

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

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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