

In the name of 'empowerment': women and development in urban Nepal

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Contents

Abstract	v
Thesis declaration.....	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Transliteration	ix
List of acronyms and abbreviations	x
Introduction	1
Ethnographic locations and methodology	3
Situating the organisations	5
Critical perspectives on development	8
Critical perspectives on empowerment	12
Reflections on empowerment.....	18
The structure of the thesis	19
1. Contested terrains	22
Introduction	22
Modern Nepal: places and people	23
Social stratifications: caste and class	26
Class perspectives	29
Recent political, social and environmental challenges.....	31
Kathmandu: the field setting	33
Entering the field.....	34
The ethnographer as ‘mother’	38
Through the prism of a local women’s group	41
The ‘good woman’	46
The ‘good woman’ and the home.....	48
Conclusion.....	50
2. Positioning women: development, discourse, access.....	52
Introduction	52

Development in Nepal.....	53
The meaning of <i>bikas</i>	55
Development and ‘the Nepali woman’	56
Development NGOs in Nepal	60
The organisations: establishing contacts and gaining access	61
Engaging with organisations: gaining access	63
Women for Human Rights – Single Women Group (WHR)	69
A brief overview of WHR	71
Gaining access with WHR	73
Sangam	75
Gaining access with Sangam	78
The implications of access	81
Conclusion.....	83
3. Sangam: ‘working for the women’	84
Introduction	84
Why the nutrition program?	86
Staff positions.....	88
Volunteers	92
Volunteer recruitment	93
Volunteer training	98
A psychosocial approach to nutrition.....	101
The practice of the program	103
Growth Monitoring	110
Child Development Centre.....	111
Home Visits.....	114
Living on the margins	116
Case Presentations.....	120
Conclusion.....	122

4. ‘Out from the four walls’	124
Introduction	124
Who is the ‘empowered woman’?.....	125
‘We are no longer housewives’: the critical role of status	129
Constraining/enabling women: the importance of ‘support’	135
Empowering women through work: ‘We should stand on our own legs’	140
Enabling ‘economic empowerment’ through the nutrition program.....	141
Ghita’s story: ‘I feel I am in a pothole and I cannot go up’	143
Garnering male support: enabling women’s participation	147
Notions of empowerment	149
Conclusion.....	151
5. WHR: ‘Opening the iron gate’	153
Introduction	153
‘Rights-based development’	155
Nepal’s legal and political landscape and women’s rights	156
Political activism: mobilising for women’s rights	162
WHR: working for widows’ empowerment.....	163
Pursuing widow’s rights through legal channels.....	167
Skills identification program: ‘transforming’ widows	171
Empowerment and experiences of widowhood	173
Anjali’s story: ‘You have to fight with everything that comes your way’	174
Upasana’s story: ‘Nowadays, I earn for myself and will wear and eat whatever I want to’	177
Laxmi’s story: ‘My job is a medium to fight against my loneliness’	179
Jamuna’s story: ‘I will to earn for myself and not be dependent on a man’	182
Narratives of empowerment	183
Conclusion.....	184
Thesis conclusion	187
References	191

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with women and development in Kathmandu, Nepal. Development and social change-oriented goals associated with it have been firmly enmeshed in Nepal since the 1950s. The philosophy and the terms of international development—both of which are based on ‘modern’, Western models of society—are highly influential in Nepal, intertwining with sets of social relations and local history to form a nationally shared vision known as *bikas* (development) (Pigg, 1992). Particularly since the 1990s, there has been a proliferation of international and local non-governmental organisations (INGOs and NGOs), including many focusing on issues related to women. The terminology of transnational discourses of development pervades the websites and literature of women’s development organisations. In particular, the language of ‘empowerment’—a term that is entrenched in the global development discourse on women—frames the stated objectives and interventions of these organisations, suggesting that this term plays an important role in formulating projects and objectives in gender and development programs in Nepal.

In this thesis I interrogate what is being done in the name of women’s empowerment (*mahila sashaktikaran*) through an ethnographic exploration of two women’s NGOs operating in Kathmandu. Drawing on data collected during twelve months of anthropological fieldwork between October 2009 and October 2010 in Kathmandu, I examine women’s goals, understandings, and experiences of specific development encounters to explore what this global development concept, empowerment, looks like in the social spaces where women work and live. Key questions, then, are what ideas of empowerment are generated in the practice of development programs for women and what are the effects on women’s lives? My study suggests that understandings of the term empowerment are diverse, contingent and situational, depending on context and a woman’s positioning in that context at any given time. I argue that notions of ‘woman’ are critical to what it means to be empowered in this context, in terms of the organisations’ program objectives and strategies and for the women involved with these groups. I demonstrate the way in which different discourses—global discourses of women’s empowerment, local discourses of gender and development, and notions of ‘woman’ in Nepal—intersect and are intertwined in the everyday encounters and experiences of development for women in specific contexts in Kathmandu.

Thesis declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Transliteration

Nepali is written in Devanagari script. The transliteration of Nepali words and phrases in this thesis is done in Romanised form and is derived from Turner's *A Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language*, 1931. This dictionary was accessed via an online database (last updated in 2006) that is supported by the U.S Department of Education at: <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/turner/>.

List of acronyms and abbreviations

CA	Constituent Assembly
CBO	Community-based Organisation
CDC	Child Development Centre
CF	Community Facilitator
CMC	Centre for Mental Health and Counselling
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
KAP	Knowledge, Attitude and Practice
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
RHO	Rights-holder Organisation
NRs.	Nepali Rupees
SP	Sarbottam Pitho
SP+	Sarbottam Pitho Plus
SANWED	South Asian Network for ‘Widows’ Empowerment
SWC	Social Welfare Council
SWEG	Single Women Entrepreneurs’ Group
TF	Training Facilitator
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
WHR	Women for Human Rights – Single Women Group
WID	Women in Development