Many organisations and individuals attribute cultural practices and beliefs such as *chhāupadi* (see Chapter Four) as violence against women and girls (Asia Foundation 2010). Trafficking is widely problematic (see Kaufman & Crawford 2011; Maiti Nepal, 2014) and further studies across Nepal suggest that rape, including marital rape, is common. One study across four districts found nearly 58% of women had experienced sexual coercion and violence at the hands of their husbands (Puri et al. 2012: 2). Despite the Nepali Government making legal inroads in 2009 concerning marital rape, many NGOs and activists are claiming the laws brought in to tackle gender

violence and rape are poorly implemented and many groups and individuals have poor understanding or a lack of awareness of the existence of such laws (2012: 2). What was interesting was the ways in which these types of violence were spoken about in my field sites. The ways in which violence was discussed, with regard to everyday language and *ijjat*, were key to understanding the ways in which different people variously understood and experienced violence.

Languages of suffering in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu

Everyone knows that suffering exists. The question is how to define it.

(Farmer 2009: 11)

As previously mentioned, anthropologists have grappled with the difficulties of defining violence (see Daniel 1994; Das, Veena 1996, 2000; Hastrup 2003). My informants expressed the violence they saw and experienced in a number of ways. Generally speaking they defined violence as being both structural and physical. However, I discovered a disjuncture in what did and did not constitute violence in various contexts in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu. I found that the language used to discuss constellations of violence often took two decidedly different tones. In one sense, language and terms used to discuss violence were often sourced from more formal language used in development discourse by development institutions such as the UN, INGOs and local NGOs. I found that development phrases and acronyms, such as VAW, were used often, as were some English words such as “development” instead of the Nepali *bikāś*. Informants who worked in the development and community sectors had a level of fluency with this language and could also more readily describe nuances of structural violence and discrimination against women as indeed constituting violence. Villagers from Bhaktanagar, who were subject to various community interventions by local NGOs, also used these development terms with relative fluency, especially in contexts specific to development practice such as workshops, trainings and events. When discussions occurred that were not couched in terms of development practice or theory, the tone and usage of language took a different turn. Outside the demarcated space of a

formalised development setting, people's discussions of violence became more fluid and less defined. What would be described clearly as violence in a development setting would not necessarily be described so strictly in a domestic setting. Informants would often cease to use the formal terminology and use words that described their experiences and emotional states more than defining what constituted violence itself. Judgements were also commonly offered as particular instances of violence were evaluated and rationalised. In these settings, the idea that violence can have a sense of 'everyday-ness' was key.

There are myriad common phrases that allude to the violence Nepali women experience, structural or otherwise. These also describe women's feelings of their experiences with violence and could serve to defuse and normalise violence (see Cohn 2004; Green 2004). Of the ones I heard during my fieldwork in Nepal, many were centred on 'difficulty', 'tension' and 'suffering'. A common phrase I heard many times was *Kē garnu? Gāhrō cha*, meaning 'What can I do? It's difficult'. I raised this with Jyoti, who was also very familiar with its usage from her visits to the field. "Yes! They will say *malaī ēkadam gāhrō cha!* 'To me it's very difficult!'" Jyoti indicated there is subtlety to the word 'difficult' and it would inform her of the possibility a woman might be experiencing some form of violence. "You see there are so many things in that '*gāhrō*' word. It might mean she can't pay money for the bus. Or she doesn't want to explain to me her husband doesn't allow her to come to the meeting." This would often be widely understood not only to mean that a woman could be facing violence, but also wishing to save face and preserve her *ijjat*. Another common word I heard was 'tension'. The Nepali word is *tanāu* or *tanāb*, but Nepalis favoured using the English word, often saying "*tension āūcha*", literally meaning 'tension comes'. This was coupled with a variety of expressions, usually a furrowed brow or sad look. Psychosomatic symptoms seemed to be common results of tension, as the woman in the opening of the chapter displayed, believing her blood to be poisoned (see Robkin 2012: 45). Stomach-aches and headaches were common amongst all the women who expressed *tension āūcha* (see Kohrt, Tol & Harper 2007).

The most common colloquial phrase I heard in my fieldwork was the description of violence, both physical and structural, as ‘suffering’ or *duḥkha*¹⁰⁰. I first heard this when sitting on the communal roof of my flat in Bhaktanagar, with my landlord and his visiting female relative. Knowing my studies, he introduced us saying, “She experiences violence. She left her husband and is staying with us for now.” We chatted, my landlord acting as translator, and she said one phrase that stood out to me; that she experienced “*ṭhūlō ṭhūlō duḥkha*”, meaning ‘big, big suffering’. I came to hear it several times, as other women described not only their own ‘big, big suffering’ but that of other Nepali women more generally.

In both Hinduism and Buddhism *duḥkha* has physiological, emotional, mental and cosmological connotations (Bowker 1975). *Duḥkha* translates as suffering, which March tells us is:

[t]he physical hurt of illness, hunger, cold, or injury; it is the weight of knowing the fears, worries, wrongs, and obligations of life; and it is the sorrow, sadness, melancholy, or grief at being unable to forget hurt and hardship. Sukha is the opposite: it is the ease and comfort of health, food, warmth, clothing, and companionship; it is the feeling of uncomplicated pleasure; it is the purest as a happiness, unaware even of its own good fortune.

(2002: 36)

March further found, as did I with my informants, that every Tamang women she spoke with “located her life overall, and the events in her own narrative, in relation to dukka and sukha” (2002: 36). In all its forms, *duḥkha* is considered to be the unfolding of *karma* (fate) and is the result of past negative actions. It is not punishment; it is a natural consequence of the moral laws of the universe. Suffering is a key feature of every person’s life path, with the goal being to free oneself from it through positive dharmic (religious/moral) action (Whitman 2007: 609). Suffering is identified as a key feature of women’s lives, with particular regard to the expected lifecycle, where by women experience dislocation from their *māitī* and experience childbirth (Leve 2007: 153). Leve asserts that while some forms of suffering are condemned, the ‘painful struggle’ of the everyday is considered a normative part of women’s lives and she argues that it is

¹⁰⁰ Other words, *duḥkhāi* (‘pain’) and *du:khī* (‘sad’) are also derivatives of the root word *duḥkha*.

“through certain types of suffering that the adult feminine subjectivity is produced” (2007: 153). March further makes the point that in contrast to men, women are more “emphatically embodied, and embodied, embodies suffering” (1998: 232).

In discussing *duḥkha* with me, Jyoti felt that it encompassed structural violence and a generalisation of how women felt about their lives, rather than acting as any kind of euphemism for physical violence *per se*. “*Duḥkha* is also linked with poverty, lack of food and resources, that is also *duḥkha*.” Ramila, a widow from Bhaktanagar, argued that external forces caused suffering, saying it “comes from the outside environment. Because we hear a lot of things, that thing affects us and we create a kind of fear. There are a lot of wrong things [violence] happening around.” When I asked if men experience *duḥkha*, she smiled and said, “Yes, men suffer. But they don’t have the way as women. And they don’t say it out. Rather they keep it or they apply in their behaviour like drink or marry another woman.” Indira from *Swar* further mentioned that when men do suffer ‘bad luck’ they are quick to “mostly blame to wife”, for it is her ‘bad luck’ that has negatively influenced his fate, rather than his action.

The concept of suffering has been discussed at length in anthropology. Hastrup says defining the concept of ‘suffering’ also bears a similarity to the difficulty in defining ‘violence’, because it recedes from “conceptual precision” and yet fills “the space of vision” (2003: 310). Suffering is difficult to define because it “defies objective measurement by belonging so intimately to the subjective domain” (2003: 310). In this sense, pain that is inflicted through any form of violence cannot be shared, subjectively speaking, because it is highly localised in the individual body (Daniel 1994: 238). This is phenomenologically the case and yet women in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu talked often about shared *duḥkha*. The knowing with which they listened to each other in group interviews showed that, while suffering and violence are phenomena experienced individually, they are commonly experienced amongst women. Ramila said:

Nepali woman have a lot of suffering. In this valley you can see little sufferings but outside this valley there are more sufferings around because there are more comforts in the valley, you can just go and complain to the police or you can just create a group to solve your problem. But outside, there is no such kind of facilities around and due to this kind of harassment women think of committing

suicide. In the situation of some single women [widows], they even have no bread to eat. Not only that even in high-caste family, this kind of sufferings happens. In experience I had a lot of sufferings from my in-laws and my birth house. So Nepali women are not free from every way.

That my informants specifically used the word suffering, and there was a sense of many women experiencing it, alludes to ‘social suffering’. “Social suffering results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems” (Kleinman, Das & Lock 1997: ix). The category of social suffering encompasses conditions that might ordinarily be divided into separate fields, but simultaneously involve legal, welfare, moral, religious and health issues. It highlights linkages of personal and societal problems and reveals the nature of suffering to be interpersonal. As such, “suffering is a social experience” (Kleinman, Das & Lock 1997: ix).

Another key feature of the ways women would talk about their suffering was acquiescence, further exemplifying that they suffered ‘everyday’ types of violence. One afternoon in Bhaktanagar I was visiting Amy while she was sick. A woman from the neighbourhood knocked on her bedroom door, to see how Amy was feeling and brought in a bottle of Coke from her store. The wife of a staff member’s relative, she was well known to Amy, though we did not know her full name; she was simply known as “Gopal Malla’s wife”. Petite and in her late forties, she had a kind face. She sat on the edge of Amy’s bed as we chatted. Amy and I had been discussing relationships and suddenly Amy asked Gopal Malla’s wife if she and Gopal ever fought. She simply replied “no”, and that there was little point to fighting with one’s spouse. We protested, saying that surely there were times she felt unhappy or they disagreed. She shrugged and said, “*Khānā¹⁰¹ miṭhō bhaē pani khānai parcha, namīṭhō bhaē pani khānai parcha*”, which translates as “When food is tasty you have to eat it, when food is not tasty you still have to eat it.” Her statement implied that marriage is not always enjoyable and amicable. Nevertheless, she expressed an acceptance of her marriage and more broadly, all Nepali marriage, by saying one must tolerate marriage despite the potential for suffering.

¹⁰¹ The dictionary translation for ‘food’ is *khānē kurā*; however, in everyday usage people used *khānā*, derived from the verb *khānu*, ‘to eat’.

Many Nepali women exhibited a similar acceptance of the fact that their lives generated a sense of tension, difficulty, suffering and/or violence. One explanation for this, as Jyoti had offered previously, is that “their hearts are socialised”. Green speaks about becoming socialised to terror (Green 2004), which relates to Nepali women living within structures of violence. While she worked in Latin America and speaks of more overt state violence, she makes useful points about processes of socialisation to violence more generally. With repetition and familiarity “people learn to accommodate themselves to terror and fear” (Green 2004: 186) and yet there is still a sense of hyper-awareness and vigilance that women maintain in order to not provoke any sort of physical violence. As one of Green’s informants told her, “violence is like fire: it can flare up and burn you” (2004: 186). While women in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, generally, did not fear death in the ways Green’s Mayan/Guatemalan informants did, they did have fear of losing *ijjat*, of being seen to be ‘bad’ women and of the violence that could ensue if they were perceived to be so. Green argues that fear is a reality in which people not only live but which also informs the choices they make (Green 1994: 227). Women’s practice in my field sites displayed this in multiple ways, such as care not to provoke ill-tempered husbands or mothers-in-law and awareness of their dress and manner, the extent to which they were surveilled and how to behave under the watchful eyes of others.

“How dare you take my *ijjat* to market?”: *Ijjat* and violence

One way *ijjat* is imbricated with gender violence in Nepal is that violence is a means by which *ijjat* can be managed. As Jyoti said to me, “Yes it [*ijjat*] is one reason [for violence] and that reason comes under the patriarchal norms and values where *ijjat* is deeply rooted.” Dr Maya was quick to correlate violence and *ijjat*, saying that the burden that *ijjat* creates is itself a form of violence. She felt that people might not see a clear connection, but argued:

Can you *imagine*? We have that burden in our *whole* life! We are *always* worried about if I do this that will hurt the *ijjat* of my family. Always think and

keep calculating, what I should and should not do. That burden is also a kind of violence, discrimination.

Bennett and Manderson posit that the salience of Asian notions of honour and shame is a significant theme of constellations of violence across most Asian societies (2003: 9). Honour-based violence (HBV) can occur in communities where honour and shame are seen as fundamental to the expected behaviour of people, especially women. It can take extreme forms such as ‘honour killings’ (see Pope 2012) or the victim can be subject to long-term mental and/or physical abuse and bullying as punishment for actions that cause a loss of family honour (Vaz 2008: 12). Pope says it pays to remember that the perpetrators of ‘honour killings’, but also of HBV more broadly, are most often the victim’s own family. In this context, violence is a tool wielded for the purpose of punishing women for “perceived infractions of the social code of conduct” (2012: 23). Violence is also seen as a tool for vindication of honour (Persistiany, J. G. 1965: 29), as a way to restore status when a transgression of honour has occurred (Cooney 2014: 409). Furthermore, HBV serves the purpose of warning other individuals not to contravene strict moral and social codes of honour (Pope 2012: 23).

Conflicts of honour are oftentimes seen to arise when female chastity is violated. More generally, however, honour extends to controlling women’s autonomy (see Chesler 2010), enforcing subservience to men and maintaining interpersonal propriety (Cooney 2014: 409). Therefore, when considering HBV, women’s social positions and their experiences of violence need to be understood within the contexts of their relationships to men and family. With regard to violence, “women are often compelled to protect family interests rather than defend their individual rights. Many women are socialised from birth not to distinguish between personal and family honour, and will consequently endure great personal suffering to avoid actions they believe will injure their families” (Bennett, Linda & Manderson 2003: 10). Violations of *ijjat* carry grave social consequences for a family or *kul* (clan), especially males. Loss of *ijjat* correlates to a loss of social standing. A dishonoured family may have difficulty in finding marriage partners, be excluded from community events or become a target of gossip (Cooney 2014: 409). Jyoti confirmed this, saying:

If you can't keep up *ijjat* of your family, parents, in-laws, or husband, or later of sons, then there is high vulnerability of getting into violence... If you are facing violence, then it will again bring the issue of *ijjat*. You are not *ijjatdār* in your community. Once you lose your – actually it is not *your ijjat*, it is not *my ijjat* – if I can't keep *ijjat* of my family or my *kul* then violence comes... If you are not disciplined you will lose *ijjat*... It is exactly that. Violence is consequence of not keeping up *ijjat* of your family or *kul*.

Any perceived loss in *ijjat* increases an individual's vulnerability to violence. It does this in at least two ways. Firstly, if a family experiences a loss in *ijjat* due to a woman's actions, one common outcome is her ostracism. This leaves her without safeguards. An example, Jyoti explained, is a man's family seeking information on a prospective wife for their son. The first action would be talking to community members about the girl's reputation. If they heard she has questionable *ijjat*, for example because she was seen coming home late at night, the marriage proposal will not be offered to the girl's parents. Nor would any other offers be likely forthcoming. A family may then cast out their daughter because she has lost family *ijjat* and is not seen as a reputable candidate for marriage. Jyoti says that, until a woman gets married, there is the central issue of keeping the *ijjat* of the family. "Once you get out of your family [ostracised]... they'll [the community] start asking 'which is your family?'; 'your parents have kicked you off from your home, why did they do so?' Then they might feel this woman is characterless, therefore we can do whatever we want with her." The ostracism some women experience if they do not behave *ijjatdār* makes them vulnerable, at a societal level, to violence such as sexual exploitation, discrimination and harassment.

Secondly, violence is used to punish transgressions of *ijjat*. Cooney argues that HBV is a crime, gender-based violence and a human rights violation; however, it is most usefully viewed as a form of social control and obeys similar principles to other forms of punishment, such as legal sanction (2014: 406). He argues that violence targeted at defending or enhancing honour takes two forms. One usually involves men's contests of physical bravery and dominance (see Persistian, J. G. 1965). The other primarily focuses on women for honour-based transgressions or disobedience, such as unauthorised sexual relationships. The objective of this latter kind is to uphold the honour of the family, especially the men (Cooney 2014: 407). What many may view as

a crime is, on the contrary, “an act of punishing those who violate the honour code” (Shah in Pope 2012: 29). HBV occurs not only as punishment but also to restore honour in the eyes of the community, as Wikan (2008) found. The killing of a disgraced daughter and sister meant the brothers felt they could again walk with their “heads held high”.

During *Tīj* in Bhaktanagar, I met a woman at the temple and we started talking. She mentioned she was careful to make the *acār*¹⁰² for her husband because the first day of the festival he had beaten her for forgetting to make it in her rush to the temple. It occurred to me then that many instances of gender violence I heard about could be seen as a reprimand for undesirable behaviour, and to keep a woman from falling into behaviour that might be seen as *kharāb* (bad). Jyoti confirmed this when I recounted this incident, saying:

If you ask the woman “why did he beat?” Either she’ll say I spoke to male member of my neighbourhood. Or she would say, “*Tarkārīmā dherai nūn*” – like today I put more “salt in the vegetables”... So those reasons “Why did you talk with that guy?” Ok – slap [*claps hand*]. “Why did you put lot of salt in *tarkārī*? If some guest were in our house what would they say? Even you don’t know how to cook good *tarkārī*!” So he would just slap. Yeah that violence comes as punishment if you can’t keep the *ijjat*.

When a woman is upset enough at violent treatment she may eventually go to friends, relatives or the police to discuss her situation or make a complaint. However, this is problematic, Jyoti said, as this act makes public a ‘personal’ problem. Thus, *ijjat* becomes a problem requiring control when an issue becomes public. To keep up appearances, a husband and wife may appear to have undertaken successful mediation at the police station or a community organisation like *Swar*. However, when returning home, Jyoti says, the husband will “definitely beat her” and say, “*tērō katrō āṃta mērō ijjat bajāramā lānē?*” which means ‘How dare you take my *ijjat* to market?’ Jyoti pointed out it “is bigger than the market actually”, as it entails a broader sense of public in which the husband has not been able to save face, or look as if he can control his wife. Indira confirmed this too when describing her struggle to establish *Swar* in 1999, saying:

¹⁰² *Acār* is a spicy Nepali pickle, which accompanies *dāl bhāt* (lentils and rice).

You know even one great woman community leader said, ‘why are you raising this issues?’ People think it’s no good to raise this voice, it’s a private matter, husbands can do this [violence]... The beating of family member, it belongs to family members, especially the husband... We [women] need to be tolerate [tolerant]... We need to be silent for the husband.

Speaking out renders his honour vulnerable to scrutiny from the community, an action that further reduces *ijjat* in the eyes of others. Thus, it often exacerbates violence, as a means of exercising further control. He would often not be concerned about his *ijjat* when he beats his wife, because it is seen as a legitimate mode of controlling her behaviour.

Jyoti said it is common for women to keep serious disputes to themselves, both for fear of what others might say and to mitigate the violence they might face. I heard many women speak in different ways of how they must not speak out from fear of retribution for bringing shame on the family. Two of the most common phrases, were *mukh siune* or ‘sewing the lips [shut]’ and *ukus mukus*, which was translated to me as ‘so full one could burst/cannot breathe’, but has also been translated to mean ‘suffocated inside the heart’ (Jack, Pokharel & Subba 2010: 161), which resonates with Jyoti’s comment about the heart being socialised. Jack has written extensively on the concepts of depression with regard to the ‘silencing of self’ and the ‘divided self’ (Jack 1991, 1999; Jack, Pokharel & Subba 2010). The importance women place on their relationships with husbands and in-laws means they often avoid conflict by supressing their feelings; in doing so women may experience a hidden self that is likely depressed, angry and hopeless (Jack & van Ommeren 2007: 247). In silencing the self, people keep ‘unacceptable’ thoughts to themselves, not mentioning them to intimate partners or family members. The ‘divided self’ encompasses an outer self that differs from an individual’s inner thoughts and experiences. A person might appear to comply with expected behaviours, while also feeling angry, depressed and/or rebellious (Jack, Pokharel & Subba 2010: 158-159). However, anger cannot be expressed for fear of retribution and so muting one’s voice is one way women’s subordination is reinforced (Jack & van Ommeren 2007: 247).

Sunita, a twenty-year-old Bāhun, was a shy but capable teacher in Amy's school. During one of our interviews she told me she was worried about a friend. She related that her friend had fallen in love with a man, had lied to her parents and told them she was working in a village outside of Bhaktanagar, while actually visiting her boyfriend. They had a sexual relationship, often meeting discreetly in hotels in order not to be discovered. Her friend really wanted to marry him even though he just "took her clothes off her and did 'those' things", indicating sexual intimacy. They were of different caste backgrounds and he was not willing to marry her, and this caused her sadness. To compound her tension, the friend's father wanted to marry her to another local man. While the friend did not desire this, she did not outwardly protest, only saying she wished to delay in favour of finishing her Master's degree. Her friend's depression was so bad she had even tried to commit suicide and went to the market to get some pesticides. While the poison made her ill, it did not end her life as she had hoped. Sunita asked me what her friend should do. I recommended services such as those provided by *Swar*. She answered that her friend would not make use of *Swar*'s service because she was worried people would see her and her parents would find out. I watched her body language communicating her despair. She rubbed her temples, looked at me and said quietly, "You know, this story. It is not my friend's story. It is my story." Sunita's story reveals the interconnectedness of discontents and violence with self-silencing, the divided self and *ijjat*. When I asked if she felt her parents would understand, she said, "No, to them I just act normal, prioritise my studies, go about my works. They would be mad if I wanted to marry another caste so I say nothing." To her parents she pretended life was normal when in reality she was depressed and desperate. Her suicide attempt is indicative of her inner turmoil. Jack, Pokharel and Subba argue "enacting a pretence of outer compliance exacts an inner cost" that divides the experience of the self (2010: 162). Sunita felt free enough to voice her discontent to me, perhaps because she presumed that, as a foreigner, I sat outside the prescriptive frameworks of *ijjat*, and would therefore not judge her. However, she muted herself in the home in order to comply with the expectations of *ijjat*. In this sense, she was actively producing and reproducing her gender through intentional silence to preserve the prescribed behaviours of the 'good woman' (2010: 162). The level of despair communicated by my informants and the literature appears common for Nepali women and this sense of 'social suffering' due to the levels and ubiquity of violence women experience has been related to high rates of female suicide across Nepal.

“Hold up that burden until you can’t”: Nepali women and suicide

I used to think why woman commit suicide? But nowadays I realise because it is all due to the tension around her.

Ramila, Formal Interview

High levels of suicide occur in low and middle-income countries¹⁰³ (Patel *et al.* 2007: 997) and up to 60% of the world’s suicides occur in Asia (Beautrais 2006: 55). The Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Survey (MMM)¹⁰⁴ discovered that suicide had surpassed the percentage of recorded maternal deaths; and female suicides had increased from 10% of deaths to 16% in a ten-year period across Nepal¹⁰⁵ (Suvedi *et al.* 2009: 8). This makes suicide the leading cause of death amongst Nepali women of childbearing age¹⁰⁶ (Suvedi *et al.* 2009: 7). In the Western regions of Nepal one study found that two thirds of reported suicides were female (Subba *et al.* 2009: 704). Pesticide poisoning and hanging are the two most common methods of suicide across Nepal (see Subba *et al.* 2009; Prahdan *et al.* 2011) and I heard of both as commonly used methods for suicides and self-harm in and around Bhaktanagar. Suicide is illegal in Nepal and, in cases where individuals die, family members are liable to be fined. In cases where individuals survive, they may themselves be imprisoned, fined or both (Benson & Shakya 2008: 178). As a result, suicides are miscategorised by hospitals (Suvedi *et al.* 2009) and under-reported to the police. Therefore, the statistics are thought to be much higher than estimated (Prahdan *et al.* 2011: 3).

Based on the influential MMM Study (2009) and further analysis of its data by Prahdan *et al.* (2011), reasons for suicide in Nepal are considered to be both varied and interrelated. Demographic and socio-economic characteristics are thought to play a role

¹⁰³ Nepal is classified by the United Nations as a low-income country (Asia Foundation 2010: 1).

¹⁰⁴ The MMM Survey was conducted across eight study districts to achieve a balance of *Tarāī*, hill and mountain populations. (Suvedi *et al.* 2009). Bhaktanagar is closely positioned to one of these districts, and so, the data collected for the MMM Survey is closely reflective of the situation in Bhaktanagar.

¹⁰⁵ Men were found to be more generally at risk of suicide than women overall; however, risk varies between ages groups. Suicide rates are higher for women between the ages of 10-24, and higher for men after the age of 35 (Suvedi *et al.* 2009).

¹⁰⁶ In this instance childbearing age is stated at being between 15-49 years of age; the MMM survey collected data on women aged 10-50 years of age (Prahdan *et al.* 2011: 4).

in influencing suicide, with one in five young unmarried women aged less than eighteen being at high risk (Suvedi *et al.* 2009: 8). While low-caste and minority groups, such as Dalits and Muslims could be considered particularly vulnerable due to factors such as poverty and social exclusion, they were found to have lesser rates than Bāhun-Chētrī and Nēwār groups, which stood at 17.4% and 15.8% respectively (Prahdan *et al.* 2011: 42). *Janajāti* women were found to have the highest rates, with approximately 20% of female deaths attributable to suicide (2011: 42). Medical conditions, such as chronic and mental illness, and stressful life events, such as bereavement (2011: 83-84) or the shame associated with the failure of an exam, were also contributing factors (Prahdan *et al.* 2011: 83-84; Robkin 2012: 89). Of most prominent significance were the influences of social and situational conditions, such as injustice, poverty, social exclusion, Gender Violence, women's status and marital and family relationships (Suvedi *et al.* 2009; Prahdan *et al.* 2011; Robkin 2012). In the 256 cases of suicide scrutinised in the MMM study, difficulties amongst families were observed in 65% of cases (Prahdan *et al.* 2011: 85). Gender violence, in its myriad forms, was mentioned in over 35% of cases, but the authors believe this figure could have been under-reported as the evidence gathered came from family members themselves (2011: 86). Shame felt as a result of failing to adhere to the 'good woman' narrative was also a common reason cited for suicide. It has been noted that women who have been raped or caught having extra-marital affairs suicide because they would rather die than "live with the shame of their situation" (Ahearn 2001: 74). This data suggests that, to understand suicide in the contexts of my field sites, it is important to see the act as "rooted in a particular constellation that connects cultural representations and political economy with collective experience and the individual's subjectivity" (Biehl, Good & Kleinman 2007a: 3).

Underlying Factors	No.	%
<u>Family / Marital / Relationship</u>	166	64.8
- Husband	90	35.2
- Male (non-relative)	27	10.5
- Parents	23	9.0
- In-laws	20	7.8
- Son / Daughter	17	6.6
- Brother / Sister	7	2.7
- Second wife	3	1.2
- Family member (un-specified)	6	2.3
- Other	4	1.6
<u>Intimate Relationships</u>	97	37.9
- Unhappy marriage	61	23.8
- Socially unacceptable relationship	26	10.2
- Extra-marital affair - husband	14	5.5
- Extra-marital affair – wife	14	5.5
- Polygamous relationship	13	5.1
- Not able to be with man she loved	12	4.7
- Opposed to arranged / forced marriage	5	2.0
- Pressure to produce a child / son	4	1.6
- Concern about being unmarried	2	0.8
<u>Gender-Based Violence</u>	90	35.2
- Psychological abuse	74	28.9
- Frequent quarrelling	41	16.0
- One-off argument	38	14.8
- Physical abuse	28	10.9
- Deprived resources	14	5.5
- Sexual abuse	8	3.1
- Treated as a commodity	7	2.7
<u>Mental Health</u>	50	19.5
- Depression	12	4.7
- Un-specified	38	14.8
<u>Financial</u>	48	18.8
<u>Other Health Problem</u>	46	18.0
- Chronic illness	33	12.9
- Acute illness	2	0.8
- Infertile	1	0.4
- Un-specified	11	4.3
<u>Stressful Life Event</u>	34	13.3
- Bereavement	10	3.9
- Academic study	9	3.5
- Quarrel with employer	1	0.4
- Other	17	6.6
<u>Alcohol / Substance abuse</u>	32	12.5
- Self	20	7.8
- Other	17	6.6
<u>Husband working overseas</u>	27	10.5
<u>Pregnancy-related</u>	5	2.0

Figure 17: Underlying factors related to suicide in Nepali women, aged 10-50 (Prahdan et al. 2011: 88-89)

Suicide has been looked at cross-culturally by anthropologists and the literature illustrates some of the power dynamics present in motivations for people taking their own lives (see Durkheim 1952; Jeffreys 1952; Bohannan 1960; Counts 1980, 1984; Brown, MF 1986; Livingston 2009; Staples 2012). Of use here is the notion of suicide as a form of agency. While some have labelled suicide an act of revenge or deviance (Edgerton 1976), Counts argues that, for the Lusi people of New Britain, suicide is perhaps best seen as an effective political action (1984: 93) available to powerless people, especially women, to limit the exertion of power by others (1984: 71-72). She argues that (revenge) suicide, “is part of a cross-cultural behavioural pattern appropriate to the powerless, particularly women, especially in situations where options for direct response to aggression, abuse or shame are limited” (1984: 92). Ullrich found in South India that Havik Brahman women resort to suicide as a final recourse because they have “no formal power” (1977: 101). Counts acknowledges the role of abuse and shame in suicide. She argues that, in her field, while suicide is not the first or usual response to difficult situations, there are certain social relationships and circumstances that generate so much shame that a woman’s alternatives are often limited or inadequate (1984: 85). Staples also argues that, in wider South Asian contexts, suicide needs to be interpreted in relation to religious cosmologies, notions of honour and shame, and in relation to the everyday practices and experiences within the contexts in which suicides occur (2012: 15). For example, in India and Sri Lanka, he notes that, due to women lacking control over their lives, suicide is seen as a viable option “in the face of seemingly intractable problems” (Staples 2012: 18). In Sri Lanka, shame and distress seem to be significant motivators for female suicide. From the perspective of agency, it is also seen as having either redemptive qualities or saving victims from their own socially imposed shame (Marecek & Senadheera 2012). Further, suicide is seen potentially to bring shame on those individuals who could be held responsible for the victim’s circumstances, thus possibly serving as a means of revenge. Widger (2012) points out, however, that these factors are complex and only make sense when considering the importance of kinship configurations and obligations .

In my field sites, informants connected suicide to the burden associated with maintaining *ijjat*. Jyoti argued, “Yes it’s [*ijjat*] definitely related [to suicide]... If you lose all that courage, strength to bear that burden, you don’t have anything to do. You will hold up that burden until you can’t. If you don’t have other avenues then you have

no option.” Shame has a strong correlation to suicide as Jyoti felt *ijjat* was always an implicit issue in any woman’s suicide, whether it was a motivation or not, because people would always gossip after a suicide. “You know if a girl suicides others will say, ‘was she pregnant? Did she sleep with someone [outside of or before marriage]’? Sexuality issues and *ijjat* again they come.” When I queried if tension and violence were considered possible reasons, she thought this would contribute too, saying “If she commits suicide after having children, they [community] might say there was so much violence she couldn’t resist.” In Bhaktanagar, Amy, who discovered one of her thirteen-year-old school children had hanged herself, felt the issues were under-reported and complex, but tied to women’s position in Nepali society and the expectations they feel from family and society to be *ijjatdār* also.

There’s a lot we don’t understand about it...I’ve heard of where girls fail a subject in SLC and kill themselves. I’ve heard rape and sexual assault, neglect and abuse from husbands. Sheer hopelessness. I remember after a flood happened, a woman, she didn’t die in the flood, but her whole house was gone. She had six kids to feed and she just jumped in the river; [as if to say] “that’s it I give up. There’s nothing else I can do”... I think it’s really complexly rooted, but I think a big part of it is that because it is a culture of shame and where your honour is so important... you don’t say “oh I’m struggling”... I think it’s just easy to shut up and hold it in and deal with it on the inside because they’re [Nepali women] not encouraged to share... You’re not supposed to feel, you’re not supposed to have an opinion. Why would you say, “This is so bad”?

This idea that women silence themselves because it could jeopardise *ijjat* is not only evident in tales of suicide but domestic violence as well, as the next case study exemplifies.

“She never expressed those things and we lost her”: Nanda’s murder

Speaking out against violence runs the risk of both losing *ijjat* and attracting further attacks. As a result, it is uncommon for women to discuss domestic violence publically. This was expressed in my discussions with Vishnu and his colleague Sujala at a Kathmandu NGO, Samudāya Āvāj¹⁰⁷ (SA), when they were shocked to learn of the murder of a close friend and colleague, Nanda, by her husband, Rupesh. I never met Nanda, for she had died a year before Sujala’s interview. A “quiet and dignified” Chētrī woman, she joined SA in 2003 as a programme manager and her job involved the facilitation of domestic violence workshops for women. Sujala said of this irony, “Now I can imagine why she enjoyed her work a lot because she was facing that kind of violence. And when she comes to SA she wants to forget that whole thing, which was happening in her home.” Despite describing her as a “kind of traditional lady”, whose “husband was everything” to her, both Vishnu and Sujala described Nanda as also being empowered, because of the work she did with SA. “She was an empowered lady, she knew everything¹⁰⁸. But because of her husband’s ‘pride’, she remained quiet.” Sujala painted a picture of a woman who had all the knowledge and networks she would need to seek help, but says she was empowered “in terms of knowledge only, not in [her] practical life. Almost all women [experience that].” Originally from the *Tarāī*, she married a Kathmandu man. Sujala reflected that it was probably his wish “to keep her isolated” from family and support. After her death, details about Nanda’s life became apparent that they had never known. “She never shared it with us but she was actually his second or third wife¹⁰⁹, that we are not sure of, but she was not his first.”

Being “traditional” in her beliefs she always reverently called her husband *tapāī* or *vahā*, the respectful forms of ‘you’ and ‘him/he’ in Nepali¹¹⁰. She was never heard

¹⁰⁷ A pseudonym. SA, the NGO where Sujala, Vishnu and Nanda worked, was founded for peace building during the ten-year civil war and focuses now not only on peace-building and post-conflict issues, but wider social services and is free of political affiliation.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Everything’ for Sujala meant Nanda understood the various definitions of violence and knew where she could seek help if she chose to.

¹⁰⁹ In this instance Sujala is referring to polygamy.

¹¹⁰ Holland and Skinner also note in their field site in Nepal that husbands commonly addressed their wives with the less respectful pronominal forms reserved for children and animals. In return, the wives would answer with the higher, more respectful form, as Nanda did with her husband. Holland *et al* say this discursive practice constantly reconstitutes their social relationship, as each time his address accords her inferiority and hers affords him greater deference (1998: 134).

calling him by his name and was extremely surprised to hear Sujala refer to her own husband by his name or as *timī* and *ū*, the familiar forms of ‘you’ and ‘him/he’. Regularly she would be late to work, as it was required by Rupesh she complete her tasks in the home first. Sujala said Rupesh was “the type of man who never looks in your eyes” and she never liked him, despite Nanda defending him, saying he was a “good man who never drinks”. According to friends and family, Rupesh used to beat Nanda regularly, but she always denied it. Sujala remembers one day in the office “she had some ‘patches’ [bruises] on her arm one day and when I asked she said she fell from a ladder, but I thought then it looked like she was beaten.” After her death, Nanda’s brother told Sujala that both physical and mental violence were common ways Rupesh exerted his control.

In April 2009, Rupesh married another woman with two sons. Nanda was reportedly depressed, because Rupesh’s new wife was her cousin. One particular day, she did not come to work and Rupesh called SA and spoke with Sujala, reportedly saying Nanda was missing. According to him, they had been separated for two years though Sujala said she thought this was a loose description of their marriage at best, as Rupesh would return to Nanda whenever she showed him “some good behaviour”. Nanda’s body was found washed up on the banks of Kathmandu’s Bāgmatī River in the last week of April 2009, only ten days after Nanda’s husband married her cousin. The authorities initially listed it as a suicide, but Nanda’s family insisted on an autopsy. It was found that she had died before being placed in the water. It emerged that Rupesh was allegedly angry with her for her dismay at his new marriage and worried she would ‘bad-mouth’ him. Another women’s rights organisation took up Nanda’s family’s legal case to have Rupesh prosecuted, and at the time of my first interview with Sujala, he had been in jail for nine months and the case was still pending. In this case, honour is alluded to many times. Sujala speculates Rupesh felt a threat to his reputation and so killed Nanda to mitigate any negative gossip she might engage in. Sujala felt Nanda tried to keep her honour intact by self-silencing. She related this to a broader sense of shame and inability of women to discuss these issues for fear of retribution and ostracism.

She never expressed those things and we lost her...For Nepali women, talking about our personal matters to our friends is very difficult. That also happened to Nanda. We are very good friends. We used to go out after the office and have

some dinner together. But she never speak out, that thing, that she's suffering that violence. For every Nepali woman it is very difficult to speak out on that issue... So we as women we can't speak. We are also one cause of that violence...for staying silent; we have to break the silence.

Sujala was acutely aware that women can be seen as implicit in perpetuating their own suffering when they choose not to speak up. Victims themselves are complicit in structures of violence (Prahdan *et al.* 2011) not only when they perpetrate violence explicitly but also when they remain silent and maintain the *status quo*. Amy also speculated on this silence with regard to shame by saying she thought there was a lot to be said about keeping up the appearance of having a good marriage and honourable lifestyle.

Like if your husband's bad it's a reflection on you, they look to the woman...
So why would they say, "Oh he's mistreating me" or "Something's up here"?
They wouldn't. That's just them basically saying, "I'm not a good wife" or
"I'm not good enough" and you don't do that.

The practice of maintaining silence is apparent amongst my informants because they were acutely aware that often the consequences of speaking out led to a loss of *ijjat* and/or violence. The high rates of suicide amongst Nepali women appear to be one indication that they experience suffering of unbearable magnitude. In one sense this action can be viewed as being taken because they cannot stay silent anymore. Alternatively, it can also be an ultimate kind of silence, perhaps offering a final commentary or protest against her discontents.

Conclusion

Ijjat is imbricated with violence and suffering: it induces women to remain silent in order to maintain honour and legitimises discipline of those who speak out. When I asked Sujala from SA what the root causes of gender violence in Nepal were, she laughed. She shrugged with an acceptance and laughed more when I asked how it might

be eradicated. “I don’t know how to answer! It’s too hard! In Nepal it’s [gender violence] happening... There is political instability so no one is focussing on these issues. It is a time of impunity. It won’t reduce in this period.” It seemed that, for Sujala, a world without gender violence in Nepal was both a hope and an absurdity. Women’s experiences with violence and suffering are complex because suffering is normalised through Hindu and Buddhist frameworks, to the point where it becomes part and parcel with everyday life. A fatalistic attitude to suffering in the Nepali context might suggest that discontents are not a motivating factor for Nepalis, as suffering is greeted with general acceptance. Even Jyoti suggested in Chapter Two that women struggle to dream for themselves. Yet, suffering and women’s subjective experiences of it are also transforming, as women not only grow more discontented, but are becoming more likely to speak out. There is an undercurrent of change with a growing women’s movement. Discontents are not merely expressed as shared emotions to be silenced but shared motivations to be voiced. Discontents are providing an impetus for change because external influences of development reveal a different narrative to Nepali women. Whereas once women seemed ‘content’ to accept their suffering as fate, and failed even to dream for themselves, now discontents are providing them a space to explore their moral imagination, whereby they envision freedom, choice and rights within their grasp. They are imagining what might and should be (Parish 2008: 1-2), but more importantly, they are coming together collectively to fight for change. I would argue this is because, as Parish asserts:

Discontents inspire moral fantasy, a reimagining of the world. This reimagining can take many forms which yet have a kind of underlying unity: there are dreams of justice, reveries of revenge and reversal, the musings that define aspirations, the poetics of utopia, the value-statements of social critique. In all these ways and many more, people imagine themselves whole, or contemplate a world where they could be whole, where they might not suffer, might have justice. They dream of possible worlds. The fantasy stands in counterpoint to an actual world, where some might fear to even whisper their discontents.

(2008: 2)

This chapter looked at the ways women traditionally have managed their suffering and discontents; through silencing and, in some extreme cases, suicide. The next chapter

looks at ways women are overcoming the idea that it is more honourable to stay silent, and are reconfiguring what it means to be *ijjatdār*. I will argue one of the ways women actively negotiated the role of the feminist in my field sites was to purposefully disengage from traditional practices of silencing and instead engage with their voice and enact what they termed, *sāhas* or ‘boldness’, in response to situations where they might normally have fallen silent. This engagement was critical for the negotiation between the two figures of daughter-in-law and feminist and a key part of the performance of gender when taking up ways to ‘be modern’.

CHAPTER SIX

“*IJJAT* IS A NICE NAME FOR SILENCE”: THE FEMINIST, BOLDNESS AND THE ROLE OF VOICE

Introduction

Right. I think *ijjat* really gives way to more silence. They've [women] always been taught to respect people. But we've [Nepalis] never been taught to voice our opinions out. So *ijjat* is a nice name for silence I guess. If you don't want to lose *ijjat* you become silent. Otherwise, if you start talking then you become a feminist and you lose *ijjat*.

Ajay, Formal Interview

Ijjat is so powerful a guiding force in Nepali women's lives that, rather than face losing it, women will remain silent under the most stressful circumstances. Time and time again I watched women surrender their desire to speak out to the demands that *ijjat* and the pressure to be a 'good' woman placed on them. This was particularly obvious at Rita's engagement ceremony. As mentioned, she considered herself a feminist and felt strong enough to take up feminist debate in her personal and professional life. On this day I was feeling particularly vulnerable to the stares of a group of men, friends of the groom-to-be. They even filmed me with their phones for long periods of time while I was eating. As I grew more uncomfortable, Basanti grew angrier and went to speak to Rita about asking them to stop. I had imagined Rita would not shy away from speaking out against harassment: her reaction, however, surprised me. She asked Basanti not to say anything and said she would speak to her fiancé when the party had finished. She did not want to make a scene in front of his family. In this context, in front of her in-laws and husband-to-be, the desire to be *ijjatdār*, and silent, was stronger than to speak out. This is not to suggest Rita did not speak out in other contexts. She petitioned her mother-in-law not to wear *curā* (marriage bangles), performed in the first Nepali production of *The Vagina Monologues* and was known to publically promote sexual

health campaigns by handing out condoms. Of interest here is how different subjectivities come to the fore in different spaces, illustrating the practice of negotiation I argue women engage in. What is key to remember is that the feminist and daughter-in-law formulate an analytical binary, not a literal one. Thus, women are often committed to gaining *ijjat* in ‘traditional’ ways, as a daughter-in-law, yet also engage in practices that would be considered ‘modern’, especially those women who have formal education and careers. While silence was pervasive in my field sites, many women were also concurrently agitating for change in their own ways. I came to understand this as the crux of gendered subjectivities and *ijjat*, whereby women would carefully negotiate being both daughters-in-law and feminists in different contexts. I have intensively examined the traditions and practices a daughter-in-law might engage in to be considered *ijjatdār*, and now ask: what does it mean to be *ijjatdār* and be modern? How do women perform their gendered subjectivity by engaging with notions of modernity, development and feminism?

In the previous chapter I argued *duḥkha* is a common thread running through Nepali women’s lives. In this chapter I argue it is their experiences of *duḥkha* that provide the impetus for driving women’s activism, expressed through practices associated with being modern. Firstly, I briefly contextualise development feminism (Cornwall 2003; Cornwall, Harrison & Whitehead 2007; Cornwall & Edwards 2014; Kabeer 2015), and summarise the women’s movement in Nepal to present an historical background in which to understand the feminisms that are pertinent to the Nepali context. Next I look at the figure of the feminist, translated in Nepali as *mahilā adhikār karmī*; an ‘agent of change for women’s rights’, to establish how it was understood and practised in the contexts of Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, as well as looking at the concept of freedom, which was raised constantly as a key desire and marker of being modern. Both the figure of the feminist and the women’s movement in Nepal are closely tied to development feminism and the concepts of freedom that women highly valued.

Having already established that *ijjat* makes it difficult to speak up in the face of injustice, I look at what women termed *sāhas* or ‘boldness’. My informants said they consciously thought about and took on the characteristic of ‘boldness’ in order to raise their voices against violence and discrimination. ‘Raising voice’ or *āvāj uṭhāune*, (Kunreuther 2009, 2014) was also identified as an important practice in being identified

as modern and gaining ground in terms of women's rights. Voice has been identified as strongly linked to political action in Nepal, not only the women's movement (see Kunreuther 2014). In engaging with 'raising voice' (see Kunreuther 2009, 2014), a space is being created where women are actively engaging with the figure of the 'feminist', and/or its related development discourses, as a means to express their discontent and bring about social change.

I next turn to the negotiations women undertook in my field sites with both 'boldness' and voice. Voice is analytically useful to address because it attends to both ideological notions of what it means to 'have' a voice and what this might achieve, and the material practice associated with its embodied form. Modes of expression, through narrative and song, not only provide avenues for giving voice to these experiences but in fundamental ways serve to naturalise them. Songs and stories of *duḥkha* have functioned in this way as mediating devices for women to "express their emotions to themselves about the difficulties and ambiguities of their roles in life, and perhaps control their emotions in some sense" (Skinner 1989: 189). It has been suggested that some ritualised practices and traditions, such as *tīj*, have served, and are serving in new ways, as sites for critical social and political commentary (Holland & Skinner 1995). Many of my informants, both women and men, are beginning to question what *ijjat* means to them in a modernising socio-political climate and reconfiguring what it means to be honourable. Political transformations, radical visions for the future, and an expanding national civil society consisting for the most part of developmental NGOs have paved the way for notions of alternative femininities¹¹¹ to emerge (Kramer 2008: 51). I close the chapter with an analysis of a case study of protest, in which both boldness and voice were notable practices women utilised to engage with their modern subjectivities.

¹¹¹ I have intentionally chosen to leave the term alternative femininities open to account for the countless alternatives, even I did not encounter in almost two years of field research. Indeed this thesis is an exploration of the various ways alternative femininities could emerge, and do, through processes of negotiation.

Development feminism and the Nepali women's movement

Feminism in Nepal is rights-based and centred on development discourse. Accounting for the gamut of literature on development feminism is outside the scope of this thesis. However, a brief introduction is necessary to ground Nepali feminism in its development orientations. Feminism generally refers to the belief that women should have political, social and economic equality with men (Adhikari, H 2013: 276). Nepali feminism is predominantly founded in development frameworks and 'speak' or language (Tamang 2004). The feminist agenda was largely introduced in development more generally around the 1970s when practice was particularly focussed on integrating women into development programmes out of concern that women had been left out of development (Pearson & Jackson 2005: 2). This gave rise to the Women in Development (WID) approach, later shifting to a Gender Analysis in Development (GAD), whereby it was argued that it was not women who should be problematised in development but gender relations in which women were subordinated (Pearson & Jackson 2005: 5). At this time 'rights-based' approaches were also gaining traction in development practice and were mainstreamed into the policies of governments and the United Nations by the end of the 1990s (Cornwall & Molyneux 2006: 1177). Contrasted with the 'needs-based' approach, which focuses on the securing of resources and delivery of services to particular groups based on their immediate need, a rights-based approach makes processes of development explicitly political by requiring existing resources be shared more equally and that marginalised people are more able to assert their rights to those resources (Jonsson 2003; Uvin 2004).

A rights-based approach legitimises development interventions and the actors involved. By providing moral authority and purpose it embodies essential principles of justice and both justifies interventions and assists those working in development to enhance the capacities of the marginalised (Cornwall & Molyneux 2006: 1179). As a result, language used in development practice is also reflecting the turn towards rights-based approaches. Rights-based development and the language used to express its rhetoric "gives moral legitimacy and reinforces social justice principles that already underpin development thinking, providing a more authoritative basis for advocacy" (Robinson 2005: 29). 'Buzzwords' have extensively found their way into 'development speak',

gaining legitimacy within institutional international development (Alejandro Leal 2007: 539). Words and phrases incorporated in the pantheon of development language include ‘empowerment’, ‘capacity building’, ‘human rights’, ‘participatory’, ‘sustainability’, ‘poverty reduction’ and more, and are commonly used to frame solutions in development practice. Cornwall and Brock suggest this “warmly persuasive” language evokes a different way of doing business by combining “pragmatism with almost unimpeachable moral authority” (2005: 1043). Scholars do warn us, however, not to take buzzwords at face value, reminding us that such language is often nuanced and encompasses multiple meanings depending on who is using it and in what context (Eade 2010: viii). For example, in my field sites I came across much development rhetoric and even some practitioners adamant that simply educating girls leads to ‘empowerment’. While I felt this an important component, I did, however, witness many educated girls and women who still felt unable to access their rights and still fell victim to discrimination. Even with regard to the power of *ijjat*, educated women continued to have problems taking up their rights, as exemplified in Chapter Three by Chandani’s case when purchasing the Contraceptive Pill. When I spoke with Pratima from *Swar* about this observation she said, “Yes! Empowerment! What word is this? Women will only be empowered when they can defend their decisions. Many can’t do these things [yet]”. Her sentiments captured the nuance of the term ‘empowerment’ and the complexity of an issue that could not be reduced to a single “warm and persuasive” word.

Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi argue that ‘development speak’ and, more specifically, talk of ‘rights’ do offer three broad justifications for development: normative, pragmatic and ethical (2004: 1461). By putting human rights at the centre of development it envisions what ought to be, providing a normative framework that directs cooperation. In specifying an internationally agreed upon set of norms (and laws), citizens are able to make stronger claims to their rights (Hausermann 1998). Pragmatically, to speak of rights directly increases “the accountability of government organisations to their citizens” and therefore increases “the likelihood that policy measures will be implemented into practice” (Ferguson 1999: 23). Ethically, rights-based approaches also serve to look at the intersection of international development and power relations. In this view, rights force those engaged in development assistance to reflexively consider power and the obligations to those development is supposed to serve (Eyben 2003).

Thus, development feminism is focussed on the language of rights and equality, brought about by rights-based approaches to development, but with a particular focus on women and gendered relationships.

Development and a burgeoning women's movement have had an impact on women's agency around claiming certain freedoms, raising their collective voices (although this by no means indicates a unified 'voice') and are opening up wider possibilities for framing a Nepali womanhood, while still very much considering *ijjat*. Nepal has undergone three significant political upheavals in a sixty-year period (see Chapter One) and the women's movement has evolved along similar timelines. Acharya argues the women's movement may be separated into five phases, spanning the late forties prior to 1951 when the Rana Regime was toppled, 1951-1960, 1961-1990, 1991-2005 and 2006 and beyond (Acharya, M 2010: 1). In the earlier part of the 20th century women's organisations tended to be offshoots of the emergent political parties, agitating for democratic change. Even at this time, these organisations were demanding education for girls, widows' rights, prevention of polygamy and child-marriage, and equal political rights. The most important triumph at this time was the establishment of women's right to vote and the construction of two girls' schools in Kathmandu (Acharya, M 2007). In 1960, with the dissolution of the parliament and introduction of the Panchayat System, all political parties and activities ceased and many women's organisations were forced to operate underground or halt their operations altogether (Acharya, M 2010: 3). The women's movement in this period up until 1990 largely revolved around development and academic works (see Acharya, M & Bennett 1981) or was facilitated through the State-established All Nepal Women's Organisation (ANWO), which was mostly made up of high-caste women (Acharya, M 2010: 3). In the lead up to the 1990 *jana āndōlan* much political agitation was channelled into attaining democracy and women participated heavily in this movement, campaigning for political reservation and equal citizenship rights (Acharya, M 1994).

The Civil War between 1996-2006 was contextually significant for the women's movement in Nepal. While women were undoubtedly victims of war crimes and sexual violence, women were also invited into the Maoist/Communist movement as political activists and soldiers (Lohani-Chase 2014: 30). From 1995, the CPN-Maoist party assembled the All Nepal Women's Association to campaign at the grassroots level on

issues pertaining to gender and caste discrimination, domestic violence, gambling and polygamy. These grassroots campaigns served to raise women's consciousness and encouraged them to engage with activism (2014: 30). The Royal Nepal Army also brought women into its fold, by forming its first all-women's battalion in 2003. Women's rights groups called this a monumental moment in Nepal's history, arguing that the decision to include women in national service would "smash the traditional thinking that women are only fit for household chores" (2014: 33).

Female activists claimed that this era in Nepali history was significant: as men travelled overseas for remittance work, female-headed households began to increase. By taking on what was traditionally men's work (Lokshin & Glinskaya 2009: 2), such as ploughing fields, thatching roofs and conducting funeral rites for deceased family members, women broke traditional gender norms (Lohani-Chase 2014: 33). Bidhya Bhandari, former Nepali minister and senior member of the UML, who was unsupportive of the violence promoted by the Maoists, argued that women at this time were becoming, "more forceful at the grassroots level, more conscious of their rights, and [...] more able to present themselves with more confidence" (2014: 33).

Women did make progress socially and politically over the course of the civil war, not because male-dominated parties wanted to promote women's advancement, but because it was no longer possible to ignore women as both supporters and drivers of and within political movements (Lohani-Chase 2014: 33). However, women's rights fought for and gained throughout the civil war are not without contention (see Pettigrew, Judith & Shneiderman 2004). While they did enter a male-dominated arena and performed previously unsanctioned duties, women's empowerment brought about through militancy is antithetical from a feminist perspective. This is because in joining the military-industrial complex, the women were cooperating with institutions and structures they were also seeking to undo (see Enloe 1983).

The women's movement of the post-civil war period is somewhat fractured as different movements, such as those of ethnic minorities, compete with 'mainstream feminism' (Acharya, M 2010; Tamang 2015) and intersectional feminism is only now gaining some traction in certain circles (Tamang 2015). Tamang argues the development project in Nepal and the Panchayat era of Nepali cultural homogenisation from 1961 onwards

simultaneously constructed a stereotypical image of a “universal Hindu woman” (2011: 281), which has created problems for the women’s movement. She argues:

The creation of the ‘Nepali woman’ was as much the work of development agencies in search of ‘the Nepali woman’ to develop as it was the result of the active dissemination of state-sponsored ideology. The patriarchally oppressed, uniformly disadvantaged and Hindu ‘Nepali woman’ as a category did not pre-exist the development project. She had to be constructed by ignoring the heterogeneous forms of community, social relations, and gendered realities of the various peoples inhabiting Nepal. This erasure of differences ensured an easy target population for development.

(2011: 281)

Tamang therefore argues that, along with the so-called ‘unified’ rhetoric of the post-1990 pro-democratic movement, this was critical for how the trajectory of the women’s movement has progressed in recent years. Since 1990, she says, the problem of the Nepali women’s movement has been envisioning its ‘natural’ goal as achieving a single feminist agenda at the expense of respecting the radical difference and diversity that are the genuine demographic makeup of Nepal (2009: 61). Thus, she is more in favour of intersectional and multiple ‘feminisms’ that speak to the relationships between different women (not just between men and women) and respect and uphold the diversities of Nepali women, their backgrounds and their experiences (2015).

The Feminist

As Basanti posed it, a feminist is antithetical to the daughter-in-law because the features or behaviours of both do not easily co-exist. As Ajay suggested, silence is associated with *ijjat* and the ‘good woman’, while talking is associated with being a feminist and losing *ijjat*. In this sense, the feminist was actually not a figure that was readily desired by some women. Many of my informants, however, wished they could attain certain features associated with the figure, without losing *ijjat*. Despite the tension between the

daughter-in-law and the feminist, women did see value in both and did seek to reconcile these by engaging in different practices related to both, depending on the context. If a 'good' daughter-in-law historically looks after the *ijjat* of the family, by ensuring her chastity, modesty and reputation, then it becomes pertinent to reflect on what features correlate with the feminist.

The word feminist is most commonly translated as *mahilā adhikār karmī*; an 'agent of change for women's rights'. What defined a feminist in the Nepali context was difficult to pinpoint, as it meant different things to different people. Furthermore, the term feminist was not readily used by all informants in Bhaktanagar, but was common enough in Kathmandu and amongst activists and many NGOs working with women labelled themselves 'feminist organisations'. Instead, most people discussed the related themes of equality, rights, freedom and development, and associated practical manifestation such as education or working. Many informants thought these features were not only becoming more desired by women, but also more commonplace as a result of development. When I asked Ajay what a feminist "looked like", he replied. "Like me", indicating a shift in urban youth perspectives by including men under the term. However, Ajay was also wary of the term feminist. He felt it could potentially isolate a person by narrowly defining them and excluding valuable dialogue from other perspectives. He argued that he was not always comfortable with the term because:

For me, I feel that when you brand yourself into something you become isolated. You become driven with ideologies, which are not practical. And I guess in situations like this I guess there should be ideologies, which is more like welcoming to everything. If being a feminist means being educated, having a good job, having an opinion, becoming part of the decision making process, then that's something I would definitely welcome. But if feminist means just *talking* about women's rights... if you start disregarding the presence of other people then you are not a feminist. I guess you become a dictator.

Ajay's sentiments tapped into a general feeling that, while rights, freedom and equality were 'good', the connotations of being labelled a feminist also had some negative implications. One Nēwār informant, Shristi, confirmed many feared that the label 'feminist' meant 'man-hater'. Thapa, founder of Nepali feminist organisation *Tewa*

(‘support’) stated that feminism in Nepal is perceived to be synonymous with “bra-burning” and “negative and borrowed from the West”, and therefore defined the work she did with her organisation as falling in line with “the more acceptable development tongue [of women’s rights]” (2002: 7). It can also be used derogatorily, as some informants noted that a number of community members thought a feminist was “too vocal”, and thus far removed from the idealised daughter-in-law who is valued because she “sits and says nothing” (Bennett, Lynn 1983: 3). Those that wanted to identify as feminist often felt they could not due to these perceptions of feminism.

Despite a general hesitation by some to take up the feminist mantle, there are undoubtedly strong feminist sentiments in Nepal and many see it as key to bringing about the change women are seeking. Anisha wholeheartedly told me: “Yes, I consider myself a feminist. I like the term. Since I advocate for women’s rights and equality of the sexes, I’m a feminist”. Feminist action group, *Chaukath*, is a self-described network of grassroots feminists and frequently stages protests and marches around Kathmandu. On their blog members note:

We are proud feminists. Feminism is not only about or for women. Feminism is also about creating a better world for men. Feminism is about recognising that we live in a very unequal world. Feminism is about acknowledging that society oppresses certain groups. Feminism is about acknowledging that the state serves only the privileged.

(Chaukath 2014)

Freedom

Women are given a scent of choice and freedom but it never materialises.

Ajay, Formal Interview

Development has had an impact on decreasing women’s poverty, with education and improved health being key indicators of progress (Ministry of Health and Population

Nepal, *et al.* 2014). Nevertheless, what was clear amongst my informants was that women were particularly interested in freedom (*svatantratā*) and choice (*chanōṭ*) as ways that would define them as being modern (Liechty 2010). Freedom, while not synonymous with modernity, was in many ways imbricated with it. Women said time and again that having the freedom to choose their life path, unencumbered by things such as parental or societal expectations, was of paramount importance in being modern. As Sangita, a Bāhun from Kathmandu, told me, being modern for her meant:

[The] ability to take an informed decision without caring much on what others have to say about the consequences is to be modern. Modernity can be observed in a small daily activity like wearing dresses of your own choice, to life-changing events like choosing your favourite subject in school, or choosing a life partner.

Other informants also had strong ideas on freedom. One young woman from EMFN felt education and earning increased a woman's capacity to have a voice equal to her husband's. Kriti in Bhaktanagar felt her husband allowed her to go "anywhere"; however, she saw other husbands stop their wives from going out and knew it was a "problem" for some women. For her, freedom meant having her own money and "buying whatever she wants" as well as living separately from one's in-laws, something she was not able to do. For Goma in Bhaktanagar, freedom equalled formal education. Mobility was a major point of contention for most informants, many saying they wished to be allowed outside the home, when and where they chose. For women in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, freedom of movement without repercussions, such as questioning or scolding, was a fantasy.

For many of my informants, the feminist related to notions of development and being modern. Freedom and equality were imbricated with modernity and feminism in many people's understandings because they were desired by women in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, and also considered ways of being 'modern'. In fact, Tamang (2004) argues that the feminist agenda and activities are set by development projects that promote rights and freedom, and she therefore thinks feminism in Nepal is more appropriately thought of as '*bikāse nārībād*' or 'development feminism'. However, in order to achieve freedom (and therefore 'be modern') one has to stand apart from the

traditional conception of the daughter-in-law, which is a major challenge, in part because of the significant role of *ijjat*.

Liechty has identified freedom as a vital part of his female informants' understandings of self as modern and many spoke of this in terms of liberation from tradition (Liechty 2010). Many of my informants recognised this feature as well, oftentimes saying, "You know we have to keep the good traditions, but get rid of the bad traditions." Liechty posits, however, that freedom is a source of fear, because with it women have experienced harassment, violence and stigma (2010: 318). The concept of freedom is a subjective one and furthermore differs across the rural and urban divide in Nepal (2010: 308) and even between Kathmandu and Bhaktanagar. Nevertheless, freedom was a primary concern for all my informants.

Women identified easily with a lack of freedom in their lives. One low-caste woman in Bhaktanagar said she did not fully understand freedom, because she "did not have any". For her, she mentioned simply wanting to be allowed to wear jeans, but lamented this was forbidden by her husband. Nirmala BK, a community reporter for EMFN, mentioned being pressured by her brothers because they felt their mother gave her "too much freedom" and started "ill-treating" her as a result. She further went on to describe an abusive marriage and how her husband left her. However, despite some challenges within the community with gossip and stigma, she was happy about her separation after receiving an education and support to undertake radio training. She said, "I am happy that I am free now, I am not under my husband. I don't want to get married to anyone else, that would take away my freedom". For many, marriage was desired for many reasons, including love, children, and providing the social institution in which to be considered most *ijjatdār*. However, many lamented that a loss of freedom would come with marriage. Basanti highlighted the differences in freedom of movement and action before and after marriage, saying, "If I could have how much freedom I have – not even here [in America], if I had that much freedom [I had] as a *daughter* if I could still have freedom of a daughter, even [still] being the daughter-in-law I wouldn't come here really".

Ijjat is also shifting and changing, as women negotiate practice and experience between these roles of daughter-in-law and feminist (and various others). While women would

ordinarily receive *ijjat* if they were seen to behave in ways in keeping with the prescribed notions of the ‘good woman’, they are now also becoming more recognised and admired for their public or academic positions. For example, Jyoti is widely esteemed as a well-known radio personality and well-respected INGO scholarship holder. Another informant has undertaken a Fulbright Scholarship at a distinguished American university, something she mentioned taking up partly because it would be seen as “prestigious”. Pratima, in Bhaktanagar, is highly respected for her public role in local governance and women’s rights issues. Lalima, one of the community reporters based in Bhaktanagar, felt that, because of her work educating communities through radio, rural women particularly looked up to her, and “seeing their love [for her] made her happy”.

These women are negotiating the figured worlds of the feminist and daughter-in-law, seeking *ijjat* in both these aspects of their lives. While what it means to be honourable is changing to encompass broader, more ‘modern’ attributes, such as an education, a job and wealth, women in my field sites were always aware of walking a fine line between engaging in activities which would be seen as honourable and dishonourable. They were aware of the tension. As Liechty posits, they were finding ways to make honour ‘portable’ (Liechty 2010: 310); however, there was always an effort, and women were intentional about their negotiations. While many women engaged in activities that identified them as ‘being modern’, there were still elements of the ‘traditional’ roles they could not seem to do away with. Time and again, women who worked in the public sphere told me that, in order to be seen as a ‘good’ woman, they still had to dress modestly, return home early, and look after domestic duties. *Ijjat* still set them strong traditional parameters. Dr Maya was evidence of this, as an unmarried academic. While she gained enormous respect in her profession, she herself maintained that as far as her family were concerned she was “*ijjat*-less” because of her single status. While women are gaining *ijjat* for their work outside the home, feminists in Kathmandu talked about this in terms of creating a “double burden”, whereby women were expected to excel in the public *and* private spheres. Dr Gita claimed equality was not a reality, despite assertions that changing laws and attitudes were creating more freedom and choice in women’s lives. Another informant described it “like a dance. Yeah we can have the job but to be considered *ijjatdār* we still have all of the household chores we have to do

anyway. So people will think good about us.” As Liechty identifies, for the middle classes:

Female participation in emerging middle-class public spheres (in careers, politics etc.) is both admired and condemned; women-in-public are both promoted as modern and progressive, and derided as sexually dangerous and threatening to the family. Female ‘freedom’ is at once celebrated as the liberation of women’s potential, and denigrated as sexual license.

(2010: 310)

It is this pressure to be *ijjatdār* while accessing desired freedoms that Basanti was speaking to when she lamented not being able to be a feminist *and* a daughter-in-law. If being a daughter-in-law carries with it connotations of being traditional and *ijjatdār*, what performance or agency do women engage in to invoke the subjectivity of the feminist?

“First, we must have *sāhas*”: ‘Boldness’ as a process of change

As I observed women negotiating more around their freedom and other ‘modern’ practices, there were two elements that marked this as a consciously ‘feminist’ or ‘modern’ engagement with womanhood, distinct from that of the ‘daughter-in-law’. One was a concept I encountered in a Red Cross gender-sensitivity training in Bhaktanagar. During one of the workshops, which took place over two days, one Chētrī woman brought up the concept of *sāhas*, or ‘boldness’. Within a broader discussion on women’s rights and equality with men, she said, “If culture is ‘bad’, first we must have boldness to change from our side. Then others will follow.” The other women nodded in agreement. ‘Boldness’ was identified as a key factor in women achieving equality, a desired outcome of development and therefore modernity. Women recognised that, while there was an element of opportunity ‘granted’ to them through laws and the relaxation of social customs and attitudes, they must also demand it in order for it to happen. For them, this required a conscious engagement with ‘boldness’, and they identified six desired outcomes of ‘being bold’.

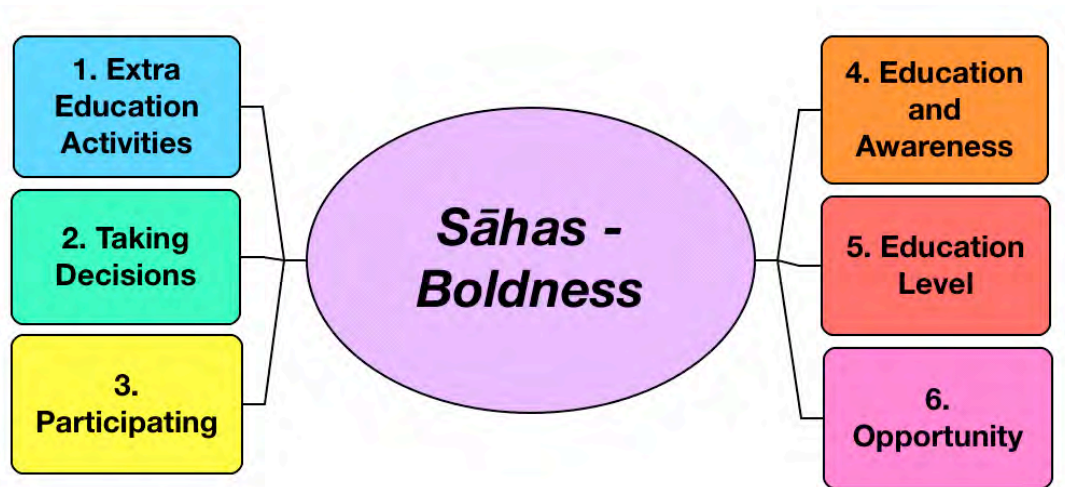


Figure 18: Women's illustration of outcomes of 'boldness' in Red Cross Workshop, Bhaktanagar

These outcomes correlated with informants' views on what it meant to be modern, and were desirable because they would improve happiness and their quality of life. Valued as key means for equality, they could only be achieved if women were 'bold' enough to "fight for" them. When I asked them what being 'bold' looked like, they agreed "speaking out" was fundamental. Being bold was a challenge, however; as Rupa, a Chētrī woman and the founder of SA in Kathmandu, said once, "You know, so very few people have the courage to do that [speak out], even in their own family." For the women of Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu being 'bold' enough to "speak out" generally meant going against the concept of being *ijjatdār*.

The role of 'voice'

Following on from being bold, one practice associated with *sāhas* is therefore that of "speaking out", in which the role of voice is crucial. Voice has been a topic of study across a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, linguistics, ethnomusicology and media and technology studies (Basso 1979; Feld 1982; Altman 1985; Brenneis 1987; Seeger 2004; Kunreuther 2009, 2014; Weidman 2014). The Nepali term for 'voice', *āvāj* (pronounced 'aawaaz') alludes to the Persian root 'avaaz', meaning both 'voice'

and 'sound'. The voice is essential to social, cultural and political life and connects practice with subjectivity, and embodied sound with communally recognised meanings (Kunreuther 2014: 34). Feld *et al* argue that, "voices are material embodiments of social ideology and experience" (Feld *et al.* 2004: 332). There are various analyses surrounding the socio-cultural significance of voice, but the most useful here are the ideological and material aspects of the voice. Feld and Fox connect these aspects of voice in anthropology, by acknowledging a disjuncture between anthropology's concern for what it means politically and socially to 'have a voice', with the physical embodiment of voice as sound and practice. In this way, a direct relationship between voice and subjectivity can be recognised (1994: 26). Indeed, Kunreuther argues that modern ways of being a social subject in her Kathmandu field site were fundamentally connected with discourses about the voice and 'raising voice' (Kunreuther 2014; Weidman 2014: 39). Weidman poses the question, "What forms of subjectivity, identity, and public and political life are enabled, and silenced, by particular regimes of aurality and the voice?" (2014: 38). Ideologically, voice indicates ideas about empowerment, speech, and legitimacy that convey historically contextual notions of personhood (Kunreuther 2006: 327). Voice is a "site where the realms of the cultural and sociopolitical link to the level of the individual, a site where shared discourses and values, affect, and aesthetics are made manifest in and contested through embodied practice" (Weidman 2014: 38). Materially, voice can also be characterised as 'the sonic voice' that communicates messages by way of meaningful sounds, such as "intonation, rhythm or musical song", and connects social concepts with emotional feeling (Kunreuther 2006: 327; Weidman 2014: 38). It also includes the sounds made by voices as well as the bodily processes required to produce and attend to them (Kunreuther 2006: 327). Weidman further argues that modern ideas of voice often go hand in hand with the material voice (Weidman 2014: 40). Kunreuther (2014) also maintains that in taking the materiality of voice seriously we can reach a greater understanding of how subjectivity is constituted, particularly through practices of interpellation (see Weidman 2006).

Weidman offers the term 'ideologies of voice' as a useful category of analysis, because it takes into account the intersections of linguistic, musical and semiotic principles. She argues 'ideologies of voice' are understood as culturally constructed ideas about the voice. This encompasses the relationship between vocal characteristics and social

categories, such as gender. It also looks at the relationship between voice and the body, how it is produced, what is ‘natural’ about it, where the voice comes from and who is allowed to speak, how and to whom. She says they “determine how and where we locate subjectivity and agency; they are the conditions that give sung or spoken utterances their power or constrain their potential effects” (2014: 45).

What was of concern to the women in the Red Cross training was that they have the boldness to express their voice “from their side”, with particular regard to fighting discrimination and fighting for equality. Freire (1972) argued that the empowerment of oppressed people occurs when dialogue is established within a community because it enables them to have a collective voice that acts to liberate them. Thus, voice is being reframed, in a neoliberal sense, as demonstrating freedom and choice (Weidman 2014: 46) and has been particularly cited in discussions around governments transparency and promises of democracy (Kunreuther 2006: 324).

Kunreuther says that this concept of ‘the voice’ which people find, have, and raise:

[...] refers to something seemingly of the nature of a personal possession, a property of selfhood. This sense and use of a voice, the voice that can be had or lost, repressed or developed, is in fact a central figure circulating with ever-greater frequency and shifting significance in the daily speech and political discourse of contemporary Kathmandu.

(2014: 4-5)

Furthermore, voice is explicitly related to development and rights because the phrasing that women (and other activists) choose consciously utilises the language and ‘buzzwords’ of development. In addition, voice is enshrined in various international conventions, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 ensures persons have the right to freedom of expression and opinion (UN 2016), and was often quoted within the offices I worked in in Kathmandu and Bhaktanagar. Therefore, the concept of ‘voicing’ is both strategic and political because voices can be constructed in such a way in formal and everyday performances (Weidman 2014: 42). Voice can encapsulate notions of discipline that are used to form social categories and

subjectivities (Weidman 2014: 44), such as the act of ‘scolding’. However, vocal performance is also increasingly being conceptualised in terms of “speaking back” (2014: 43) and has emerged as a practice for resistance to hegemonic socio-cultural norms (see Abu-Lughod 1999; Wilce 2003; Feld *et al.* 2004). As such, voice, repeatedly engaged, encompasses practice and discipline that may “performatively bring into being classed, gendered, political, ethnic, or religious subjects” (Weidman 2014: 44) (see Bourdieu 1991; Abu-Lughod 1999; Kunreuther 2009; Minks 2013). Kunreuther argues that, in this sense:

The act of speaking comes to stand more generally for a new set of social relations, between citizen and state, between men and women, between youth and older generations, between emerging private media and their audiences. It reveals the significance of speaking to be at once deeply personal and practically political.

(2014: 3-4)

This correlates with a notion that Kunreuther (2009) presents of *āvāj uṭhāune*, or ‘raising voice’. Many of my informants, across different contexts in both field sites, talked about needing the ‘boldness to raise their voice’. For Kunreuther, the concept of *āvāj uṭhāune* signifies speech that is particularly related to political and social changes brought about by various democratic movements (Kunreuther 2014: 33). It is a key practice of political agency and characterises the activities of many groups engaged in political and human rights work (Kunreuther 2009: 545-546). She argues *āvāj uṭhāune*, while not exclusively associated with democratic movements, is “associated with democratic participation and political consciousness and implies a parallel between voice and collective or individual agency” (2009: 546). Furthermore, it depicts discourse in Nepal, which aims to seek the attention of those in positions of power to effect change (2009: 546; 2014: 10). ‘Raising voice’ thus denotes speech that is specifically connected to social and political change instigated by any number of democratic movements, of which the women’s movement is no exception.

Negotiations with boldness and voice

This active engagement with ‘boldness’ and ‘raising voice’, the political ideology of ‘having a voice’, and the phenomenology of the voice as embodied spoken and sung performance were commonplace in my field sites. One key way for women to ‘be feminists’, or rather perform this more ‘political’ or ‘modern’ gendered subjectivity, is by consciously negotiating practice that has both ‘boldness’ and ‘raising voice’ in mind.

‘Boldness’ and ‘raising voice’ were salient in women’s individual and collective behaviour in different ways. In some contexts, the acts were those of individuals, trying to create a positive change in their own sphere of immediate experience. For others, it was collective-based actions with the hope of having a positive impact on the experiences of both themselves and others. While these were enacted in different ways and with different modalities, ‘voice’ and ‘boldness’ remained at the forefront of these engagements.

The NGO I worked most closely with in Bhaktanagar was *Swar*. The word itself is another translation of the word ‘voice’ and their slogan is “breaking the silence”. Indira told me she consciously chose this slogan in connection with the concept of ‘raising voice’, specifically, because “*swar* is a big powerful word. In breaking the silence, we listen to the voice of all the suffering and also to raise the voices of the suffering.” Greenland noted in her field site in Hetauda, Nepal, when working with youth club members, the most valued type of agency amongst her participants was the “ability to speak – to raise one’s voice” because it was fundamental to their social mobility (2013: 165). Similar sentiments were found amongst my informants, especially those who were activists or recipients of development programmes. However, prior to raising one’s voice, my informants described needing to initiate a feeling of boldness from within. Many women were aware that, when they encountered an issue they wanted to speak about, their initial feeling was fear; they often talked about being afraid for both their safety and their *ijjat*. My participants felt the key to overcoming this fear was to think about being bold. Rita was well aware of the presence of fear in her life and in the lives of other women. She saw fear as a barrier to women becoming modern, noting that many women feared losing the acceptance of their family and society. She said, “Many

women do not dare to be outspoken because of the fear of abandoning from their family. Let me say, we have been growing up so much fear inside our heads!”

One way women would raise their voices was to speak out directly against perpetrators of violence, though they often needed to summon considerable courage before doing so. Ramila spoke of her fear of speaking to her parents before marriage. As she was betrothed to her husband at a young age, the children at school teased her, but she did not dare tell her parents: in her experience, she would receive punishment if she brought up such issues. She said, “I didn’t even speak to my parents and used to run away from them when they were near. Because if I raised my voice my mother would beat me.”

Another example occurred concerning street harassment. I was complaining about the sexually charged calls of men on the street to my research assistant, Priya: I asked if it was only me this happened to. She replied “No! Sometimes they say bad things to us. If we’re brave, we tell them off. If not, we walk in the other direction and ignore them. But it doesn’t feel nice so I try to feel courage.” On two occasions, young women in Bhaktanagar warned me that if I travelled on the bus between towns, “men would touch me”. I was told not to worry, however, that I should adopt the common strategy of having a safety pin discreetly fastened to my *kutār*. If a man were to touch me inappropriately, I was to stab the pin as hard as I could into his knee to make him stop. While this was not literally a raising of voice, it seemed to me an action that spoke louder than words, and meant the behaviour would not be tolerated. That two separate women mentioned this technique, suggests that it was a common strategy employed by women to protest against sexual harassment. The sense that harassment and discrimination did not “feel nice” provided the impetus for boldness.

Rita also discussed boldness when I asked her one day, “Do you think ‘being modern’ is experienced differently for men and for women?” She answered:

It is! For men in our nation, it is easy to be modern, for women, it is not that easy! The male chauvinism keeps the women who try to be modern under control. The first ever enemy in the road of being modern is we women ourselves. The way we were brought up is something that has fed us the importance of males, serving them and keeping them a step higher than us! We

need to beat this feeling with boldness and then only we can get out to the road of modernism and tackle the outer world. But for men it is easier because nobody basically cares the way they take decisions about self, they are free from birth!

Her comment displays the extent to which boldness is required to raise one's voice and engage in behaviour contrary to that of a 'good woman'. One of the key ways she commonly engaged with boldness was through performance, having performed in *The Vagina Monologues*, but also performing 'poetry slam' on a regular basis. 'Poetry slamming', or performance poetry (Gregory 2008) is increasing in Nepal through regular nationwide competitions and Kathmandu-based organisations such as Word Warriors (2016). One day she performed a poem she wrote for International Women's Day with participants from her office.

In my deepest memory
My mother's struggle for life
Sometimes becomes my tears
Sometimes comes as my trust for life
But mostly it translates into my inspiration
...
My mother...
Or let's say mother of other 11 children like me
Got married before she had her first menstruation
A well-off's daughter-in-law
She was expected to give birth to dozen of sons
Well yes! She gave birth to dozen children in return
Alas! There were more girls than boys
She was therefore punished
For having more girls than boys
...
After four daughters
When there was almost no hope for boys
My mother's god probably woke up
Saw her misery and sent my eldest brother
As her first son
And then celebrations started

My mother in many years ate goat meat
She was so happy ... She burped
But then reminded herself
A woman should not burp
Because she is a woman
In those guilt and anguish
My mother kept on living
...
This much property for one grandson?
We need more of them
My mother's in-laws boasted
Mother was pregnant again
No goat meat this time
Because it was a girl again
However, my mother did not stop burping
In the name of this painful life
But then reminded herself
A woman should not burp
Because she is a woman
In those guilt and anguish
My mother kept on living
...
Almost as a last child
I was inside my mother
After a long labor pain
I came out but did not cry for awhile
Mother was relieved that
A dead girl was born
But I started crying within minutes
Her heart melted again
With motherly love
...
My mother did not know how to read or write
But she was determined to educate her children
My sisters only half educated
Were married off in early age
But mother fought for my education

Probably she had guilt that
This last girl born in her old-age
Might suffer if did not get proper education
...
With time, I grew ... I went to school
I got married ... I was pregnant
But time distrusted us... My mother fell sick
A woman who never was allowed to be fully happy
Before my child was born
Went off ... [died]
But before she went
She left some light for my unborn child
'My dear, if you have a girl child
Promise me you won't compromise her education
Because we need more educated girls in this society
So that they can raise voice against injustice
They can live fearlessly
And Laugh freely'

Like Shova Nepali's performance poem in the Prologue to this thesis, Rita's expresses her discontents to an audience, written and voiced in her own words. Within the themes of these poems can be found many of the common discontents and struggles of a daughter/daughter-in-law, but also, in the last stanza, both the concepts of 'raising voice' and "living fearlessly" (another translation of *sāhas*) are raised. She sees these themes as explicitly linked to education and development. Not only did Rita believe education was key to girls "living fearlessly" and "raising voice against injustice", she exemplified the change in her elderly mother's attitude as well. For them, brave, educated girls were the answer to fighting poverty and injustice.

Technology is also opening up avenues for women to raise their voices through sound reproduction, broadcasting, and amplification (Kunreuther 2009: 546; 2014: 10). Technologies offer powerful new modes of communication, audiences and subjects, as well as new ideas about voice as a collective and individual form of agency (Weidman 2014: 41). Community radio is a particular modality creating opportunity for people to express their concerns and receive much needed education, as they work in cooperation

with local communities to give ‘voice to the voiceless’ and raise issues of local concern (see Bessire & Fisher 2012). Jyoti, as a prominent radio personality, told me happily, “You know, some people stop me in the street and say, ‘I don’t know you, but I’m sure I *know* you! I know your voice!’ So really I am known to many people!” She was aware of the influence and responsibility of her voice regarding listeners and took great pride in her ‘on-air’ activism and education of men and women across the country. For her, this was not only a conscious engagement with ‘being modern’ but also the recreation of *ijjat* in a public sphere, reshaping its significance and meaning, making it more amenable to feminism and development. The community radio reporters, trained by EMFN to collect stories from the field, also had emphatic ideas about their voice, what it meant to them to be able to ‘raise’ it and help other women, and the courage it took to do so. Chaitali, a Tamang trainee from north of Kathmandu, said, “I have a lot of shyness now. I want to overcome this shyness. I want to be able to talk clearly and frankly”. She saw radio work as a means to strengthen self-esteem. That she spoke of being able to “talk clearly and frankly” draws attention to the silencing that comes with feeling *lāj* (ashamed or shy). Many felt, if they had courage to speak out, that the influence of their voice would affect positive changes in their own lives and have a flow-on effect, inspiring other women to be bold also. Dristi, a Chētrī woman from the far-western part of Nepal, said:

If the voices I send gets played on air that would make me very happy. The people whose voices I send will also be happy and I think it will inspire other people as well. If such voices will get played then women will be aware and maybe they will be able to fight for justice, they will be able to speak up for themselves. That will bring positive changes in the society.

Kalpana, a Bāhun woman whose father died of HIV, trained as a community reporter in a district south of Kathmandu. She said, “Many women in the village feel that, if they speak openly in the society, that will hamper the prestige of their society. Many people fear to speak up for that reason. I want to be a medium to bring forth the voices of such people [shamed people].” She went on to say that getting the voice recorder to record stories for the radio programme was partially responsible for giving her *sāhas*:

I felt very proud when I got the recording device for the first time... I don't have fear of anything after getting the recorder. If I become a reporter, and I send my report to EMFN or any other organisation and if it gets aired then, instantly the way society views me will change. My will to live and do my work will rise up, that's what I hope. It may not happen instantly, but I believe that I will be able to do something.

Social media is also a domain in which Nepalis engaged in boldness and raising voice. Photographer Jay Poudyal, who blogs under a page called 'Stories of Nepal' (Poudyal 2016), has instigated a social media campaign, inspired by Humans of New York and supported by World Bank Nepal called #StriveStruggleThrive.

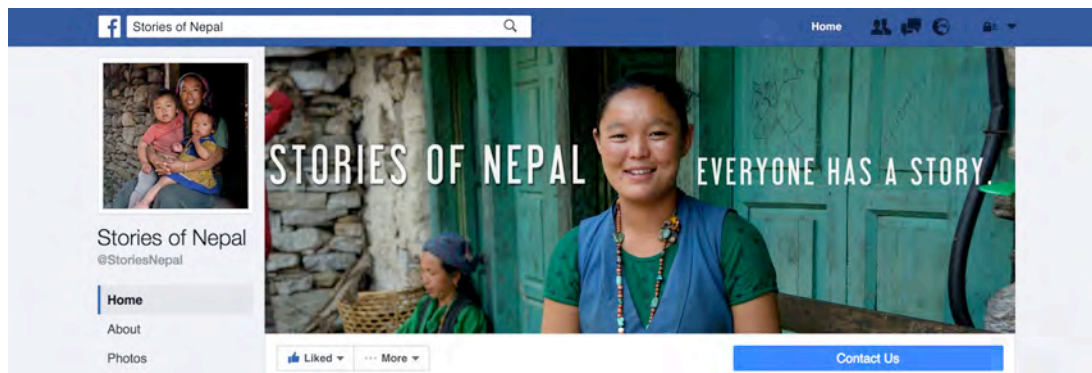


Figure 19: Stories of Nepal Facebook Page

This campaign aimed to display stories of the hardships, life changes and courage of Nepalis across the country, especially highlighting the agenda for economic empowerment (Tiwari 2016), includes many women's experiences. One such post discussed many of the intersecting themes in this thesis, but particularly how women's lives have changed when participating in development programmes and engaging with raising voice.



Stories of Nepal

30 June · Relationships

"I was married when I was 11 years old. I don't remember a thing. What would I remember? After a few years of living with my husband, I slowly came to understand that my husband was not right. The people who had arranged the marriage had tricked my parents. He could not speak and was like a little child. I was not happy. I always knew something was wrong with him. I wanted to run away but I worried about hurting the pride of my parents. So, I just stayed. I saw the husbands of my friends go to work and do nice things for their wives but my story was different. When I turned 15, I was able to think more, about what was good for me and what was bad for me. So I decided that I wanted to get a divorce. Being a woman in the society is already hard enough and now I was a divorcee. People would talk about how I had abandoned my 'poor' husband. But no one came to ask me how I felt. I didn't want to be married at 11. Who asked me? I didn't even know what marriage was. Slowly I started to participate in training camps that would teach women about equal rights and freedom. So the more I started getting involved in these events and interacting with more men and more women, I started to find my true self. I could finally talk. Tell people, both men and women, about how I felt. I also realised that people will always talk behind your back. Even today, when I visit households to spread awareness about different social ills, I hear people say, "Look, the all-knowing woman is here to preach. Don't listen to her." But I don't care. I have power over such things now. I walk with my head held high." (Parbati Kumari Joshi, Girichauga 6, Doti) [#StriveStruggleThrive](#)



Like

Comment

Share

Figure 20: Parbati's tale on Stories of Nepal Facebook Page.

Parbati says the confidence she built through development and rights trainings helped her find her “true self” and finally, she “can talk”. While she acknowledges some gossip about raising her voice, described here as “preaching”, by participating in development she was able to “hold her head high”. This newfound sense of pride can be viewed as *ijjat*, formulated for herself through modern pathways.

Sunita from Bhaktanagar, in several Facebook posts, made a public commentary of her disgust at the different expectations of men and women in terms of what constitutes honourable behaviour. For her this was a public space to challenge the “double standards” she perceived in the *ijjat* of men and women. On two occasions she posted:

The society that judges women and girls sets the men free from judgement. For females there is always restriction but there is none for men. They say a woman will lose her *ijjat*. Does that mean men have no *ijjat*? When will there be equality?

In Nepali society girls are always considered wrong or the society blames girls. Whatever the boys do people take it lightly. Somebody does a mistake but the other one has to face the consequence. Such is the culture here [Nepal]. When you try to stand against the society they tag you as disgraceful and end up blaming you. The wrong doers roam freely and I don't know when these people will be punished.

Development discourse is partially responsible for influencing women taking up opportunities to ‘be modern’ in Nepal. Nepali women in my field sites expressed a desire to ‘be modern’, as articulated through desires for freedom and rights, particularly with regard to choices around their bodies, sexualities and mobility. In particular, women would often state in conversations about traditional practices they considered harmful, such as *chhāupadi*, “we need to leave behind the ‘bad’ traditions, and keep the ‘good’ ones.” Dr Gita held core beliefs of feminism, and indicated her life as a feminist was a central motivating force in her life and work, saying:

This is one of the fundamental problems of our development practitioner in our country. No one wants to touch the root cause. They want to keep the balance.

Because they're *workers*. They are professionals. For us we are *activists*. We know the issue. For someone else this is a 'project', but for me it's a *life*. You see the difference?...For him, he works there and after two years, his project will be finished and he will find another job. But for *me*, my project is *never* going to be finished. I'm an activist! I work with women's rights, I sleep with women's rights, I wake up with women's rights. And I know, I'm 'wearing the shoe'. I know where it pains, where it pinches.

Dr Gita was not the only activist I met who held such strong views, and there were countless examples of wider community support for such beliefs, for example, the National Anti-Rape Campaign (Action Works Nepal 2013) (see Figure 21) and the public protests for the rights of gay and intersex communities (BBC 2015b).



Figure 21: Women protest rape of a migrant worker by a police officer in Kathmandu (Mathema, Shrestha & Park 2013).

Based on their experiences more generally, my informants often claimed they had been treated for a long time as “second class citizens” (FWLD & Sub-Committee 2011: 29). As such, they felt an entitlement to rights and saw the transformations in the treatment of women as a positive development in keeping with modern, development ideals. The

finalisation of the Constitution in late 2015 saw more laws enacted around women's rights as well as addressing their political representation¹¹².

***Tīj* reimaged**

Some of the engagement with boldness and voice takes the form of collective public protest. One such event in Bhaktanagar, a reimaging of *Tīj* celebrations, incorporated these themes.

Anthropologists have analysed the festival of *Tīj* in Nepal with regard to gendered subjectivity, figured worlds, critical expression and arenas of resistance (Bennett, Lynn 1983; Skinner, Holland & Adhikari 1994; Holland & Skinner 1995; Enslin 1998; Ahearn 1999). As mentioned in Chapter Three, *Tīj* is a Hindu women's festival where women undergo rituals and sing songs for the long life of their husbands, or to create the conditions to attract a good husband if they are unmarried (Ahearn 1999: 63). While many populations in Nepal do not celebrate *Tīj*, it is a large and important festival for Hindus and, as Hinduism is demographically the dominant religion of Nepal, when time for festivities arrives it certainly feels ubiquitous. It has also been asserted to be an important space for women's cultural production and contestation. *Tīj* songs are considered 'in process' and authorship is not emphasised as singers freely change lyrics from one performance to the next (Skinner, Holland & Adhikari 1994: 263). While some songs might traditionally focus on Gods or politics, the oldest and most common are *duḥkha* songs that translate the suffering and sadness of women's lives (Enslin 1998: 276). These verses flow out of one's *man*, heart, and are an opportunity for women to voice their problems and criticise those who have wronged them (Skinner, Holland & Adhikari 1994: 267) and their structurally subordinate position in Nepali society (Enslin 1998: 276). The imagery of *duḥkha* songs conveys the suffering of the female life path in Nepal, but it is not a space for the virtues of womanhood to be

¹¹² While women's rights were addressed in the Constitution, many activists have felt there is still further scope for women's issues to be addressed, such as citizenship laws (see Shrestha, Sabin *et al.* 2014; Desouza 2015)

venerated. As Skinner, Holland and Adhikari argue, they provide an alternative viewpoint on women's social position, where the lyrics:

[...] codify in song a voice that is critical of the expected life path and of the adversities and misfortunes that it brings to women [...] The verses disclose the problems wives and daughters face, the anguish they feel, the criticisms they have of their malefactors, and the implicit or explicit protests they have against the social system that places them in their powerless and vulnerable position.

(1994: 267)

The lyrics of one *duhkha* song state the sorrow of being married off without an education.

Even though I have a desire to study further,
My mother married me off to the Karlung hills.
I have to go cut grass in the Karlung hills,
How much sorrow and sadness are in my heart.

(1994: 277)

Another communicates the suffering associated with husbands who drink and gamble away the family's resources.

Whatever money he has, he takes to the bazaar.
He searches for a place to drink alcohol...
Waiting for the husband, the night is almost gone...
The husband came with a stick at midnight.
If I say, 'Do not drink alcohol,' he threatens to bring a co-wife.

(1994: 276)

Songs prior to the first *jana andolān* of 1990 were undoubtedly already political in the sense they made a public performance of women's suffering and how much sorrow they

felt as wives, daughters and daughters-in-law. However, the songs sung during *Tīj* after 1990 up until now are emerging as more and more overtly political and in many ways are sites not only for expressing *duḥkha* but revealing discontents and desire for social change (Ahearn 1999; Holland & Skinner 2009). Holland and Skinner noted a marked difference in the political tone of the songs performed during *Tīj* between 1990 and 1991, remarking the women were especially sensitive to the political and social tensions affecting their lives at the time (Holland & Skinner 1995: 280). They assert *Tīj* groups in the past identified themselves as *didī/bahinī* (sisters), whereas post 1991 more groups of women congregated, calling themselves *bidyāthī* (students) and *parhnelekhekī* (educated women), and sang about the political parties and antigovernment activity typical of the time (Holland & Skinner 1995: 289).

The discontents that emerge through song, especially during *Tīj*, are interesting to note. Ethnomusicologists have recognised women's musical practice as a way to critique gendered power relations and participation in public life (Weidman 2014: 43). Weidman sees the notion of voicing as useful for deconstructing the dichotomy that is drawn between 'having a voice' and remaining silent or being silenced. She argues that, while voicing has been analysed in relation to speaking, interesting assertions may be derived on agency and authorship in relation to sung expression. Consequently, we must look at voices that are "highly audible and public but not agentive in a classic sense including voices that sing rather than speak" (Weidman 2014: 43). She asks whether singing can, for example, be a valid expression in some contexts where speaking is not an option.

It is not only the songs themselves that are being transformed but also the context of the performance and the women themselves. Songs of *duḥkha* are being transformed from tales of women's personal sorrow to accounts of the sorrow of being a woman in a post-conflict, politically transformed Nepal. One memorable event in Bhaktanagar occurred during *Tīj* in 2011. In the centre of Bhaktanagar sits an expansive park, simply called *ghaṇṭā ghar*, which refers to the gigantic clock tower at the western end. Under the *ghaṇṭā ghar*, *Swar* and a coalition of other prominent women's NGOs set up a large tent with a stage and speaker system. Inside, they adorned the walls with signs identifying themselves and their cause.



Figure 22: *Tij* protest for the long life of the Nepali Constitution, 2011 (Bhaktanagar).

In keeping with custom, many women attended temple to enact traditional *pūjā* for their husbands. However, this year, in addition to that, they decided they would stage a public action, where women would come together to sing and speak about advancing women’s roles in society through the Nepali Constitution, which was still being drafted. The event attracted a large crowd and much media attention.

One by one, women from prominent organisations in the district took to the stage to proclaim their feelings about women’s roles and the political process. At the time, women were concerned about having their “voices heard” with regard to legal protections and rights being provided through the constitution. Women shouted into the microphone phrases like, “We women are tired, give us our rights”, “We’re dancing for the long life of our constitution” and “Women want and deserve peace”. After the speeches, women sang songs spontaneously, like any other *Tij* festivity would have inspired them. After and during the singing, they danced for hours. The singing and dancing displayed the continuities of the festival’s traditions, but the lyrics echoed the content of the speeches, demanding that peace, freedom and rights be enshrined in the Constitution. Ordinarily, women would have gone to temple, dressed in their finest red

garments, to sing, pray and dance for the long life of their husbands. It is telling that many of them did this, but also sang, prayed and danced for themselves. In doing so, they were negotiating the practices of both the 'good woman' who fulfils her moral duties, and the 'feminist' who consciously engages with 'boldness' and 'raising voice'. The protest itself used voice to stage a public outcry, which condemned both the lengthy political process and what they saw as women's exclusion from society as citizens. Even EMA, the widows' organisation, played an integral part on the day, which was in direct defiance of the tradition that widows are excluded from festivals. At its heart, this *Tij* exemplified a contestation of the traditional positional identities and figured worlds of the ideal woman in Bhaktanagar, which places them lower than men. It allowed women of all castes, religions, marital status and positions to join and speak to public, political processes – something historically disallowed. More importantly, it utilised a significant religious tradition for married women to make a point of 'raising voice' in an effort to address Nepali women's rights across the nation. 'Boldness' in the pursuit of a desired 'modern' womanhood enabled them to renegotiate and reshape tradition, rather than rejecting it, and so claim a new form of *ijjat*.

Conclusion

As quoted in Chapter Five, Sujala was sceptical that attitudes and violent practices were changing for Nepali women. Ramila, from Bhaktanagar, was more positive. She said the emergence of women's groups and changing attitudes were altering the experiences of suffering and violence for women, through education and sharing. For Ramila, this was a direct result of raising voice, but also the solidarity this practice encouraged amongst women. She felt that:

After sharing [our problems] of course positive things come out. The problems are solved. When one woman brings her problem, we help her to solve it in many ways. Like first we ask who is guilty? Then, if it is others, we warn them not to do it [violence or discrimination] again. Or even we go through the police. And we get more closeness in sharing our problems. The people from this office [EMA] are the ones who go to solve the problem. Like one example

is one single woman came to EMA bringing her problems about land [inheritance]. The next day we went to her place and a woman scolded us with vulgar words but I shouted back and she became quiet. So little bit, it's changing.

For Ramila development provided a space to feel good about speaking out for her and others' rights. As Sujala described, Nanda did not share her fears or suffering and they "lost her". Ramila demonstrated that the practice of sharing and hearing voices is also a powerful engagement with 'raising voice' for women and further fuels their boldness. Voices have the capacity to structure feeling for actors and to channel public affect. Individual voices may be examined for the various ways in which they are felt to embody and sonically manifest specific values (Weidman 2014: 45), which in the case of my study, are the values of modernity expressed through development speak, rights and freedom. Furthermore, across a variety of different instances, the themes of boldness and voice, especially when shared, can be seen to be common practices in which women consciously engage in alternative ways of 'being modern'.

CONCLUSION

“THE WALL WON’T TUMBLE DOWN ALL AT ONCE”

For the Nepali New Year holiday, three foreign friends and I decided to hitch a ride on our pilot friend’s plane up into the Western Himalayas. Whilst there I witnessed an interesting celebration of Hindu women that gave me insight into the multiple subjectivities women inhabit, which exemplified the nuances of Nepali womanhood. The village itself, situated in the northernmost district of Province Six and a forty-five minute flight from Bhaktanagar, is small, with planes and walking the only means of transport. The pace of this remote village was quiet and relaxed, despite Coca-Cola signs, photocopy shops, mobile phone towers and other hints of modernity. From our hotel we heard loud Hindi hip-hop songs reverberating across the fields. We ventured out to investigate, following the deep, booming bass, and passed a group of men smoking, quietly celebrating the New Year. We came to the edge of the village, overlooking the valley hundreds of metres below. When we rounded a bend in the landscape, we were met with the sight of approximately a dozen women having a picnic and dancing to loud Hindi hip-hop music. The absence of men was as striking as the marginalised location and the irreverent behaviour of the women.



Figure 23: Nepali New Year Celebrations with village women and children (Photo: Orr Niv)

They invited us to join them and we danced, ate and drank alcohol with them for the rest of the afternoon. We learned the women were married and also respected teachers in the village. And yet, their demeanours were unlike any I had witnessed before. They seemed irreverent and debauched, as they laughed, screamed, danced, drank alcohol and ate meat with careless abandon. One woman could not stop laughing as she kept sneaking meat into her bag for later consumption. Another was drinking *chyān*, a type of beer made from millet, and joyously persisted in offering some to me, despite my dislike of it. They danced with exaggerated, gyrating moves of their hips and arms, emulating both Hindi and American hip-hop dance moves. The environment, as well as the behaviour within it, was of keen interest to me. That these women had chosen a space physically ‘out of the way’ (see Tsing 1993; Brunson 2013) was not accidental; their location was not only at the outskirts of the village but also obscured by trees and the undulating landscape. However, they made no effort whatsoever to disguise their celebrations; the sound could be heard all over the village, and yet no one came to interrupt.

The marginal space was significant for the women’s celebrations. Brunson argues that out-of-the-way spaces, or “‘individuals’ spatial and imaginative peripheries”, are also chief locations for cultural creativity, due to the fact they are less governed (2013: 611). Brunson’s own Kathmandu informants would seek out spaces on the peripheries of ‘social governance’ to escape the gendered pressures and social expectations they found in their own spatial ‘centres’ (2013: 612). For the women I encountered in the mountains, the selection of this site was deliberate, as privacy allowed for a greater improvisation in the “‘production of gender” (see Brunson 2013: 611). The women’s debauchery could be explained using Bahktinian notions of the ‘Carnival’ (1984), a space whereby people could challenge hegemonic hierarchy through humour, masquerades and performance (Patton & Snyder-Yuly 2012: 367). Turner’s definitions of liminality could also prove useful here (Turner 1969), as a sacred in-between space (Pielichaty 2015: 236) that allows people “‘opportunities for critical engagement, subversion of normative ways of being, and the trying out of non-dominant values and systems within public, albeit less rigid and proscriptive, spaces” (Caudwell & Rinehart 2014: 1). What was most prominent was that the space, physically and conceptually, was enticing precisely because it represented possibilities and potential for behaviour that was something ‘other’ than either the figure of ‘feminist’ or ‘daughter-in-law’.

In some senses they could be viewed as both; clearly the women were married and many had children, and because of this, had perhaps carried out performances in the past that pertained to the ‘good woman’ (see Chapter Two). While they did not strictly enact elements of the feminist as previously presented in terms of being focussed on development and practices of raising voice, they could arguably be described as ‘being modern’. They were educated and employed women, key features identified by informants as ‘modern’. They listened to hip-hop music, recorded their celebrations with video cameras and acted not as typical daughters-in-law but in more ‘masculine’ ways, such as drinking alcohol. I would argue they exhibited boldness as well, as their demeanour was audacious and extroverted. *Ijjat* would have certainly been questioned, should certain other people have witnessed them, perhaps their husbands or mothers-in-law, and it would have been courageous to undertake this behaviour.

This thesis has argued, based on ethnographic fieldwork in two urban locales in Nepal, Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, that *ijjat* is a gendered framework which formulates for largely *Khas-Parbatiya* Nepalis important local understandings, practices and subjective experiences of womanhood. *Ijjat*, the Nepali notion of honour, is intimately associated with women and their practices. It became the most useful lens through which to analyse womanhood(s) for many Nepalis. Honour, understood loosely as people’s sense of value in their own eyes, but also in the eyes of their society (Pitt-Rivers 1965: 21), has been a topic of anthropological enquiry for decades now (see Pitt-Rivers 1965, 1977; Persistiany 1965; Herzfeld 1980; Wikan 1984; Abu-Lughod 1985). I found nuanced and fascinating ways in which honour was linked with various figures of womanhood, particularly with the ways in which women are the protectors of family honour. Honour and shame, and the practices and understandings associated with them, were directly involved in a multitude of varied events in the lives of women. Marriages, sexuality, university degrees, ostracisms, promotions, violence, births and even deaths – honour and shame has a hand in all these and more. Throughout I have utilised the figures of ‘feminist’ and ‘daughter-in-law’ as devices to further analyse honour and womanhood related to modernity and tradition. ‘Feminist’ has been used to signify a woman engaging with discourses of development, freedom, equality and the wider women’s movement, which is gaining traction in Nepali civic and social life. The ‘figure of daughter-in-law’ connects the individual to local and traditional institutions, particularly marriage and the notion of the ‘good’ woman. The ‘figures of daughter-in-

law’ and ‘feminist’, and related themes, are useful and utilised by my informants as ways to inform practice and make meaning. What is clear is women are not so much fulfilling one of these roles, or indeed any other; they are fulfilling multiple nuanced subjectivities at any given time, in any given context, through processes of negotiation. I have argued that womanhood is enacted by “negotiating suitable gender practice” (Liechty 2010: 310), in my field sites and perhaps Nepal more generally. By exploring gendered subjectivities I have looked at the ways in which honour, shame, modernity and tradition intersect to shape both the ‘figured worlds’ of my field sites and also the various figures of womanhood themselves. It is within these intentional negotiations that urban Nepali womanhood is manifest. Here, the analytical dichotomy dissolves and the nuances of womanhood and gendered subjectivities come to the fore. Women occupy neither only one nor another subject position and, dependent on context, the blending of multiple subjectivities is entirely possible. Accordingly, women *can* be feminists *and* daughters-in-law.

When women do perform a subject position representative of a feminist or daughter-in-law, it is clear there are sacrifices. As Jyoti said, “It is difficult to pick one, it’s like you’re punished either way.” As I was revising drafts of my thesis, I received an email from Basanti. Years before, she had taken my hand in the back seat of a taxi and emphasised that one could *not* be a feminist *and* be a daughter-in-law. She and her husband Vishnu had moved to America and were enjoying life as inhabitants of a new place, and she especially extolled its freedoms. On a recent visit to Nepal, however, she had experienced anxiety around how to be with her affinal family and her *māitī*. To return to life as a daughter-in-law was difficult, because she had carved out a life that prioritised her freedom. Despite her earlier proclamation that a Nepali woman could not be both a feminist *and* a daughter-in-law, her email was full of longing to reap the benefits of both.

Always before going to Nepal, Vishnu and I will be having discussions about where will I be staying. I would so much be wanting to stay at my Mum and Dad's place but as I am married nobody wants me to stay there and I feel restricted during my visit when I stay where I would be staying (in-law's house). It's really frustrating that people do not understand...

The life is not like here [America] over there [Nepal]. I would not be having my freedom, transport and time as I have here. Though I have been married for 5 years I have stayed at Vishnu's parents place for a maximum of 3 months in various intervals. It's so tough for me to accept that it is my home. Whenever I stay there it still feels that I am staying there right after my marriage and there are lots of expectations for me to fulfil my role as daughter-in-law during my holidays there. The only problem is I don't know how to fulfil the expectations of being a daughter-in-law, daughter, sister, friend, cousin, etc. during such a short holiday. If only I was unmarried, life was so much easier when I came for holidays. But not anymore, as there are loads of things I need to compromise with what I want... My heart will be at home [*māitī*] and I will be at Vishnu's place... Even at Vishnu's place they would expect me to stay there for the whole day and cook in the morning and evening, or at least be together in the evening but my family wants me to come home for dinner... It's so tough to handle all this, though I understand their perspective it feels like I need to get divided in parts and scatter myself...

If it was something like America where I have my freedom to go where I want on my own and I have access to my car when I want and I could invite people I like to *my* place, holidays would be so awesome but the sad thing is the people I love are there and I am not. And isn't it disgusting that I have chosen my freedom and facilities over people I love? So here goes my life and I feel what the heck am I doing here?

Basanti, Email correspondence

Basanti's case would seem uncommon; not every Nepali has the opportunity to live and work outside Nepal and the capacity to experience such different physical contexts, in

which she can more easily explore freedom or the subject position of ‘feminist’¹¹³. Nevertheless, whether in Nepal or abroad, the concern for gaining and maintaining *ijjat* is of the utmost importance for women. As discussed in Chapter Two, *ijjat* is a complex issue that takes careful and intentional consideration in terms of gendered practice. In Basanti’s example, a layer of complexity was added, for she did not spend extended time in the affinal home accumulating *ijjat* through the actions of a live-in daughter-in-law. With moving overseas for work and education came another kind of status. She garnered *ijjat* in different ways, related to the prestige that comes from living in a “Western” country, something many informants attested to as being ‘good’. On the other hand, *lāj* was also evident in her email, as she felt disgust at her prioritisation of her freedom and life as an individual. What is most salient here is the tension that existed in both spheres and the sacrifices she made in order to attain freedom. When in America, she felt free to explore her independence and yet, experienced a level of shame for prioritising it above family. When she did negotiate the role of a daughter-in-law whilst in Nepal, she found it difficult to step back into the figured world of the ‘good woman’, precisely because of the tension she felt having become accustomed to her independence. She wanted to be both, but for her an incompatibility remained. Geographic location meant Basanti’s engagement with complex negotiations of her womanhood was in some ways more obvious than those of other informants, who were more accustomed to balancing these competing subjectivities (and others) in the contexts they moved between, which were more closely bound temporally and geographically. For others, like Jyoti or Rita, the juxtapositions between the figured worlds of feminist and daughter-in-law were not necessarily as stark. Nevertheless, the need for negotiation was the same as they stepped in and out of spaces, multiple times a day, negotiating different aspects of their subjectivities in different figured worlds.

The act of being both feminist and daughter-in-law, or a multitude of other roles, is not clear-cut and rarely carried out simultaneously. Various roles are managed, however, through a myriad of actions based on different subjectivities in diverse contexts. Basanti’s email speaks of the tension women must feel when they forge the life of their choosing. Rita also confirmed similar sentiments, when she told me women “may have to compromise many things in the name of being modern; you are tagged ‘outrageous’

¹¹³ The remittance economy suggests that this is changing, as more Nepalis move overseas for opportunities (see Seddon, Adhikari & Gurung 2002; Acharya, CP & Leon-Gonzalez 2012; Wagle 2012).

in the kind of society I am living [in].” If a woman is to be a daughter-in-law, as prescribed by gendered social norms, she has a socially sanctioned role in which she can acceptably accumulate and maintain *ijjat*. This is something many women feel good about and is a role many women see as an opportunity to make themselves and their parents proud. However, oftentimes women experience tension as a daughter-in-law brought about by traditional expectations and many women spoke of feeling “burdened” or experiencing ‘suffering’, as addressed in Chapter Five. If a woman is to be more explicitly modern, particularly by prioritising her freedom and choice, she is more vulnerable to being labelled negatively, with connotations of overly sexualised, immodest and dishonourable behaviour. Furthermore, with Basanti specifically, she forfeited time spent embedded in family relationships and her suffering was clear. This sense of sacrifice was evident in other informants’ lives, such as those who forewent love marriages, education or succumbed to, as they called them, ‘bad traditions’, like *chhāupadi*.

As modernity collides with tradition in almost every sphere in urban Nepal, Nepali women are faced with the challenges of what kinds of women they can and want to be. I have come to see this as representative of being alternatively modern. Knaft questions the validity of customary understandings of ‘modernity’ as a coherent and singular process that is universal in nature. As the world’s peoples become more entwined with capitalist influences, institutions and so forth, one might expect a greater uniformity of experience, but at the interface of the traditional with the modern, there actually occurs a maintenance of or increase in cultural diversity. “Hence, the paradox that people in different world areas increasingly share aspirations, material standards, and social institutions at the same time that their local definition of and engagement with these initiatives fuels cultural distinctiveness” (Knaft 2002b: 1). Rather than querying what traditions might be destroyed or left behind by processes of modernity and modernisation, he asks what these help to create in a specific time and place given a range of unique variable factors? Similarly, I ask how the interplay between modernity in Nepal and its historical contexts has influenced women to negotiate new ‘ways of being’, of forming subjectivities, which produce for them a meaningful, local social hybridity with both traditional and modern facets? Knaft asks what new social developments surface and what new forms of subjectivity and diversities are incited (Knaft 2002b: 1)? I argue that the ways urban Nepali womanhood is enacted, with firm

negotiations of *ijjat*, tradition and modernity in mind, *are* the new diversities, social developments and forms of subjectivity Knauft discusses. Women's sense of being modern is very much tempered with *ijjat*, which has been conventionally used to inform practices and experiences of womanhood. Women approach being modern in ways that are mediated by this cultural history (Knauft 2002b: 4), especially with regard to the meaningful framework *ijjat* provides them.

I do not pretend to be able to make definitive claims on what an alternative modern practice means for the future of Nepal's women, However, the future of *ijjat* is worth contemplating, especially in this time of abrupt social change. New possibilities are opening up for urban Nepali women as they negotiate honour and womanhood within frameworks of what it means for them to be both traditional and modern. I have argued that, in many ways, *ijjat* has proven a constraint in women's lives in my field sites. However, I recognise that this is also changing, as discourses of development and modernity are not only shifting understandings of women's rights, but also of local definitions of honour. It is now changing to the point where many are starting to see being modern or a feminist as honourable and for many women it is a source of pride (see Chaukath 2014). Not only are women feeling able to pursue education and jobs, they are raising their voices and making public demands and points about their position in society. In doing so, they are reframing what honour looks like. This process of transformation is slowly translating into real outcomes in terms of women's lives in Nepal, such as property rights, political representation in parliament and changes in attitudes to widows' rights and women's menstruation. Despite the women's movement being somewhat fractured (Acharya, M 2010; Tamang 2015), women's rights issues are, on the whole, being addressed collectively, at political, state and grass roots levels in drafting the new Constitution. In October 2015, the first female President, Bidhya Devi Bhandari, was elected by the parliament, one month after the official Constitution was finally passed. While this is a largely symbolic role (BBC 2015a), it is telling of change in the ways women are viewed, that a fifty-four-year-old widowed Chētrī woman, of the UML, could be voted into the position. As a self-described women's rights activist, she has vowed to champion women's and minority rights and has ensured that at least one third of the Nepali parliament is comprised of women (Forbes 2016). Her election and associated status attests to the real and aspirational change in women's lives that is occurring at all levels of social and civic life.

I return finally to subjectivity, which is shaped by the framework of *ijjat*. Chodorow argues multiple femininities (and masculinities) are constructed through processes whereby a person creates their personal sense of gender by means of an emotional attachment to and investment in certain gender images (Chodorow 1995: 517). The tension between the roles of the daughter-in-law and the feminist (and other subjectivities) is indicative of this; embodying a shift in the emotional attachment to and investment in the traditional and emerging modern images of womanhood. While traditional forms of *ijjat* are certainly strong, it is becoming more acceptable for gendered traditional and modern subjectivities to intersect. Jyoti stated:

You know we can't leave all our traditions behind, but slowly we will take up new ideas and incorporate them. The 'wall' won't come tumbling down all at once, but slowly slowly, if we take a hammer and take it down bit by bit, we [women] will have rights.

This 'hammering' and 'taking down of the wall' are the processes of collective change women are engaging in more frequently in Nepal, in both personal and public spheres. Significantly, they are not putting aside traditions but instead are actively negotiating and reworking them. We saw this with the reconfiguring of *Tij* in Chapter Six as *Swar* invited women to join in a familiar ritualised celebration traditionally dedicated to prayer for the long life of one's husband. Instead of engaging strictly in the customary practice, they utilised the traditional, ritualistic framework for something completely new, as they sang for women's rights to be enshrined in Nepal's new constitution.

The practice of being a woman in Bhaktanagar and Kathmandu, and in all likelihood across much of Nepal, is one of improvised, creative negotiation, ever informed by the dynamic interaction of *ijjat*, tradition and modernity. Through employing various modes of negotiation, as well as engaging with boldness, women in public and private spheres are shifting the social framework. They are gradually convincing family, community members, and themselves, that discourses of feminism, rights, and development, are indeed important aspects of their womanhood, with potential to bring them honour.

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