

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

Margaret Becker

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Department of Anthropology

School of Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts

The University of Adelaide

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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

# Introduction

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, replete with modernisation theory<sup>1</sup> and notions of modernity are highly influential, intertwining with sets of social relations and local history to form a nationally shared vision known as *bikas* (development) (Pigg, 1992). *Bikas* is deeply institutionalised in Nepali society, as Fujikura (2013, pp. 64-65) notes, ‘much of how people live their lives in the short and long run, is already shot through by discourses and practices of development... there is virtually no direct access to a “reality” unmediated by the discourses of development in Nepal’. Particularly since the 1990s, there has been a proliferation of organisations such as INGOs (international non-governmental organisations) and NGOs (non-governmental organisations)<sup>2</sup>, 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’<sup>3</sup>—a term that is entrenched in the global development discourse on women—frames the stated aims 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 the urban setting of Kathmandu, I examine women’s goals, understandings, and experiences of

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<sup>1</sup> Modernisation theory presumes that ‘underdevelopment’ in ‘Third World’ countries was related to the existence of traditional cultural values and attitudes, considered to be primitive and ancient, which prevent the adoption of modern innovations, attitudes and behaviour (Waisbord, n.d., pp. 2-3). Thus, the goal is to inculcate modern values and information through the transfer of knowledge, innovations and culture originating in the industrialised Western world (Waisbord, n.d., p. 3).

<sup>2</sup> W. F. Fisher (1997, p. 447) suggests that ‘The term ‘NGO’ is shorthand for a wide range of formal and informal associations. There is little agreement about what NGOs are and perhaps even less about what they should be called’.

<sup>3</sup> Empowerment is a contested terms that calls for the use of quotations marks. This holds true for other contested terms. I shall use quotation marks around these terms only on their first use.

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. While the category 'woman' is treated as self-evident in the development literature—particularly the figure of the 'third world woman' (Mohanty, 1991) as an homogenous category—my study highlights the multiple and dynamic positioning of women. I demonstrate that 'woman' is not a universal category, either conceptually or in Nepal.

My analysis shows the ways 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. Focusing an ethnographic lens on the organisations brings to the fore the ways in which the organisations and individual women incorporate and transform the global notion of empowerment in terms of local values and practices—particularly in relation to gender. In turn, it focuses attention on the importance of the notion of 'woman' and women's positioning with regard to these processes. Grounding the research in the concrete social spaces where development takes place also highlights the way in which discourses are appropriated in the negotiation of multiple identities, specific contexts and material realities, thereby revealing the complexity of the processes involved and the multiplicity of voices within the programs.

In seeking to explore the notion of empowerment through the lens of the organisations, this ethnography also presents insights into the practice of women's NGOs in Kathmandu. W. F. Fisher (1997, p. 441) suggests that focusing on what NGOs do sheds light on the multiple and fluid connections 'that enable and constrain flows of ideas, knowledge, funding, and people' (cf. Appadurai, 1990). W. F. Fisher (1997, p. 450) highlights the importance of understanding NGOs 'not as local wholes

subsumed within larger national and global political contexts’ but sites that are fragmented with myriad connections, both national and transnational. He points to the complex and wide-ranging formal and informal linkages with one another, including ‘intermediaries, governments, constituencies, communities, leaders, elites, municipalities, state institutions, other local, national and INGOs, social movements, and NGO coalitions’ (W. F. Fisher, 1997, pp. 441, 450). This is brought to bear in what follows—in the broader context of development in Nepal and in the ethnographic detail of the two organisations that form the focus of this thesis. In turn, this detail provides an understanding of what happens in specific contexts at specific times, highlighting the diversity of NGOs and showing the way in which they are neither ‘fixed... [nor] generalisable entities with essential characteristics’ (W. F. Fisher, 1997, p. 442).

Further, attending to the workings of the organisations brings into sharp focus the people involved in the programs. Long (2004, p. 26) notes the way in which processes of development, that is, ‘policy agenda, defining the problem, formulating alternatives, designing the policy, implementing it, and evaluating the results... are often visualised in a linear and logical order’. However, as Long (2004, p. 26) argues:

these processes are a lot more messy and often overlap. Each and every one of them is entangled in complex sets of evolving social practices, negotiations and political and epistemological struggles that involves a multiplicity of actors with divergent and sometimes contradictory agendas.

In the next section, I briefly set out my field site and detail the methodology undertaken for the research. I introduce the two organisations and discuss understandings of empowerment in terms of different categories of ‘woman’ and the way in which these shape program strategies.

## **Ethnographic locations and methodology**

While this thesis focuses primarily on the two organisations that I conducted research in, it is enriched by my research in other contexts in Kathmandu. Living for 12 months

in an area inhabited predominantly by Nepalis<sup>4</sup> (as opposed to expatriate-dominated areas) afforded me insights into different aspects of everyday life, many of them mundane, but nonetheless important for understanding the broader context in which women and organisations are situated. My knowledge also derived from encounters with other women's organisations in Kathmandu located in various areas of the city. These include a women's group from the community in which I resided, the heads of two women's alliances (a network of NGOs), five prominent women activists/academics working in NGOs and INGOs, and three other women's NGOs. However, with the exception of the local women's group, most of the knowledge was drawn solely from repeated interviewing and thus it was much more of a partial view in terms of the ethnographic detail of those organisations. As Miller (1997, pp. 16-17) notes, an ethnographic approach includes a commitment to 'evaluate people in terms of what they actually do, that is, as material agents working in a material world, and not merely of what they say they do'. Therefore, rather than forming the focus of my ethnography, this data will serve to support my analysis throughout the thesis.

The anthropological approach taken in this study was developed through the collection of data using ethnographic methods, including participant-observation, in-depth, open-ended interviewing, focus group discussions, life histories and genealogies. In addition, I read English-language newspapers daily, cutting out and analysing articles on gender, empowerment, and development in Nepal. During visits to NGOs, I gathered any available printed literature on the organisation to cross-reference with data collected during interviews. I spent many hours sitting, observing and listening to women, in their homes, in seminar rooms, in NGO offices, at bus stops, and in teashops—a practice that resonates with what Pigg (2013, p. 127) describes as 'patient ethnography'. She notes: 'The purpose of patient ethnography is to listen and to be in situ, a practice that opens up a space for the questioning of received certainties through a responsiveness to multiple viewpoints and contested perspectives' (Pigg, 2013, p. 127). It was also through walking that I gained insights, into the community in which I resided and Kathmandu more broadly, but particularly

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term 'Nepali' rather than 'Nepalese' throughout this thesis, however certain quotes may use the latter, more Anglicised form. Further, it is important to highlight the ambiguity regarding identification with the state of Nepal and the way in which the terms—Nepali and Nepalese—homogenise the ethnically and religiously diverse peoples of Nepal into one category (see Chapter One).

into the workings of one organisation and the practice of its program. Ingold and Lee (2006, p. 83) note the way in which the fieldwork practice of walking is a valid source of field material, opening up different perspectives and different ways of knowing.

Further, I traversed the scattered field sites of my study on public transport, thereby affording me a window, literally, onto everyday life as it was occurring on the streets of Kathmandu. As with every aspect of my fieldwork, these journeys were a multi-sensory experience. Through sight, smell, sound, and touch, the unfamiliar became less incomprehensible, which I try to convey throughout this thesis. Bloch suggests that describing these sensory experiences is important for reminding readers that most anthropological material ‘is taken from the world of non-explicit expert practice and does not only come from linear, linguistic thought’ (2006, p. 296). I place myself firmly in the encounters that I describe in order to make explicit my position as both a researcher and an actor in these fields and to highlight the inter-subjective negotiation that goes on between anthropologists and participants (Harper, 2007; Hastrup, 2004; M. Jackson, 1998). Lastly, it is important to highlight that this thesis is not a definitive or timeless account rather it is selective and historically contingent.

### **Situating the organisations**

The two organisations that form the focus of this thesis share similarities insofar as Nepali women are central to each group. Nepali women were the founders of both organisations and most staff members, all volunteers and all program participants are Nepali women, including the heads of each organisation. However, they are markedly different in terms of motivation, intention, size and the social contexts in which they operate. In particular, the women that form the target audience of each organisation—in development terms, ‘beneficiaries’—are different in terms of positioning in Nepali society. It is important to emphasise that the categories to which I refer below are not fixed but rather contested, shifting and blurred. Further, they are not the only way in which women in Nepal identify themselves or are identified. As Moore (2007, p. 17) suggests, ‘Individuals are multiply constituted subjects who take up multiple subject positions within a range of discourses and social practices’. However, these social categories are influential in terms of gender norms and therefore hold meaning in

Nepal. Moreover, in the context of the two organisations, they are important, particularly in terms of program aims and strategies.

Sangam<sup>5</sup> is a small volunteer organisation that focuses on the nutrition and wellbeing of pregnant women, post-natal mothers and young children in various locations across Kathmandu. As married mothers, these women belong to a particular social category of woman—they are ‘good women’ (Bennett, 1983; Skinner, 1990; Skinner & Holland, 1998; Stone, 1978), a cultural construct that refers to the ideal life path of women, in which marriage is central. By contrast, Women for Human Rights – Single Women Group (WHR)<sup>6</sup> is a large, prominent organisation that operates at the national level for the rights of widows through a multi-faceted strategy, including engagement with the judiciary in an effort to change laws pertaining to widows. Particularly in high-caste Hindu terms, a widow is no longer a ‘good woman’; once her husband dies she loses social standing and her position within the household. She is often ostracised and treated with disdain, although there are differences in the experiences of widowhood based on caste, ethnicity and region (Cameron, 1998).

Through detailed ethnography I show the way in which each organisation understands and uses the notion of empowerment in terms of these different social categories of women—as married mothers (Sangam) or widows (WHR). I also show how these categories shape program objectives and strategies. For the women involved with Sangam, empowerment is understood in terms of their relationships with others within existing social structures and power relations, particularly gender relations, within their households and communities. Empowering women in this context does not involve overtly challenging these structures; rather it is a process of negotiation. Becoming involved with Sangam is a starting point for many women and the first of many negotiations. Indeed, most women need permission from their husbands to participate in Sangam’s programs, be it as a staff member, volunteer or recipient. While Sangam’s program is ostensibly concerned with women in terms of their role as mother, my study shows that involvement with Sangam enabled women, albeit not all

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<sup>5</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>6</sup> As the largest and most prominent organisation in Nepal focusing on widows a pseudonym would not protect the identity of this organisation. However, with the exception of Lily Thapa, who has a high profile in Nepal and South Asia, I use pseudonyms to protect the identities of other respondents quoted in this thesis.

women, to bring about changes in their lives that they value, some of which could transform social structures and gender relations, however small and incremental. Nevertheless, it is also the case that some aspects of Sangam's program reinscribes the dominant gender ideology and the power relations it is based upon.

Empowerment in the context of WHR, by contrast, involves overtly challenging the dominant gender ideology; it is seen as critical to improving the status of widows in Nepal. WHR uses the term empowerment in terms of the gender rhetoric embedded in the global development discourse on women to develop a feminist awareness and political agenda and, in turn, to legitimise its claims against the state, particularly through legal action. Featuring in this discourse is the image of the homogenous 'third world woman', as ignorant, oppressed and victim of patriarchal traditional practices. Critical to WHR's objective to empower widows is engagement with the courts to change laws that discriminate against widows. This is seen as the first step to the empowerment of widows as a collective group and regarded by WHR as necessary for individual widows to then be able to bring about changes in their own lives. For WHR, the notion of empowerment is key to a multi-pronged strategy that aims to enact change at the political and societal levels (i.e. discriminatory and exclusionary laws and societal beliefs) through legal mobilisation and advocacy, and change at the level of individual widows, beginning with improving confidence and self-esteem and creating an awareness of widows' rights. Thus, in the context of WHR, empowerment is understood as both a strategic political tool to improve the status of widows as a collective group and an individual process, wherein widows would then be able to harness the power of the collective to act on their own behalf.

In addition to the categories of 'woman' highlighted above, there is another rendering of 'woman' in Nepal that continues to be highly influential—the image of 'the Nepali woman' (Tamang, 2002). Women have been constructed as both underdeveloped and therefore in need of development and as agents of change, fundamental to the development of Nepal and thus duty-bound to become developed. In this construct, the roles and expectations of women stand in contrast to those of the 'good woman'. Throughout my fieldwork, women in various contexts—not just in the context of the two organisations that form the focus of this thesis—grappled with the tensions between the various categories of 'woman'. I show the way in which the notion of

‘the Nepali woman’ manifested differently in the context of each organisation, in terms of program strategies and in women’s understandings and experiences of development and empowerment.

In this thesis I draw on scholarship from two distinct but interrelated bodies of research: the anthropology of development and feminist scholarship on gender and empowerment. Both have been influential in helping me understand the insights that emerged from my fieldwork. The literature on these topics is vast and I do not attempt to present a thorough overview of this work. Rather, I address each separately and briefly discuss a number of points from this literature in terms of how they relate to key issues raised in this thesis.

### **Critical perspectives on development**

There is extensive anthropological scholarship on development,<sup>7</sup> including a substantial body of critical anthropological writings on development interventions.<sup>8</sup> The emphasis on the production and reproduction of development discourse, in a Foucauldian<sup>9</sup> sense, has been highly influential in these analyses (Arce & Long, 2000, p. 23), particularly the work of Escobar (1995). Critical anthropological perspectives of development view it as a historically specific configuration of power and knowledge (see Crush, 1994; Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 1992; Ferguson, 1994; Hobart, 1993), although there are many variations within this position. In this approach, development is conceived of as a Western-generated idea, which, through the discourse and practices of development, reproduces a power asymmetry through the notion of the ‘Third World’, thereby creating ‘an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about, and the exercise of power over’ this region—described by Escobar as the ‘development gaze’ (1995, pp. 9, 155).

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<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive overview on anthropological perspectives of development see Grillo (1997).

<sup>8</sup> Crewe and Harrison (1998, p. 14) note the way in which development intervention has been widely criticised, particularly for the way in which it has ‘increased poverty, environmental degradation, and inequality in many parts of the world’.

<sup>9</sup> According to Grillo (1997, p. 12): ‘A discourse (e.g. of development) identifies appropriate and legitimate ways of practising development as well as speaking and thinking about it’.

Of critical concern is ‘understanding how Western science and development models enrol, discipline and transform forms of knowledge rooted in other cultural traditions’ (Arce & Long, 2000, p. 23). Hobart (1993) argues that there are two opposing kinds of knowledge—Western scientific knowledge, upon which development has been historically based, and ‘indigenous’ or ‘local’ knowledge(s), which is suppressed and undervalued by the Western paradigm (Grillo, 1997, p. 13). To an extent, these notions have been breaking down over the past twenty years as more attention has been paid to local knowledge. However, in the context of Nepal these categories are relevant, although fluid. Further, Escobar (1995, p. 44), in one of the most widely read and debated books in this literature, highlights a key premise of this perspective: ‘development was—and continues to be for the most part—a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach, which treated peoples and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of “progress”’.

The concern with discourse has been regarded as important to the anthropology of development (Grillo, 1997, p. 11). Arce and Long (2000, p. 23), pointing to Grillo and Stirrat (1997), state that the focus on power and knowledge ‘finally opened up the discussion concerning the significance of Western hegemonic views and practice in the representation of the Third World and its ‘problems’’. Nevertheless, it is not without critique. Grillo (1997, p. 20) suggests that while the idea of the ‘development gaze’ has validity, it has limits, noting that it tends to regard development as a ‘monolithic enterprise, heavily controlled from the top, convinced of the superiority of its own wisdom and impervious to local knowledge, or indeed common-sense experience, a single gaze or voice which is all-powerful and beyond influence’ (cf. Crewe & Harrison, 1998, p. 18; Fujikura, 2013; Klenk, 2004).

Grillo (1997, p. 22) points to the multiplicity of voices that have always been present within development, ‘even if some voices are more powerful than others’. Grillo (1997, p. 23) argues that anthropological accounts illustrate ‘the variegated and multi-vocal nature of the development process’ (for example, see Gardner, 1997; Marsden, 1994a, 1994b) and its multi-sited nature (cf. Marcus, 1995). Further, Arce and Long (2000, p. 23) suggest that the emphasis on knowledge as a binary opposition between Western and non-Western epistemologies and practice fails to consider what Long and Long (1992, p. 26) describe as ‘diverse and discontinuous configurations of

knowledge', which come to the fore in development encounters. Moreover, Grillo (1997, p. 25) notes the way in which anthropological studies have long paid attention to 'indigenous' or 'local' concepts of development, exploring the ways in which people define and understand the processes that affect them (for examples on Nepal see Pigg, 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1996).

Long (2004, p. 15) suggests that social interface analysis is useful for understanding the 'multiple social realities' ('the different meanings and interpretations of means and ends attributed by the different actors'), and the diversity of social practices and bodies of knowledge involved in development. He argues that this approach 'helps to deconstruct the concept of planned intervention so that it is seen for what it is – namely, an on-going, socially constructed and negotiated process, not simply the execution of an already-specified plan of action with expected outcome' (1999, p. 4). Interface analysis highlights the way in which the implementation of policy is not simply a top-down process, as is often suggested, 'since initiatives may come as much from below as from above' (Long, 1999, p. 4). Focusing on intervention practice allows for a 'focus on the emergent forms of interaction, procedures, practical strategies, and types of discourse and cultural categories present in specific contexts' (Long, 1999, p. 4). This analytical approach is useful for understanding the complex findings of my research with Sangam and WHR and for highlighting the interconnected processes of development and discourse translation, adaptation and transformation.

Escobar's view of development is compelling to many, including Hertzog, who, in her book on 'gender development' in rural Nepal, suggests that 'gender rhetoric in development discourses serves as lip service for the purpose of appeasing vocal feminists' demands or for concealing ulterior commitments to more powerful partners' (2011, p. 21). Hertzog's book is based on insights she gained while working as an applied anthropologist on an irrigation project with a gender component. Based on this research, Hertzog calls for the categorical rejection of gender development projects (and all development projects), noting the way in which they 'serve those in power and not those who they claim to be serving and consequently abandoning' (2011, pp. 21, 14). Nepali scholars, particularly those writing on the wider women's movement in relation to development NGOs (for example Rajbhandari, 2009;

Tamang, 1999, 2002), share Hertzog's critique of development as serving those in power, particularly high-caste, middle-class women. In terms of development more generally, I observed a cynicism in the local media and in conversation with Nepali people towards the aid industry in Nepal for serving elites, or as one participant put it, 'giving more to those who already have more'.<sup>10</sup>

Further, Hertzog points to a crucial element in Escobar's argument, which I also observed during encounters with women's NGOs in Kathmandu. Escobar (1995, p. 41) argues that development discourse identifies 'problems' and 'clients' in need of interventions and strategies produced in the West, for example 'the underdeveloped', the 'poor', and the 'illiterate'. In this discourse, the category of 'woman' is also constituted as an abstract, homogenous category, as a 'client' and a 'problem', a rendering of 'woman' that features in the notion of 'the Nepali woman' in need of development—and, as mentioned earlier, is used by WHR. Hertzog (2011, p. 24) maintains that 'this image is conveniently employed by agencies that profit from women's alleged collective backwardness'. However, as my research with WHR demonstrates, some organisations engage with this image as a strategic tool to develop a political agenda.

Lastly, while Hertzog (2011, p. 14) contends: 'Women cannot be helped by development projects, certainly not in terms of changing gendered power structures', my study presents a different picture—one that highlights that change is indeed taking place, although it is far slower and more complex than development discourses envisage. Further, my study illustrates that when women are central to the development intervention, rather than comprising a component of the program, a different picture emerges. There are anthropological studies on development in Nepal that also depart from Hertzog's view, including Fujikura's (2013) work, which focuses on development in urban and rural Nepal, although not specifically programs concerned with gender. Some of his research findings resonate with mine, particularly that 'individual and collective actions in Nepal... *were made possible* by some of the cognitive and institutional resources made available through the project of development... within a terrain *already reconfigured* by the activities of development'

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<sup>10</sup> This resonates with Pigg's observations (2013, p. 129).

(2013, pp. 13-14; original emphasis). Further, Fujikura (2013, p. 14) argues that individual and collective actions ‘are often made possible by their having taken seriously the ideas of development’, an insight that emerged in my research with women in Kathmandu. Indeed, for many women involved with my research, the notion of empowerment had genuine currency that cannot be dismissed as insignificant or merely hegemonic discourse.

### **Critical perspectives on empowerment**

Ebrahim (2001, p. 80) suggests that development discourse refers to how development is described and discussed and also the way in which it is thought about and practiced. Ebrahim (2001, p. 80) points to the way in which these assumptions and practices are reflected in conversation, in text, in national and international development policies, and in actual development projects. Further, Ebrahim (2001, p. 80) purports that ‘an analysis of a discourse... involves investigating the formation of that discourse to identify the assumptions and rules peculiar to it, how it operates, as well as how it changes over time’. It is not my intention to provide a thorough exploration of the multiple critiques and debates that pertain to the concept of empowerment, particularly in relation to women’s empowerment in development. Rather, I wish to elucidate the complexity of the term and point to the underpinning assumptions that inform it in order to then consider the ways in which the concept is brought to bear in the contexts of Sangam and WHR.

Eade (2010, p. ix) notes the way in which development discourse, or as she puts it, ‘Development speak’ is ‘simultaneously descriptive and normative, concrete and yet aspirational, intuitive and clunkily pedestrian, capable of expressing the most deeply held convictions or of being simply ‘full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’’. Concepts that feature in the lexicon of development discourse—such as ‘empowerment’, ‘participation’ and ‘poverty reduction’—have been described as ‘buzzwords’; a word that has ‘a multitude of meanings and nuances, depending on who is using it and in what context’ (Eade, 2010, p. viii). Cornwall and Brock (2005, p. 1043) point to the important role buzzwords play in ‘framing solutions’ in international development policy. They suggest that ‘words that once spoke of politics

and power have come to be reconfigured in the service of today's one-size-fits-all development recipes, spun into an apoliticised form that everyone can agree on' (2005, p. 1043). Cornwall (2010, p. 2) points out that 'development's buzzwords are not only passwords to funding and influence...they are more than the mere specialist jargon that is characteristic of any profession'. She argues that these words work to place the sanctity of development's goals 'beyond reproach' (2010, p. 2). For Rist (2010, p. 22), 'development' has become a modern shibboleth, an essential password for anyone who wishes to improve their standard of living'. Further, Cornwall (2010, p. 2), drawing on Rist, notes the way in which 'the very taken-for-granted quality of 'development'', and many of the terms used in development discourse, 'leaves much of what is actually done in its name unquestioned'—something that an ethnographic study such as mine is well placed to address.

Batliwala (2010, p. 111; original emphasis) states that 'of all the buzzwords... *empowerment* is probably the most widely used and abused'. While the concept of empowerment can be traced back as far as the Protestant Reformation in Europe, the notion of women's empowerment emerged during the 1980s out of global feminist debates and critiques regarding the prevailing models in development (Batliwala, 2010, p. 112). Activists and social movements were inspired by Freire's (1972) 'conscientisation' pedagogical approach and ideas about the development of critical consciousness (Cornwall, 2014, p. 2). Nevertheless, this framework failed to address gendered power and the subordination of women (Batliwala, 2010, p. 113). Other important influences on activists and social movements were Gramsci's 'subalterns' and his notion of hegemony, social construction theory, and post-colonial theory (Batliwala, 2010, p. 113). By incorporating a gender dimension to Freire's theories—by recognising women as part of Gramsci's 'subalterns'—the social construction of gender and gender subordination was introduced as 'a fundamental category of analysis in the practice of social change and development' (Batliwala, 2010, p. 113). A distinctive approach evolved amongst feminist movements from developing countries, particularly in Latin America and South Asia, where 'consciousness-raising' was a critical strategy for 'radical organising and movement building for

gender equality’ (Batliwala, 2010, p. 113).<sup>11</sup> By the beginning of the 1990s, the term empowerment was firmly entrenched in development jargon—used most widely in terms of women, emerging as a ‘political and transformatory idea for struggles that challenged not only patriarchy, but also the mediating structures of class, race, ethnicity... [and] caste and religion – which determined the nature of women’s position and condition in developing societies’ (Batliwala, 2010, p. 113).

However, the early successes of women’s empowerment in international development policy and practice led to ‘its conversion into not only a buzzword but a magic bullet for poverty alleviation and rapid economic development’ (Batliwala, 2010, p. 116). Development agencies began to use the concept to replace earlier terminology, including ‘people’s participation’ and ‘women’s development’ (Batliwala, 2010, p. 113). Since the adoption of the term empowerment by development institutions, feminists and women’s advocates have been critical of the way in which it has been turned into a ‘technocratic category’ (i.e. an attempt at a technical solution) (Cornwall, Harrison, & Whitehead, 2007b, p. 3), thereby effectively narrowing the strategy ‘despite the complexity of gender relations and the contextual variations in the processes and outcomes related to gender inequalities’ (Subrahmanian, 2007, p. 112). Further, feminist critics argue that including women in poverty reduction fails to address the gendered root causes of their discrimination and poverty while ‘assuming that targeting women and women’s participation would lead to their empowerment’ (Wallace & Hayes, 2010, p. 541).

Cornwall (2014, p. 3) highlights three significant insights that emerged from feminist analyses on empowerment from the 1990s. First, empowerment is concerned with changing power relations, ‘not just about people gaining more confidence to be able to act on the world with more impact, but... recognising that the inequalities of everyday lives are neither natural nor acceptable’ (Cornwall, 2014, p. 3). Second, empowerment must be understood as relational—‘it is about the relations of power in which people are located, within which they may experience disempowerment or come to acquire

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<sup>11</sup> Raising the consciousness of women in Nepal remains a key strategy of activists and women’s NGOs in Kathmandu.

the ability' to make strategic choices<sup>12</sup> (Cornwall, 2014, p. 3). The third insight conceives of empowerment as a process (individual or collective)—as neither a fixed state or an end-point or 'a measurable outcome to which targets can be attached' (Cornwall, 2014, p. 3).

Batliwala (2007, p. 89) points out that, for a term that was coined to represent a political notion, empowerment has been thoroughly 'mainstreamed'<sup>13</sup>, thereby 'divesting the idea of its cultural specificity, its political content, and generalising it into a series of rituals and steps that simulate its original elements, but lacking the transformative power of the real thing' (cf. Leve, 2007, p. 141). Similarly, Kabeer (1999, p. 435) notes the way in which the mainstreaming of women's empowerment (i.e. an instrumentalist approach), combining feminist goals such as gender equality with the broad set of measurable goals of policy makers, has resulted in the loss of this political edge. However, Kabeer also highlights some of the positive effects of mainstreaming the notion of empowerment. She argues that, in the context of 'competing claims for scarce resources', this instrumentalist approach has made greater inroads into the development agenda than the intrinsic argument for women's empowerment as an end in itself (1999, p. 435). Further, Kabeer (1999, p. 435) notes that the measurement of empowerment, despite its vagueness, 'appears to put the concept on more solid and objectively verifiable grounds'. In the domain of development policy, quantifiable results are viewed as critical to demonstrating the implications of intervention objectives and policy goals. Development projects typically require predictable indicators and verifiable measurements in order to justify the existence of such programs to donors. However, establishing a comprehensive definition of the concept remains difficult, which in turn, has implications for how it is measured (Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006; Batliwala, 2007; Kabeer, 1994; Leve, 2001, 2007; A. Sharma, 2008).

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<sup>12</sup> 'Choice' is central to Kabeer's (1999) conceptualisation of power, which in turn, is critical to her notion of 'empowerment'. Empowerment, Kabeer (1999, p. 437) states, is 'inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability'. She argues that 'power is... the *ability to make choices*: to be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choice' (1999, p. 436; original emphasis).

<sup>13</sup> Batliwala (2010, p. 113) highlights the fuzziness of gender mainstreaming, noting the way in which 'it can be defined in a number of ways, all of which are contested in one way or another'. Nevertheless, there is relatively widespread agreement about its aim, which Woodford-Berger (2007, p. 124) describes as seeking to 'produce transformatory processes and practices that will concern, engage and benefit women and men equally by systematically integrating explicit attention to issues of sex and gender into all aspects of an organisation's work'.

Alsop et al. (2006, p. 1) note that interpretations of the meaning of empowerment are many and varied—both analytically and operationally—and can be inconsistent even within one organisation. A. Sharma (2008, p. 2) points to the way in which the term ‘condenses multiple meanings; it is reinvented and practiced in different institutional settings and in different spatial and historical locations by variously positioned actors’. Further, the complexity and multidimensionality of empowerment complicates the establishment of approaches to measure and analyse the notion. For example, when it is conceptualised ‘as an individual attribute rather than a collective practice, empowerment is a term that must necessarily vary according to personal proclivities’ (Leve, 2001, p. 114), thereby presenting challenges for identifying meaningful quantitative and qualitative indicators. Alsop et al. (2006, p. 1) highlight another complication for measuring the term, noting that ‘individuals or groups may have different experiences of empowerment’ depending on the context—for example, as social actors in society; economic actors in the market; or civic actors in the state. Nonetheless, there have been attempts to conceptualise frameworks for measuring empowerment—for instance The World Bank publication by Alsop et al. (2006)—however, there are others who question the effectiveness of such formulations (see Crewe & Harrison, 1998, p. 52). These critiques point to the inherent complexity and contextual specificity of the term, while pointing to the value of finely grained ethnographies of specific contexts to elucidate why and how change happens.

A key criticism of the mainstreaming of empowerment refers to the way in which the radical transformatory vision has been brought to serve neo-liberal economic ends (Batliwala, 2010, p. 114; cf. ; Cornwall, 2007; Kabeer, 1999; Leve, 2001; Rankin, 2001; A. Sharma, 2008).<sup>14</sup> It was during the 1990s, Batliwala (2010, p. 212) suggests, that the concept of empowerment was transformed ‘from a collective to an individualistic process’ and co-opted by conservative and reactionary political ideologies in their quest to divest the welfare state of its ‘purported power and control by ‘empowering’ communities to look after their own affairs’. A. Sharma and Gupta (2006, p. 21) describe the deployment of discourses of ‘empowerment’ and ‘participation’ as ‘strategies of governance’ in which people are tutored ‘to build their capacities and become self-dependent, responsible citizens who can take care of their

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<sup>14</sup> According to Rose (2006, p. 155), neo-liberalism ‘maintains the view that failure of government to achieve its objectives is to be overcome by inventing new strategies of government that will succeed’.

own welfare and govern themselves'.<sup>15</sup> Such strategies of governance have featured in development in Nepal since 1990, when the state adopted a multi-party democratic system and engaged in market liberalization and the downsizing of its bureaucracy (Leve, 2001, pp. 108-109).

Anthropological analyses highlight a neo-liberal approach in women's development projects in rural Nepal. In her analysis of a rural women's literacy project in Nepal, Leve shows the way in which the notion of empowerment was defined by the project 'as an individual instrumental rationality, a capacity conducive to economic development' (2001, p. 115). In terms of the project objectives, 'empowering women' involved the cultivation of a certain personhood that conforms with the ideals of neo-liberal thought—'autonomous, assertive, self-consciously gendered subjects...[able to] recognise and represent their own interests (which are assumed to be bound up with increased production for the market, greater agency as consumers, and further 'development')' (2001, p. 141). Rankin also points to a 'neo-liberal logic' in her study of microcredit in Nepal, describing the subject in the microcredit concept as 'rational economic woman'—'women entrepreneurs with cultural propensities to invest wisely and look after their families and communities' (2001, p. 20). The neo-liberal ideals that Leve and Rankin highlight are reflected to varying degrees in the contexts of Sangam and WHR.<sup>16</sup> However, these ideals are appropriated and localised in relation to the social contexts in which the programs are operating and women's locations within those contexts. In turn, individual women (staff, volunteers and recipients) view these ideals through the lens of their own positionings within that context.

Strikingly, regardless of the context, economic empowerment featured in women's narratives as critical to what it means to be empowered and bring about positive changes in their lives.<sup>17</sup> While economic empowerment has come to play an increasingly prominent role in contemporary development policy, in the 'belief that

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion on neo-liberalism and empowerment see Rose (2006) and Cruikshank (1999).

<sup>16</sup> Further, they resonated with ideas about being 'developed' and 'modern' that people articulated in various contexts during my fieldwork, particularly in my focus group discussions with young female Bachelors and Master students. Notably, they featured in talk about 'freedom' and 'choice', notions that are strongly connected to post-1990 Nepal.

<sup>17</sup> These ideals were observable in other Kathmandu-based women's development NGOs I encountered as well as in interactions and conversations with Nepalis during informal everyday encounters outside of the organisational setting.

women's business success is enough to overcome all other barriers to equality' (Cornwall, 2014, p. 5), my study shows that it is not the 'magic bullet' solution promoted by mainstream development discourse. Further, if we look at the mainstream discourse on empowerment, we see a relatively straightforward understanding of the notion, as Cornwall (2007, p. 28) highlights, and it is worth quoting at length:

...spurred by an injection of capital, such as a small loan, women come to enter a pathway to individual self-improvement and self-actualisation, on which they gain capacities and confidence. With this, the narrative goes, they earn the possibilities for greater autonomy, and the ability to exert greater control over their lives... Given responsibility both for dealing with their own and their households' poverty, women living in poverty, we are told, will use their agency to make the choices that permit them to climb out of destitution and attain better lives.

However, the narrative above fails to account for context and the reality of women's lives, including the constraints to bring about changes in their lives (i.e. their disempowerment)<sup>18</sup> but also the opportunities and strategies to do so. It does not consider the ideologies, norms and rules to which women in this context are subject. Scholars have highlighted the need to be alert to the importance of context in shaping processes of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999, p. 460; Klenk, 2004, p. 65). Further, as I mentioned earlier, discourses of development do not necessarily determine the ways in which terms and categories will be negotiated and produced in the local contexts where development takes place. As Seidel argues, 'Discourse is a site of struggle. It is a terrain, a dynamic linguistic and, above all, semantic space in which social meanings are produced or challenged' (cited in Grillo, 1997, p. 12).

## **Reflections on empowerment**

Coming to terms with how women in my research understand and engage with the notion of empowerment has been a difficult process. The ubiquity of the word in

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<sup>18</sup> Feminists use the term disempowerment to underscore 'the active processes of subordination carried out by people in positions of dominance and by social, political, and economic structures' (A. Sharma, 2008, p. 26).

framing development goals and strategies for women demonstrates the currency of the term in Nepal. Indeed, the ideological and moral value of the concept in this setting cannot be overstated. However, as I started to apply an analytical lens to my ethnographic material in the write up of this thesis, the difficulty in making a straightforward argument became apparent. The aims and goals of Sangam and WHR are clearly framed by the term empowerment, however my ethnographic detail of the practice of the programs offered only glimpses of the global discourse of empowerment. Further, the stated aims and objectives of Sangam and WHR reflect multiple meanings of empowerment within each organisation, as both a destination, a goal with quantifiable indicators, and as a means to achieve that goal. Notably, senior staff members of each NGO engaged with the term during interviews. Yet the word rarely came up during program activities, even though these programs were critical to the overall objective of women's empowerment. Moreover, it becomes further complicated when the focus turns to individual women, whose lived realities do not resonate with the mainstream discourse on empowerment, although there are moments and situations where it is possible to identify some aspects of this discourse.

In this thesis I demonstrate the complexity of the notion of empowerment through an ethnographic account of the practice of the programs that offers a way to explore women's understandings and experiences of the concept in the lived realities of their everyday lives. Situating the analysis in the context of Sangam and WHR allows for the concepts and strategies as envisioned and practiced by women involved with these organisations to emerge. Thus, rather than taking the concept of empowerment and analysing the way in which it 'fits' into women's conceptions and goals, this thesis focuses on what the term empowerment signifies to them.

### **The structure of the thesis**

In this section, I outline how I have structured my thesis. In Chapter One I situate Nepal, with a brief overview of its geography, ecology and its people, in terms of categories of distinction, including ethnicity, religion, language, caste and class. I introduce Kathmandu and then provide a reflexive account of entering the field. I detail my encounters with a women's group from this community, which were

formative to my understanding of being a woman in Kathmandu, before turning to the final section of the chapter, which focuses on the notion of the ‘good woman’—a prescriptive life-path for women that dominates gender ideology in Nepal. As I show in subsequent chapters, a woman’s positioning in relation to this ideology is critical to understandings and experiences of empowerment, in terms of the organisations’ program objectives and strategies and for the women involved with these groups.

In Chapter Two my focus turns to development, beginning with an overview of the history of development in Nepal and the notion of *bikas* (development). I highlight the complex history of gender and development in Nepal, outlining the notion of ‘the Nepali woman’, a construction of women that is highly influential in gender and development in Nepal. I touch on the development approaches adopted by the Nepali state in relation to gender and briefly discuss NGOs in Nepal. The second half of the chapter is concerned with the preliminary planning and early stages of making contact with organisations. Through ethnographic detail of gaining access with WHR and Sangam, I highlight issues of access and the challenges associated with conducting long-term fieldwork in and on organisations. In turn, it is through these accounts that I introduce the organisations.

In Chapters Three and Four I explore the ways in which empowerment is imagined and experienced in the context of Sangam through an ethnographic account of the organisation and the practice of a nutrition program. Together the chapters form a case study of Sangam. Chapter Three is a descriptive account of Sangam, including the people involved with the organisation and program activities. Through ethnographic detail I illustrate the ways in which differently positioned women implement, receive and interpret the program, which, in turn, highlights the way in which development interventions are highly contested (Long, 1999). In Chapter Four I focus an analytical lens on the nutrition program in terms of empowerment. I bring to the fore women’s expressed understandings and experiences of the notion and highlight the ways in which Sangam sought to realise its stated objectives of empowerment through program activities.

In Chapter Five I focus a critical lens on WHR to examine how empowerment is understood and experienced in this context. I present an overview of WHR, highlighting the people involved with the organisation and the context in which it operates. I examine WHR's multi-pronged strategy aimed at empowering widows, including its legal engagement, which is a key means through which the NGO addresses the discrimination of widows and pursues their rights. I highlight WHR's programs aimed at enabling widows to access their rights. Women's narratives of widowhood reveal insights into the lived experience of widows, including the constraints women face in bringing about positive changes in their lives. Parts of this chapter have been published previously in *Asian Studies Review*, 39(2), pp. 247-265, 'Constructing SSLM: insights from women's struggles for women's rights in Nepal' (Becker, 2015).

This thesis contributes to the literature on empowerment, providing an ethnographic account of women's empowerment from urban Nepal that disrupts mainstream conceptions of empowerment and rather, offers an alternative understanding that is grounded in the complexities of everyday life.

# Chapter 1

## Contested terrains

### Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the various contexts in which my research was situated. It is divided into separate sections, beginning with a broad overview of Nepal. I start with Nepal's geography and ecology and then consider its peoples in terms of categories of distinction, including ethnicity, religion, language, caste and class. Each of these is complex and worthy of detailed exploration in its own right, as reflected in the many anthropological works on these topics, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis to do so. Rather, I present an overview of these categories while attempting to point to the complexities inherent in each, because they feature throughout this thesis, particularly in relation to the experiences of being a woman in Nepal. It is noteworthy that categorisation has been an important part of modern nation-building processes in Nepal as various governments have sought to unify Nepal's diverse communities. Pigg (1992, p. 500) has pointed to Nepal's ongoing struggle to create a coherent narrative of national unity and, in 2016, it is still a work-in-process, as the concluding part of this section highlights.

My focus then shifts to Kathmandu, where I begin with a brief outline of the city before moving to an experiential account of entering the field in order to place myself firmly in this setting and give a sense of 'being there' (Okely & Callaway, 1992). The fieldwork was shaped not only by encounters with women's organisations but by my everyday interactions and observations in both the wider setting of Kathmandu and, more specifically, the locale that I called home for twelve months. It was in this local setting where I overcame my unexpected culture shock and began to understand everyday life—the flow of people and goods and the rhythm of day-to-day living. It was also the location where I first became aware of how others in the community perceived me, where I was positioned with a particular identity: 'mother', a positioning that was critical to my understanding of 'woman' in Kathmandu. As Okely and Callaway (1992, p. 16) note, 'reflexive knowledge of fieldwork is acquired

not only from an examination of outside categories, but also from the more intangible inner experience'. The final section of the chapter focuses on an encounter early in the fieldwork with a local women's organisation that brought to the fore insights about being a woman in Nepal—specifically the notion of the 'good woman' (Bennett, 1983; Skinner, 1990; Skinner & Holland, 1998; Stone, 1978). Based on Hindu ideologies, this prescriptive life path sets out the ideal trajectory for women, circumscribing their social roles, although there are differences based on caste, class, age, and ethnicity. The final section of the chapter discusses the implications this positioning has for women, particularly in terms of the home.

### **Modern Nepal: places and people**

The Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal is a small, landlocked, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, predominantly Hindu nation of over 26 million people (Government of Nepal, 2012a). Nepal has existed as a unified nation-state in its current geographic form for a relatively short time. In the 1760s Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723-75), king of Gorkha, a small district in Western Nepal, embarked on a series of conquests that brought about the territorial integration of the Kathmandu Valley and most of the territory of present-day Nepal under one administrative rule (Des Chene, 1996, p. 263; Liechty, 2003, pp. 40-41). However, the legacy of the original state remains, reflected in the discrete communities and villages and the vast differences between the culture at the country's capital, Kathmandu, and the multiple and varied local cultures at the district and village levels (Justice, 1986, p. 20). Inequalities exist in 'social identity based on caste, ethnicity, region of origin (hills or plains), and gender', which significantly 'determines access to and control over economic, political, and cultural resources' (Pradhan & Shrestha, 2005, p. 2). Gender crosscuts all of the above categories, including religious beliefs, although it varies by caste and ethnicity (Pradhan & Shrestha, 2005, p. 12).

Nepal is bordered to the north by China and the south, east and west by India, spanning approximately 1000 kilometres from east to west, and 500 kilometres from north to south. Ecologically diverse, it can be divided into three distinct regions running parallel to one another from east to west. The northern mountain region is

dominated by the *Himalayas*, including more than 250 peaks over 6000 metres above sea level. This region is sparsely populated due to the rugged topography and extreme climate. The central hill region is the most densely populated region, sitting at an altitude of between 1000-4000 metres above sea level and featuring fertile foothills, valleys and rivers, including the Kathmandu Valley. Moving south, the tropical and sub-tropical sea-level plains of the Terai region consists of farmland and jungle and experiences extreme heat. Until recently Nepal was organised into five development regions that were subdivided into fourteen administrative zones and then 75 districts. Following the schedule of the recently promulgated constitution in September 2015, Nepal is now divided into seven provinces that are defined by grouping together the existing 75 districts. Each district contains a district headquarters that is run by District Development Committee (DDC) and a municipality office, which is overseen by the Federal Government. The districts are further subdivided into localities known as village development committees (VDC) and municipalities. Each VDC is further divided into wards, which are can be understood as suburbs.

The ethnic composition of Nepal's population is based on the migration and settlement of people over time (Whelpton, 2005). Anthropologists have highlighted the complexity of ethnic identity, as J. Fisher (2007, p. 164) notes:

[Anthropologists<sup>19</sup>]...have moved far from notions of ethnicity as primordially given and constituted by objectively constructed accounts of language, dress, kinship, religion, and so on. Their views of culture as fluid, flexible, constructed, and contested are widely accepted in the anthropological community.

For the purposes of this overview, however, the people of Northern Nepal and the North-eastern region are of Tibeto-Burmese descent, those residing in the Kathmandu Valley belong to the Newar group, and the people of Southern Nepal are of Indo-Aryan descent (Bista, 1967). Nevertheless, internal migration—most recently due to the political upheaval of the civil war (1995-2005) but also because of work opportunities—both horizontal (Hill to Hill) and vertical (Mountain and Hill to Terai) has changed the spatial distribution of people in Nepal (Government of Nepal, 2012a). Further, emigration has substantially affected demographics in Nepal with the 2011

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<sup>19</sup> Fisher cites W. F. Fisher (2001) and Guneratne (2002).

census recording an absent population of almost two million people. There are 125 caste/ethnic groups, the largest comprising Chhetri (16.6%) and Hill Brahman (Bahun) (12.2%)<sup>20</sup> (Government of Nepal, 2012a, p. 4). While Nepali<sup>21</sup> has been the official language since the late 1920s (Burghart, 1996, p. 274) and is reportedly spoken by 44% of the population, the country is linguistically diverse with 123 spoken languages (Government of Nepal, 2012a).

Religion is fundamental to all aspects of life in Nepal (Bista, 1991). While Islam and Christianity have been present in Nepal since the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively, Hinduism and Buddhism have continued to be the two most salient religions (Gellner, 2005, p. 760).<sup>22</sup> The majority of people are reportedly Hindu (81%) followed by Buddhism (9%), Islam (4%), Kiranti (1.4%) and Christianity (1%) (Government of Nepal, 2012a).<sup>23</sup> However, the census fails to highlight the religious syncretism of Nepal and the way in which religious conversion (the practice of changing from one religion to another) has long featured in the country's history. Gellner (2005, p. 756) suggests that 'in polytropic religious situations [in Nepal and Asia as a whole]...it is very hard to divide people up and allocate them unambiguously to discrete religious categories'.<sup>24</sup> For example, he notes the way in which many people regard Buddhism

...as the hereditary identity of particular groups of people, an identity which is both a part of Hinduism and distinct from it depending on context. Buddhists saw no problem in presenting themselves both as Buddhist and as part of the Hindu world, and still today there are some who continue to think like this (Gellner, 2005, p. 775).

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<sup>20</sup> Chhetri is the largest caste/ethnic group having 16.6% (4,398,053) of the total population followed by Brahman-Hill (12.2%; 3,226,903), Magar (7.1%; 1,887,733), Tharu (6.6%; 1,737,470), Tamang (5.8%; 1,539,830), Newar (5.0%; 1,321,933), Kami (4.8%; 1,258,554), Musalman (4.4%; 1,164,255), Yadav (4.0%; 1,054,458) and Rai (2.3%; 620,004) (Government of Nepal, 2012a).

<sup>21</sup> Previously known as Parbatiya, Khas or Gorkhali.

<sup>22</sup> Gellner notes that 'many tribal traditions also existed, though being non-literate they were not valued as highly' (2005, p. 761).

<sup>23</sup> Population censuses have been carried out in Nepal since 1911 at decennial intervals, however, detailed information about the size and structure of the population has been available only since the 1952/1954 Census. Census data is not without its problems and should be read as a basic set of data. For example, Pfaff-Czarnecka (cited in Wilmore, 2008, p. 77) has criticised the methodology of census collection in Nepal, particularly the results identifying most of the population as Hindu, arguing that the questions asked were leading and exploitative. This is supported by Gellner (2005, p. 761) who states, 'The self-conscious Hindu identity of the [*Panchayat*] regime meant that census-takers were encouraged to use 'Hindu' as the default option and to assign as many as possible to it'.

<sup>24</sup> Gellner (1988) suggests that religious differences exist but they tend to relate to practice rather than doctrine.

The ‘Hinduisation’ of the nation can be observed in the policies of the ruling elite over time. The attempt to create a national religious consciousness (Hindu) dates back to at least the Rana period (1846-1951), during which only Hinduism and ‘traditional’ religions were permitted (Burghart, 1996, p. 274; Gellner, 2005, p. 756). The Gorkha Government’s preoccupation with its ethnic identity was also reflected in the way in which it began to refer to itself officially as the Kingdom of Nepal (Burghart, 1996, p. 274), signalling the beginning of what is understood as the ‘Hinduisation’ of the nation. It was also at work in the nationalist agenda of the *Panchayat*<sup>25</sup> regime (1960-1990), which pushed for a singular national identity—seeking to homogenise the ethnically and religiously diverse peoples of Nepal into one category: Nepali-speaking Nepalis.<sup>26</sup> Gellner (2005, p. 770) notes the way in which the phrase ‘*ekmatra Hindu rajya*, ‘the only Hindu kingdom (in the world)’ was frequently referred to during this period. While the current 2015 constitution describes Nepal as religiously free, Hinduism continues to dominate with Hindu festivals being celebrated universally, regardless of religious inclination.<sup>27</sup>

### **Social stratifications: caste and class**

During the Rana regime (1854-1951) society was ordered according to a complex caste and ethnic schema that was codified in 1854 in the *Muluki Ain* (literally ‘law of the land’), the main body of law in Nepal for almost a hundred years (Hofer, 2005). Influenced by Hindu religious scripture and customary law, the codification prescribed a set of principles based on the caste system through which the diverse peoples of Nepal could be classified (Hofer, 2005). As Gray (2015, p. 205) succinctly states, the codification

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<sup>25</sup> 1960 to 1990 ‘is known as the *Panchayat* period because of the state’s claim of instituting democracy suited to Nepali soil based on village *Panchayats* (councils)’ (Tamang, 2009a, p. 64).

<sup>26</sup> Pigg (1992, p. 496) highlights the ambiguity related to identification with the nation of Nepal, noting: ‘The Nepalese national identification is not equally compelling to all Nepalese citizens’.

<sup>27</sup> For example, Dasain is a Hindu festival however it is a nationally declared holiday across all of Nepal. Kathmandu becomes very quiet as government offices and most businesses, shops and restaurants close for two weeks and people depart the city to visit family in rural areas. I asked a Buddhist friend if her family celebrated this festival and she said that she and her family take all the national holidays, many of which are Hindu festivals, although they do not practice the rituals. She said that everything shuts down in Kathmandu during this time so it is a kind of enforced time off.

...encompasses all recognised castes and ethnic groups in Nepal and places them into five castes; each caste's existence, characteristics and location within the whole system are defined by the same series of exogenous distinctions that differentiate it simultaneously from all other castes.

The *Muluki Ain* contained a vast array of legal and criminal laws, including land tenure regulations, and legislated almost every aspect of social life stipulating appropriate interactions between castes—for example, marriage, eating together (commensality) and other forms of bodily communication—based on the principle of purity and impurity (Hofer, 2005). The dichotomy of pure/impure forms the basis of Dumont's (1972) conceptualisation of the caste system. Dumont's work has been enormously influential even while it has been taken by some anthropologists as a major point of departure (Searle-Chatterjee & Sharma, 1994). Further, it is important to underscore the contentiousness of caste in the social sciences, where different theoretical standpoints and major sociological debates exist, including concerns over orientalist and colonial discourses (Parish, 1996; Quigley, 1993) and the indigenous roots of the concept (Quigley, 1993; U. Sharma, 2005). As Quigley (1993, p. 12) notes in his book dedicated solely to the exploration of caste, 'the very definition of the word 'caste' is intensely problematic'.

Dumont sees the opposition of pure and impure as not the cause but the form of the caste hierarchy (Hofer, 2005, p. 12). As Hofer (2005, p. 12) explains: 'Caste hierarchy is a systemic universe of relations...The Brahmins' purity is only relational, that is, it only exists in relation to the Untouchables impurity'. Every caste is characterised by a particular combination of different criteria, absolute and relative, the combination of which determines their status position (their degree of purity) within the caste hierarchy (Hofer, 2005, pp. 12-13). Further, as Adams (1998, p. 40) notes: 'One's caste is ascribed as one's family status, and it also refers in Nepal to the wider group of persons occupationally categorised within the Hindu status hierarchy'. In this hierarchal substratum, high-caste hill Hindus (Bahun and Chhetri) were positioned at the top and ethnic groups (*Janajati*<sup>28</sup>) were relegated to the middle and low levels (Hofer, 2005). This had the effect of facilitating and legitimising 'the economic

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<sup>28</sup> Adopted in Nepali at the end of the 1980s, the term *Janajati* gained currency after 1990. It is translated in English as 'ethnic group' or 'indigenous nationality'—the preferred translation by the federal body NEFIN (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities) (Gellner, 2009, p. 341).

exploitation and political marginalisation of low castes by a ruling elite of Hindu high castes' (Gray, 2015, p. 205). For example, Parish (1998, p. 53) suggests that 'in the past... certain occupations were reserved for certain castes; occupational mobility was limited', noting the way in which lower castes 'have occupations and symbolic roles that are stigmatising: for example, to serve as sweepers'. Parish (1996, p. 4) notes the way in which 'the state's caste system throws together tribes, castes and ex-nations, groups of different religions and with fundamentally different social organisations'. For instance, the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley are caught up in two caste systems—the state system, where they are relegated into a single category at the middle level, and their own complex caste hierarchy ranging from high-caste to Untouchable<sup>29</sup> status, which pre-dates the state system (Parish, 1996, p. 5).

While discrimination based on caste was legally abolished in 1963 (Bista, 1991), according to Liechty (2003) caste, though diluted, remains highly institutionalised. Similarly, Heaton-Shrestha (2004, p. 40) notes the way in which '*jat*<sup>30</sup> is still a key resource in the negotiation of everyday relations and power—but that there has occurred a change in the conditions under which *jat*, as a form of capital, can be efficacious'. During my fieldwork I found caste to be visible in various practices—conforming and non-conforming—particularly related to marriage and commensality. A person's surname is typically an indicator of their caste and this was a useful way in which to establish a person's caste status. During my fieldwork, asking a woman her surname before marriage was a starting point for a conversation about her marriage and other aspects of her life related to this, including her level of schooling, particularly as many women left school at the time of marriage. Caste could also act as an indicator of socio-economic status, educational attainment, and occupational status. Inequalities by caste and ethnicity are highlighted in statistical reports derived from the 2011 Nepal Census, highlighting the correlation between high levels of these

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<sup>29</sup> The lowest category of the caste system is referred to as *Dalit*, literally meaning 'the oppressed' (Gellner, 2009, p. 343). According to a recent report—the 2011 National Index of Empowerment and Inclusion—*Dalit* women are among the most marginalised and excluded in Nepal (UN Women: Asia and the Pacific, 2014). Moreover, a *Dalit* woman is subject to double discrimination; as a woman, she faces discrimination within the *Dalit* community and also, due to her caste status, outside of it (Devkota, 2005, p. 12).

<sup>30</sup> Heaton-Shrestha (2004, p. 40) states that *jat*—'Literally 'species' or 'kind'... is rendered in the literature as both 'caste' and ethnic group'. Further, Hofer (2005, p. 86) notes the polysemy of the term in the Nepali language, drawing on a number of meanings of the word including 'sort', 'kind', 'tribe', 'nation' and 'caste', noting that these meanings are also reflected in the *Muluki Ain*.

indicators and high caste groups and low levels for those of low caste status (Government of Nepal and UNDP, 2014). As Allen (1993, p. 11) notes, caste is ‘a highly institutionalised form of social inequality’.

Nevertheless, I repeatedly encountered women whose lives contradicted this association. For example, I found that women working for development were more likely to be of high-caste status but I also met women belonging to this caste who were unemployed and living in squalor. Conversely, I encountered women of low-caste status who were working for NGOs and living in good conditions while other women belonging to this caste were struggling to survive in a slum settlement. Caste, then, did not guarantee a person’s socio-economic status or their occupational status. Furthermore, I regularly came across examples of caste subversion, particularly inter-caste marriage and occupational status, thus highlighting the way in which people rejected and accepted elements of caste and were able to subvert/escape the caste order. Quigley (1999, p. 308) suggests that Sanskritisation—the adoption of higher-caste practices (Gellner, 2005, p. 759)—and mass conversions from Hindu to Buddhism and Communism have all been ways in which various groups in South Asia have rejected the caste labels that have been assigned to them in attempts to improve their social standing. With regard to Nepal, Liechty (2003, p. 64) points to capitalist market forces to help explain this social mobility (both downward and upward), noting the way in which it occurs at the family and, less often, at the individual level. Moreover, he argues that ‘class has emerged as a powerful mode of social logic and paradigm for social mobility’ (2003, p. 63). Bista (1991, p. 44), writing almost 20 years earlier than my fieldwork, notes the way in which ‘there is a tendency for the caste outlook to be replaced by a class outlook’. However, at the time of my fieldwork both caste and class featured as key concepts of social life, as will be highlighted in the thesis.

### **Class perspectives**

The emergence of a middle-class in Nepal, particularly Kathmandu, and the way in which the middle class forms a large part of the development industry in Nepal has been well documented (see Des Chene, 1996; Enslin, 1998; Heaton-Shrestha, 2008;

Liechty, 2003). For example, Heaton-Shrestha (2008, p. 13) points to NGOs, professional associations, and citizens' movements as 'middle class forms of activism'. Enslin's (1998) study, though rural-focused, shows the way in which middle-class women are key leaders in women's organisations and my own research resonates with both of these studies. Liechty (2003, p. 62) suggests that in Nepal a range of socioeconomic processes, including the emergence of an increasingly market-oriented economy and new commoditised goods and activities, have gradually produced a 'shift in cultural idioms of dominance' whereby class has increasingly become 'the most meaningful conceptual and experiential frame'.

Liechty (2003, p. 67) points to the difficulties in trying to find a concrete, objective definition of 'the middle class' in Kathmandu, suggesting that it was like 'trying to catch clouds with a net'. Rather than trying to come up with a list of traits and features, Liechty (2003, p. 67) turned his attention to how people spoke and thought of themselves and others as bearers of class, and in so doing, a concept of the middle-class emerged. Liechty (2003, p. 69) suggests that it is not necessarily a common lifestyle or a uniform set of values that characterises what it means to be middle-class in Kathmandu; rather it is a moral distinction. He notes:

... the middle class in Kathmandu is a social space... [located] between two devalued social poles. This space is one separated from both the 'vulgar' lives of the national elite, whose distinction lies in their emulation of a foreign modernism, and from a lower class trapped in equally vulgar lifestyles of 'tradition' and poverty (Liechty, 2003, p. 67).

Liechty (2003, p. 69) argues that 'morality tales are among the key narratives of middle-classness', suggesting that it is through 'stories that characterise those above and below as essentially immoral' that people in Kathmandu create themselves as middle-class subjects.

Morality narratives also featured in my research, although in settings quite different from the consumer practices related to fashion, food and media that Liechty (2003) focused on. Women working for development articulated morality tales in the context of development encounters, specifically in relation to women participating as program

recipients and whose lives were vastly different from their own (see Chapters Three and Four). These could be considered ‘narratives of middle-classness’ insofar as talk about others (often disparaging) was concerned with reputation management and served to reiterate social standing (cf. Haviland, 1977). Karp (2002, p. 122) points to this, noting that ‘in locally modern contexts [in this context, Kathmandu], class distinction operates as a judgement of taste and lifestyle that easily accords low symbolic capital to customary ways of life while affording elevated prestige to more modern ones’. However, in my research settings morality talk also functioned to differentiate those working for development (i.e. the ‘developed’) from the recipients of the program (i.e. those needing to be ‘developed’), and, in turn, to legitimise the existence of the program (see final section of Chapter Three). I return to this in Chapter Two in the section on *bikas*, where I expand on the way in which people in Nepal draw on notions of development and being modern to differentiate themselves from others.

### **Recent political, social and environmental challenges**

Nepal has experienced tremendous upheaval since 1990, when a democratic movement, the ‘People’s Movement’ (*jana andolan*), overthrew the repressive, autocratic *Panchayat* regime. The Nepali state was forced to adopt a multi-party democratic constitution, giving rise to high expectations for political, societal and socio-economic improvements among the people of Nepal (Liechty, 2003). This was an event of enormous magnitude during which talk of democracy, freedom, progress, and modernity permeated the public sphere (Kunreuther, 2009). The democratic movement of 1990 saw the opening up of political space for historically excluded groups<sup>31</sup>—including women—calling for social, cultural, economic, political, and legal changes for a more just and equitable society (Gellner, 2001, 2009; Tamang, 2011). In particular, raising voice (*awaj uthaune*) has been key in public discourses throughout Nepal ‘as a sign of political agency and novel change’, characterising the activities of many groups (Kunreuther, 2009, p. 545).

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<sup>31</sup> Historically excluded groups include women, *Dalit* (low caste), *Janajatis* (indigenous groups), and *Madhesis* (which Tamang (2011, p. 294) describes as ‘the population living in the eastern part of the plains area in the south of Nepal, bordering India’).

Nevertheless, since 1990 Nepal has continued to experience a prolonged and tumultuous period of political turmoil and social flux. 2006 signalled the end of a decade-long bloody civil conflict between the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) and Nepali state forces, which claimed the lives of over thirteen thousand people.<sup>32</sup> This year also saw a democratic uprising (*jana andolan 2*), and the abolition of the monarchy. In the April 2008 election a new Constituent Assembly (hereafter CA) was, for the first time, elected by the people of Nepal tasked with drafting a new constitution over the next two years—a new, purportedly more inclusive and liberal constitution based on the concerns and interests of elected members promising political, societal and socio-economic improvements. High expectations were especially salient for Nepal’s women, particularly as women’s participation in the constitution writing process was at a record high at 33%.<sup>33</sup> As Sapana Pradhan Malla (2011), CA member, lawyer and women’s activist, noted in a ‘Letter to the Editor’ in a daily Nepali newspaper:

Nepal is in a state of change. The country is in transition, after a decade of conflict, and re-structuring is in progress. For the Nepalese women, the enactment of a new constitution will be a historic opportunity. The Constituent Assembly (CA) members, who are working on the constitution, have the chance to ensure greater equality for women.

However, at the end of its two-year remit in May 2012, the CA failed to deliver a new constitution—mostly due to an inability of political parties to agree on issues related

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<sup>32</sup> The Maoist ‘People’s War’ is said to have opened up new spaces for women however anthropological research suggests that such claims are limited and somewhat overstated (see Pettigrew and Shneiderman, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> While there have been inroads and positive changes for women in government, women remain underrepresented in politics and female politicians continue to be marginalised by their male counterparts (UNDP, 2013). In addition, political party women have been criticised by feminists and activists for following the party priorities, rather than women’s interests. As one high-caste Newar female activist suggested to me during an interview: ‘I recently met with three women from parliament but they could not get past the politics. In many respects, game playing and political agendas overshadows the real issues [of women]. Speaking to these women individually, they are very supportive but with women from other parties—the politics gets in the way. They say they are very supportive and seem to know about women’s problems but then do not speak up in parliament. They don’t want to risk their own seats or rock the boat’. Further, the increase in women’s representation was widely criticised as tokenism. This criticism was not restricted to any particular class, caste or ethnic group of women rather it was widely agreed amongst the many variously positioned women I spoke with. A resounding argument pointed to the way in which a large proportion of the women holding CA seats were not equipped with the necessary skills or expertise—including reading and writing skills, public speaking skills—nor the confidence to address issues and meaningfully participate in the constitution-building process.

to the restructuring of the state—and was thus dissolved. On September 20, 2015, a new constitution was promulgated, however it has attracted controversy and contention because of a purported lack of representation.<sup>34</sup> In terms of outcomes for women, the current constitution has been highly criticised for its discriminatory citizenship provisions (Pradhan Malla, 2015).

During this political turmoil, Nepal experienced a 7.8 magnitude earthquake that has had devastating consequences. The earthquake struck on April 15, 2015, triggering avalanches and landslides and wiping out entire villages across many districts. 8000 people were killed and over 21,000 people were injured. Hundreds of thousands of people were rendered homeless. Centuries-old buildings at UNESCO World Heritage sites were destroyed or damaged. Continued aftershocks occurred, including a major aftershock two weeks later, killing and injuring more people. The consequences for the people of Nepal have been far-reaching, particularly for Nepal's women and girls, who have become more vulnerable to trafficking for sex work across Asia (Burke, 2015). With this background I now turn to the location of my fieldwork, Kathmandu.

### **Kathmandu: the field setting**

Kathmandu sits in a large, bowl-shaped valley surrounded by mountains. It is the headquarters of both the Bagmati Zone and the Central Development Region with a population of around one million people. Since 1951 Kathmandu has experienced rapid increase in wage labour and enormous growth in the scale of the economy resulting in a population explosion, particularly of poor people in search of work (Liechty, 2010, pp. 6-7).<sup>35</sup> More recently, the decade-long civil conflict (1996-2006), which took place in Nepal's countryside, greatly disrupted life in rural areas, resulting in mass migration to Kathmandu.<sup>36</sup> The often expressed saying 'Kathmandu is not

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<sup>34</sup> Pant (2015) highlights the biggest criticism—that the constitution discriminates against the *Madhesis* and *Tharus*, who make up 70 per cent of the population living in the Terai region bordering India, and the *Janajati*. While together these groups account for nearly half of Nepal's population, they were marginalised in the constitution making process, which was controlled by the high-caste elite.

<sup>35</sup> For example, the population of Kathmandu Metropolitan City has increased from 671,846 in 2001 to 1,003,285 in 2011 (Central Bureau of Statistics Nepal, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Leve (2009, p. 129) notes the way in which 'schools, health posts, and development projects' all over Nepal were disrupted or forced to close and 'airstrips, bridges, and telephone lines' were destroyed. As a result, up to 200,000 people fled 'their rural homes...seeking work abroad or migrating to Nepali cities as internal refugees'.

Nepal' points to the vast disparities between the country's capital and its rural regions, where most of the population live. International aid, tourism, and foreign labour remittances are the country's major sources of income, much of which goes straight into Kathmandu's local economy (Government of Nepal and UNDP, 2014). As Liechty (2010, p. 6) notes, Kathmandu as 'a *relatively* cash-rich region in an otherwise cash-poor country'. Tertiary education is a burgeoning industry, largely due to the strong emphasis placed on education—as both critical to the modernisation and development of Nepal and a symbol of progress, modernity, and class mobility (Enslin, 1998; Liechty, 2003).

### **Entering the field**

Having spent months preparing for fieldwork, I had expectations of what life may have in store for my eight-year-old son Laurence and I over the coming twelve months. Nothing, however, could prepare us for what I describe as an attack on the senses. The smells, sights and sounds of Kathmandu were incredibly potent and served as an immediate reminder that we had entered a world totally foreign to that of our own. After piling our luggage into the back seat and on to the roof of the small Suzuki taxi, a ubiquitous vehicle on the roads of Kathmandu, we headed towards the congested road that leads out from Tribhuvan International Airport. It quickly became apparent that despite the humid heat, it was best to keep the windows shut tight in order to keep out the exhaust fumes. Keeping our windows wound up also helped to block out the sound of constant beeping from vehicle horns. Most of the streets of Kathmandu are very narrow, there is a lack of footpaths, and pedestrian crossings are virtually non-existent so pedestrians, dogs, cows, and motor vehicles share the roads. In addition, there is a virtual lack of regard for road rules. These combined factors meant that one is subject to the near continuous sounding of horns in the streets of Kathmandu.

One of the advantages of travelling on pot-holed, congested roads is that vehicles are rarely able to exceed 20 kilometres per hour and coming to a complete standstill is a frequent occurrence, which allowed me to take in the visual spectacular that is Kathmandu on the day of our arrival. In contrast to my organised, ordered, and well-

maintained city of origin, Kathmandu is a vibrant, chaotic, bustling centre. As our taxi haltingly made its way along the main road I saw children smartly dressed in school uniform walking to school, a woman washing her hair under a tap, cows picking through mounds of rubbish, and a butcher skinning a dead goat. I noticed women dressed in brightly coloured *kurta*<sup>37</sup> with babies tied to their backs buying vegetables at roadside markets, an amalgam of power lines propped up with wooden posts, and a boy about the same age as my son carrying a baby on his hip and moving from car to car begging for money. By the time we crossed the rubbish-choked foul-smelling Bagmati River it had become apparent that we were a world away from Australia.

Our house was situated in Patan, officially known as Lalitpur Sub-Metropolitan City, one of three former independent city-states in the Kathmandu Valley—Kathmandu and Bhaktapur form the other two. Patan is located on the southern bank of the Bagmati River approximately five kilometres south-east of the centre of Kathmandu. Throughout the fieldwork period my son and I lived with our Swiss housemate in a large, quite run-down three-storey house set within a walled compound but which had the most magnificent garden—its saving grace. Our house was situated in an area that was home predominantly to Nepalis and a fifteen-minute walk from the area in which expatriates tended to reside. Much of the services that existed in the expat area—hotels, restaurants, supermarkets and international schools—were tailored specifically for expatriate needs. Also located in the expat area were numerous INGO and NGO offices, including the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) head office in Nepal. The attraction for living in a Nepali-dominated area was two-fold; it was reportedly safer due to reduced chances of break-ins and street muggings, which the expat area tended to attract; and secondly, it was a way in which to immerse myself in a Nepali community and potentially provide me with more opportunities to participate in and observe everyday life.

The houses in our immediate vicinity were three-storey dwellings in which each level was occupied by at least one family. Typically, each household had its own kitchen and at least one separate room for sleeping, while bathroom facilities such as a shower (if it existed) were shared between households. Rooftops were utilised as a space to

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<sup>37</sup> A *kurta* is a cotton top that hangs below the knee or just above it, and which can be worn over leggings or jeans.

dry washing, grow plants in pots and to house large black plastic water tanks, which was particularly important given the water shortages Kathmandu frequently experiences, especially during the dry winter season. Once the tanks were empty people bought water if they could afford it or they carried it in plastic containers from the public wells. The size of the house compounds varied, ranging from very large areas with massive gardens (like ours), to small front yards with lawn, a small garden and extra water tanks, to tiny concreted areas directly in front of the dwelling and to those which fronted right onto the street. While most households owned a motorbike, there was only one family in our vicinity that owned a car and they also owned the entire building in which they lived. They rented out the ground level to a couple and kept the two upper storeys for themselves, a typical practice in Kathmandu.

The space directly in front of our house played an important role in our introduction and acceptance into the local community. I describe this area as a park however in Nepali terms *phulbari* (park) signifies the place where there are flowers, so a more apt Nepali description would be *chaur* or *maidan*, meaning open space. While the park offered opportunities for me to meet people and recruit participants for my research it also provided rich ethnographic detail on the everyday practices and rituals of the community. The park first came alive at five in the morning when our neighbour set out a large plastic blue sheet on the ground in preparation for his two-hour yoga class. While men were welcome to attend, it tended to be women and children who participated in this activity. The uproarious laughter at the end of the yoga session at seven am signalled that it was time to walk my son to the school bus stop—a ten-minute walk almost to the main road. As we headed out of our front gate we often greeted a neighbour picking tiny white flowers from the tree that stretched over our front fence and into the park. She added the flowers to her offering basket as she walked towards the small Hindu temple next to our front gate. The area in the front and to one side of our compound was also a place of worship. There were three Hindu temples positioned at the edges of the park and devotees carried out their daily worship (*puja*)—or as Nepalis put it, ‘go for *puja*’—in the early morning, before activities such as school and paid work began. Offerings of food and flowers were brought, a bell was rung, and vermillion (*tika*) was placed on the forehead of devotees.

Living in a predominantly Nepali area meant that in the beginning I felt conspicuous and self-conscious of my outsider status every time I walked outside of our front gate. In particular, I felt as if my whiteness—fair skin and fair hair—stood out glaringly. Despite these uncomfortable feelings I participated in daily life in my community in myriad ways and over time these feelings subsided. For example, I purchased goods at the local fruit and vegetable stalls most evenings, walked to the school bus and home again twice a day and passed the same people out for their morning walk or visiting the local temples for *puja*, visited the mobile phone shop to chat with the owner, drank tea in the local café, browsed the local book store, bought meat for the street dogs from the butcher, and visited the bakery every day after school. Gradually people became used to seeing me in the area and I began to receive smiles of recognition when I was out and about in the community. It was through these interactions that I gradually learned about daily practices and everyday life in this setting. Moreover, through sitting and waiting every day at the school bus stop I also learned about the flow of people in and out of the area. Many residents departed every morning on their scooters for work elsewhere, crossing paths with women carrying large bundles of grass for cows or overtaking men and women pushing heavy carts of fruit and vegetables to sell or passing the woman selling single cigarettes from a small wooden box on wheels in front of the Engineering College. Thus, I was able to observe interactions between different classes, castes and ethnicities, and my own interactions were not restricted to a particular group.

It was my son who provided me with the greatest scope for meeting people and interacting in daily life in our local community. From the very beginning Laurence was embraced by our community with open arms. He spent hours playing with street dogs in the park in front of our house. Our neighbours soon knew his name and people would shout out to him from their windows. He began playing badminton in the area in front of our house with a neighbour and his teenage son and daughters on a regular basis. Within weeks we had met our neighbours and local vendors and traders. The staff at our local café, which we frequented regularly, played games with Laurence and allowed him to help make drinks behind the bar and wait on tables. The two young men at our local mobile phone shop engaged him in computer games while I browsed the bookshop across the road. Laurence would be given chocolates by the stall owners just for asking for eggs and vegetables in Nepali. My son enjoyed a

freedom that was not available to him in our place of origin. His experience of living in this community and my observations of the interactions between children and adults were telling of an inclusiveness of children in the public domain. This embracing of my son by the community was revealing of the importance placed on family in Nepali society.

### **The ethnographer as ‘mother’**

My relationship to my son had the most significant impact on my positioning within the local community. I was immediately positioned as ‘Laurence’s mother’ and was often greeted as such. Typically people would ask ‘where is your son? How is your son?’ and then, ‘and how are you?’ My position as ‘mother’ influenced the ways in which people engaged with me in the community. Throughout the fieldwork period this continued to be a way in which Nepalis in this setting struck up conversation with me with questions regarding Laurence’s name, age, his grade level and school.<sup>38</sup> This would typically lead to questions about Laurence’s father or my ‘husband’. Indeed, when accompanied by my son I was frequently asked ‘where is your husband?’ It was automatically assumed that I was married because of my status as mother and, typically, that I was accompanying my husband on his work posting. Stating that Laurence’s father was working in Australia was acceptable to most people because of the large number of Nepalis—predominantly men although increasingly women—living and working abroad.<sup>39,40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> I was mindful of how to reveal that Laurence attended the American international school, the most expensive school in the country where Nepal’s elite and powerful send their children, without portraying myself as something I was not—extremely wealthy. Of course, relative to the average Nepali I was wealthy but mentioning Lincoln School elicited particular reactions (typically ‘oh!’ and ‘wow!’) that clearly placed me in a category other than just ‘wealthy foreigner’. Indeed, I was aware that our association with the school meant that we occupied a world where power and wealth were commonplace—it was otherworldly in contrast to our own lives in Australia. Given that my research scholarship was contributing to the school fees I said that Laurence was attending the school on a scholarship.

<sup>39</sup> The out-migration of labour plays an important factor in transformations taking place within Nepali society, including the changing roles of men and women. For example, female-headed households are proliferating and becoming normalised due to the long absences—for months, and in many cases, years—of the male head of the household.

<sup>40</sup> People often responded with surprise and interest when they learned I was a PhD student. Both men and women conveyed a sense of approval of my topic, with many commenting on the need to focus on women’s issues in Nepal.

I am certain that this was not the only way in which locals perceived me. As an Australian I was both high status (due to the association with wealth and modernity) and low status (non-Hindu and therefore impure).<sup>41</sup> I was frequently mistaken for a vet because of my preoccupation with helping street dogs, although it was through these activities that I met many people. However, my categorisation as ‘mother’—and, in turn, respectable married woman—was privileged over anything else. It affected the way in which people presented themselves to me and, in turn, our interactions. Moreover, it was a specific resource, opening up opportunities to meet and get to know people in the community that would not have been available to me if I did not have a child. Moreover, it played a critical role in building trust and rapport with women in all areas of my fieldwork, not just in the context of everyday interactions in the community in which I resided. I found my position as ‘mother’ to be a point of commonality with other women and, especially in the beginning, a focal point of conversation.

This positioning and the influence this had on how people engaged with me meant that from early on in the research my attention was focused on the gender norms and behaviours in this context. To some extent I was exempt from these—or probably more accurately, my transgressions were tolerated—because of my status as foreigner/outsider. However, motivated by a desire to blend in and be accepted, I tried to adhere to what I thought was appropriate and expected behaviour for a woman in this context. I engaged in what Goffman (1959) calls ‘impression management’, where I tried to control the impressions others received of me, knowing that such impressions would determine the kinds and validity of data to which I would be able to gain access. While out in public I was aware of an unspoken judgement, something that I felt acutely in the first few months of living in this community. A disapproving glance, a prolonged stare, a nod or a smile felt to me to be an indication of approval or disapproval. However, as Berreman (2007, p. 138) points out, ‘misinterpretation occurs frequently... anyone who has been in an alien culture can cite *faux pas* resulting from such misinterpretation. Inadvertent disrespect is a common type’. Indeed, I did make mistakes, although my *faux pas* proved to be instructive. In

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<sup>41</sup> Bennett (1983, p. 254) outlines the symbolic dimensions of the mother in high-caste Hindu kinship organisation, highlighting her powerful status as a ‘representation of female purity’.

addition to my positioning as ‘mother’, I was also made aware of my gendered identity via my body.<sup>42</sup>

One day, about four weeks after arriving in Nepal, I decided to wear a sleeveless dress that just covered my knees. The straps were wide and the dress was flowing so it was not figure-hugging or revealing of anything other than the length of my arms, my neck and just below it, and the lower parts of my legs. I looked at myself in the full-length mirror and decided that I was dressed quite modestly. As I walked out through my front door I reassured myself that my dress was appropriate. However, within minutes of closing the front gate I immediately regretted my choice of outfit. I had intended to make the five-minute walk up to the local fruit and vegetable stalls to buy fresh produce but as I walked along the track and encountered people I felt increasingly self-conscious and uncomfortable. While I was familiar with people staring at me—typically, I thought, out of curiosity and intrigue for the foreign newcomer—on this occasion I felt that I was attracting disapproving attention due to the way in which people were staring at my pale bare limbs. I only managed to walk halfway before turning back towards home. I never wore that dress again in Nepal.

It was an assumption on my behalf to attribute the stares to my exposed limbs and I may have misinterpreted the situation, but it was not something I clarified with people. However, out of this experience arose questions relating to gender norms and behaviour in this context. Feeling self-conscious and uncomfortable while transgressing the dress code—a relatively minor contravention—got me thinking about Nepali women and what it might be like for them to resist gender norms. What were the societal expectations for women? How did women feel about them? How strictly did women adhere to them? Encounters with a local women’s group helped provide answers to some of these questions, as well as raising new ones. They were revealing of women’s domestic and family responsibilities and the difficulties women faced in meeting obligations in the public sphere. Moreover, spending time with this

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<sup>42</sup> Okely writes about the importance of acknowledging ‘the bodily experience of the fieldworker as research process and source of knowledge’, noting the way in which ‘Moving and living beyond the familiar by engaging with other cultures, groups and societies... entails learning about difference in all aspects: economic, political, religious, ideological *and* bodily’ (2007, p. 66).

group also shed light on what women's groups in Kathmandu were doing outside of the NGO sector.

### **Through the prism of a local women's group**

Not long into the fieldwork a local women's group gathered for an all-day meeting that was held right in front of my house. Indeed, the party tent was erected literally two feet from the front gate leaving only enough room to squeeze between the tent and the gate. On that particular Saturday my research assistant, Sanu, happened to be working with me at my house, which was highly unusual because Saturday is the only day of the week that many Nepalis do not work—banks, schools, government agencies, and offices are all closed. Given the difficulty I was experiencing in gaining access with organisations (see Chapter Two), this chance encounter seemed to be a 'lucky break' (Bamford, 1997) or what Markowitz (2001) describes as 'ethnographic opportunism'.

It transpired that this was the group's annual general meeting and on this occasion there was a crowd of about one hundred people present, consisting mainly of women dressed in identical pink and navy blue floral saris. Initially Sanu and I stood at the back of the tent observing proceedings while my son quickly made friends with the children present. It was not long before women began chatting with us and we were invited to sit down and eat with them. They insisted we partake in the feast that they had been preparing in large pots since early morning. Paper plates piled high with fried chicken, fried buffalo, and vegetables cooked in chilli, onions and spices as well as plastic cups of soft drink were brought to us. One of the men sat next to me as we ate and passed me his business card, which informed me of his role as a locally based lawyer and an advocate at the Supreme Court and also enabled me to identify him as a high-caste Newar, which was signified by his surname Shrestha. He tried very hard to get me up to sing karaoke into the microphone and dance to the Nepali music that was pumping loudly out of large speakers, stating that the people would enjoy it very much. Mortified, I declined, pleading shyness. I soon learned that this man was someone of importance in the group due to his position as president of the local Community Welfare Group, which was established in 1991. In 2009 the women's

group was born out of this larger organisation, which in turn was born out of the local Area Development Committee, which started in 1980. This man's wife was the president of the women's group and thus they both occupied visible, high-ranking positions within the community.

After he had finished eating, the man excused himself to carry out his official duties at the microphone where he proceeded to talk briefly about the activities and achievements of the women's group over the past year. He highlighted the way in which women have become involved in social services in the area through the organisation, and that it has been contributing a lot to the community. In particular, he acknowledged women's efforts in cleaning local roads: 'women, if they are in the outside sphere, they can contribute a lot. It is not just the role of mother, daughter, wife'. At the conclusion of the man's speech it was back to the festivities including more karaoke and dancing. By this stage I had met the president and the secretary of the women's group who were able to provide me with more information about the group, including their contact numbers so that future meetings could be arranged.

At the time of this meeting there were 121 women enrolled as members, although not all members actively participated. The president explained the way in which the 'women's cooperative' began as a micro-credit savings group for women, however it had grown to include different kinds of 'skill-enhancing programs for women'. Women active in the group contributed Nepali rupees (hereafter NRs.) of savings per month to the credit scheme, which was collected at the regular meetings held in the late afternoon at the beginning of each month in a room on the second floor above a shop nearby, known as the organisation's office. It was a requirement for all local women's groups in Patan to be registered with the Lalitpur District Sub-Metropolitan Office. The group was one of 146 similar groups for women in Patan and it was currently in a leading position among these groups because of its good financial standing and its healthy membership numbers. The group was not supported by any other organisations including NGOs, INGOs or donor agencies, however the aforementioned Sub-Metropolitan Office played an advisory role whereby groups could drop in to the office for advice and suggestions. The women's willingness to share information, offer their contact details and meet with me again reflected the overall positive reception I received throughout the day.

Maintaining access with the group proved to be difficult, largely due to the women's time constraints relating to their obligations and responsibilities within the home and family. The phone conversations during which I was attempting to secure a time with the president or secretary were revealing of the constraints and pressures women face in negotiating the household and the public domain. When I telephoned a month later, the president was unable to set a time because her daughter-in-law—who was married to her eldest son, a lawyer like his father—had recently given birth to a son. In keeping with high-caste Hindu norms, this was a patrilocal setup where the family lived together in a joint family situation. In keeping with societal norms, the president's first obligation resided with her family and her commitments in the public sphere were put aside so that she could fulfil her responsibilities to her daughter-in-law and new grandson. Her husband's life in the public sphere remained unchanged.

The secretary also found it difficult to set a time because of her commitments with her husband's catering business. She spoke frankly on the phone, talking about the president's current family obligations with the arrival of a new baby in the house. She drew on these examples to highlight the way in which household chores and family obligations prevent women from participating in the public sphere, stating: 'this is the main barrier, why women cannot go and establish their *own* existence outside of the home' (original emphasis). It is notable that her comments stood in stark contrast to the president's husband's earlier comments at the annual general meeting, where he underscored the importance of the broader role of women in the public domain. Yet his wife was unable to partake in activities outside of the home because of her role and responsibilities as mother-in-law and grandmother inside the home.

After many months and several more attempts at trying to set up a time to meet it was agreed that I would be able to attend the savings scheme meeting at the group's office. We arrived to find the president sitting on the floor in a far corner of the room counting money and writing in a notebook. She looked up at us briefly in acknowledgement and continued with her bookwork. There were ten women and one man (on behalf of his mother) present, ranging in age from 29 to the eldest, the president, who was 53. The president's husband arrived and proceeded to take charge of the meeting, dominating discussions and at times interrupting other people. Following his suggestion, everyone in the room introduced themselves to me. Just as

one woman was about to speak, he interrupted and began speaking for her: 'she is unmarried and around 48 years old. She makes a living by knitting'. Nobody, except for me, seemed surprised by his behaviour. It was notable that he did not do this with any other member of the group; all of them married women.

While the introductions were formal and brief, they were useful in revealing the wide-ranging activities of the women. Most of the women identified themselves as housewives first and foremost, however, some of them also engaged in other activities outside of the house. One woman owned and operated a shop with her husband; the group's secretary helped her husband in his catering business; another woman taught Nepali to elderly housewives in the group as one of the 'skill-enhancing programs'; and lastly, one woman, who could speak only Newari (she was illiterate in Nepali) worked as a social worker.

The secretary informed me that the group was created because of the need for women in the area to 'mobilise' and 'socialise'. The secretary was also one of only three female members of the parent organisation, the local Area Development Group, which was not surprising given her knowledge of both groups. When I asked her whether women were able to take out loans from the savings scheme she said that this was a middle-class area so there was no need for loans. While the president and the secretary insisted that the group was open to all women living in the local area, every current member of the group was Newar. Moreover, the meetings were always conducted in Newari. When I later queried one of my neighbours, Raju Lama—a *Janajati* woman—about the group, she had not heard of it. The president's husband approached me as he was leaving the meeting and again handed me his business card. I wondered if he would be present at the next meeting, which I attended two weeks later.

The mood in the room at the monthly meeting was quite different to the previous meeting I had attended. From the outset it seemed to be a much more social, joyful occasion and there was none of the stiffness or formality of the last meeting. This time my presence was barely noticed by the women, who were sitting on the floor chatting together. The president appeared much more relaxed and gave me a smile as my

research assistant and I sat just outside the group of 24 women. She was sitting in the far corner with another woman, who was helping her manage the deposits for the savings scheme. Each deposit was written down in a logbook and in each woman's personal account book, which was brought from home. On this particular evening there were also crafts available to buy. One woman, dressed in a linen top and pants—the only woman wearing Western attire that evening—had brought small bags and purses that she had made as well as aprons made by her sister. The women sat perusing the goods, obviously enjoying themselves. I bought a red polyester shopping bag and an apron. Talking about the items was a way to engage in conversation with the women and space was made for me to sit amongst them. In turn, this allowed for a discussion with the women about themselves and their relationship to the group.

Ramita had been a member of the group for a few months after hearing about it from neighbours, stating: 'before there was nothing. This provides a platform for women to raise their voices'. Since joining the group at its inception, Bimla, a 40-year-old housewife with two teenage children, had gained knowledge through various training and information sessions. For instance, a community health worker regularly visited the group at the office for women's reproductive health check-ups. Bimla aspired to do something outside of the home and work in an office however she believed that because she only completed class ten, there was virtually no chance of finding work. She said that if she worked and received an income her husband, who worked as a gold and silver plater, would show her more respect. Shanti, a 39-year-old housewife who helped with her husband's handicraft business, agreed: 'women who work outside [of the home] are given more respect. I only reached class six so I am not educated. Therefore I cannot work outside. I do not have confidence'.

The concerns and aspirations that the women articulated during the brief time I spent with them came to be recurring themes I encountered in every field site. In particular, they resonated with the ideas of empowerment expressed by women involved with Sangam (see Chapter Four). Working outside of the home and earning money were equated with garnering a higher level of respect from their husbands. The women aspired to find paid work, however they believed that a lack of education prevented them from securing a job, which in turn, affected their confidence. Domestic chores and family commitments also affected women's ability to participate in activities—

not necessarily only economic ones—outside of the home. There were, however, benefits to belonging to the group. As I sat amongst the women that evening it was clear that the group provided a place and a purpose to come outside of the house, make friends, socialise and speak about their feelings to other women. As the secretary explained: ‘since I’ve been involved with this group I’ve been feeling good. I felt alone and now I feel part of a family’.

What was not talked about was the gender hierarchy I so clearly observed during time spent with the group. This was revealed in the actions of the president’s husband, who was present in two of the three encounters, and the women’s response to his presence. He dominated proceedings, talked over and for women, particularly an unmarried woman, and made his presence felt. The noticeable difference in the mood and behaviour of the women in his absence at the final meeting was stark. To help explain this seemingly natural order of things I now turn to explore the notion of the ‘good woman’—the expected life path for females in Hindu society. It is important to emphasise that the experience of being a woman in Nepal is multiple and varied and, as Tamang (1999, p. 40) notes, ‘is circumscribed by a very specific ethnic, caste, class, and religious milieu’. Further, the ideology informing the ‘good woman’ is not static or unchanging. Moreover, what occurs in everyday life is far more complex than the dominant gender ideology portrays: a woman’s roles and positions change over the course of her life. Nevertheless, this prescriptive path for women was, to varying degrees, observable in every context of my research with women in Kathmandu.

### **The ‘good woman’**

As a cultural construct based on Hindu religious ideologies drawn from Brahmanical writings and teachings, the notion of the ‘good woman’ refers to the ideal life path of women (Bennett, 1983; Skinner, 1990; Skinner & Holland, 1998; Stone, 1978). In this life path the woman’s roles are focused on the family and the most cherished characteristics are those that support the patriarchal family, particularly duty (dharma) and obedience (Bennett, 1983, p. xiii; Skinner & Holland, 1998, p. 91). Hindu patrilineal ideology and patrilocal marriage simultaneously exclude women from public affairs and renders them subordinate to men, and yet at the same time depend

on women for the reproduction of new lineage members (Bennett, 1983). However, dharma (duty) relating to these roles differs, depending on a woman's caste (Cameron, 1998, p. 149). As Cameron (1998, p. 149, original emphasis) explains:

High-caste women say they have no *jatidharma* (duty based on their high-caste status and their female gender) beyond serving their husbands. Untouchable women, in contrast, have dharma specific to *jat* [caste/ethnicity] and to their work. Low-caste women say their dharma is primarily to work so they can provision their families and secondarily to serve their husbands.

High-caste women are subject to strict Hindu notions of sexual purity and pollution that restrict freedom of movement beyond the home (Bennett, 1983). By contrast, low-caste women experience a less severe form of subordination in the home and the public sphere because of their involvement in the market economy, which is highly valued, and the 'greater complementarity of men's and women's work' (Cameron, 1998, p. 59).

Marriage, particularly, is central to ideal life path for women, as Nepali academic and activist Acharya (2003) notes, 'marriage becomes the overwhelming factor determining all her life options. This [is] reinforced by all round social norms and legal structures, everything else is secondary to marriage'. Those women who do not marry or whose husbands die before them are thus seen as deviating from the ideal life path of the 'good woman', although this relates particularly to high-caste women. Moreover, a woman's status is defined in terms of her marital or sexual status (Pradhan Malla, 2001). As a prominent high-caste feminist, activist and academic told me, 'marriage is a licence to be a good woman. I'm not married so I'm not a good woman. My sexuality is not controlled by anybody so I am not a good woman. I'm not natural, I'm not rational, I'm emotional—I'm not a full woman unless I have got a man attached to me'.

The notion of the 'good woman' emerged among research participants as both a moral code by which to live but also a constraint, particularly for women aspiring to participate in activities outside of the home or partake in decision making within it.

Liechty (1996, p. 207) highlights what he calls ‘unresolved (and unresolvable) contradictions’:

...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.

I will return to this in Chapter Two, where I discuss the notion of ‘the Nepali woman’ (Tamang, 2002), a construct that posits a different understanding of women’s roles and expectations to that of the ‘good woman’—a contradiction that women participating in my research grappled with. But now I turn briefly to the roles and responsibilities of women in the household and the difficulties it posed for women to participate outside of the home. As the local women’s group secretary stated, ‘this is the main barrier, why women cannot go and establish their *own* existence outside of the home’.

### **The ‘good woman’ and the home**

Moore (1988, p. 31) suggests that focusing on what women and men do raises questions regarding ‘the sexual division of labour and the related divisions of social life into ‘domestic’ and ‘public’ domains’, the former typically associated with women’s activities and the latter comprising those of men’. However, Stivens (1996, p. 23) cautions any attempt to apply the concept of ‘domestic’ to all societies, arguing that ‘the use of ‘domestic’ implies an assumption that ‘household’ and ‘domesticity’ have the same meaning in all contexts as natural and given’. Further, Strathern points to the way in which analytical frameworks can be underpinned by ethnocentric Western assumptions, for example the ‘domestic’ sphere as demeaning (Moore, 1988, p. 40). However, anthropology has long since highlighted the cultural and historical variability of domestic life (Moore, 1988, p. 55). Moore (1988, p. 54) describes the difficulty associated with discussing the ‘domestic’. She notes the way in which ‘a range of amorphous concepts and entities’ emerge, including “‘the family’, ‘the household’, ‘the domestic sphere’ and ‘the sexual division of labour’”—all of which

‘overlap and interact in complex ways to produce a sense of the domestic sphere’ (Moore, 1988, p. 54). However, she maintains that anthropology tends to use the term ‘household’ ‘to refer to the basic unit of society involved in production, reproduction, consumption and socialisation’ (Moore, 1988, p. 54). Further, Moore (1988, p. 55) emphasises the importance of households in feminist analysis:

...because they organise a large part of women’s domestic/reproductive labour. As a result, both the composition and the organisation of households have a direct impact on women’s lives, and in particular on their ability to gain access to resources, to labour, and to income.

As Stivens (1996, p. 23; original emphasis) argues, ‘the analysis of the household clearly has repercussions far beyond the so-called *domestic domain*’. Her argument is particularly pertinent to the Nepali context where it was clear from women’s narratives that the role of ‘housewife’ (*grhini*) is imbued with meanings other than domesticity. Rather, it is fundamental to gender relations, particularly between husbands and wives. The notion of ‘housewife’ is intricately tied a woman’s individual subjectivity—how she sees herself in relation to others (particularly her husband), thereby encompassing her position within her social world. This is highlighted in Chapter Four in the narratives of women working for Sangam. For example, since engaging in paid work the women no longer identified themselves as housewives, even though they were still largely responsible for domestic labour. Further, the household as an entity featured prominently in my research—in women’s narratives, in my observations of women’s labour associated with it such as buying food and caring for children, and in a physical sense insofar as it was often where I conducted the research (particularly with Sangam). Moreover, the household and women’s positions within it were integral to women’s understandings of empowerment.

My research revealed that women were typically expected to carry the burden of work in the household, making it very challenging for them to fulfil their obligations and work requirements outside of the home. There was still an expectation—by men and other women—for women to do most of the work associated with duties in the domestic realm. Indeed, the division of responsibility for domestic and reproductive

activity in Nepal was apportioned in a way that made women's workload burdens heavy. Typically, taking on work outside of the home needed to fit around a woman's household duties; indeed, it was central to the way in which a woman structured her time. She needed to complete the household chores<sup>43</sup> and feed her family a cooked meal<sup>44</sup> before her husband left for work and her children went to school, both of which commenced between 9.30-10am. She was then free to go to activities outside of the home—be it study<sup>45</sup>, paid work, or volunteering.

This routine was something that I observed in the community in which I resided. It was also central to the way in which Sangam structured its program activities in local communities (see Chapter Three and Four). Thus, while the president's husband announced at the local women's group annual meeting that 'a woman's role is not just that of mother, daughter or wife', the reality for many women was that these roles were expected to be their first priority, taking precedence over any other activities—it was what 'good women' do. The practicalities for women realising a role in the public realm point to the triple-burden of women (Moser, 1989)—meaning working for husband, household and community 'without recognition or remuneration for their efforts' (Unnithan & Srivastava, 1997, p. 163)—and the negotiation involved in fulfilling their multifarious obligations. This is brought to bear in detail in the narratives of women involved with Sangam (Chapter Four), particularly in relation to women's expressed aspirations of empowerment.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I situated Nepal, outlining its geography, ecology and its people in terms of categories of distinction, which feature throughout this thesis in relation to the experiences of being a woman in Nepal. I introduced Kathmandu and provided a reflexive account of entering the field, detailing the early processes of immersion into the community in which I resided. I highlighted the way in which my son was critical

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<sup>43</sup> In poorer households this could encompass multiple trips to fetch water from the community well and lighting a fire to make tea (*chhiya*) and cook food.

<sup>44</sup> Nepalis typically ate two meals a day—which included the staple *dal bhat* (lentil soup and rice)—midmorning and evening, with an afternoon snack in between.

<sup>45</sup> A recently married young man told me that his wife needed to complete her household chores and duties before she could go to her university classes. This meant that she could only take classes in the afternoons.

to how I was positioned in this community—as ‘mother’—a positioning was important to my understanding of ‘woman’ in Kathmandu. Further, it opened up doors for me, helping me build trust and rapport within the community and it was one of the ways in which I was able to forge connections with women involved with organisations. An ethnographic account of my encounters with a local women’s group brought to the fore insights about being a woman in Nepal. In the final section of the chapter I detailed the notion of the ‘good woman’—the dominant gender ideology that sets out the expected life path for women in Hindu society.

In the next chapter I present another way in which women in Nepal have been constructed, in the form of ‘the Nepali woman’, a central figure in gender and development in Nepal. In many respects, this notion came up against the expectations of the ‘good woman’ for the women involved in my study. The way in which women were able to negotiate between these two notions was critical to their experiences of empowerment, but also to how they defined it. The chapter begins with an overview of the history of development in Nepal and the notion of *bikas*. I discuss the way in which gender and development have been understood in Nepal and detail the notion of ‘the Nepali woman’, situating this image in the broader context of development. I outline the development approaches adopted by the Nepali state in relation to gender and briefly discuss NGOs in Nepal. In the second half of the chapter I discuss the early stages of making contact with organisations before moving to an ethnographic account of gaining access with the two organisations that form the focus of this thesis, WHR and Sangam.

## Chapter 2

### Positioning women: development, discourse, access

#### Introduction

In this chapter my focus shifts to women and development in Nepal. It is divided into two distinct sections: first, I present an overview of the history of development in Nepal and the implications this has had for women; and second, I discuss gaining access and introduce the two women's development organisations that form the focus of the thesis. The chapter begins by briefly outlining the history of development in Nepal, post-1951 and the meaning of *bikas* (development). I then consider the way in which gender and development have been understood, highlighting a particular framing of women—'the Nepali woman' (Tamang, 2002)—that emerged out of the project of *Panchayat* nationalism, in which development was key. The construction of 'the Nepali woman' as 'uniformly de-politicised, patriarchally<sup>46</sup> oppressed, disadvantaged...illiterate subject in need of having her 'consciousness raised'' (Tamang, 2002a, p. 317) continues to be influential in Nepal. It was visible in both the discourse used by almost all the development organisations I encountered and outside of this sector, however, much less overtly. I situate this representation of Nepali women in the broader context of development, highlighting the fundamental role of 'woman' to the functioning of development as a discourse. I have attempted to capture the notion of the 'the Nepali woman', however it is important to emphasise from the outset the complexity of the term.

The second section of the chapter presents the preliminary planning and early stages of making contact with women's development organisations in Kathmandu. It highlights a number of key issues involved in the ethnographic study of organisations, such as gaining access. Organisations have explicit rules and internal structures

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<sup>46</sup> In relation to patriarchy, Tamang (2003b, p. 225) notes: 'I...retain the unfashionable term 'patriarchy/patriarchies' in order to highlight the political agenda (compared to 'gender studies') of seeking to challenge the dominant patriarchal ideologies which justify women's subordination as natural, universal and inevitable'. Tamang (2003b, p. 225) points to the existence of 'multiple patriarchies' in Nepal, noting the way in which 'ethnic, class and caste systems structure gender... differentially informing, structuring and contouring the lives of women in Nepal'.

including particular boundaries that need to be transcended in order to gain access (Gellner & Hirsch, 2001, p. 5). Access may also need to be continuously negotiated throughout the fieldwork period. I explore these issues through separate accounts of the two NGOs that granted me access and allowed me, to varying degrees, to conduct ethnographic research in and with their organisations. These case studies highlight the multiple and varying issues that arose in gaining access, being granted consent and negotiating ongoing access, which, in turn, provided insights about each organisation. It is through these accounts that I introduce the groups, enabling a comparative stance, which highlights the diversity of women's organisations operating in Kathmandu.

## **Development in Nepal**

Development has long been institutionalised in Nepal. Since 1951, when the autocratic, patrimonial Rana regime was overthrown and Nepal was opened up to the outside world, massive amounts of foreign aid have poured into the country. Fuelled by a desire to modernise and develop a society that had long been 'systematically impoverished under the Ranas oligarchy', the new government reversed the isolationist policies of the Ranas and invited international aid into Nepal (Pigg, 1992, p. 497). After dismissing the democratically elected government in 1961, King Mahendra instituted the party-less autocratic *Panchayat* form of government, a repressive political system that concentrated power in the monarchy and banned all political parties (Tamang, 2002a, p. 314). Throughout its three decades of rule the regime was guided by a single ideology, albeit with changes in emphasis over the years, which Gellner (2001, p. 183) sums up as 'economically developmentalist, culturally integrationist and politically monarchical'. Burghart (1996, p. 274) notes the way in which *Panchayat* democracy required a particular type of citizen—'the government construction of the Hindu person'—in order to be legitimate.<sup>47</sup> Further, 'key to the legitimisation of *Panchayat* rule was the doctrine of 'development'—*bikas*—as 'the national project'' (Tamang, 2002, p. 163, original emphasis).

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<sup>47</sup> However, the preoccupation to create a national Hindu identity dates back further to the Rana period (1846-1951) (Burghart, 1996, p. 274).

The ascension of the *Panchayat* regime and its ideological endeavours to forge a new political identity during the post-World War II, post-colonial period coincided with the beginnings of the global discourse of development (Pigg, 1992, p. 497).<sup>48</sup> During the 1950s and 1960s most developing countries were regarded by American social scientists, economists and administrators as sites for Western development ideologies and programs—as Fujikura (1996, pp. 271-272) puts it, ‘as potential laboratories for the ideas and agencies of the project of ‘development’’. Nepal has long been one of the favourite sites, largely because it was one of the few developing countries in the post-colonial period that did not have a colonial past, thereby making it free of the complications typically caused by having been colonised (Fujikura, 1996; Liechty, 2003, p. 48). Added to this was the image of Nepal as an isolated, Himalayan kingdom with its peoples ‘struggling to become ‘modern’ in the aftermath of Rana tyranny’ (Tamang, 2002a, p. 314). Large amounts of foreign assistance helped forge the development and expansion of infrastructure and state institutions, which, in turn, assisted in the propagation of *Panchayat* ideology (Tamang, 2002a, p. 314). As Pigg (1992, p. 497) notes, ‘for Nepal, development—rather than the residues and scars of imperialism—is the overt link between it and the West’.

Despite more than sixty years of development aid Nepal continues to be ranked as a ‘Least Developed Country’<sup>49</sup> (Government of Nepal and UNDP, 2014, p. 1). The global discourse on development constructs Nepal as ‘underdeveloped’—as one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world—with an estimated 25 per cent of people living below the poverty line<sup>50</sup>, although there are disparities in income and wealth, particularly between the Kathmandu Valley and the rest of the country<sup>51</sup> (Government of Nepal and UNDP, 2014, p. 33). Indicators and statistics are important for creating development categories, however these representations also have a powerful effect locally, as Pigg (1992, p. 497) notes: ‘Nepal now identifies itself as an

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<sup>48</sup> Further, during this period ‘the post-colonial redefinition of global relationships produced the category of the third world and organised certain complexes of social relations in a condition labelled underdevelopment’ (Escobar 1988 and Pletcher 1981 in Pigg, 1992, pp. 497-498).

<sup>49</sup> The UN ranked Nepal’s Human Development Index 2014 at 145 out of 188 countries, the lowest score in South Asia (Government of Nepal and UNDP, 2014).

<sup>50</sup> The poverty line is estimated to be NRs. 19,261 per annum (Government of Nepal, p. 93).

<sup>51</sup> The poverty rate is lower in urban areas (15.46%) than in rural areas (27.43%) (Government of Nepal, p. 93).

underdeveloped country in relation to the developed world' (cf. Enslin, 1998; Liechty, 2003).

### **The meaning of *bikas***

The philosophy and terms of international development (both of which are based on 'modern', Western models of society) are highly influential in Nepal (Pigg, 1992, p. 495). The Nepali word for development is *bikas*, however Pigg sets Nepali understandings of this term apart from theories and models of development used and understood by academics and development agencies in Western contexts. She suggests: 'notions of *bikas* are imbued with meanings particular to Nepalese society... these notions form in a context of what we might be included to see as western influence. The meaning of *bikas* in Nepalese society and the meaning of development in international institutions differ but are not separate' (Pigg, 1992, p. 495). Pigg argues that Nepalis come to know the ideology of development through specific social relationships, noting:

The terms of this ideology are identifiable either as their own or as those of other Nepalis. The questions therefore lie in how these ideologies frame social differences and how certain ways of imagining social difference come to be associated with specific social positions or identities (1992, p. 495).

Thus, Pigg (1992, p. 496) contends, development has a particular meaning in Nepal, one that is profoundly social and 'weaves *bikas* into the fabric of local life and patterns Nepalese national society'. Pigg (1992, p. 492) uses the image of the village to discuss the way in which development concepts are rendered Nepali but in the process, the meaning of the village is altered in Nepali social imagination. She writes:

When development policy makers plan programs they discuss what villagers do, how they react, and what they think. Together, these images coalesce into a typical, general village, turning all the villages of rural Nepal into the village. Commonplace as these representations of the village and villagers are, they mold the way in which people in contemporary Nepal conceptualise national society and differences within it (Pigg, 1992, p. 491).

Pigg (1992, p. 491) argues that this profound ideological shift is an unplanned (and largely unrecognised and unexamined) effect of development. Pigg further notes that, while the ideology of development forms a key component of the construction of Nepali nationalism, rather than bringing the nation together, it has a divisive effect whereby rural Nepal is imagined as less developed, *abikasisit*, (both materially and symbolically) while urban Nepal is regarded as more developed, *bikasisit* (1992, p. 499). Such imaginings are promoted by the state through propaganda in an attempt to construct Nepali nationalism, and circulated in school textbooks and the popular media (see Des Chene, 1997; Enslin, 1998; Pigg, 1992). Further, the intersection of the *Panchayat* project of *bikas* and the global agenda of development has had significant implications for the women of Nepal, as the next section illustrates.

### **Development and ‘the Nepali woman’**

It is important to underscore the complexity of the history of gender and development in Nepal where two separate but inextricably linked agendas were at work: the project of developing ‘the Nepali woman’ and the promotion of *Panchayat* ideology and the regime’s quest to create a homogenous Hindu national culture (Tamang, 2002). In this context, women were simultaneously constructed as ‘underdeveloped’ and therefore in need of development, and as agents of change, critical to the modernising mission of the country and thus duty-bound to become ‘developed’ (Enslin, 1998).<sup>52</sup> Tamang (2002, p. 163) points to the way in which the intertwining of the global and *Panchayat* ‘agendas of development’ had significant implications for the women of Nepal:

For, at the very time that the *Panchayat* government was seeking to impose its definition of ‘the Nepali’, the international project of development had set itself the task of developing ‘the Nepali woman’... This linkage to development is essential to understanding the history of gender in the country. The creation of ‘the Nepali woman’ was as much the work of development agencies in search of ‘the Nepali

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<sup>52</sup> Azim, Menon, and Siddiqi (2009, p. 1) suggest that ‘the ‘Woman Question’ has been central to the nation-making process in South Asia’, noting: ‘the continued pitting against each other of the discourses of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’... for one kind of discourse, women are designated as the markers of progress from tradition to modernity, while for another, women are the space of nationalist assertion’.

woman' to develop as it was the result of the active dissemination of state-sponsored ideology.

The notion of 'the Nepali woman' was constructed by erasing difference including the multifarious 'forms of community, social relations, and gendered realities' of the various cultures of Nepal (Tamang, 2002, p. 164). Tamang (2002a, p. 316) notes the way in which women's past collective political action was also erased, although this must be situated in the *Panchayat* state's restriction of all organisations during this period (Gellner, 2007, p. 1825). Tamang (2002, p. 164) argues that the creation of an homogenous group of women bound and constituted based on their shared oppression, helplessness and backwardness 'ensured an easy target population for development' and at the same time 'legitimised the creation of a single national culture based on Hindu norms extolled in the *Panchayat* regime'. The flattening out of difference is not restricted to the Nepali context; the creation of homogenous categories in order to fit into standardised procedures and statistics is critical to development.<sup>53</sup> Klenk points to the way in which the category of 'woman' often collapses

...diverse experiences of women living in the Third World into a single category of 'Other' characterised by her status as victim—victim of capitalist development schemes, victim of patriarchy, and victim of poverty and an increasing work burden in a degraded natural environment (2004, p. 65).

The image of 'the Nepali woman' resonates with the category 'third world woman', which, as an object of development, allows for the uncritical application of universal principles of gender and development 'across region, culture, class, and ethnicity' (Wood, 2001, p. 430).<sup>54</sup>

The average third world woman defined in the women and development literature has very specific attributes that are presented as essential to her character: she is

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<sup>53</sup> According to Escobar (1984, p. 388), this forms part of the 'apparatus of development'.

<sup>54</sup> Post-modern and post-colonialist feminist theorists have sought to deconstruct and destabilise the pervasive image of the essentialised and homogenised 'third-world-woman-as-Other-and-victim' in development discourse (for example see Bulbeck, 1991; Cornwall, Harrison, & Whitehead, 2007a; Klenk, 2004; Marchand & Parpart, 1994; Mohanty, 1991). Writing about Nepal, Des Chene notes: 'Women – not the world's women and not Nepali women – do not speak one language, do not share one political ideology, do not have one ethnic identity. Above all, women are not a class like *Dalits*, peasants or workers (1997, p. 297).

‘ignorant, irrational, poor, uneducated, traditional, passive, and sexually oppressed’ [Mohanty 1991, p. 56, 72]... So defined, the third world woman cannot be anything but a victim—of a similarly homogenised third world man, of universal sexism, of globalisation, and of history (Wood, 2001, p. 430).

Further, Spivak points to the critical role this image has in development:

Gender is fundamental to the functioning of development (and post-development) as a discourse. It is not coincidental, even if it is over-determined, that it is the figure of the third world woman which is so frequently called into the service of development (1999, p. 274).

It is notable that attention to women in *bikas* intensified with the 1975 United Nations declaration of the International Year of Women and then the Decade for Women (1976-1985), which led to the inclusion of women as a development target for the first time in Nepal in the sixth Five-Year Plan (1980-1985) (Tamang, 2002a, p. 316). Fundamental to this inclusion was the seminal study, *The Status of Women* (Acharya & Bennett, 1979) that detailed, for the first time, the contribution the women of Nepal made to the national economy. The focus on women also coincided with the introduction in Nepal of the Women in Development (WID) approach by donor organisations in the 1970s (Tamang, 2002a, p. 316). The purpose of this approach was to actively include women in development and gain equity for women in the development process (Moser, 1993, p. 56). WID advocates focused on women’s training and education and implemented microcredit and income-generation programs, so that they could become more productive and active contributors to the modernisation efforts of their nations (A. Sharma, 2008, p. 5).<sup>55</sup> Also influential was the ‘welfare’ approach, which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as the earliest policy approach concerned with women in developing countries (Moser, 1993, p. 58). In this approach women’s reproductive roles as wives and mothers is recognised and they are regarded as passive beneficiaries of development (Moser, 1993, p. 58). These approaches are identifiable in the notion of ‘the Nepali woman’.

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<sup>55</sup> However, as Wilson (2015, p. 805) notes, ‘WID identified discrimination against women within the development process, but did not place it in the context of gendered structures of power, or relate unequal gender relations to those of class, race or imperialism’.

The *Panchayat* state propagated a particular construct of ‘the Nepali woman’ that emphasised women’s domestic roles within the household and in so doing relegated all women—including those belonging to various ethnic groups where gender roles were more flexible—to Hindu notions of ‘family’ based on a strict dichotomy between the masculine realm of the public and the feminine sphere of the private (Tamang, 2002, p. 163). This had the effect of actively feminising and narrowing the ‘roles deemed acceptable and indeed necessary’ for Nepal’s women (Tamang, 2002, p. 164). Tamang (2002a, p. 319) argues that the project of WID and its essentialised notions of the women to be targeted ‘facilitated the emergence of dichotomously defined, gendered spheres of the public and private’ as defined by the Nepali state.

Enslin (1998, p. 281) suggests that the focus on ‘integrating women in development’ has contributed to ‘the production of a popular discourse on the rights and responsibilities of women’ that constructs women as agents of social change, critical to the modernisation and development of Nepal. Literacy and education (particularly knowledge of English)—as symbols of progress, modernity, and class mobility—are central to this modernising mission (Enslin, 1998, p. 283). As such, ‘notions of women’s political activism and agency become cast as a women’s duty to become educated’ (Enslin, 1998, pp. 282-283). Enslin highlights the way in which the rendering of women in a particular way has had an impact on the collective consciousness. Enslin (1998, p. 283) points to the way the state, in speeches, pamphlets, media and educational materials used in schools, actively promotes the notion of the ‘ideal Nepali citizen: a modern, urban, literate, high-caste person’ and contrasts it with the image of the ‘underdeveloped villager’ (cf. Pigg, 1992). In much of this official rhetoric, ‘women—especially illiterate, low-caste, rural women—are represented as the most undeveloped of the underdeveloped’ (Enslin, 1998, p. 283).

This discourse on the responsibilities of women, particularly to become literate and educated, is still salient in Nepal, albeit with changes that reflect the global discourse relating to the development of women. Ahearn (2004, p. 152) notes that, particularly from the 1990s, development discourse was ubiquitous in Nepal in textbooks, magazines, novels, radio programs, Hindi movies, and everyday conversations. She points to the ideological content of state sponsored female literacy materials that advocated ‘self-sufficiency, hard work, development, success, and individual

responsibility' (Ahearn, 2004, p. 170). Further, women 'were encouraged to associate the acquisition of all kinds of skills with greater development, capitalist activity, independence, and agency' (Ahearn, 2004, p. 170). These notions feature in much of the literature on empowerment (see Introduction). Moreover, they featured, to varying degrees, in the themes promoted and strategies utilised by Sangam (see Chapter Four) and WHR (see Chapter Five).

The 1990 democratic reforms in Nepal marked a clear change in the governmental approach to women and development. Nepal's 8<sup>th</sup> Five-Year-Plan (1992-1997) emphasised gender mainstreaming, resulting in the establishment of WID units in various ministries and the National Planning Commission (Bhadra, 2001, p. 102). Following Nepal's participation in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the Ministry of Women was established, declaring its policy as 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment' (Bhadra, 2001, p. 102). A number of bills aimed at achieving gender equality were drafted. Nepal's 9<sup>th</sup> Five-Year-Plan (1997-2002) included working policies that focused on 'mainstreaming, gender equality and women's empowerment' (Bhadra, 2001, p. 102). The government's focus on women's empowerment reflects the growing consensus on the importance of women's empowerment among major donor agencies during this period, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, and the United Nations system (see Leve, 2001). Further, the 1990s saw a tremendous growth in the number of NGOs in Nepal.

## **Development NGOs in Nepal**

Since the early 1980s, one of Kathmandu's growth industries has been the development of international and local non-governmental organisations (INGOs and NGOs), employing hundreds of expatriates and thousands of Nepali middle-class professionals (Liechty, 2001, p. 49). However, particularly from 1990, with a more enabling political climate, the NGO sector grew exponentially.<sup>56</sup> Prior to 1990 there were only 250 NGOs in Nepal, increasing to 5976 in 1997 and 12,600 in 2001

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<sup>56</sup> In addition, a number of other organisations have emerged, including CBOs (community-based organisations) and RHOs (rights-holder organisations) (see Tanaka (2011)).

(Heaton-Shrestha, 2004, p. 42). The scope and number has continued to proliferate, with Nepal's Social Welfare Council registering 39,763 NGOs in June 2016 (Social Welfare Council, 2016). The number has grown considerably since the time of my fieldwork in 2010, when the SWC recorded 27,790 registered NGOs. Of these, the number of NGOs operating in Kathmandu and listed under 'women's services' stood at 1075.<sup>57</sup> Leve (2001, p. 108) suggests that the massive growth in NGOs during this period reflects a major shift in the organisational structure and priorities of the development industry in Nepal, 'carried out under the joint rubrics of "participation" and "empowerment"'.<sup>57</sup>

With this background I present the preliminary planning and the process of gaining access with women's organisations in Kathmandu before turning to introduce the two organisations that form the central focus of this thesis.

### **The organisations: establishing contacts and gaining access**

Before arriving in Kathmandu much of my knowledge about Nepali women's organisations was derived from the Internet, in particular from their websites from which I was able to get an overall idea of the aims, objectives, and activities of the groups. Searching the Internet for Kathmandu-based women's organisations began more as an exercise in trying to locate contact details, which in this pre-fieldwork stage with no prior arrangements or contacts set in place, I perceived as a critical start to locating 'the field' (Coleman & Collins, 2006, p. 6). I was mindful that the organisations with websites might not be representative of women and development in Nepal. In addition, it is important to note that my initial impressions were based on a textual and somewhat superficial analysis of women's organisations, thus eluding the micro-politics of organisational processes and practices as they are embedded in the context of everyday Kathmandu. As Gellner and Hirsch (2001, p. 4) point out, 'organisations do not exist in a vacuum. They operate in a wider context which both

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<sup>57</sup> One of the organisations that features in this thesis, Sangam, was listed under another section, 'community and rural development'. However, it could have just as easily been listed under 'women's services' or 'child welfare' or 'moral development', and thus this figure is a rough estimate and does not fully reflect the number of women's development NGOs operating in Kathmandu.

provides them with the aims they pursue and sets limits to the way they operate'. Nevertheless, the Internet was a place to start.

Upon opening the web pages it was immediately apparent that these were websites created by NGOs, a fact that was usually stated in the introductory section. Moreover, the very existence of these websites indicated that these groups had the capacity, in terms of knowledge of information technology or access to it, and the means, in terms of access to a computer and the Internet and available funds, to generate a website, although the level of sophistication was wide ranging. Typically an organisation's website outlined any or all of the following details of the group: (i) history; (ii) vision/mission statement/principles; (iii) strategic approach (iv) organisational structure including executive committees, boards, advisors, staff, volunteers; (v) donors and supporters; (vi) projects, policies, and guidelines; (vii) networks including membership and affiliations with other groups and networks; and (viii) achievements. Some websites included photographic galleries depicting the organisation's programs and activities such as conferences, workshops, rallies, training seminars, among others.

The mission statements of many of the women's organisations reflected Western development ideology, replete with the ideology of modernisation and notions of modernity—including the rhetoric of universalist notions of progress, freedom, equality, and independence (Liechty, 2001, p. 34). I was especially struck by the way in which the language of development discourse pervaded the websites of women's organisations, particularly terms such as 'empowerment' and 'rights'. I wondered about the ways in which Nepali women understand these notions. Do their understandings reflect Western notions of development? What are the ways in which women involved in these groups envisage gendered social change? Moreover, I was interested to explore the slippage between the discourse that is promoted by women working in these NGOs and the actuality of their lives—indeed, the multiple realities for women living in the context of Kathmandu.

While my initial understandings of women's organisations were shaped by the information presented on these websites, my knowledge also derived from a more

subtle reading of them. In particular, the level of fluency in English and the extent to which development discourse was used both contributed to my first impressions of an organisation. Bennett (2005, pp. 25-26) describes those NGOs ‘whose leaders are conversant with the current development trends and can converse in English’ as ‘professional’ NGOs, noting ‘an apparent donor bias favouring these NGOs over smaller local NGOs’ (cf. Tamang, 2003a). My impressions were also informed by the sophistication of the websites, some of which contained glossy, photographic slideshows and hyperlinks—including, in some instances, a ‘button’ resembling a computer keyboard key that asks the user to ‘click here’ to make an online donation. Such attributes highlight the way in which the website can work as a strategic tool used by organisations to garner support and attract funds.<sup>58</sup> While recognising this information to be a fragmentary account of women’s organisations, it served as an introduction and provided me with a background sketch of a number of organisations operating in Kathmandu. Indeed, information about an organisation and more broadly, knowledge of gender and development in Nepal, later proved critical to my credibility as a researcher and for building trust and rapport, all crucial to maintaining access with an organisation. Nevertheless, I first needed to gain access to an organisation, to which I now turn in the next section where I set out the methodological and practical issues this involved.

### **Engaging with organisations: gaining access**

Sridhar (2008, p. 9) suggests that one of the key issues that researchers must consider when undertaking fieldwork in and with organisations is gaining and maintaining access. From the outset I recognised there was a risk that I could be associated with evaluation and monitoring (i.e. working for donors) and therefore may not be trusted, or alternatively, welcomed as a potential donor, or denied access. Gaining, and in many instances maintaining access did prove to be difficult. However, in many cases it appeared to be because I was *not* from a potential donor organisation. One of the biggest constraints I faced, particularly in the beginning of my fieldwork, was securing an audience with an organisation in order to present my proposal, which was

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<sup>58</sup> Since my departure from Nepal many women’s organisations have embraced social networking with many joining *Facebook*, stating it to be a way in which ‘supporters’ can ‘follow’ the organisation.

the first step to getting consent to carry out my research. I began initially by embarking on cold calling, a marketing term that refers to the process of approaching—typically by telephone—prospective customers or clients who are not expecting such an interaction. I use this term because, while initiating contact with organisations was a necessary step to beginning my research, I felt more like a very uncomfortable marketing salesperson pitching my proposal to people in the hope that they would grant me access to the organisation. As Monahan and Fisher (2015, p. 717) note: ‘Making cold calls can be a very uncomfortable and difficult activity for anyone’. However, this strategy was essential in establishing contacts and gaining permission to conduct ethnographic research with organisations.

My reference point was my list containing the contact details of Kathmandu-based women’s organisations that I had compiled in Australia. I began by sending eight organisations an introductory email briefly outlining my project and requesting a visit to the organisation. I received an email response from only one organisation, which was keen to make a time to meet with me. I contacted the remaining seven organisations within three or four days of my introductory email with a follow-up phone call. It was at this point that I encountered the ‘gatekeeper’ (Perwez, 2008), which in this case was the person answering the phone. Securing a meeting or even a phone discussion with someone in a managerial position about gaining access rested with the ‘gatekeeper’. I found it difficult to get past this initial point of contact on many occasions, despite being armed with the name of a contact person, typically the heads of organisations or women in decision-making roles who I thought may be able to approve my access, and following up with numerous phone calls. Perwez (2008, p. 73) refers to the ‘techniques of gatekeeping by organisations’ and suggests that an understanding of these is critical ‘to the pursuit of any anthropological enquiry attempting to work with or through organisations’. I soon learned the gatekeeping technique typically employed by Kathmandu-based women’s organisations—it was avoidance.

Perwez (2008, p. 82) notes that ‘securing access is never a one-go process’, however from my fieldwork experience it is sometimes impossible. Indeed, some organisations simply do not wish to be studied. Over the course of the next ten months I contacted particular organisation multiple times via email and telephone in an attempt to arrange

a meeting but to no avail. Techniques of avoidance—‘too busy this week’, ‘out of the Kathmandu Valley’, ‘call back later’<sup>59</sup>—were utilised to keep outsiders, including foreign researchers like myself, from entering the organisations’ domains or as Perwez (2008, p. 72) puts it, their ‘sovereign-territorial boundaries’. Perwez (2008, p. 72) notes the way in which NGOs create and maintain such boundaries through ‘varied actions, strategies, routine practices and processes’. In particular, he suggests:

...the creation of such boundaries and processes are primarily oriented towards, what Bryant (2005) has termed, a quest for ‘moral capital’—the need to boost moral standing with actors such as local communities, donors, the media or state agencies (Perwez, 2008, p. 72).

However, these processes and practices present major challenges for anthropologists, particularly because of their long stay in the field (Perwez, 2008, p. 73). Sridhar (2008, p. 18) notes the way in which presenting himself as an anthropologist to development organisations ‘arouses suspicion and prompts questions, and results in unanswered phone calls and cancelled appointments’. By contrast, ‘doors open’ when he introduces himself as ‘working in public health’ (Sridhar, 2008, p. 18). In attempting to explain the reasons for this mistrust, Sridhar (2008, p. 18) points to the ‘hegemony of...objective, technical sciences’, noting the way in which economists and biomedical scientists dominate development in the public health sector whereby ‘economic indicators’ and ‘reductionist physiological targets’ have become ‘“common sense’ and accepted benchmarks’. Justice (1986) also raises this point in her analysis of foreign aid and health development in Nepal, which is based on long-term, ethnographic fieldwork. She highlights the way in which donor agencies typically favour ‘hard’ data, meaning statistical, quantifiable data, because it enables them to ‘monitor large expenditures and investments’, which in turn satisfies the standardised requirements and guidelines ‘formulated at the top of the agency hierarchy’ (1986, p. 133; cf. Gellner and Hirsch 2001). Justice (1986, p. 133) argues that an emphasis on quantity, rather than quality ensures the continuation of programs and thus justifies ‘creating and securing jobs in the bureaucracy’.

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<sup>59</sup> I do not wish to imply that these reasons are false or invalid. Indeed, it could simply have been the reality that some groups did not see a foreign student to be a priority. However, the fact that most did not decline outright is telling of a technique of avoidance.

With respect to my own fieldwork it is difficult to ascertain whether presenting myself as a PhD student in anthropology was perceived negatively by the organisations I contacted. What seemed apparent to me at the time, however, was the way in which the responses, or lack thereof, to my attempts at setting up an initial meeting conveyed a sense that for time-poor women's organisations in Kathmandu, the research project of a foreign student did not rank high on the list of priorities. Over time I came to realise that these questions point to the social spaces of the NGO world in which I was moving where there is a multitude of people circulating—consultants, volunteers, interns, students, researchers, among others. Such questions also emphasise the potential tension between the goals of an academic research project and an organisation's objectives (Sridhar, 2008). Academia values knowledge production itself while organisations are interested and concerned with the practical application of knowledge and the benefits it has for them as well as for the wider cause, and for continued funding (Mosse, 2001, p. 176; Sridhar, 2008, pp. 6-7).

Borrowing from Warin (2002, p. 32) writing in a different context, I found that 'steering a course in between' was one way to alleviate this tension, although the extent to which this was successful varied. From the outset I was straightforward about my research, making it clear that the best way I could contribute and lend support would be through my research findings, a PhD thesis, and possible journal publications. While I openly expressed solidarity with women's concerns and efforts, I attempted to remain detached from party politics among women. I was aware of the importance of not aligning myself with any group in particular, despite being asked to engage in advocacy activities on occasions. Because, as Sridhar (2005, p. 18) suggests:

Every individual, every community, has a unique perspective informed by history, politics and religion, to name just a few factors, that produce differing and often contradictory versions of 'reality'. Whose reality counts? Whose reality should the anthropologist accept and advocate on behalf of?

As I began to grasp the complexity of the women's NGO sector in Kathmandu, the value in remaining detached became clear. For example, I was asked by one organisation to write a letter to the local newspapers openly condemning proposed

legislation that the group deemed to be oppressive and derogatory to women.<sup>60</sup> Although I empathised with the organisation's concerns I declined to do so, in part to avoid any risk of upsetting the Nepal Government, which could affect my visa status. Later in my research I came to understand that not all groups of women were opposed to the legislation; rather some were in full support of it. The polarised reactions to the proposed law were based on different interests due to varying social norms and practices informed by ethnicity, religion, caste, and class. This stood as a critique of the notion of the homogenous Hindu 'Nepali woman' that prevails in the development discourse in Nepal (Tamang, 2002).<sup>61</sup> By declining to adopt an active role in advocacy, I avoided being positioned publicly and thus avoided being aligned exclusively with any particular issue or group.

By the time I met with a women's organisation for the first time I had already had experience in dealing with a number of bureaucracies including Tribhuvan University, the Department of Immigration, and the Ministry of Education. Negotiation with these institutions was essential for being granted a study visa, which in retrospect was also my first encounter with gatekeeping. Although this was a time-consuming and often frustrating experience, it provided me with insights into dealing with the state apparatus, something which women's organisations deal with on a regular basis. Gellner and Hirsch (2001, p. 5) suggest that it is important to consider the behaviour of state and local bureaucracies because it 'provides important insights into the way particular places are locally conceptualised, bounded, and resourced'. In order to legally exist and operate, an NGO must first gain approval from the local government and register at the District Administration Office (Sunderji, 2005, p. 1). NGOs receiving foreign funds must be registered with a state-run organisation known as the Social Welfare Council (SWC), which was formed under the Social Welfare Act of 1992. According to its website, the Social Welfare Council (2015) is responsible for

...the promotion, facilitation, co-ordination, monitoring and evaluation of the activities of the non-governmental social organizations in Nepal. It is also responsible for the extension of its supports to the government in the matters of

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<sup>60</sup> To protect the identity of the organisation I do not elaborate on the details of the legislation.

<sup>61</sup> These differences also point to the difficulty of including individual group interests within the larger cause of the women's movement (see Rajbhandari, 2009; Tamang, 2009a).

developing the NGO sector policies and programs of the nation and implement them in a co-ordinate way.

Registration with the SWC must be renewed every year through submission of NGO accounts audited by a government-approved auditor (Sunderji, 2005, p. 2).

Justice (1986, p. 20) argues that the structure and system of bureaucracy in Nepal may appear straightforward, however ‘alongside the formal bureaucratic structure, there exist complex, deeply rooted informal networks based on regional identities, ethnic and caste distinctions, and family ties that still exert powerful influences on how things are done’. Adams (1998, p. 37) describes these as ‘giving priority to close relatives (*krypabad*), and to ‘one’s own people’ (*afno manche*<sup>62</sup>), flattery or ‘currying favour’ (*chakari*), and especially cultivating reciprocal obligations with status superiors’. My research does not include an in-depth study of the workings of state bureaucracies nor of the relations between women’s organisations and the Nepali government.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, regular examination of the English language daily and weekly newspapers, conversing with Nepalis about the state in social settings and while commuting to my field sites, and anecdotal evidence drawn from interviews with women’s organisations regarding relations with state agencies, enabled me to form an overall picture—one that resonated with the informal networks and family ties Justice (1986) speaks of.

In some organisations I recognised the influence of these networks only after I had been living in Nepal for some time and after many months of participant-observation with the groups. Nevertheless, in other organisations the structure of the group was immediately revealing of networks such as *krypabad* within the upper ranks of the organisation. In another example, informal networks and family ties were openly spoken about by the organisation and a conscious effort was made to negate these influences, as highlighted in their newly written constitution. Thus, while organisations all have explicit rules and structures and objectives that aim to act on or

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<sup>62</sup> Adams (1998, p. 41) suggests that ‘*Afno Manche* can refer to the system by which benefits accrue to one by birth or by social connection to persons in privileged caste or ethnic groups... it is not isomorphic with caste or ethnicity; it defines a variety of pluralistic networks which determine one’s access to resources and privilege’.

<sup>63</sup> For detailed accounts of interactions between NGOs and the Nepali government see Fujikura (1996) and Hertzog (2011).

change everyday life (Gellner & Hirsch, 2001, p. 2), it is important to recognise the ways in which these groups reproduce particular rules and structures that exist in everyday life in Nepal. Moreover, the continuing influence of informal networks in organisations and bureaucracies points to the way in which women's organisations—and Nepali politics and administration—need to be understood within the broader context of Nepal's history and culture. In the next section I explore my early encounters with the two organisations that form the focus of this thesis, highlighting issues related to access. A brief overview of each organisation also features in this account.

### **Women for Human Rights – Single Women Group (WHR)**

There was much resting on my first meeting with this women's organisation. While I had conducted informal interviews with various people in my local community, my meeting with Women for Human Rights – Single Women Group (WHR) was the first to be held in the formal setting of an organisation and thus it felt very official. I climbed into the back seat of the taxi and immediately began re-checking through my backpack making sure I had the necessary tools and equipment such as research information sheet, consent forms, pens, paper, and voice recorder. I opened up my notebook and began revising the detailed information I had written down about the organisation which I had found on the group's website, hoping that I could memorise the main points. Given that this was the only organisation that had responded to my introductory email, I felt immense pressure to secure access to conduct research within and through this organisation.

As my taxi pulled up in front of Bhat-Bhateni Supermarket and Department Store<sup>64</sup> in Baluwatar it was clear that this is an affluent area of Kathmandu. Large, well-kept houses set on leafy, manicured compounds are sprawled amongst foreign embassies, government offices, NGOs, INGOs, private schools and small street shops.<sup>65</sup> Located in this area is the organisation I had come to meet, Women for Human Rights – Single Women Group (WHR) (hereafter WHR). Locating WHR's office was initially

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<sup>64</sup> At the time of my fieldwork it was Nepal's largest supermarket and department store.

<sup>65</sup> The Russian, Chinese, and Sri Lankan embassies are located in Baluwatar. A large number of foreign embassies are located in nearby Lazimpat.

difficult because of the lack of street signs and numbers. In Nepal, directions are typically based on landmarks and I became astute at remembering visual prompts such as a particular tree, a shop sign, a tea shop, among countless others. I finally located the organisation's central office—a large, multi-storey house that has been refurbished as an office building situated off the main road at the end of a lane in the heart of a residential pocket of Baluwatar. Upon making myself known to the woman at the reception desk on the ground floor I was guided to the meeting room on the first floor where I sat at a large oval table waiting for Anita Bhandari, the Senior Program Manager, with whom my meeting was arranged.

As its name suggests, the meeting room at WHR's head office is the place where visitors to the organisation meet with WHR staff. The meeting room was the location in which many of my interactions with staff members took place. In his notion of 'locale', Giddens (1984, p. 118) refers to the 'use of space to provide the settings of interaction'. He contends that the '*settings* of interaction are essential to specifying its *contextuality*' (1984, p. 118; original emphasis). WHR's meeting room also constitutes a specific locale. The physical features of the room and the activities conducted here specify the utilisation of the room, including the way in which people are expected to behave. The formal setting of the room and the activities that regularly take place within the space, such as meetings with staff and outsiders, shaped my interactions with staff members. The impact of the setting on such interactions was most notable during interviews with widowed staff members. In these interviews the women talked about their life stories and experiences of widowhood. The formal setting of the meeting room was not always conducive to such personal and often very painful accounts. Some of the women broke down in tears as they spoke while others resorted to whispering at times while keeping an eye on the open door in an attempt to keep some things private, given my assurances of anonymity and complete confidence. Clearly this was not a setting in which the women felt that they could talk completely freely.

The meeting room was, however, a good place to begin my relationship with WHR, particularly because it was well equipped to introduce outsiders to the organisation. The room was well stocked with numerous books and informative materials such as booklets and brochures, including many of the group's own publications. There were

also posters of various campaigns and slogans on the walls giving the visitor a glimpse of the issues, concerns and activities of the organisation. Much of this information was also available on the Internet on WHR's sophisticated website, which makes full use of technology to promote the organisation—including hyperlinks, photograph galleries, and slideshows of activities. Indeed, my preliminary study of the available information on WHR, most of which was accessed from the Internet, had allowed me to form a detailed picture of the group. While my main aim of this initial meeting with WHR was to gain access, as it turned out, the lengthy formal, unstructured interview with the Senior Program Manager and the impromptu participation of Lily Thapa—the founder and head of the organisation—provided me with an overview of the group's beginnings and journey up until the present interview.

### **A brief overview of WHR**

Lily Thapa—a highly educated, high-caste Chhetri woman from a large, respected Kathmandu family—is a veteran of agitating for women's rights in Nepal, having founded WHR in 1994. WHR is primarily concerned with the issues and rights of widows in Nepal.<sup>66</sup> Because of the stigma associated with the word 'widow', WHR passed a national declaration in 2001 to use the term 'single women' instead of the word 'widow'.<sup>67</sup> Particularly in high-caste Hindu terms, a widow is no longer regarded as a 'good woman'. With the death of her husband she loses social standing in the community and her position within the household. A widow is regarded as someone with bad fate and bad luck and she is often blamed for her husband's death.<sup>68</sup> She is subject to discrimination, stigma and abuse and is often perceived by her in-laws as a burden.<sup>69</sup> While the experience of widowhood differs based on factors such

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<sup>66</sup> WHR works with 'widows, wives of missing husbands, divorcees, unmarried women of over 35 years of age or women separated but not divorced from their husbands', however 99% of its focus is on widows (WHR, 2010b, p. 1).

<sup>67</sup> The term 'single women' is used in media, government and non-government documents (WHR, 2010b, p. 23). However, my research revealed that not all women in Nepal accept this term as a replacement for the word widow. One of my participants, a highly educated successful woman who has never married, takes issue with this use of the term in relation to widows given that she considers herself to be a single woman.

<sup>68</sup> WHR's study of 41,530 widows reveals that the overwhelming cause of death of the husband was due to sickness (WHR, 2010b).

<sup>69</sup> Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in a rural subdistrict unit in central Nepal, Skinner and Holland (1998, p. 92) highlight the low and derided status of widows in Nepal through their description of the way in which females, including toddlers, were often insulted and scolded using a derogatory

as age, caste, ethnicity and religion (Cameron, 1998), it is this depiction of widows that dominates gender ideology in Nepal. During our meeting Lily Thapa commented on the stigma related to widows:

Widows are seen as invisible people, however they are very visible by the clothes they wear—they are expected to wear white. Married women wear beads around their neck, a necklace that signifies they are married. A widow will wear this [in public] so that she does not get harassed and then take it off at home. If people recognise she is a widow she will get harassed.

Further, Lily Thapa noted that because of the stigma attached to their status, widows face many obstacles including trafficking, sexual harassment, inheritance difficulties related to the husband's property, a lack of citizenship, and a lack of economic resources.

It was Lily's own experience of being widowed that provided the impetus for WHR. Lily's husband died in 1990 while serving as a doctor in the Gulf War in Iraq, leaving her with three young sons aged nine, eight, and three years. Her life changed dramatically as her status quickly shifted from respected married woman to widow, as someone to be treated with suspicion and disdain, as she highlighted:

When my husband was alive everybody not dare to do anything to the wife. The dignity, respect and everything... I get that while my husband is alive, no? The second, the minute after my husband's death I would not get that auspiciousness... Not from the community, not even from my family as well. Immediately after [his death]... my family thought...that I could be a kind of burden to them—young and three children, so they also avoided me. For 3-4 years they treated me very badly.

In 1992, two years after her husband's death, Lily initiated an informal weekly support group for widows in order to provide a space in which they could openly express their sorrows and difficulties. In the beginning six widows gathered at Lily's house to share their grievances and provide support for each other. The number

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term for widow, '*Radi*'. By contrast, WHR (2015) points to the word '*Bidhwa*' (widow), noting the way in which it 'carries negativity and disdainful societal views which leaves many single women feeling humiliated and distressed'.

gradually increased to up to 50 widows and in 1994 the group was formally registered as an NGO. WHR has grown to become one of the largest and far reaching women's NGOs in Nepal. WHR seeks to empower widows through a multi-faceted strategy involving a range of 'capacity building programs' for widows, legal engagement to change laws and policies that discriminate against widows and advocacy to change societal attitudes towards widows. I explore the organisation in more depth in Chapter Five, but now I turn to gaining and maintaining access.

### **Gaining access with WHR**

While much can be gained by conducting a desk review of an organisation, it is no substitute for 'being there' (Gellner & Hirsch, 2001, p. 6). What is most significant about 'being there', suggest Gellner and Hirsch, 'is that one has gained some insight or understanding into 'the native's point of view', i.e. into how the world looks or is perceived from the perspective of the people themselves' (2001, p. 6). Indeed, sitting in the headquarters of WHR in Baluwatar listening to Lily Thapa talk about her life and the situation of Nepali widows was markedly different from reading about it in an article on the Internet. From the outset Lily was warm and friendly and although she must have spoken about the issues of single women countless times over the past 20 years, she engaged in our meeting with enthusiasm, which did not waver throughout the period of fieldwork. She regarded my project as an avenue through which to spread the group's message further afield. Moreover, I saw my writing about Nepali widows as a way in which I could give something back to the organisation, particularly to the women who participated in the research.<sup>70</sup>

At this initial meeting with WHR I was granted access to conduct research within the organisation. Senior Program Manager Anita, who had read my research proposal before our meeting, consented to my participation and observation at any activities the organisation was running. In addition, Lily gave me a seemingly open invitation,

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<sup>70</sup> My contribution to the organisation took place while I was still in the field through my role as an 'International Volunteer' at the international conference on widowhood that was organised and hosted by WHR. My main task was editing papers written by Nepali women (in English) ready for the conference, many of which were presented at the conference and all of which are included in a book that was launched at the conference. I edited eighteen articles and wrote an article on widows in Australia, which I presented at the conference. I was also a moderator for a session.

stating on numerous occasions over the course of fieldwork that I could ‘visit anytime’. Anita also informed me of the large number of supporters and volunteers working at the organisation, thus pointing to WHR’s history of accepting support, which could explain WHR’s prompt and positive response to my introductory email. Further, Anita mentioned that the staff were very busy, however she agreed to inform me of any seminars, workshops and other activities that were taking place at WHR with the view to me attending them. The reality, however, was quite different.

I quickly learned that I needed to actively seek out upcoming events and activities. This meant that throughout the fieldwork, my access with WHR was continuously mediated, negotiated and re-negotiated. Buchanon, Boddy, and McCalman (1988, p. 56) state that ‘negotiating access for the purposes of research is a game of chance, not of skill’, which resonates with my experiences with WHR. For example, one of my visits to the organisation fortuitously coincided with a day-length visit from a donor organisation. At the end of my meeting I was given an impromptu invitation to attend, thereby enabling me to interact with and observe the recipients of one of WHR’s skill-building programs while they participated in various activities. Attending this program, which was funded by the visiting donor, also allowed me to observe the relationship between the donor agency and WHR and further, the interactions between WHR and the recipients of the program, thus providing me with rich data and critical insights (see Chapter Five). By contrast, on another occasion I telephoned one of the program managers in order to clarify dates and times for any upcoming programs or seminars that I might be able to attend only to be told of an important workshop that finished the day before.

While I came to see the negotiations over access as a way in which WHR maintained its boundaries, upon reflection it also seems to be a case of out of sight, out of mind, as the above examples highlight. The organisation resisted my attempts to set up a regular schedule and without the information about upcoming programs and activities it was not possible to engage in sustained, long-term research with WHR. The organisation’s behaviour fitted with what Mosse (2001, pp. 177-178) describes as ‘non-cooperation’ wherein organisations deny researchers access to activities or documentation, or circumscribe the areas in which they can work. Mosse (2001, p. 178) contends that the difficulty social science researchers often face in gaining access

is based on the fear of information leaks. Moreover, Mosse (2001, p. 176) argues that this is particularly so in development organisations

...which exist in a nexus of information, evaluation, and external funding... [which] are, among other things, systems for the production and control of information. Development organisations have highly evolved mechanisms for filtering and regulating flows of information...In short, contrary to the tenets of academic research, in organisational settings information is rarely seen as a ‘public good’.

I now turn to an organisation that was a world away from the context of WHR, even though its head office was located only 20 minutes away by taxi. In the context of the mainstream gender and development ‘scene’ (i.e. those organisations that were well known), this NGO was unknown. However, despite its obscurity, it was also engaged in women’s development.

## **Sangam**

*There is an organisation that works for the women—Sangam, do you know it? It is located on the river but this is on purpose for it is located in the heart of the community it’s trying to help.*

Dutch friend working for animal welfare in Nepal

The smell alerted me to what was up ahead of us well before we came to the source of the putrid odour. Usually covering my mouth and nose with my scarf while out and about in Kathmandu was enough to block out the vehicle fumes and pollution but on this journey the smell was so unbearable that I held my breath for as long as I could. As the odour intensified I could see a structure consisting of four posts holding up a thatched roof located on the banks of the Bishnumati River. The blood soaked ground was the only evidence of what had taken place earlier in the day; this was the site of a buffalo slaughterhouse.<sup>71</sup> Less than five minutes later my research assistant and I had

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<sup>71</sup> At this slaughterhouse buffalos are killed for human consumption and the meat can be bought at local butcher shops. While there has been much written about buffalo abattoirs from a health and safety perspective, another part of the picture relates to animal rights.

arrived at a busy intersection. There were people seated on the ground along both sides of the road with their wares laid out in front of them including vegetables, clothing, shoes, umbrellas, among many others. We crossed the road, carefully dodging through the thick traffic, to the building that houses the central office of Sangam Sanstha<sup>72</sup> (hereafter referred to as Sangam), the organisation I had come to meet, which occupied all but the ground floor of the three-storey building.

We climbed the stairs to the first floor and a small sign on the wall in the stairwell signalled that we were at the central office of Sangam. There was no reception area and nor were there names or signs on any doors once we had reached the top of the stairs. I gently knocked on the first open door and was warmly greeted by Sangam's program manager, Shanti Shrestha—a high-caste Newar—who motioned us to sit on the two chairs located under the window. While a reception area was a feature of many of the organisations I visited, at Sangam visitors would wait to be seen in the room of the person they had come to meet. On either side of our chairs there were desks, both with computers and telephones. Shanti's desk, with a computer and printer, stood in the other corner of the room. A wide, well-labelled filing cabinet was situated directly behind Shanti's desk and a Nepali calendar hung on the wall above. This modest room was where the administrative duties were carried out. The room was very light due to the windows on all but the inside wall, which also afforded good views of the streets below and the nearby river. After a short time Shanti pulled up a chair in front of me and through my translator we proceeded to engage in conversation about Sangam, beginning with its history.

Sangam focused on improving the health and nutrition of pregnant women, young children under three years of age and their mothers. While NGOs typically rely on project-based funding from a variety of donor organisations and INGOs, Sangam received funding from just two European INGOs, one of which had been providing both financial and technical support since Sangam's inception in 2004: indeed, this INGO, hereafter referred to as Nutrition Nepal, was critical to the formation of the organisation. Further, Nutrition Nepal closely monitored and managed Sangam's finances, programs and the day-to-day running of the organisation. The connections

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<sup>72</sup> *Sangam* translates to 'where two points meet' and *sanstha* translates to organisation.

between a number of Sangam's volunteers and staff members and Nutrition Nepal go back even further to another NGO, which was also funded and supported by Nutrition Nepal from 2001, and out of which Sangam evolved. This earlier NGO implemented a four-year project focused on the nutrition and health of antenatal and postnatal mothers, and children below three years of age. Following the success of the project—where success was interpreted by the donor organisation, Nutrition Nepal, in terms of underweight children reaching weight targets as set out by the World Health Organisation—the volunteers and staff of the earlier NGO and Nutrition Nepal were eager for the project to continue resulting in the formation of the current organisation, Sangam. Thus the earlier project provided a blueprint for Sangam in terms of its focus, approach, and activities. A number of the volunteers and staff from the first project moved across to Sangam. This included Shanti Shrestha, who shifted from her role as staff member of Nutrition Nepal providing technical support to the earlier project—which she had held since 2002—to her current position as program coordinator of Sangam, the highest-ranked position in the organisation.

Sangam was registered with the compulsory government agencies including the Kathmandu District Administration Office, the Social Welfare Council (SWC), and Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC). The organisation worked with government departments including the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare and more closely with the Ministry of Health and Population, specifically the Department of Health, including the District Public Health section and the Nutrition section. It also had a close working relationship with public health clinics in the municipality. In addition, Sangam worked in partnership with the Centre for Mental Health and Counselling (CMC), an NGO that focuses on mental health and provides support in the form of training and counselling to NGOs. Sangam implemented three separate programs running in different locations across Nepal; (i) a nutrition program in Western Nepal; (ii) a Social Responsiveness Program in twenty brick kilns in the Kathmandu Valley;<sup>73</sup> and (iii) an urban nutrition program in eleven wards in the

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<sup>73</sup> Sangam operated nine childcare centres (Child Development Centre—hereafter CDC) in brick kilns in the Kathmandu Valley. The very dusty and dangerous environment of the brick kiln is unsuitable for children. Sangam encouraged families working in the brick kilns to place their young children (between 7 months and 5 years) in the CDC instead of taking them to work. Convincing parents to do this, most typically fathers, was challenging, largely because of the fees, which although small, were seen by families as taking out of the day's earnings.

Kathmandu Municipality. Initially I sought to explore all of these programs, however the size and complexity of each program soon became apparent. I therefore decided to concentrate on the program running in the Kathmandu Municipality, largely because it was urban-based and ran continuously throughout the year. By contrast, the program running in various brick kilns in the Kathmandu Valley was seasonal, ceasing throughout the monsoon when the brick kilns were unable to operate because of the monsoonal rains.<sup>74</sup>

Upon learning of Sangam's existence I was surprised to find that the organisation had a website detailing its programs and activities, which I scrutinised before my first meeting with the organisation. My surprise was largely due to the obscurity of Sangam within women's development NGO circles and in the wider sector of development more generally to which I had access through friends and acquaintances. Apart from my friend who recommended Sangam, no one I spoke to—Nepali and foreigner alike—had heard of the organisation. In contrast to WHR's sophisticated website, Sangam's website was basic, providing a brief outline of the organisation and current projects, including aims and objectives. Sangam's focus on empowering women appeared to resonate with my own research interests.

### **Gaining access with Sangam**

At the end of this informative first meeting with Sangam I was granted permission from Shanti to undertake two field trips, the first of which was a daytrip to two brick kilns just outside of Kathmandu. The first trip occurred two weeks after my initial meeting with Sangam. Accompanied by my translator and a staff member from Nutrition Nepal, I was given a guided tour of the brick kilns and I spent time at the Child Development Centres (CDCs) speaking with Sangam's volunteer caretakers and observing the centre's activities with the children. The second fieldtrip afforded me a glimpse of the urban-based program, which was to form the focus of my study. Four days after the first field trip I accompanied Shanti and another staff member to an

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<sup>74</sup> The brick kilns rely on the sun as an essential part of the brick-making process. Using their hands, workers scoop mud into the brick molds that are then left to dry in the sun. The heavy rains during the monsoon mean that this process is not viable for six months of the year. The brick kilns close and most of the families return to their rural homes.

inner-city ward for a home visit, one of the key activities of the program. We visited a woman and her two young daughters, both of whom had been identified as underweight, to check the growth of both girls. We then visited another ward in a different part of Kathmandu where we spent time at a CDC, enabling me to speak with the caretakers and observe the centre's activities. Following this second field trip I asked permission to make a return visit to the brick kilns and CDCs for follow-up interviews and it was at this point that my relationship with Sangam became more complicated. In short, I had come up against a gatekeeper although this was not the organisation itself; rather it was the donor organisation, Nutrition Nepal, who instigated the process of defining Sangam's boundaries.

Shanti did not respond to my request immediately, instead she later contacted me and invited me to attend a meeting with Nutrition Nepal to discuss 'outside visitors' and look towards a plan for future research. One month later I met with Shanti and two staff members—one male, one female—from Nutrition Nepal in the meeting room on the top level of Sangam's central office. Seated on cushions around a low table we proceeded to discuss the possibility of me conducting research with the organisation. One of the staff members from Nutrition Nepal held strong views about the role of an anthropologist based on her previous experience as a research assistant for an anthropologist. From her perspective my project did not fit within the bounds of what anthropologists do, that is, study a particular ethnic group—typically rural based—and learn the language of those people.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, I found her to be almost hostile towards me, ignoring my questions about her experiences and my efforts to try and explain my urban-based project and the time constraints I faced.<sup>76</sup> Throughout the meeting Shanti hardly spoke at all.

The male staff member, a Newar man of middle caste status, was polite to me but condescending towards my female translator, a high-caste Chhetri. He completely dismissed my research information sheet, which had been translated into Nepali, suggesting that I needed to provide a research proposal stating my objectives and the

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<sup>75</sup> Des Chene (2007, p. 211) points to the way in which early anthropological work on Nepal focused on 'the mapping of ethnic groups and their practices'.

<sup>76</sup> I found her to be intimidating throughout my time with Sangam even while I recognised her critical insights and depth of knowledge about Sangam's program. However, in the final months of fieldwork she allowed me to interview her wherein she was forthcoming with important detail about Sangam.

specifics of the projects such as the number of interviews I planned to conduct, although this document had to be short. I stated that I could provide such a document but given the nature of qualitative research it would be difficult to abide by a rigid, structured plan for my research. After a discussion relating to the value of anthropological methods the male staff member became much more supportive of my research, which ultimately greatly assisted my quest for access. I needed to provide letters of support from my supervisors in Australia and Nepal and a short working plan of the proposed research. The final decision rested on ‘the women of Sangam’. At the next board meeting my letters of support and research objectives would be examined and discussed by the Working Committee,<sup>77</sup> as representatives of ‘the women of Sangam’, and a vote would be taken on whether I would be given permission to continue my study with the organisation.

With the meeting over, the Nutrition Nepal staff exited the room and I remained seated at the table with my translator and Shanti. After the discussion that had transpired at the meeting I was concerned that I would not be granted access to conduct research at Sangam. I took this opportunity to talk further with Shanti about anthropological methods and my research objectives, suggesting for instance that it would be difficult to provide a number regarding future interviews however I would be able to give her a some sort of time frame. From my first email contact with Sangam, in which I provided a detailed outline of my research, Shanti had a good understanding of my project, noting at our first meeting: ‘from the emails that you sent me, I get a feeling that the work of the organisation matches with your study’. From the outset she had been supportive of my study, setting aside time from her busy schedule to meet with me and facilitating field visits within a short timeframe. In response to my concerns about the meeting, Shanti made it clear that the process of gaining access was not about me personally or my project particularly. Rather, long-term research (i.e. more than one or two visits) was seen as something out of the ordinary at Sangam. I was the first researcher to approach Sangam since the organisation’s inception six years ago and there was no established procedure for integrating outsiders. Thus, Nutrition Nepal was concerned to put systems in place.

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<sup>77</sup> The Working Committee, also known as the Work Committee or the Board, was made up of nine women who were elected from Sangam’s membership.

I was elated to receive the news from Shanti that the Working Committee voted to grant me access to conduct research with Sangam. In return I would need to provide Sangam with a copy of my thesis. While gaining access to the organisation had not been entirely straightforward, it was a process nonetheless with a start point and an end point, which ultimately made my research with Sangam that much easier because I did not have to continually negotiate access. Shanti incorporated me into Sangam's monthly action plan, emailing me a spreadsheet at the start of each month with the details of the activities I would be attending. This was an ongoing process of consultation and dialogue between Shanti and myself. At the beginning of my research with Sangam I recognised that I had no clear understanding of the urban-based project, due to its complexity and enormity, and thus Shanti was best placed to decide on my schedule, although I did provide a basic outline of my preferences. This proved to be an effective way in which to get a first-hand overview of the numerous activities and contrasting field sites of the urban program; in Bourdieu's (1977) terms, a 'feel for the game'. As I developed a greater understanding of the program, I requested (and was granted) visits to particular field sites and activities thereby enabling repeat visits, which afforded me the opportunity to build rapport and trust with participants and importantly, forge deeper relationships—something that is not possible to do in a single visit.

### **The implications of access**

Establishing contacts and gaining permission to conduct ethnographic research was critical for me to begin fieldwork. While initiating the project was a time-consuming and often stressful process, it provided insights into both organisations. Gellner and Hirsch (2001, p. 5) suggest that 'access is something that has to be both scrutinised for the way it transforms the research and continuously negotiated throughout the time of fieldwork'. Gaining access with WHR was quite straightforward although maintaining it was challenging, requiring persistence and ongoing negotiations. I was able to conduct participant observation (although mostly observation) during scheduled activities and interview various staff members, however the research was predominantly confined to the organisation's headquarters—despite my attempts to secure permission to conduct research in other locations, such as smaller WHR groups

close to Kathmandu. I was, therefore, unable to bring a broader perspective beyond the context of the centralised head office.

This also had implications for my methodology. The formal setting of WHR's headquarters was not conducive to open access—i.e. visiting any time and freely observing the workings of the organisation—despite the assurances articulated at our first meeting; nor was it suited to personal interviews, particularly with widows, as mentioned earlier. I was aware that it was difficult for women to venture outside of the party line, insofar as it was not possible for any critique of the organisation to be articulated in this setting. Rather, this came to the fore when I encountered staff members at a program that was organised and held outside of the organisation, one where most of the well-known women's NGOs were present. One WHR staff member whispered throughout our conversation and I was sworn to confidentiality about the details. Overall, however, I remained an 'outsider' researcher' with WHR and access to the internal practices of the organisation was restricted (Mosse, 2001, p. 161). Indeed, my research with WHR was under what Mosse (2001, p. 177) calls 'management control'. This is unsurprising because, as Mosse notes, the ethnographic work of 'exploring and revealing complexity of social relationships and the untidy business of practice... runs up against organisational needs for simplicity and to reduce complexity' (2001, p. 177).<sup>78</sup>

By contrast, gaining access with Sangam was more complicated and I was required to participate in a structured process to gain consent. This structured approach was evident throughout my research with the organisation—in the electronic spreadsheets highlighting the program activities and in the meetings that ran on time as scheduled. It meant that instead of spending time trying to ascertain what program activities were running and continually negotiating access, I was able to get on with the study and immerse myself in the setting. I was given relatively free reign to conduct ethnographic research and therefore able to utilise a range of methods. I was able to

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<sup>78</sup> Further, Mosse (2001, p. 177) points to 'the perception that research is unnecessarily wasteful of staff time and serves only to reduce the desired manageability of the social world.' This was especially evident in my interviews with widows working at WHR. I was granted permission to interview these women but only in their own time and at the central office. Thus, the interviews took place early in the morning before the women began work. They were conducted in the meeting room that I described earlier, with the door kept open. By contrast, interviews with program managers were held during office hours and not necessarily in the meeting room.

accompany staff and volunteers during program activities, most of which took place outside of Sangam's office, which afforded me insights into these roles but also into the relationships between staff, volunteers and program recipients. My access also provided me with the opportunity to enter the homes of women (staff, volunteers and recipients), during which narratives of women's lives emerged. I was able to develop substantial relationships with study participants and gain deeper insights into the practice of Sangam and the nutrition program. The contrast between each group in terms of access, methodology and the subsequent insights I was able to produce is reflected in the ethnographic detail of each organisation.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I provided important background detail about development in Nepal, and gender and development specifically. I highlighted the notion of 'the Nepali woman', a central figure in gender and development in Nepal. I touched on the development approaches adopted by the Nepali state in relation to gender and briefly discussed NGOs in Nepal. In the second part of the chapter I focused on my early interactions with organisations and issues related to gaining access and doing anthropological research in and on organisations. I provided an ethnographic account of gaining access with WHR and Sangam, and in turn, introduced the organisations. I highlighted the implications of access on my methodology and the subsequent insights I was able to produce in terms of each organisation.

In the chapters that follow I focus an ethnographic lens on WHR and Sangam to explore the ways in which empowerment is understood and experienced by women in these contexts. Chapters Three and Four should be read in conjunction with one another; together they form a detailed case study of Sangam. In the next chapter, Chapter Three, I provide a descriptive account of Sangam and the nutrition program, detailing the people involved with the organisation and program activities. In Chapter Four I focus an analytical lens on this detail in terms of empowerment. Chapter Five considers empowerment in the context of WHR.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Sangam: ‘working for the women’**

#### **Introduction**

The word empowerment frames the aims and objectives of Sangam’s nutrition program, as stated on Sangam’s website under key objectives: ‘empowerment of women through awareness programmes, capacity building and income generation’ and ‘to empower women through improving their social and economic status’. It also features on the website in Sangam’s vision statement: ‘to bring about improved nutrition and wellbeing of young children, pregnant women, and post-natal mothers through the empowerment of women’. In these statements empowerment is conceptualised as both a process and an end. It is perceived in instrumental terms, as a solution to realise the goals of improved health and nutrition of young children, pre- and post-natal women. Empowerment is also envisioned as a goal, a destination that women can reach by participating in specific activities aimed at improving their social and economic status. In this chapter and the one that follows I explore the way in which this discourse is understood, interpreted and implemented at the ground level through an ethnographic account of Sangam and the nutrition program. I examine what ideas of empowerment are generated in practice, in the lived realities of specific development encounters.

Wood notes the way in which development as a discourse is brought to the fore by the writings of academics and development practitioners (2001, p. 429). Typically, she argues, this discourse ‘operates among professionals working ‘in’ development rather than among people designated as the recipients or beneficiaries of policy’ (2001, p. 429). Development discourse, including women’s empowerment did feature on Sangam’s website, as highlighted above. Further, in an interview with Sangam’s Project Manager, Shanti Shrestha, the theme of women’s empowerment was discussed. It was also featured in a conversation with a senior staff member from Sangam’s donor organisation, Nutrition Nepal. Nevertheless, words and terms that typically feature in development discourse were not part of the usual vocabulary of the

women involved with Sangam—neither the staff members and volunteers implementing the program or the women the NGO was trying to help. Indeed, some women, particularly Sangam’s so-called beneficiaries that Wood (2001, p. 429) speaks of, had never heard of such terms. Rather, other ways of describing the work of Sangam were used by the women involved with the organisation. It is important to emphasise that the word empowerment only arose as a result of my direct questions in relation to the organisation’s stated objectives. In fact, throughout the fieldwork period the only time I heard the term empowerment mentioned in the Sangam community was in discussions instigated by me.

When I started research with Sangam it was not immediately apparent the extent to which women’s empowerment was a key concern of the organisation, despite the aforementioned claims on Sangam’s webpage. In the beginning the health and nutrition of young children, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers dominated discussions and appeared to underpin most program activities. As was often reiterated to me, ‘our focus is on health and nutrition’, and as such, it formed the overriding focus of my study in the early days of the research. The importance of focusing on women to achieve this goal of nutritional wellbeing came to the fore over time as I became immersed in the work of Sangam. Over the course of four months I accompanied Sangam staff and volunteers as they implemented and monitored the nutrition program within specific locales—described as ‘working areas’. I sat in the houses of women belonging to these communities and observed their interactions with Sangam staff and volunteers, including their responses to the information and messages derived from the program’s goals. Multiple visits afforded me a glimpse into the lives of women (staff, volunteers and program recipients) and over time I was able to develop a rapport with a number of them, resulting in women expressing themselves at a very personal level. It must be said, however, that women rarely—if ever—spoke in the language used in development discourse. Nevertheless, as I will highlight, a number of issues raised in the women’s stories resonate with concerns that have been problematised within the literature on women’s development. Through the practice of the program and the associated encounters with women in their everyday lives I came to understand the complexities and tacit dimensions of Sangam’s urban-based program. In turn, I was able to begin to comprehend the deeper aspects and wider implications of the program. The focus on opening up possibilities and enabling

women to make changes within their own lives, described by Sangam as empowering women, emerged as a key foundation of the organisation's work.

In the first section of the chapter I focus on the people that make up Sangam. In order to provide context for the roles within the organisation I begin by briefly discussing the key impetus for the nutrition program—malnutrition. I then turn to staff positions, with particular attention focused on the role of Community Facilitator (CF), a key position that also provided a fundamental link between the organisation and the community. A CF was almost always present during my research with Sangam, acting as a mediator between myself and program participants, and thus they feature in much of the data collected. This section highlights staff dynamics and struggles between differently positioned staff members over authority and status. Next, the role of volunteers is outlined, illustrating the recruitment and training processes for this position. Women in this role supported staff in the implementation of program activities, providing a critical link between Sangam and the community. The focus then moves to the nutrition program where I present a descriptive account of program activities through the lens of one locale.

### **Why the nutrition program?**

Sangam's nutrition program was based on a project that was established by Community Care, the NGO that preceded Sangam. Community Care was founded in 1992 to work with marginalised communities in Nepal to improve access to resources. In 1998 the NGO focused on the health of the community in two wards of inner Kathmandu. These initial projects identified particular needs within the communities and in 2001 a nutrition project was initiated to address these needs—a collaborative project between Community Care and the international non-governmental organisation Nutrition Nepal (Sangam's donor). A baseline survey study was conducted, focusing on the Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice (KAP)<sup>79</sup> related to nutrition in women and small children in these inner wards. KAP surveys are widely used devices used to gather information for planning development interventions and

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<sup>79</sup> Also called the knowledge, attitude, behaviour and practice (KABP) survey (Hovland, 2009, p. 1).

public health programs in poor countries (Hovland, 2009, p. 1).<sup>80</sup> The study found that many families living in inner-Kathmandu—specifically mothers—lacked basic knowledge about the health and nutrition of their young children, in terms of what to feed them, or how often, or how to care for them adequately during illness (I return to address this further towards the end of chapter). Further, many children were unwell because of worms, contaminated water and poor sanitation. Pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers were found to be anaemic due to a lack of iron caused by a diet deficient in meat and protein. The study results showed widespread malnutrition (a term used interchangeably with undernutrition<sup>81</sup>)—a deeply entrenched health issue in Nepal.

Research related to child and maternal health and nutrition in Nepal highlights that while there has been a slight improvement in the nutrition status of the population, undernutrition continues to be a significant issue throughout the country (Shrimpton & Atwood, 2012, p. 29). The most recent available data reports the following: 18% of women are undernourished and 35% are anaemic; 41% of under-fives are stunted, which is measured by height per age and reflects chronic malnutrition; 11% are wasted, they are thin for their age; 29% are underweight; and 46% are anaemic (Pahar 2012 and Ministry of Health and Population 2012 in Shrimpton & Atwood, 2012, p. 29). The significance of these results was underscored during a conversation with Dipika Gurung, Senior Consultant at Sangam’s donor organisation, Nutrition Nepal.<sup>82</sup>

49% of the children in Nepal are stunted... They are chronically malnourished. This is generational. It is not the recent impact; it is the long impact of food insecurity,

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<sup>80</sup> Hovland (2009, p. 10) suggests that such surveys ‘can be useful... to obtain general information about public health knowledge regarding treatment and prevention practices, or about sociological variables, such as income, education, occupation, and social status’. However, KAP surveys are not without criticism, as Pigg and Pike (2001, p. 178) highlight in their work on AIDS and STD prevention in Nepal: ‘In Nepal, simple tests [KAP surveys] are used to measure the ‘success’ of workshops, training sessions, and informational campaigns. These bureaucratic practices reflect an instrumentalist view of AIDS and STD prevention, a view that measures knowledge about AIDS solely according to whether respondents can correctly parrot back a set of authoritatively determined ‘facts’ about HIV transmission’.

<sup>81</sup> Shetty (2003, p. 18) states that ‘the terms ‘malnutrition’ and ‘undernutrition’ are often used loosely and interchangeably’. He notes the way in which ‘malnutrition refers to all deviations from adequate and optimal nutritional status, including energy undernutrition and over-nutrition (obesity is a form of malnutrition). The term ‘undernutrition’ is used to refer to generally poor nutritional status, but also implies underfeeding’.

<sup>82</sup> Our conversation took place in 2010 when the most recent statistics were from 2006, thus they differ slightly from the 2011 findings cited above.

drought, flood, landslides and natural calamities. 50% of the people are malnourished. 13% of children are wasting... It's alarming, it's a danger... Their brain is not fully developed and their system not fully developed. How the country will live with malnourished people?

Shrimpton and Atwood's (2012) report supports Dipika's concerns, citing a range of adverse outcomes related to poor nutrition. For example, severe anaemia can result in lower intelligence (a loss of up to 25 IQ points) (Lozoff et al. 2006 in Shrimpton and Atwood, 2012: 30) and stunted children of normal weight are likely to complete fewer school years than their normal counterparts (ibid). Further, Shrimpton and Atwood (2012, 29-30) echo Dipika's alarm regarding the consequences for the country as a whole, stating, 'what is at stake is not only individual but national development'. Pointing to the statistics (noted above), they state that 'it is clear from the numbers that 'business as usual' is not going to solve Nepal's problems with undernutrition' (2012, 29). They highlight that despite the government's strong 'commitment to improve the nutrition status of children and women, there is a gap in specific policies directed at public nutrition' (2012, 31). Moreover, they conclude that while the approach and strategies to counter undernutrition may be sufficient for clinical settings, it is not adequately 'focused on populations to change the size or the trend of the problem' (2012, 29). Their conclusions resonate with observations articulated by people who had long worked in the sector at the ground level. As one Sangam staff member told me, 'nutrition is the preventative work. You can spend thousands and thousands of money on x-rays... prevention is better than cure'. In order to explore the ways in which Sangam addressed the issue of malnutrition, it is first necessary to introduce the people that make up the organisation and implement the nutrition program.

### **Staff positions**

In addition to its volunteers, Sangam employed 45 people in paid positions, three of which were men who held desk positions at the organisation's central office—two in the finance section and one in administration. With the exception of the cook and the finance and administration staff, staff members spent the bulk of their time in their 'working area'. This included 24 women working as caretakers of children in the

organisation's six childcare centres, four women working as Social Mobilisers in the brick kilns, and sixteen women working in different wards in the urban-based nutrition program in their role as either Community Facilitator (twelve) or Training Facilitator (four). The *jat* (ethnic/caste) makeup of staff was similar to that of volunteers—24 from Bahun/Chhetri groups, seventeen from indigenous nationalities (*Janajati*), and four from the Dalit community. As with the volunteers, staff were selected based on a platform of workplace diversity, as an advertisement for a new staff member stated: 'without discrimination on the basis of language, caste, creed, religious affiliation, political affiliation, age and sex'.<sup>83</sup>

The position of Community Facilitator (CF) was a fundamental role in the organisation—one that was, along with volunteers, one of the strongest links between the organisation and the women and children it was aiming to support. Women in these roles were almost always present during my research with the organisation, thus they feature in much of the data collected. As the title suggests, CFs were chiefly responsible for implementing the nutrition program in the community. Typically, CFs were selected from the pool of volunteers in a particular working area. Once appointed in the new role, CFs continued to work in that same location, which was also the place in which they resided. It was common practice for CFs and volunteers to inform me of which batch or group of volunteers they belonged to. It was a way in which the women identified themselves in the context of the organisation.<sup>84</sup> Each new group of volunteers was given a batch number at the outset of their training. Those volunteers belonging to early batches stated their batch number with pride; it signified a long association with Sangam and spoke of the depth of experience in their working areas. Historically, a person's status in the organisation was largely based on experience and the longevity of their association with Sangam. This was still the case for volunteers. However, in the past few years there had been an increased focus on formal educational qualifications for paid positions, thereby displacing informally

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<sup>83</sup> To keep the anonymity of the organisation I do not include this citation.

<sup>84</sup> In her research on NGOs in Nepal, Heaton-Shrestha (2004, p. 12) notes the way in which her informants 'stressed the close relation between who one is and what one does: identity was both constituted by, and motivated, action'.

acquired skills and experience as the key attributes for employment in the organisation.<sup>85</sup> As long-term CF Priya, explained to me:

From 2004/05 it started. They started seeing the qualification. I did not come in qualification. *Didis*<sup>86</sup> saw my work [as a volunteer] and they requested [that I become a Community Facilitator] and then that's how I came. When I was a volunteer I was very active so they saw that and then I came. I did not come from the competition.

Priya's story resonated with many of the CFs at Sangam. These women caught the attention of the staff at Sangam and Nutrition Nepal through their exemplary work as Sangam volunteers and, as a result, they were not required to apply formally for the job, nor partake in a formal interview—although they were placed on a three-month trial.

The emphasis on educational qualifications impacted on the formal status of staff members, particularly in terms of salary. While the volunteers still provided a base from which paid roles within the organisation were drawn—for instance for the role of Community Facilitator (CF) or Board Member—increasingly, importance was also placed on a person's formal credentials. The relatively new role of Training Facilitator (TF) sought candidates based predominantly on educational qualifications; indeed, the women in this role were all trained nurses. TFs were responsible for disseminating medical and technical knowledge that was gained through education rather than experience. The four TFs working at Sangam during the fieldwork period were not required to live in their working area, although this seemed to be a practical consideration given that they were required to cover all eleven wards. Moreover, the role of Training Facilitator was a higher paying position than Community Facilitator. The disparity in salary between these two positions caused friction between some staff members—described to me by one senior staff member as a 'cold war'—which was particularly visible during home visits and staff workshops where the two positions

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<sup>85</sup> This trend was observable in the wider context of Kathmandu.

<sup>86</sup> Literally meaning older sister, *didi* is the word a person used to address a woman older than themselves or approximately in the same generation. It is a mark of respect but can also be a friendly term. By contrast, *bahini* is used for women/girls younger than themselves.

were required to work closely for lengthy periods. One CF, Nita, told me: ‘I mind a lot that I have a very less salary. I feel pinched’. She commented further:

They have no experience but they are seniors to us. There is so much age gap [the TFs were much younger] but they say ‘Nita, Nita,’ but we have to tell them ‘*didi*’. So it exists. I get pinched somewhere. Even if I am pinched but it is the truth.

Chief among the criticisms from the disgruntled CFs was that while the TFs may have the educational qualifications, they did not necessarily have the skills required to work effectively in the field. CFs regarded their own skills, which were gained from experience, as more effective for field visits—particularly given that building trust and rapport with the recipients of the program were critical to program success. As CF Nita stated: ‘They are given trainings by the projects from Sangam. But in spite of the training they’ve not brought into the behaviour. They just have the training but every time they ask us. There are four TFs now. But they say—‘Nita, when will we start talking like you’? Nevertheless, as a senior staff member told me, ‘the project is not totally social, there is a need for technical expertise’. She went on to explain further:

The CFs bring experience to the program, provide role modelling and they have practical knowledge—they are paramedical. Whereas the TFs are young, fresh—they come from the university, they have technical knowledge but not the practical knowledge. I have seen some conflict between them [CFs and TFs] but after one or two years then both will settle down and work well together. They will learn from each other and there will be a mutual benefit.

As a person who hired and managed staff, she highlighted the importance of a ‘positive learning attitude’ to good workplace relations, which she described as a willingness to take on new ideas and ways of doing things. Further, in her view, some staff members were more equipped with a positive attitude than others, hence the occasional tension. I turn now to the volunteers and outline the processes of recruitment and training.

## Volunteers

Program Manager Shanti Shrestha described Sangam as ‘totally a **volunteer**<sup>87</sup> organisation’.<sup>88</sup> Volunteers were the bedrock of the organisation, providing much of the labour needed to implement project activities as well as forming the population base from which some staff and all members derived. A volunteer could be any woman whose child was below three years of age and who had lived in a particular locality within the areas that Sangam operated for at least two years. Thus, they were at once both members of a community and workers for that same community. As such, they played a key role in forming and maintaining relationships within their communities, which was critical to the implementation of the program. There were just over one thousand trained volunteers at Sangam, each having participated in training in basic health and nutrition for a period of sixteen weeks to then be able to promote this knowledge in their communities. Their work with the organisation was completely voluntary, with the exception of the small commission they received for selling Sarbottam Pitho Plus (hereafter SP+)—a highly nutritious mix of roasted maize, soya beans and wheat that is fortified with added vitamins, zinc, and iron, which Sangam produces, markets and sells to local families.<sup>89</sup> Volunteers were also remunerated NRs. 150 per training day as an incentive to participate. Nevertheless, not all volunteers were active, with only 65% of trained volunteers engaged in project activities (Sangam, 2010).<sup>90</sup> There were times when volunteers were compelled to search for paid work for a variety of reasons, which affected the amount of time they could give to Sangam.

Membership was also central to the organisation, as elaborated by Shanti:

The membership is also created from the same volunteers. It’s totally on them if they want to be a member. We do not force them for membership and we now have

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<sup>87</sup> Use of italics or bold type in women’s articulations designates a word spoken in English. It was not unusual for Nepalis to say some words in English.

<sup>88</sup> Ghosh (2009, p. 476) contends: ‘NGOs certainly belong to the voluntary sector but what differentiates them from other voluntary organisations are their paid employees, and obtaining funds for particular development purposes’.

<sup>89</sup> Throughout Nepal SP (*sarbottam pitho*) was manufactured and sold through outlets such as public health clinics. Sangam also produced the product in its own factory, adding vitamins and minerals—therein making it SP *plus*—and selling it cheaper than the health clinics.

<sup>90</sup> During the fieldwork period fourteen volunteers received a Certificate of Recognition, which Sangam awarded to women who had volunteered for one full year.

669 members. In every two years, we held an election among these members. Now, Amrita Bista is selected as a chairperson and we have nine [in the] working committee.

Membership was open to volunteers and staff. An initial fee of NRs. 5 was charged for new members and upon annual renewal the cost was NRs. 30 per membership. As Shanti noted above, the Working Committee<sup>91</sup>, also known as the Work Committee or the Board, was elected from the membership. This committee played an important role in Sangam. Most decisions were made in consultation with the Working Committee, including the signing off on finances for programs. The committee met once a month—much more regularly than other organisations, which typically held board meetings twice a year. A staff member from Sangam’s donor organisation, Nutrition Nepal, highlighted the reason for this during a staff meeting:

Ours is an organisation of volunteers so they have to come. It is not like other organisations. Here Work Committee’s meeting is not held twice annually like in other organisation. The Work Committee should know about the projects in detail because they are the ones who have to run the organisation in the future.

## **Volunteer recruitment**

Caste and ethnicity (*jat*) were not determining factors in the recruitment of volunteers, as Shanti noted:

The volunteers can be anyone. They can be the mothers of healthy as well as unhealthy child. It’s not that they have to be from a certain ethnic group and caste to be a volunteer. It’s totally their desire to be a volunteer.

The largest proportion of volunteers comprised of women belonging to Bahun/Chhetri groups (638 women), followed by 489 women from ethnic groups (*Janajati*), 44 *Dalit* and 21 *Madhesi* women. Shanti suggested that the ‘working area’ (i.e. the particular locality in which a volunteer lived and worked for Sangam), which could include up to three wards depending on their size, tended to play a determining role in the caste

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<sup>91</sup> Also known as Executive Committee in other organisations such as WHR.

and ethnicity of volunteers. For example, in inner Kathmandu there were a large number of the Newar volunteers, thereby reflecting the large population of Newars living in these areas—although this area was also populated by rural migrants belonging to a range of ethnic groups. By contrast, in an outer area populated largely by migrants from different parts of Nepal and from a multitude of ethnic backgrounds, most volunteers belonged to Bahun/Chhetri groups<sup>92</sup>.

Shanti emphasised that while caste was no longer an issue within Sangam, in the early days of the organisation it posed problems, particularly in relation to the sharing of food (commensality). She noted, ‘if the lunch was made by so-called low castes, then Bahun and Chhetri—so-called higher castes—hesitated to eat the food prepared by low caste people’. The sharing of food is an activity through which caste relations are brought to bear. As Heaton-Shrestha (2004, p. 46) notes, *jat* is ‘both inherent and constructed and reinforced through particular kinds of engagement in very specific activities’.<sup>93</sup> Caste rules govern which foods can be accepted by whom and under what circumstances, (see Dumont, 1972; Hofer, 2005).

Because food was central to the nutrition program and the sharing of food was a key part of building relationships between volunteers and staff members, it was imperative that Sangam found a way to overcome the early difficulties that arose in relation to caste. Shanti explained how Sangam did this:

By the end of the 16-week trainings we were able to change the attitude of those people...During these trainings the volunteers are made to sit and eat together in a group. We make a group of 14-16 volunteers during such trainings. Automatically the group members supported each other and got along with each other very well. In a short period, the volunteers were so close to each other that they could not say ‘no’ to the food that their friends offered. Furthermore, we also organise a picnic program once a year. We also have provision of distributing the certificates to the

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<sup>92</sup> Tanaka (2010, p. 187) notes that since the 1960s, the compositions of the dwellers and settlement patterns in Kathmandu have changed with the ‘increase of non-Newar in-migrants, who have tended to settle as tenants’. Since the late 1990s, the ratio of tenants in Kathmandu has increased rapidly with ‘approximately 35 per cent of the dwelling units counted as tenants paying rents to owners (KMC/World Bank, 2001: 156)’ (Tanaka, 2010, p. 187).

<sup>93</sup> Further, Heaton-Shrestha (2004, p. 46) highlights the way in which *jat* is seen to have ‘an important performative dimension’. She notes the ‘close relationship between being and doing’, which is particularly apt in the South Asian context (Heaton-Shrestha, 2004, p. 47).

volunteers who serve the organisation for a year. During such programs we not only invited our general members but all the volunteers of the organisation. Food is also arranged during these programs and all the volunteers from different castes and ethnicity eat together...Now we have no problems with castes and groups and with untouchables.<sup>94</sup>

There was, however, another restriction that had implications for the nutrition program. This was the exclusionary practice relating to contact: who is allowed to enter whose house. The kitchen is the most sacred place in a house, where purity has to be strictly maintained (see Gray, 2011). For orthodox Hindus, members of lower castes may be allowed into the house, but never into the kitchen. House visits were central to the implementation of the program and thus it was necessary for volunteers and staff members to enter the houses of people belonging to a range of caste groups, including those of low-caste status. This was acceptable to most staff members and volunteers, as long as they were not required to eat at these houses. I asked a key participant, who belonged to the Chhetri caste, about this: ‘You know in Sangam in the work situation there are many different castes—*Janajati*, *Dalit*, but does it work okay? Is there a problem with working together?’ She replied:

When we work in Sangam, everywhere we have to see everyone in one level. We see them in one level only and work. We don’t feel like that. Because only in our house we do like that but when we work we forget all about that.

It was also the case that volunteers and staff members belonging to low-caste groups needed to enter the houses of high-caste participants in order to facilitate the nutrition program. Typically, participants were only able to afford to live in one room, where the family slept, cooked, ate and in some cases, toileted. Thus it was impossible for Sangam staff and volunteers to avoid entering the kitchen.

While it may have been the case that exclusion based on caste was no longer an issue within the context of Sangam (i.e. during program activities), it was still a reality outside of the organisation. A key participant commented on the way in which a number of her high-caste colleagues would make excuses not to come into her house,

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<sup>94</sup> Further, a woman belonging to the *Dalit* caste held the position of cook at Sangam.

especially her upper storey kitchen, although they would freely enter into the homes of other high-caste colleagues.<sup>95</sup> This was because of her low-caste status, into which she married. Born into a prominent high-caste Newar family, she married a Newar man from the ‘Untouchable’ sweeper caste, thus rendering her ‘Untouchable’ and effectively ostracising her from her family—particularly her parents, who completely severed all contact. She believed that if she still belonged to the high-caste her colleagues would indeed enter her kitchen and eat at her table. Further, in instances where she was invited to the homes of high-caste women, she invariably declined in the fear that someone would confront her during the meal, expose her as a person of low-caste status and tell her that she should not be eating in the kitchen of a person of higher caste.

As someone who has belonged to both ends of the hierarchical ladder, this participant’s story offers insights into the way in which ‘human awareness adapts itself to the exigencies of inequality’ (Parish, 1998, p. 78). In his study of the Newars of Bhaktapur, Parish (1998, p. 78) suggests that, ‘hierarchy embodied in practice is something that people must know and engage, since it is central to their lives’. Further, and particularly salient for my participant’s experiences of caste hierarchy, Parish (1998, p. 78) notes:

In caste life, actors invoke hierarchical modes of knowing self and society to make it possible for them to interact with members of other castes, reduce the otherwise painful dissonance, and avoid exposing themselves to the risks that overt opposition would entail.

Parish (1998, pp. 52-53) writes about the work of narrative—particularly of those from the lower caste:

Telling stories constitutes one way that people relate self to caste hierarchy, respond to their experience of caste hierarchy, and reflect on its ideology and practices... Narrative work can...subvert some of the stigmatising constructions of themselves manifest in the ideology, narratives, and practices of others.

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<sup>95</sup> Based on the model of purity and impurity, those from the ‘dangerously impure’ or ‘Untouchable’ castes are not permitted to enter the upper storeys of houses of those from the higher castes. The bottom storey of such a house is regarded as either outside or ‘impure in its own right’ (Parish, 1998, p. 53).

Moreover, this example highlights the compartmentalisation of caste in the private and public spheres, where it was acceptable to share food with different castes in the context of the organisation but not possible in the private sphere of the home, particularly the kitchen (see Singer, 1972).

Women were recruited as volunteers through a number of different avenues, including Sangam activities such as awareness programs and growth monitoring sessions. However, Sangam chiefly sought out volunteers in an activity known as ‘volunteer selection’. This involved Sangam staff and trained volunteers door knocking in the community in an effort to attract women to join the organisation. There was no requirement for volunteers to be literate or educated. Nevertheless, Sangam preferred women with small children who were of a similar social and economic background to the majority of the people within the area, particularly given the significance of rapport to the successful implementation of the program.

I accompanied Sangam staff members Shristi and Anu and volunteers Rita and Juna for volunteer selection on a very hot day in early July 2010 in an area that had not been approached by Sangam before. The terrain was hilly and, in the summer heat, the day proved to be physically demanding. Shristi said that on this day they aimed to recruit six to seven women, however statistics from the previous volunteer selection in a nearby ward revealed that of the 152 families approached, only four women signed up. This activity was widely regarded amongst staff as the most difficult task of Sangam—largely because of the difficulty in attracting women to join. The most common reason stated by women approached by Sangam was their inability to meet the time commitment required to effectively carry out the role—typically six hours per month. Indeed, time as a barrier to women’s participation in development projects has been well documented (Cornwall, 2003, p. 1332). Nevertheless, other factors were also at play. One family we approached said that Christian missionaries had recently been door knocking in the area and people thought that Sangam was there for the same reason, which helped to explain why people who were visibly inside were not coming to the door to speak with us. Further, it was often the case that a woman needed her husband’s permission to become a volunteer. Nevertheless, according to Shristi, successful recruitment of volunteers depended on the skill of staff and trained volunteers in persuading women.

## Volunteer training

New volunteers were trained by Sangam staff and experienced volunteers over the course of a 16-week period. For the first ten days the group met Monday to Friday between 10am-3pm (to fit in with their domestic responsibilities), however in the final six days they met for only two hours per day. Because Sangam promoted home-cooked food, it was not possible to eat ‘outside’<sup>96</sup> food at a restaurant. Thus, each person took a turn to bring along prepared home-cooked food and share it with the group. Sangam hired community buildings to conduct the training, which were typically concrete structures without furniture. Women sat on cushions provided by Sangam throughout the sessions. Given that volunteers were required to be mothers of children aged three and below, children were always present at these sessions. They played together, slept, and sat (often quietly) on their mother’s lap or were passed amongst the women.

CFs and TFs were responsible for leading training sessions, imparting basic knowledge in child health and development, hygiene and nutrition and practical skills to implement the information within their communities. Nevertheless, this was a far more interactive process than the linear sender-receiver transfer of information implied by the term. Rather, volunteer training was more of a collective learning process in which changes in awareness occurred through ongoing processes of observation, analysis, reflection, experience, and learning. For example, one training session I attended focused on the milestones of a child (e.g. child’s birth weight, age child first crawled), possible reasons for a child being underweight and typical child illnesses such as common cold and diarrhoea. The CF distributed stories about child health to a number of volunteers to read out loud to the group. The women were then broken up into small groups where they discussed the stories and recorded their interpretations onto large sheets of paper. The stories exemplified three different scenarios. The first story highlighted the way in which consulting a shaman<sup>97</sup> and not

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<sup>96</sup> The ‘outside’ is generally considered suspect and dangerous throughout South Asia (Heaton-Shrestha, 2004, p. 45). On the significance of the ‘outside’ see Chakrabarty (1991) and Kaviraj (1997).

<sup>97</sup> The Nepali term *dhami-jhankr* is used generically to refer to different kinds of shamanic healers, although according to Pigg (1995a, p. 54) this generic label fails to acknowledge ‘the wide range of ritual healers and how their practice and knowledge differs... [and further] blurs the differentiation of skills, kinds of power and relations to spirits that are of the utmost importance in healing practice’.

the doctor resulted in the death of a sick child.<sup>98</sup> In the second story a very poor family could not afford to feed the baby boy SP+ and the baby became very underweight and sick. A shaman was consulted, who advised the family to visit a medical doctor. The child was hospitalised and his condition improved tremendously. The third story told of a child who was well fed but after contracting chickenpox was only fed rice and butter. Upon consulting a doctor the family was advised to give a proper balanced diet and the child soon gained weight.

Here we see the use of narratives and role models to portray ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practices, an approach that has long been used in development and health communication. This method is based on social cognitive theory which contends that individuals learn behaviour by observing role models that transmit culturally accepted information, values, and new styles of behaviour (Galavotti, Pappas-DeLuca, & Lanksy, 2001).<sup>99</sup> Further, this approach is reflected in the words of Sangam co-founder, Rupa Pandey, ‘telling people what to do will not work. To generate change, you must practice what you preach. Women will see this and be inspired to make changes within themselves and their own lives’. In her anthropological study of NGOs in Nepal, Heaton-Shrestha (2004, p. 46) noted the way in which the staff of one NGO were expected by management to be models of behaviour for members of the community.

In addition, Sangam also provided one-day orientation to volunteers on legal rights, including citizenship rights. Many women in Nepal do not have proof of citizenship and remain unaware of its importance and the implications for claiming rights, including access to education, formal sector employment, affordable healthcare, marital property and inheritance (P. Abrahams & Varughese, 2012). Sangam provided information and practical support to enable women participating in the nutrition program to obtain the necessary paperwork—including a birth certificate (often held

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<sup>98</sup> Shamans, spirits and sorcery were talked about during my fieldwork, particularly in relation to illness and difficult circumstances. CFs regularly encouraged mothers participating in the program to take their sick children to a hospital or clinic, however some families continued to consult shamans or bought medicine from local medical shops without consulting a (bio-medical) doctor. This supports the earlier findings of Justice (1986, p. 8), who suggests that ‘a multiplicity of medical traditions still exists in Nepal, and these traditions are used interchangeably and in varying combinations’.

<sup>99</sup> Further, social cognitive theory has strong connections to behaviour change models, which have been the dominant paradigm in the field of development communication, including health promotion and education (Waisbord, n.d., p. 2).

by the woman's family in rural areas) and a bank account (by joining Sangam's savings group).

Training sessions were also a forum in which women shared stories—about their own situations and that of people in their communities. Central to this activity was analysis and critical reflection on these stories. At one training session I attended, the theme focused on raising a child. There were many stories shared about the consequences of leaving a child home alone, many of them tragic. Each story was discussed amongst the group. As CF Padma stated, 'there are a lot of experiences so the group talks a lot about them'. While these stories were shared in the context of an organised activity, they were drawn from events that women had not necessarily witnessed themselves but rather had heard from others in the community, thus they constituted gossip. Anthropologists have long since focused attention on social communication and the function of gossip in specific contexts (see R. D. Abrahams, 1970; Handelman, 1973; Haviland, 1977). Haviland (1977, p. 5) points to the way in which 'gossip reveals how native actors examine, use, and manipulate cultural rules in natural contexts...gossip dwells on those features of behaviour which call cultural rules into play'. In the volunteer training sessions, it was through the sharing of stories—gossip—that 'appropriate' behaviour and practices came to the fore. As R. D. Abrahams (1970, pp. 296-297) notes, this kind of talk guarantees 'a certain level of homogeneity of ideals and even social practices'.

At the end of the training period each volunteer was responsible for a geographic location where she undertook 'social mapping'. A volunteer would visit every household—kitchen by kitchen—to identify pregnant women, lactating women and small children and document each one onto a large piece of paper—the social map. Typically, volunteers were each responsible for 30-35 families in their working area. As well as providing important information, the process of mapping the area was a way in which volunteers could meet their communities and introduce themselves and the work of Sangam. This was the starting point for the implementation of the project and the first step to Sangam gaining access to the communities. While the volunteers were ready to commence working after this initial training period, support from Sangam was ongoing through monthly ward-level volunteer meetings. Volunteers reported on statistical information from their working areas and in turn, CFs—and

TFs, if they were present—would address any issues and concerns raised. Further, volunteers were quizzed on their knowledge of Sangam’s key issues and themes, which they were tasked to promote within the communities. These meetings were also forums for further training for specific issues, including women’s health issues such as uterine prolapse and breast cancer. Sangam hired trained professionals to conduct these sessions in its working areas. With this outline of the people working for Sangam, the focus shifts to the nutrition program itself—beginning with the approach underpinning the project.

### **A psychosocial approach to nutrition**

Earlier in the chapter I touched on the issue of malnutrition in Nepal. Here I point to the underlying causes of it and, in turn, outline the psychosocial approach that underpinned the nutrition program. Highlighting this approach helps provide an understanding of the practice of the program, particularly the importance placed on the relationship between Sangam staff and volunteers and participants of the nutrition program. Sangam’s predecessor, Community Care (2003, pp. 19-20) notes that while inadequate care is one of the main causes of malnutrition, there are also a number of other factors that have an impact on how a child is looked after, including poverty, water scarcity, household food insecurity, an unhealthy environment, and limited access to health care—and, I would add, domestic violence. Community Care (2003, p. 19) notes that while the key objective of many nutrition projects is to improve the knowledge and practice of good care, the organisation’s own research showed that the central issue is the relationship between the caregiver and the child. Further, ‘this relationship of caregiver and child is shaped by resource constraints, the availability of support for parents, and the individual characteristics of caregiver and child’ (Community Care, 2003, p. 53). Thus, the constraints of resources and the psychosocial situation of families are crucial in determining how a child is looked after (Community Care, 2003, p. 19).

A psychosocial approach to nutrition recognises the link between the weight of a child and the emotional wellbeing of the main caregiver, which in most families involved

with Sangam was the mother. Community Care (2003, pp. 19-20) suggests that this approach

...entails working with the very specific emotional situation of a caregiver as it affects his or her ability to negotiate the family's socio-economic conditions and care for children. The socio-economic context on the other hand defines the caregiver's space to act. Thus, the psychosocial approach to nutrition does not only focus on the individual agency nor on the social conditions; instead, it is rooted in an understanding of how these are interrelated.<sup>100</sup>

While working in inner Kathmandu, Community Care found that mothers of malnourished children were often under significant stress, thereby affecting their ability to apply health messages. In turn, this informed the underlying approach of the nutrition program:

Imparting health messages should not be the main objective of an interaction with a family; rather, the objective should be to facilitate the caregivers' empowerment to cope better with their situation. We made the assumption that only with a change in the family's psychosocial situation would the child's health have a chance to improve. It was to that effect that we defined the role of the health promoter: She should be a listener first and a teacher second (Community Care, 2003, p. 19).

Building a trusting relationship with the mother was the first step in enabling her to open up and express her problems and concerns. A senior clinical psychologist from the Centre for Mental Health and Counselling (CMC), an NGO that provides training and counselling to organisations working with a psychosocial approach, reiterated the importance of trust in conversation with me during a workshop at Sangam. He had been working with the nutrition program for many years, starting with Community Care in 2001. His chief responsibility at Sangam was to support the CFs, which he noted, focused on 'how to develop the trust with the beneficiaries'. He explained the challenges of building trust, 'it takes time. It is a slow process because individuals are

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<sup>100</sup> The psychosocial approach has been criticised in a study that considers this approach in Nepal from both an anthropological and psychiatric perspective. Kohrt and Harper (2008, p. 485) argue that 'most psychosocial workers in Nepal described it as a one-way street in which social problems cause psychological difficulties. The latter approach ignores the multiple and complex pathways that contribute to psychological difficulties and the impact that psychological problems have on social processes and institutions'.

different. Family dynamics, persons themselves, family situations—all are different from one another. It is very difficult to support these families'. While staff and volunteers were educated on strategies at developing trust, it was through program activities that relationships between Sangam and program participants were established.

I now turn to explore these program activities through an ethnographic account of one working area—defined by a staff member as a 'slum settlement'. This ward was purportedly Sangam's most difficult and challenging working area, in large part due to what was regarded by Sangam staff as a high rate of what is termed in development speak as 'non-compliance' by the women participating in the project. For example, Sangam staff noted that participants in this area often disregarded the health messages promoted by Sangam—they continued to feed their children store-bought food, children registered in the child care centre did not consistently attend, nor were they brought regularly for weighing. This label of non-compliance and the reasons for it makes this field site an ideal case study for the way in which it brings into sharp relief the distinct interests, concerns, and priorities of the variously positioned people involved in the project. In addition, the reluctance of some program participants to behave in a way that was seen by Sangam as appropriate brings to the fore a shared notion amongst staff of what constituted a 'good woman' and, importantly for the program objectives, a 'good mother'. In turn, this sheds light on the gendered norms and social expectations of women in the wider social setting—the 'good woman'—highlighting the ways in which these influenced the women associated with Sangam (staff, volunteers and participants) and the program itself. Moreover, in the context of Sangam, the slum settlement highlighted most profoundly articulations of local moralities, or what Howell (1996, p. 2) calls 'morally prescriptive discourses'. These are brought to bear in the final section of the chapter.

### **The practice of the program**

My translator and research assistant, Pramada, and I crossed the busy road and immediately after the bridge walked down a steep slope to a path by the river. A huge mound of rubbish was piled high along the bank at the start of the path. The river was

on our right and, to the left of us, approximately 50 metres away, was a long-running brick wall. We could easily see the multi-storey houses that stood behind the wall. They resembled houses typically belonging to middle-class Nepalis. We walked along the path for about ten minutes before the slum settlement came into view in the distance. It spread along both sides of the river right up to the brick wall. The settlement could not be seen from the main arterial road; it was hidden from view of the hundreds of people who travelled along this road daily. Indeed, Pramada, who travelled regularly along this road, had been oblivious to its existence prior to our visit and expressed great surprise that the settlement existed.

The slum settlement came to my attention relatively late in my fieldwork. Program Manager Shanti Shrestha mentioned it to me one morning as I was sitting in her office waiting for the day's activities to commence. Over the course of my research with Sangam, the slum settlement was the only working area that Shanti spoke about with me prior to me entering the field site. She said that people in the area threatened the staff of Sangam's childcare centre (Child Development Centre) regularly—typically regarding issues with fees. Further, she pointed to a level of mistrust and suspicion prevalent amongst locals, noting:

I am briefing you about the area before because when we take someone to that area the people say that Sangam is taking the money from that area and not actually working. Even if they say that, you people [my research assistant and myself] have come to study to see where Sangam works.

Various staff members had reiterated to me time and again that the slum settlement was one of the most difficult communities participating in the nutrition project. According to Shanti, the settlement had existed for about ten years. People built houses along the banks of the river on government land, which meant that the settlement was illegal.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, Shanti noted, the government showed no intention of removing the houses, although other illegal settlements in Kathmandu had been removed in the past. Shanti told me that this was because the settlement had 'political backup' from the Maoists—the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN—Maoists).

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<sup>101</sup> Tanaka (2009, p. 146) highlights the heterogeneity of Kathmandu's squatter settlements, in terms of the caste and ethnicity of their residents but also in relation to their places of origin, present occupation and income, family structure and reasons for squatting'

She said that many people living in the area belonged to the Maoist Party and further, if the government ordered the community to move, there would be resistance in the form of Maoist strikes (*bandhs*<sup>102</sup>), which were a regular feature of life in Nepal during the fieldwork period. However, research on squatter (*sukumbasi*) settlements (both inland and along rivers) in Nepal shows that there is a high level of fear of forced eviction amongst squatters, which has ‘encouraged them to seek ways to raise their collective voice [by way of organised groups] against expulsion and to seek essential services and their rights to shelter’ (Biggs, Gurung, & Messerschmidt, 2004, p. 116). Because many are unable to produce citizenship certificates or prove property ownership they are ‘denied their essential rights and access public services and amenities’ (Biggs et al., 2004, p. 116).

We continued along the path until we met Shristi Basnet, one of the most experienced staff members at Sangam, who was waiting for us in front of a building. From the outset of my research with Sangam, a staff member or volunteer always met me at an arranged meeting point prior to any field visit. This was not something that I requested; rather it was one of the ‘systems’ put in place by Sangam and its donor organisation Nutrition Nepal. This protocol proved beneficial to me for a number of reasons. Given the absence of street names in Kathmandu, it greatly reduced my chances of getting lost, or worse, not finding the field site. The meeting point was always at a prominent landmark, typically some distance from the site of the project activity. This provided the opportunity to talk with the Sangam staff member or volunteer about her own life and the details of her association with the organisation as we walked to the field site.

Walking opened up different perspectives and different ways of knowing. In walking, I was using my body to open up views of the social spaces. It was a different experience to sitting in an NGO office listening to a staff member describe the field site. Ingold and Lee (2006, p. 83) highlight the way in which the fieldwork practice of

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<sup>102</sup> *Bandh* (meaning ‘closed’ in Hindi) is a popular form of political activism in Nepal. A *bandh* effectively stops or disrupts everyday life. A political party or organised group announces its concerns or demands and calls a *bandh*, stipulating the area affected and the times during which businesses must close and traffic cease. To defy these stipulations risks people, buildings, and vehicles being stoned by rocks or vehicles set alight—which occurred during my fieldwork. *Bandhs* can last over a week and have a crippling effect on the economy. In the time of my research this form of protest was most commonly utilised by the Maoist Party, although minor parties were also known to call them.

walking can ‘become a practice of understanding, so that the record of the walk and the experience it affords, is just as important—and just as valid a source of field material—as the record of the ‘discourse’ that might have accompanied it’. Further, they suggest:

It is *through* the shared bodily engagement with the environment, the shared rhythm of walking, that social interaction takes place. People communicate through their posture in movement, involving their whole bodies. Crucially, walking side by side means that participants share virtually the same visual field. We could say that I see what you see as we go along together. In that sense I am with you in my movements, and probably in my thoughts as well. We can talk within and around our shared vista and the other things we are doing along the line of the walk. Participants take it in turns to carry the conversation on, and when not actually speaking one is nevertheless listening, participating silently in the ongoing flow (2006, pp. 79-80; original emphasis).

Walking with a Sangam staff member or volunteer through the streets and alleyways of her community also enabled me to observe her interactions with the people of that community. It highlighted the way in which Sangam had a wider presence in the communities in which it worked, expanding further than the families involved with the nutrition program. My observations revealed the way in which, in most working areas, Sangam representatives were regarded as respected members of the community. In turn, Sangam staff looked to people within the wider community for additional support. Alerting people within the community about a family’s precarious existence strengthened and broadened Sangam’s support network for these families. For example, Sangam staff members regularly checked with local shop owners to see if a particularly vulnerable woman participating in Sangam’s program had been shopping for food lately or had been seen outside of her home. These activities were regarded as a positive indication of her health and wellbeing. Here we see the value of Sangam’s policy of employing women from the same community in which they work. These women know the community, they already have trusted relationships there and therefore know who to trust and confide in. Further, knowledge gained from community members added to Sangam’s knowledge about the family, thereby enabling staff to verify details provided by the family.

The degree to which Sangam staff and volunteers engaged in conversation with me while walking to our destination was highly variable, depending largely on personality and willingness to talk. Familiarity and trust were also key factors and I found that even the most reserved women felt comfortable talking with me about themselves and their work with Sangam if I was afforded the opportunity to interact with them on multiple occasions. If time permitted, the conversation would then turn to the activity set to commence and details about Sangam's work in that ward, for example the number of volunteers in the area or the expected turnout for the upcoming activity. On this particular day Shristi was willing to engage in conversation about her role in the organisation.

As a staff member of Community Care, the NGO that preceded Sangam (and from which Sangam evolved), Shristi Basnet—a Chhetri woman—had long since been involved with programs concerning the nutrition and health of women and children in local communities. As a qualified nurse she initially worked in a government health clinic delivering polio vaccinations in an outer ward of Kathmandu. Community Care, and later Sangam, worked closely with these clinics. Shristi was recommended to Community Care by the health clinic and after successfully passing an exam, was hired as a CF, forming the initial link between the organisation and this outer ward (currently the largest ward in which Sangam worked). She was highly regarded by both Sangam and the communities in which the organisation worked for her extensive knowledge of the program, but more importantly because of her even temperament and easy-going personality. In particular, Shristi's refusal to be drawn into any gossip or talk about other people was singled out by the staff member as a highly valued quality. The staff member told me that it reflected both Shristi's ability to refrain from judging others (behaviour that was emphasised in staff meetings as desirable and beneficial to building rapport) and her skill at gaining the trust and confidence of the women with whom she worked, both inside and outside of the organisation. It took me some time to work out Shristi's role in the organisation because it defied one of the basic rules of Sangam, which stipulated that a staff member must live in the area in which she worked. Over the course of my research with Sangam, Shristi had been present at a variety of activities in many different wards. During our walk together to the slum settlement, Shristi put my confusion to rest:

I do everything. I select volunteers. I give them training... I don't work here [slum area], I work in another ward but I look after the work in this ward overall. I supervise how Anu works in this area. And I also teach her about the work. I do everything!

Indeed, Shristi often worked as a mentor to other Sangam staff members, particularly those who were new or experiencing difficulties in their working area. Shristi was the first representative from Sangam to work in the slum settlement—even though she did not live in the area—which was testament to her skills and abilities given the difficulties Sangam experienced in gaining access to this area. While Shristi was no longer the staff member responsible for this ward, she continued to act as a support person when needed. As we walked along the river towards the settlement, Shristi spoke of the community's suspicion and distrust of outsiders and foreigners:

Yes, there are lots of difficulties working in this area. Before they did not allow us to enter in this area.... they used to say... 'they bring foreigners... they work with foreigners and that we [Sangam] make the money by showing them to foreigners. They used to say that. But slowly we are winning because of our work. Now because of our work they don't say anything. Before they did not let us enter in their area.

There existed at least 29 slum settlements along differently named rivulets in Kathmandu and this community was one such settlement. While I had seen a slum settlement many times as I crossed the Bagmati River upon leaving Lalitpur and entering the Municipality of Kathmandu, it was a very different experience actually being there. This was my first visit to a settlement and I found it very confronting. On this particular morning there was the hustle and bustle of people and many, many ducks—filthy ducks waddling and quacking all over the place. As we walked along the track I noticed that there was not the usual overwhelming stench along the river, which my research assistant and I regularly experienced on each journey along the river to Sangam's central office. Pramada suggested that the absence of a buffalo slaughterhouse on the riverbanks here could explain this. What struck me most about the settlement was the density of housing and the conditions in which some people were living, although conditions appeared to improve the further away from the river

we went. The high density, however, remained. People were packed in so tightly and the settlement reached right down onto the banks of the river—in some instances literally less than a foot away from the edge and the sheer two-metre drop to the water.

Materials used for housing were varied ranging from stone, brick, concrete, iron sheets, bamboo and mud to plastic sheeting stretched over bamboo frames. In most cases, regardless of the materials used, rocks held down the rooves. The houses I visited closest to the river had dirt floors, many of which were neatly swept, while further away from the river concrete floors were the norm. Also situated precariously close to the edges of the banks were communal squat toilets—holes in the ground surrounded by a bamboo pole frame covered with plastic tarps and large hessian bags. The waste flowed directly into the river. A ubiquitous feature of the area was piles of sandbags stacked up along the riverbanks and alongside houses in preparation for a rise in the river. On this day, however, the threat of a flood this year seemed remote as it was nearing the end of the rainy season and the level of the river was a few metres below the banks.

We walked along the unsealed road that ran through the centre of the settlement until we reached the location where three women from Sangam were waiting. One of the women, dressed smartly in a turquoise *kurta* and bright red scarf, stepped towards us. Her bright clothing stood out starkly in an otherwise brown/grey landscape. Smiling, she introduced herself: ‘Namaste. My name is Anu Paudel. I am the Community Facilitator for this Ward, Ward number 10’.<sup>103</sup> Anu had worked as a volunteer for Sangam for three years before taking up the role of CF one year ago. Anu, a high-caste Bahun, had two daughters, aged nine and five years. Her husband worked at Kathmandu’s Tribhuvan International Airport. Anu expanded on her role and duties, which was typically the way in which women working for Sangam identified themselves in relation to the organisation: ‘I look after Wards 1, 10 and 11. Across the bridge is Ward number 1 and before the bridge [our current location] is Ward number 10. I was a volunteer in Ward number 11 where I also live. I am from 23<sup>rd</sup> batch.’ Following Anu’s greeting we walked through an opening in a wire fence to a tin shed

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<sup>103</sup> Sangam identified each ward using a number. For the purposes of anonymity I have numbered the wards using pseudonyms.

with no sides. Old sofas were piled up under it. As the monsoonal clouds opened in a torrential downpour we huddled together under this shelter, trying not to get drenched as we waited for families to bring their children to be weighed.

## **Growth Monitoring**

Often Growth Monitoring was the first point of contact between the organisation and local women. Indeed, many Sangam volunteers and staff members noted the way in which the organisation had initially come to their attention through a session held in their local area. Moreover, it was through this activity that underweight children came to the attention of Sangam and from this identification the way in which household visits—another key activity—were initiated. The scales to weigh young children were set up under a tree. A hook was hung over a branch and the child was secured into a cotton harness and left to hang for enough time for the scale measurement under the hook to register the child's weight. Despite the rain, mothers (and two fathers accompanying two mothers) brought their children to be weighed. Some women smiled at me while others kept their distance, cautiously observing me. In the meantime, their children protested loudly at being placed in the harness and weighed in the torrential rain.

Growth Monitoring occurred once a month in a number of locations within a working area. Typically a session ran for an hour or two, depending on the number of children that were brought to be weighed that day. Some sessions I attended were very busy with up to 20 women waiting for their child to be weighed. Sangam volunteers informed families in the community of the session in the days leading up to the activity and it was often the case that volunteers and CFs were required to leave the session and visit homes in order to remind mothers to bring their children. Typically a volunteer would weigh the child and report the details to the CF, who would then record them on a list kept by Sangam and on the child's government-issued health card, which was based on World Health Organisation standards. The card was kept by the family. In addition to charting a child's growth, the health card was a visual aid used by CFs to support health promotion and impart knowledge and practice of good

care. If a child were identified as underweight the CF would arrange a follow-up visit to the family home to provide further support.

Another element to this activity was the practical tasting of foods promoted by Sangam as nutritious and especially appropriate for children, breastfeeding mothers and pregnant women, known as complementary foods. The CF and volunteers brought along *jaulo* (a mixture of rice, potato, lentil and tomato) and prepared SP+ (fortified *sarbottam pitho*), which was offered to children after they had been weighed. The raw ingredients for *jaulo* were set out next to the cooked dish and packets of SP+ were available to buy. While SP+ was a highly nutritious food, especially for young children, it was also an income-generating activity for both the organisation and volunteers, providing the opportunity for volunteers to learn new skills as well as a way to make money. Four volunteers were employed for the production of SP+. Sixteen volunteers marketed the product in their respective working areas and during program activities, receiving a small commission (NRs. 5) for every packet sold.

### **Child Development Centre**

Once the Growth Monitoring session finished we began walking with Anu back along the main road of the settlement. Anu then guided us off the main road to a narrow track between two houses. We wound our way between buildings and eventually entered a doorway that lead to a short flight of stairs. The door at the top of the stairs was padlocked from inside. This was the entrance to the settlement's childcare centre, known as Child Development Centre (hereafter CDC). We walked passed a room where twelve children were sleeping on a large blue plastic mat. Anu motioned us to come through to the kitchen and be seated on cushions on the floor. Chairs were a rarity in any of my field sites with Sangam—and indeed, with any other organisation I interacted with. They featured only in the central offices of organisations and even then, not in all rooms. In most contexts, it was customary to sit on the floor—be it on a mat, cushion, a scrap of carpet or a brick.

Sangam operated six CDCs in six wards in its working area. The CDCs accepted children aged between nine months and three years and on average 26 children

attended a centre. I had already conducted participant observation and interviewed staff and parents in three other centres before my visit to the slum settlement. Program Manager Shanti Shrestha accompanied me on my first visit to a CDC, providing an overview of the centres:

The prime objective of CDC was to look after the underweight child but underweight children in these centres are minimum. Mostly, children of working parents are kept in these centres. During monthly growth monitoring programs we also motivate the parents to keep their child in such centres. Moreover, Community Facilitators and volunteers also advertise about such centres. They talk about these centres to the working women who have nobody to look after their child. The volunteers frequently go for home visits and they are constantly in touch with the pregnant women. So, these pregnant women know about such centres.

Each CDC was staffed by 'Caretakers', who were also trained volunteers. This fitted with Sangam's policy, as Shanti noted, 'when there is a vacancy in the organisation, our trained volunteers get the first priority for the position. Then, the selection is made among the volunteers'. Being a mother was also a pre-requisite for the role. The CDC fee per child was NRs. 700 per month, however families who were unable to afford this fee were given a discounted rate with the view to increase it when their financial circumstances improved. Nevertheless, in the slum settlement the families tended to be of low socio-economic status and therefore the fee was NRs. 600. Moreover, they often had trouble paying the fees as CF Anu stated, 'some mothers give the full fees but they do not give at once. It's difficult here. Somebody pays on daily basis, somebody after fifteen days and some after a week. And at times they do not give'. Shanti pointed to the difficulty in attracting families to the centres: 'It's not that easy to convince the family to bring their child to these centres. They visit the CDCs first and if they are convinced with our centres and caretakers they bring their child... it also depends on the caretakers to give their best service'. This was reiterated by Anu with regard to the slum settlement:

It was hard to convince them and to tell them. If we see the registration file there are 80-90 children who are registered. But many families shifted, some crossed the

required age for CDC, some went to school and some mothers kept the children with themselves when they did not work. Children keep coming and going.

In keeping with the organisation's focus on child nutrition, the regular feeding (five times per day) of children with food that was cooked onsite (one serving was banana) at the CDCs was something that was highlighted to families as an advantage of the centre. This was an attraction for parents, as one mother noted, 'they [children] get to eat food in time. Even we mothers sometimes do not feed children at times due to excessive work'. Another mother pointed to another positive aspect of the CDC, 'it's safe here. Now we do not have to worry whether they will get hurt or they will play in dirty places'. Monthly meetings for parents were held at the CDCs, providing a forum for questions and answers and offering staff the opportunity to present group statistical information to families about the centre, such as feeding times, food given, and activities. Posters directed at parents were secured to the walls of the centre detailing the schedule of the CDC, including meal times. Sangam also used this meeting as an opportunity to present basic hygiene and care practices to families through posters secured to the centre walls and practical demonstrations, for example correct method of washing hands.

Sangam presented the CDCs as a practical solution to enable women to engage in work outside of the home. In particular, the centre was suggested by CFs and volunteers to women experiencing difficulties as a way to improve their situations and the lives of their children. Nevertheless, often women needed to gain permission from their husbands—or in his absence, the head of the household, who was typically male but might also be her mother-in-law. In tumultuous households it was common for women to be met with resistance. Ostensibly men rejected the option of childcare because they did not want strangers (i.e. non-family members) caring for their children. However, in many cases their decision related to their wives, first and foremost. Keeping a woman within the confines of the house enabled the husband to control and restrict her mobility. These issues will be explored further through cases studies in Chapter Four.

It was soon time to leave the CDC, as the caretakers needed to begin preparing food for the children, who were due to wake from their nap. We headed out of the building

and began walking towards the river heading for the first home visit of the day. As we walked along the track Anu talked about the constraints that existed within this community and the difficulties she faced throughout her working day. What she told me was verified by other CFs. The high density housing and living in such close confines caused a lot of conflict, both within and between families in this area. Domestic violence was endemic, which Sangam staff attributed to the high number of inter-caste, love, and polygamous marriages and the fact that many people drank alcohol—all of which are taboo for people belonging to high castes.<sup>104</sup> I mentioned that we had come across many love marriages that morning to which Pramada, my research assistant, stated that this was a *Dalit* community, noting: ‘open society in *Dalit*’. Anu agreed, pointing also to inter-caste and ‘more’ marriages, meaning polygamy, and the ‘many many problems’ as a result of these unions.

Anu also noted that it was difficult to get women to turn up for Awareness Programs. This activity was held monthly in the street in each of Sangam’s working areas. It focused on health issues and care practices and included practical demonstrations, for instance how to wash your hands properly or how to correctly mix oral rehydration salts. Posters depicting pictures of good and bad practices were also utilised to promote the messages. CFs and volunteers held these up and asked questions of the audience. For example, during one session a volunteer held up a picture of a mother smoking while holding her baby and women in the audience laughed. Another picture portrayed a mother wiping a child’s nose while another showed a mother breastfeeding her child. It was widely acknowledged amongst staff that this activity was especially needed in the slum settlement due to the unhygienic living conditions. Anu commented on the way in which it was very difficult to attract volunteers in this ward. She further noted, ‘it’s very hard to convince mothers here. No matter how much we tell them about health safety in pregnancy, they act ignorant’. As we arrived at the location of the first Home Visit Anu added, ‘change takes time’.

## Home Visits

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<sup>104</sup> However, I came to understand through socialising with Nepali friends that people regularly contravene this caste restriction.

Home Visits were a key activity of the nutrition program. It was here that relationships were established between volunteers, staff and program participants. As mentioned earlier, when a child was identified as underweight at a Growth Monitoring session, a home visit was organised by the CF and volunteers to consider the psychosocial situation of the family. In the initial visit, the CF looked into care practices, including breastfeeding, complementary feeding, interactions between caregivers and children, hygiene practices, care during sickness, as well as the physical environment and the house where the family lived. Taking into account the social factors and the individual problems and needs of each family was crucial to understanding how knowledge can become relevant to that family. In turn, this understanding was vital for the CF to then be able to help families improve their own situations to then be able to improve the nutrition status of the child. As Rupa Pandey, Sangam co-founder stated in conversation with me:

It is about listening to women, providing a listening ear, gaining trust and then helping the woman develop self-confidence and self-esteem to do things for herself. When you go to a house, don't look at her name or her caste. Look at her—look at her self. If you listen properly you will understand. If you preach, no rapport.

However, I found that the subjectivity of each CF was critical to how this played out in practice. What the CF focused on and promoted reflected her priorities and chief concerns. For some, the focus began with the nutrition and weight of the child and this dominated the interaction. While for others, it began with the mother and how she could be supported to care for the child. The CFs who engaged more rigorously in the latter approach tended to be vocal proponents of supporting women to make changes to improve their lives—which forms part of the understanding of empowering women in this context (see Chapter Four).

Home Visits in the slum settlement were particularly challenging, for the reasons elaborated by Anu above. However, to give a better sense of the difficulties I present a case study from the settlement. This story not only highlights the challenges faced by Sangam staff and volunteers, it also brings to the fore the specificity of lives lived in an environment shaped by overwhelming economic and cultural constraints. In short, this was a setting replete with poverty, violence and suffering. Moreover, this was a

morally laden field site, as demonstrated by the comments of Sangam staff but also through my own response to this setting, which I highlight in the case study. Much has been written on violence (Das, 2000; Hastrup, 2003), suffering (Daedalus, 1996; Hastrup, 2003; Kleinman, Das, & Lock, 1997), the issue of morality in anthropology (Fassin & Lézé, 2014; Howell, 1996) and problems associated with representing the poor (Butt, 2014; Lewis, 2014). However, I find compelling the stance taken by Scheper-Hughes (1995, p. 418), who notes, ‘not to look, not to touch, not to record can be the hostile act, an act of indifference and of turning away’.

The case study that follows provides a counter to the abstract findings of the KAP survey I pointed to earlier in the chapter that presented women as unable to adequately care for their children. In this report, the issue of underweight children and anaemic pregnant and breastfeeding mothers was construed as a lack of knowledge about health and nutrition—both of which were based on Western scientific notions, as demonstrated by the utilisation of WHO’s child growth chart—thereby making it a technical problem. The answer was also instrumental; families, specifically mothers, required further knowledge to change their behaviour and child-caring practices. Thus, a central thrust of the intervention was to utilise the mother to change the nutrition of the child by improving herself, thereby also uplifting her community. Empowering mothers was key to this improvement. While the report by Community Care, Sangam’s predecessor, presents a far more complex picture than the KAP study, the fundamental notion of health and nutrition promotion remained key to the nutrition program. However, identifying the problem as a lack of knowledge about health and nutrition ignores the structural constraints of this context, some of which were highlighted in the ethnographic detail of the slum settlement above, such as caste/ethnicity, class, marginalisation, poverty and deplorable living conditions—all of which are brought to bear in the following account.

### **Living on the margins**

Our first home visit for the day was Karuna Pariyar’s house. This was the first of five home visits Anu had scheduled for the afternoon. As was typical of this area, the path to the house was bordered on both sides by a brick wall that stood at approximately

four metres high. Pigs were kept in concrete pens to the left of this path. Karuna's house backed onto the last pen. The frame of the one-room dirt floor dwelling was made of bamboo to which plastic and cloth were attached for the walls and iron sheeting was held down with stones for the roof. There was no front door, rather a piece of cloth hung loosely in this opening. Upon our arrival, Karuna's husband promptly departed. His eyes looked glazed but Anu informed me later that today he was in good condition. He was unemployed and often started drinking very early in the morning—sometimes he was drunk when Anu arrived. Further, according to Anu, both parents regularly consumed alcohol. Karuna was one of two women I met that day who had blows to the head that had been inflicted by their husbands. Karuna was still experiencing pain and difficulties with her head since her husband hit her almost four months ago. Before the injury, Karuna worked as a construction labourer and sometimes sold vegetables in the community but now she was restricted to only occasionally selling vegetables because of the ongoing pain in her head.

Karuna and her husband were both 25 years old and belonged to the *Dalit* community. They had been married for three years—a love marriage. Their neighbours suggested to Anu that Karuna had 'married others' and that the husband spoke badly of his wife to others in the community. The husband's family had lived in the settlement for sixteen years while Karuna's *maiti* (maternal home) was in Sindhupalchok District (east of Kathmandu). The husband's parents were dead and only Karuna's father was alive, leaving little family support. They had a two-year-old daughter who was very alert and engaging, although underweight and unwell—Sushma, who ran, barefooted, towards us with open arms. The chief reason for the home visit was to check on Sushma, who was recovering from jaundice. Up until one month ago Sushma had been attending the CDC. Anu was keen to see her back at the CDC, stating that Sushma had been thriving; she was stimulated and well fed.

We sat on bricks for the duration of the 40-minute visit. The smell inside the house was so strong that I could barely manage to remain inside. I clasped my shawl tightly across my mouth and nose to try and block out the smell. There were food scraps just near the head of the bed—which was a cane bed with no mattress, only a blanket. A table stood in a corner of the room, piled with clothes. There appeared to be no other furniture. The floor was covered in patches of linoleum and was filthy—matching the

soles of Sushma's feet. A radio played Nepali music in the background. In the time we were in the house, Karuna hit Sushma on two occasions—once for trying to climb onto the bed.<sup>105</sup> Anu spoke to Karuna about this, suggesting that she should never hit the child and to let Sushma play. Educating families to not physically punish their children was part of the Nutrition Program. Soon afterwards, Sushma wet her pants inside the house. Karuna became angry and took off Sushma's pants. The urine was left to soak into the floor. Karuna engaged in conversation with us about her life, which, according to Anu, was out of character, as she was usually reluctant to speak to Sangam staff.

It became apparent that Sushma needed to go to the toilet. Karuna, however, remained sitting on the bed, focused on speaking. A few minutes later Sushma walked up to us (no pants on as she had just wet them) and defecated; diarrhoea that ran down her legs. Karuna became angry again and hit Sushma. She picked Sushma up and sat her on a potty (small bucket) just outside the door in front of the pigsty. Sushma complained, however she remained seated on the potty with diarrhoea stuck all up her legs. Anu reiterated that Karuna should not hit Sushma, stating that the child was unwell and needed medicine. While it was upsetting to see Karuna's reaction towards Sushma, it was also clear that she was embarrassed by her daughter's behaviour. Anu then noticed that Sushma was playing with a razor blade as she sat on the potty. Karuna took it away and Sushma proceeded to cry as she sat there. However, by the time we were ready to depart a short time later, Sushma was smiling in her mother's arms as they walked us out, past the pig pens towards the road.

As we walked away along the road I spoke with Anu about the appalling conditions the family were living in. Anu said that she could take me to five more houses just like the one we had just visited where animals were living in very close quarters with people. She noted that in such unhygienic conditions, diarrhoea was common amongst children living in the settlement. I had visited people living in very bad conditions in other working areas, however these were the worst conditions I encountered during fieldwork. I found this visit to be profoundly disturbing; indeed, it was distressing to

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<sup>105</sup> The physical punishment of children was widespread in Nepal and something I witnessed in my research with Sangam. It was socially acceptable for parents to hit their children and for teachers to physically punish children at school.

witness. While acknowledging that this is only a partial picture, it was apparent from my visits that this was an environment hostile to the wellbeing of people, particularly mothers and children. Here, deprivation was part of everyday life. Karuna and Sushma were what Biggs et al. (2004, p. 111) describe as ‘multiply disadvantaged and excluded—being female, poor, and members of ethnic, caste or religious minorities’. What troubled me deeply, and has remained with me, was the child who was born into these conditions—Sushma.

While the case study of Karuna and Sushma was one of the more extreme situations, in terms of living conditions, it resonated with the circumstances of other women I encountered during Home Visits with Sangam. Indeed, this activity brought to the fore the lives of many women that were grappling with their life-situations and trying to navigate towards a solution with which they could, quite literally, live. In terms of the program objective of improving the nutrition and health of the women and children through changing care and feeding practices via the dissemination of knowledge, program activities—particularly Home Visits—revealed that nutrition and caring practices were part of a complex picture in which multiple factors ranging from socio-cultural to environmental, economical, and structural factors intersected and, in turn, shaped behaviour. Indeed, knowledge alone was insufficient to change the ways in which mothers were able to care for their children—and indeed, themselves, which was recognised by Sangam, as a senior staff member articulated during an interview:

Some of the causes for the malnutrition we are working with—so many causes. We have only one resource to solve the problem, especially the causes in the area of health and nutrition. But it is difficult to solve the problem like social and domestic violence and the political...it's difficult. In the house if the husband and wife have a conflict and they have domestic violence, due to the domestic violence the child becomes malnourished...because of the tense situation and violence the children become underweight, the children are completely ignored by their parents. Another reason is the young mothers, just fourteen and fifteen years. They got married and settled down and became pregnant and gave birth to two children. You have not a penny of money but you have one, two children. How can we solve? How can volunteers and Sangam staff solve it?

It was apparent during program activities that recognition of this limitation did not alter the difficulties staff and volunteers faced in implementing the program and achieving results (i.e. increasing weight and changing caring and feeding behaviours to fit within program recommendations). The circumstances of women participating in the nutrition program and the challenges Sangam staff and volunteers faced in supporting these women came to the fore clearly during Case Presentations.

## **Case Presentations**

Twice a month Sangam staff met at the main office to hear the case studies of families that the CFs were finding difficult to manage. Also in attendance was a psychologist from the Centre for Mental Health and Counselling (CMC), an organisation concerned with mental health that had a long association with Sangam and its predecessor (see Chapter Two). Case Presentations typically ran for a day during which two CFs presented two of their most difficult cases to other staff members. This was an interactive activity whereby staff asked questions and provided comments and suggestions to support the CF. While the organisation had particular guidelines regarding building rapport, counselling women and promoting health and nutrition, and there was a strong emphasis on the need for staff and volunteers not to judge program participants, this was sometimes difficult to achieve in reality. Much of the CFs working week was spent with women living in terrible conditions under difficult circumstances, providing a listening ear and offering possibilities and avenues for change. It was clear during Case Presentations that this took a toll on the CFs, particularly emotionally. Sangam counselled the CFs on this, as highlighted in the comments by a senior staff member:

No matter in which situation...you get to see any kind of situation...you should not get terrified...or get frightened. She will arise from her situation. When we go there we close our nose because the place is stinking of toilet. But it's not stinking for them...You should not get terrified by seeing their poverty. If they are **adjusting**, it's okay...We should always not take their tension...You have your own life...she is not only the mother...there are a hundred more mothers...to all those hundred mothers we have to reach and support. We cannot only give **time** to one. Nobody should do this.

While each case had its own unique circumstances and difficulties, and the CFs were empathetic to these, overwhelmingly the most difficult aspect articulated by the CFs during Case Presentations was the frustration that women did not take on board the information and change their behaviour. This relates to the ‘non-compliance’ of some program participants that I mentioned earlier. Further, Case Presentations were instructive of a certain moral code operating at Sangam, in terms of being a woman in this context (i.e. a ‘good woman’—itself a moral code) but also in relation to categories related to development—the ‘developed’ in contrast to the ‘developing’. These are brought to bear in CF Shristi’s comments about the slum settlement in conversation with me:

There is lot of garbage in that **area**. Those children are very dirty when they come for weighing. We have to keep telling them about being neat and clean. Many children are underweight there...And in that area there are lots of husband and wives who drink alcohol. In that **area** many people drink alcohol. There are cases where one wife has two-three husbands and one husband has two-three wives...There are lots of disputes and fights in that **area**. There are many small, squatted roofs here. So if one person is smoking and throws the cigarette there...so then some one else will come to shout at him. So the conflicts rises like this—a lot of fighting and there is also lack of awareness. *We have tried a lot but they enjoy staying themselves. They don’t want to improve. It is that kind of place* (emphasis added).

Shristi’s comments point to a number of issues that were raised by other Sangam staff during discussions about social issues and their direct correlation with malnourished children. Furthermore, her words are revealing of a moral narrative that speaks to a number of issues at play in this context. Here we have an educated, middle-class, high-caste professional woman making categorical statements about a marginalised community living in a slum settlement to a foreigner (*bideshi*). She was in a position to categorise others and in so doing, she positioned herself as someone with the capacity to speak—she was ‘developed’. By contrast, those she spoke of did not speak back. Indeed, throughout the research, I was not aware of any criticism of Sangam by program participants. As Cornwall (2003, p. 1329) posits, ‘the voices of the more marginal may barely be raised, let alone heard, in these spaces’. Further, in Shristi’s narrative we see similar themes to the ones Anu articulated as we walked through the

slum settlement, particularly the idea that despite the support offered by Sangam, ‘they act ignorant’. These themes also emerged during Anu’s case presentation from the slum settlement, where staff reactions were instructive of the moral judgements related to these themes.

Kamala Shrestha, a high-caste Newar, first came to Sangam’s attention at a Growth Monitoring session where her two young sons were identified as underweight. CF Anu had visited this family many times over the past six months, however she was experiencing great difficulty in communicating with Kamala, who was evasive, reluctant to open up and her story changed with each visit. She did, however, regularly tell Anu that she had ‘too many tensions’. Anu also expressed that Kamala continued to feed her children store-bought food, despite Anu’s repeated attempts to change this practice. It appeared, however, that Kamala had good reason to remain guarded, as staff reactions to her case highlight. Kamala’s life thus far was a long way from the ideal of the ‘good woman’. Kamala was mother to eight children from three different husbands and her current husband did not know about the six children that were not his. Before Kamala met her current husband she had adopted out two of the children to American families<sup>106</sup>, due to financial hardship. Kamala was keeping these details from her husband because she thought that he would leave the marriage. Upon hearing this case, the staff erupted into laughter—too many children and too many husbands. This reaction was revealing of the normative behaviour expected of the ‘good woman’ within the context of the organisation.

## **Conclusion**

Engagement with what Sangam was doing in specific contexts illuminated assumptions embedded within the design, presentation and implementation of the program. It also highlighted the wide range of flexible, and sometimes contradictory, ways differently positioned women implemented, received, interpreted and used the program. In turn, this revealed struggles over status and competing interests and

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<sup>106</sup> Kamala stated that she received NRs. 1000 (less than AUD\$15) for each adoption. Two Nepali women facilitated the adoption and money transactions. During a Home Visit Kamala showed me pictures of the children with their families, asking me if I knew the adults because she wanted her children back. International adoptions of Nepali children have been outlawed since my fieldwork due to corrupt practices.

values, highlighting the ‘multiple voices and contested ‘realities’’ (Long, 1999, p. 22) in processes of development intervention. In the next chapter I focus an analytical lens on Sangam’s nutrition program. I consider a key development notion that was utilised by Sangam to direct action to the issues related to health and nutrition—empowerment. The chapter traces pathways of empowerment that are intricately tied to notions of being a woman in Nepal.

## Chapter 4

### ‘Out from the four walls’

#### Introduction

Earlier I highlighted the notion of the ‘good woman’ (Skinner & Holland, 1998), a local moral order based on Hindu religious ideologies drawn from Brahmanical writings and teachings that refers to the ideal life path of women. In this chapter I draw on this concept and suggest that it is critical to notions of empowerment for the women that feature in the discussion that follows. Kabeer notes: ‘When women talk about forms of change in their lives that they value, and when these changes undermine the prevailing structures of patriarchy in some way, they are providing us with their own highly articulate narratives of empowerment, ones that are grounded in their local realities and everyday lives’ (2011, p. 500). Following Kabeer, I focus a critical lens on the nutrition program to explore the ways in which empowerment is imagined and made meaningful in this context.

The chapter begins with the comments of a senior staff member from the donor organisation, Nutrition Nepal, in relation to the work of Sangam. It then focuses on the voices of Sangam staff members who articulated their experiences and ideas of empowerment during interviews. These narratives provide a good starting point for understanding the ways in which program staff perceived empowerment. While the comments are not representative of every woman’s idea of empowerment in this setting, much of what was articulated by these participants came to the fore at various moments and in a multitude of locations and circumstances in the ensuing months I spent with the organisation—in relation to staff, volunteers and recipients, not just the volunteers that Shanti Shrestha refers to in her comments. The ‘domestic/public’ realms and the gendered division of labour are central to this discussion, in part because they relate to issues raised in the women’s narratives on empowerment but also because the ‘domestic’ sphere was relevant to Sangam’s urban program. It was fundamental to the program in terms of content (gender relations, women’s

reproductive roles and hygiene/nutrition/food within the home) and implementation (much of it was conducted inside women's homes or in an accessible public place).

The focus then turns to the notion of 'support'—a factor that women talked about in terms of both the possibilities that it afforded them and the difficulties they faced without it. The discussion moves to consider Sangam's strategies aimed to empower women, which were implemented through program activities that were targeted at women participating as recipients. It is important to highlight that for many women, their association with Sangam was dynamic. For instance, a woman whose child was underweight could be simultaneously a volunteer (working for development) and a recipient of the program (receiving development). Further, typically, women first became involved with Sangam as recipients, with many moving on to a volunteering role, from which a small number were engaged as paid workers for the organisation. Thus, many women had belonged to a target audience at some stage and, therefore, had experienced some or all of the strategies that will be discussed in what follows.

### **Who is the 'empowered woman'?**

In an interview with Nutrition Nepal senior program coordinator, Suresh—a mid-caste Newar—a discussion took place where much of what I had observed during my research with Sangam was articulated. I began the conversation by noting: 'spending time with the organisation, it seems to be running really well. It seems to have a very strong foothold in the community...it seems to be a lifeline to many families, supporting them a lot of the time—not just regarding nutrition, but other times'. Suresh agreed, 'because this [the program] is not purely health, it's more of a women empowerment but looking after health and nutrition'. He expanded further,

Sangam is like an agent, you know, to bring the changes among the women, underprivileged women. And it is very difficult to work with underprivileged women. If you say 'okay, we are going to improve your living status' in some way it is not likely to happen. But if you go through very small input like nutrition, which is like output...we can measure immediately. We can convince the community, they can see the changes, what we have changed and how much we have changed the children. So that is the motivating factor, to go more into social

and socio-economic changes. That is the approach. So, even though we say this is the nutrition project, truly saying it is empowering women in socio-economic ground.

Suresh's comments resonate with instrumentalist notions of development in which there are measurable inputs and outputs, thereby demonstrating quantifiable effects (see Kabeer, 1999, p. 435). Predictable measurements and verifiable indicators are critical to justify the existence of the program to donors but also to the target audience, as Suresh highlights. However, conceiving of the program in these terms points to the way in which a political issue (i.e. structural issues such as poverty and marginalisation) has been translated into a technical problem that can be addressed by development (i.e. 'empowering women' through the nutrition program). Nevertheless, as Suresh's comments illustrate, structural change is slow and incremental and difficult to achieve. As will be highlighted in this chapter, even armed with knowledge and the will to change, it is extremely difficult, and sometimes not possible, for people to act.

When I raised the issue of women's empowerment with the organisation's Project Manager, Shanti Shrestha, she immediately knew the term. Shanti's familiarity with this word suggests that she was aware of global discourses of development. This was not surprising given her senior role at Sangam and her close working relationship with the international donor organisation, Nutrition Nepal, through which development discourses were transmitted via consultants (local and international), reporting requirements, and conditions of funding. Nevertheless, her response is revealing of her own understanding of the notion and the importance of particular elements to the organisation's approach to empowerment:

Empowering women is challenging indeed. We are running a volunteer organisation. We selected the volunteers, who used to be the housewives. We brought them out from the four walls. We then trained them for 16 weeks in a group. The other programs like General Assembly,<sup>107</sup> picnics helped them to make friends. They have developed a habit of expressing themselves. They also are now

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<sup>107</sup> This was an annual event for staff and volunteers that was hosted by Sangam in recognition of the work of volunteers. The women dressed in their finest saris for this much anticipated occasion.

serving in other different organisations through our network. I feel they are highly empowered now.

Shanti's comments point to a number of changes that Sangam brought about in the lives of women involved with the organisation. These include becoming skilled, mobility in the public domain, connecting with other women, speaking up and branching further into other organisations. These changes are reflected in the words of other women involved with Sangam. For example, Sumitra commented on how working as a Caretaker in one of Sangam's Child Development Centres (CDC) had improved her life. I asked Sumitra: 'Working in the CDC, has it improved your life?' She answered:

Before, I had no confidence in myself. I was afraid of talking to my neighbours. But nowadays, I can freely communicate with them. I ask them about their children, their age, health etc. The mothers complain about their child's health and we explain them about our weighing program and nutritious food. Before joining the organisation, I was ignorant about nutritious food. Sometimes, I used to feed my child once a day. But after the training, this has changed... When I find someone is pregnant in the community, I immediately approach her and enquire of her health. Moreover, I suggest them to see a doctor. I also ask them if her family is supporting her at that stage.

Amrita Bista, a high-caste Chhetri woman who lived in a joint household with her husband, two teenage sons and her mother-in-law, was a long-term staff member, Board Member and current Chairperson. Amrita was present for the last part of my interview with Shanti Shrestha, during the conversation about empowerment, highlighted above. Amrita talked about the trajectory her life had taken since she became involved with Sangam:

I am the example of an empowered woman. I used to be a housewife. I got selected for the training. I am an old resident of this area but still I could not make any friends in the area. After attending the training I made many friends. I got selected as a representative of the group and now I am a Chairperson of the organisation. I have developed confidence in myself. Before, I used to fear talking to the Program Manager. Now, my neighbours also talk about me and my position in the

organisation. I feel proud that I am able to reach this position today. I feel the changes in me. Even, the same thing is happening to my friends. When we are in the state to help others then it's also empowerment...

Amrita's sense of pride in her achievements was palpable. Amrita's initial encounter with Sangam instigated her journey along a path that fundamentally changed her life—from housewife to volunteer to paid worker—to someone of standing in her community who felt confident to speak up. Further, as a Sangam Chairperson (Head of the Board), Amrita was in a relatively powerful decision-making role—indeed, the Board was involved in most decisions, including finance for programs—which gave her the capacity to affect the lives of other women. Amrita not only equated building a better life for herself as empowerment, she also saw her capacity to help others as an indicator of her empowered status. This notion of helping others was also something that was raised during the fieldwork period as a reason for working for Sangam, particularly by volunteers.<sup>108</sup> As one staff member told me, 'even in our childcare centres the staff are working as volunteers. The payment that they get for their work is very less but they are happy with the help they are doing for these centres'. Further, the notion of helping others was one of the ways in which women positioned themselves, articulating their status within both the organisation and their local communities. This is reflected in Amrita's comment above, where she proudly talked about the social standing her position in Sangam afforded her within her neighbourhood.

The desire of Nepalis to be working for development (*bikas*) rather than becoming a recipient of it has been noted by Pigg (1992, p. 511):

...the apparatus of *bikas* (the burgeoning of office jobs, the money brought in by foreign aid, the positions of influence in the bureaucracy) is the source of power, wealth, and upwards social mobility. Therefore, to be relegated to the margins of *bikas* is to be excluded from the opportunities it offers. Simply put, everyone wants a piece of the development pie.

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<sup>108</sup> Other studies on women's empowerment reflect this. For example, in her study of women's empowerment in Honduras, Rowlands (1997, p. 133) notes: 'women who become empowered to act to meet their own needs can also contribute to development for the wider society'.

Further, incorporating the capacity to help others within a conception of empowerment, as Amrita did, must be understood in terms of the history of gender and development in Nepal (see Chapter Two). It relates to the construction of ‘the Nepali woman’ in need of developing and the *Panchayat* project of Nepali nationalism in which women were rendered agents of change—duty-bound to the modernisation and development of Nepal (Enslin, 1998).

### **‘We are no longer housewives’: the critical role of status**

In their comments above, Shanti and Amrita point to the way in which women working for Sangam—in both paid and volunteer positions—were no longer ‘housewives’ since becoming involved with the organisation. Both women, and others, stated that their husbands were supportive of their work at Sangam, helping with household duties and care of (school-aged) children.<sup>109</sup> According to Amrita, ‘when he is home, he does most of the things. Even my sons help me with housework’. Tulsi spoke about her husband’s reaction to her role as Caretaker in the CDC:

My husband is happy with the changes in me. There is nobody to look after my child but still he encourages me to manage the time and come to work. I explain him the benefits of such weighing programs. Sometimes, I have to leave the house early and go for work. During such periods, I request him to stay longer in the house and look after the child and he agrees to do so. He is supportive.

Tulsi’s colleague, Punyawati, also spoke of her husband’s response to her position as CDC Caretaker:

My husband helps and supports me. I am busy with work. It’s my husband who picks and drops the daughter to school. He is supportive. All of our husbands are drivers. Actually, husbands of all four staffs of CDC in this ward are drivers.

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<sup>109</sup> It was typically not the case for younger children, who were cared for by other female family members or they accompanied their mother to work (if the workplace permitted, for example brick kilns, market/street stalls).

Program Manager Shanti spoke of her own experience:

As I am a working woman, I cannot look after everything in the house, so we divide the task. It's not compulsory that I have to cook—whoever is free can do that. Now my husband also washes clothes. I feel happy that my husband does not separate any work according to the gender.

However, one participant who headed another women's NGO, in a similar role to Shanti, emphasised that even though her husband was supportive of the fact that she worked, the domestic burden ultimately rested on her shoulders. For example, if she and her husband both had work programs in the morning, he would attend his program, leaving her to manage all of the demands of getting the children to school. It was also the case that when the children were unwell, she was expected to stay home from work to look after them.

In Chapter One I highlighted the way in which women were typically expected to carry the burden of work in the household as well as manage work and community commitments outside of the home. Normative expectations meant that women needed to complete household chores before they could leave the house. A Sangam staff member spoke about this in relation to program activity times—although he was clearly not talking about women engaged in paid work: 'when the mothers send their child to school and finish their household chores, they have free time. So, we conduct the program at around 11 in the morning or around 3.30 or 4pm'. Amrita made it clear, however, that a woman's status as worker, volunteer and/or student opened up possibilities:

I was a housewife and I used to do anything my husband told me, but now I take my own decision. Sometimes my husband questions me for my later arrival at home from work, but he does not stop me from my work...I am a community worker and I know what sorrow means and I have seen many ups and downs in life. He encourages me to help my friends but in the meantime he also wants me to take good care of the house. Before, I could not come out of the house whenever I wanted. But now I finish my tasks and then come out whenever I have to, even at 6am in the morning.

Shanti drew on her own situation to highlight the possibilities that paid work presented:

There is a great difference in women when they start working. When we work, we are able to contribute to the expenses of the family. We can spend for ourselves...I feel that when I started working, then my husband started listening to me. He takes my suggestions positively. Like Amrita, I can also come out of the house whenever I like.

Kabeer (1994, p. 204) points to the way in which ‘any kind of paid work enhances a woman’s capacity to exercise choices and gain some control over the different aspects of their lives’. This is reflected in the women’s comments above, particularly with regard to a woman’s mobility. Working outside of the house gave Amrita and Shanti licence to move more freely, although restrictions still applied. Societal norms dictate that it is unacceptable for women to be outside of the house unaccompanied in the evening, even in a work-related capacity. One participant outside of the context of Sangam—Srijana, a high-profile female lawyer and activist of high-caste Bahun status—recounted her time as a university lecturer where she was required to teach in the evenings. She was frequently the subject of local gossip:

When I was returning from college in the evening people would say ‘always she is coming so late to home’. That means you know... I was somewhere but they don’t know that I was teaching... [They thought] ‘Oh, you are a woman; you have to be inside the home. [Laughing] You! Inside for six o’clock!’<sup>110</sup>

Srijana’s comments exemplify the way in which women who stray from normative behaviour are subject to gossip and depicted in negative terms. Cornwall (2014, p. 15) relates this to sexuality, noting the way in which ‘narratives of sexuality circulate and shape women’s experiences’. Cornwall (2014, p. 16) explains sexuality in relation to women’s empowerment:

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<sup>110</sup> Focus group discussions with middle-class high-caste female Bachelor students during the fieldwork period revealed another perspective. It was acceptable to their families (and themselves) for them to be out at night if they were with a group of female friends in an appropriate setting, e.g. a restaurant. The women contrasted this with what they deemed ‘inappropriate’ and ‘unacceptable’—a woman out in the evening at a bar/nightclub in the company of men. Such behaviour was linked to what they called ‘bar girls’.

...if we understand 'sexuality' as being about choices not just concerning people's intimate lives but also, for women, which streets are safe to walk down... whether to go out of the house at all, whether wearing certain clothes means hassle from men... whether to give in to family pressure to marry, then we begin to see more clearly the far-reaching implications for sexuality for women's empowerment.

However, Srijana rejected categorically the prototypical identity of the good Hindu woman—acquiescent to her fate and compliant with the notion of what the good Hindu woman should be—'submissive and relatively powerless... vis-à-vis men' (Skinner & Holland, 1998, p. 95). This was evident in her choice of career in the male-dominated legal profession<sup>111</sup>, her status as divorced single mother, and her outspoken criticism of the subordinate status of women in relation to men in Nepal. But Srijana was one of a tiny minority of women amongst my research participants who so blatantly and definitively rejected this prescription of women's lives. Indeed, to do so was very difficult, because, as Merry (2006, p. 14) notes, 'challenging women's subordinate position in the family or workplace threatens to disrupt a wide range of patriarchal privileges'. This is highlighted in Liechty's (1996, p. 207) work on women and modernity in Kathmandu, where he notes, 'in the male-dominated public sphere [women's] 'freedom' becomes a zero-sum game in which woman's advances are seen as coming at the expense of men's losses'. Further, Kabeer (1994, p. 59) states, 'to challenge the gender division of labour within a social order is to challenge the basis of core gender identities'. The consequences of defiance could be far-reaching, including social stigma and ostracisation from family and friends, both of which would be devastating for her reputation, and for the reputation of her family.

The women I encountered were aware of the difficulties in challenging gender norms, as highlighted by the comment made by my research assistant after an interview with a participant who had defied the expected trajectory: 'this woman is so very brave. I am not so brave, I want an easy life'. Nevertheless, throughout my research with Sangam, women's commentary about their lives highlighted the way in which they did not think about their lives exclusively in terms of this prescriptive path. Rather, women tended to both accept and reject the notion of the 'good woman', depending

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<sup>111</sup> The most recent available statistics reveal that in 2008 only 7.6% of the total registered lawyers (932 women out of a total of 12,222) in Nepal were women (Nepal Bar Association, 2009, p. 7).

on the context of specific activities and her position within that domain at that particular time. Indeed, women's positioning was dynamic, which I came to understand over time. Accompanying CF Maya in her capacity as staff member and spending time with her outside of Sangam (as wife and mother) provided insights into the way in which women managed their various positions. In her role as CF, Maya was a strong advocate of women, promoting strategies for women to improve their situations—some of which challenged the gender hierarchy. By contrast, at home Maya was unable—or unwilling because of the consequences confrontation would bring—to put some of these strategies into practice. Rather, she fulfilled many of the attributes of the 'good woman' and was acquiescent (albeit, reluctantly) to her place in the hierarchy in this domain, particularly with regard to the decision-making role within the family. Here we see the complexity of women's positions and the multiple roles they occupy across various contexts.

Amrita and Shanti highlight the way in which a woman's status could be an enabling or constraining factor to her capacity to deviate from the ideal life path without being perceived as a 'bad woman' (*kharab mahila*) by her family and community.<sup>112</sup> For instance, the expectations of the role of 'housewife' restricted a woman's movement, her decision-making capacity, and her voice, thereby offering women limited possibilities for an alternative to the prescriptive path. By contrast, the status of 'working woman' opened up new possibilities—possibilities that were socially sanctioned.<sup>113</sup> For example, Amrita described the way in which working outside of the home and earning income was 'creating a positive impression in the community that *even* women are capable of doing something' (emphasis added). Moreover, for Amrita and Shanti, engaging in paid work meant that their husbands took them more seriously; it afforded them a voice that was heard within the household, the opportunity to make their own decisions and freedom of movement in the public domain. To these women, this was empowerment—as Amrita stated, 'I am an example of an empowered woman'. Even so, Amrita was also accepting of some

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<sup>112</sup> Motivation to behave in accordance with social rules is intrinsically tied to protecting one's *ijat*, which Liechty (1996, p. 207) describes as 'a personal attribute; it is a matter of character and moral essence'.

<sup>113</sup> In their seminal study on Nepal's women, Acharya and Bennett (1981) highlighted the relationship between a Nepali 'woman's ability to earn an outside income, and the elevation of her social status within the family and community' (Biggs et al., 2004, p. 121).

aspects of the dominant gender ideology, for instance taking good care of the house, as was expected by her husband. Further, the story of CF Maya exemplifies the complexity both of women's positions and the possibilities afforded by a particular status. Thus, while Maya fitted the category 'working woman/paid worker', this status did not open up the same range of possibilities in the domestic realm as it did for Amrita and Shanti. Nevertheless, Maya's circumstances had a wider reach, out into the community where she was held up as a role model to women. As Sangam co-founder, Rupa Pandey noted:

Many of the staff working for Sangam came from the volunteers, who, in turn, came from the community. They are all known in their communities, which is good for building trust. But small communities know much about what is going on in their community. So if Maya has a problem in her household then the community would often know about it. She is coming out of the house and doing something for herself, this is positive... For change to happen it must be more than words. People see the changes and then they themselves will be inspired to make changes within themselves and their own lives.

In describing the positive aspects associated with their status as 'working women', Amrita and Shanti also highlighted a number of constraining factors that had an impact on women's possibilities and capacity to enact changes in their lives—most significantly, the restrictions related to the status of 'housewife'. As Kabeer (1999, p. 437) notes, 'empowerment is intrinsically linked to the condition of disempowerment'. Kabeer's statement is brought to bear in the next section, where I focus on the notion of 'support' as a key factor in circumscribing the possibilities open to women involved with Sangam. I explore this through the lens of an encounter with participants of the nutrition program at a Growth Monitoring session I attended. This encounter highlights the importance of context in shaping women's behaviour; in this instance, what was sayable/not sayable for women in the public domain. As Skinner (1990, p. 75) notes, 'the good wife never criticises her husband or complains about him to other people', but as this next section illustrates, in specific contexts they sometimes do.

## **Constraining/enabling women: the importance of ‘support’**

Half way into the research with Sangam I decided to ask women more direct questions during a Growth Monitoring session in an attempt to find answers to some of my research concerns around marriage relations and the effects on women’s lives, particularly issues such as freedom of mobility and decision making roles in the household. Growth Monitoring afforded me the opportunity to observe interactions between Sangam and program participants as well as meet participants. This activity provided the time and space for me to ask women about themselves and their engagement with the nutrition program. Some women were very shy and it was difficult to get a conversation started. In other instances women approached me and spoke at length and would seek me out during my next visit. I found that those women who wanted to engage in deep conversation often had a complicated story to tell, typically of hardship and suffering. It was clear to me that speaking about their lives was a relief for them. I had the time—or tried to make another time—and I was a compassionate and concerned listener.<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, while Growth Monitoring provided the opportunity for me to speak with large numbers of women, this forum was not always conducive to discussions of a personal, and at times, sensitive nature. In turn, this was revealing of what was sayable in particular locations.

After initial introductions, where I asked a woman her name, age, marital status and the age and sex of her children, I asked if her husband was supportive (*sahayogi*). This term of phrase—‘my husband is supportive/not supportive’—was a phrase that I heard women use when they were talking about their everyday lives. CFs often used the phrase when recounting to me the situation of a woman experiencing difficulties—‘her husband is not supportive’. Sangam staff members also used it when describing their own lives—typically, ‘my husband is supportive’, although this was not the case for every staff member. What, however, did women mean by ‘supportive husband’? While there were nuances to the meaning women attributed to this notion, there were also shared understandings of the term. The range of behaviours women associated with ‘supportive’ husbands could include providing for the family financially, helping

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<sup>114</sup> Scheper-Hughes (1995, pp. 417-418) suggests: ‘While the anthropologist is always a necessarily flawed and biased instrument of cultural translation, like every other craftperson we can do the best we can with the limited resources we have at hand: our ability to listen and to observe carefully and with empathy and compassion’.

with domestic and childcare responsibilities, supporting her career, respecting her opinions, sharing household decisions, and accepting her freedom of movement outside of the home. I found that it was typically the case that in situations where the husband was deemed ‘not supportive’, life for the woman was difficult. In these instances women identified a number of behaviours in relation to their husbands, which could include withholding money, not working, excessive drinking, gambling, domestic violence, polygamy, and control of mobility.<sup>115</sup> A husband’s desire for a son (son-preference) was associated with some of these behaviours, particularly polygamy—or the threat of this practice. It is important to emphasise, however, that the desire for a son is a widely held preference in Nepali society and does not necessarily result in any of the aforementioned behaviours.

The culture of son-preference in Nepal is reflected in popular, well-known sayings: *dhilo paye, chhora paye* (let it be late, but let it be a son); *chhora paye swarga jaane* (the birth of a son paves the way to heaven); and *chhora paye khasi, chhori paye pharsi* (if a son is born, it is celebrated by sacrificing a goat; if it is daughter, a pumpkin is enough). Son-preference is linked to Hindu patrilineal ideology, in which a son is required to carry on the patriline (descent through the father’s line) (Bennett, 1983, p. viii). In this ideology, male offspring are also deemed important because they perform the funeral ceremonies, thus ensuring an individual’s transformation ‘into an ancestor spirit, *pitr*...[who then] goes to dwell in the *pitrlock*, the abode of the’ ancestors (Bennett, 1983, p. 37). However, son-preference has considerable impact on women, including taking a toll on their bodies and on their lives as they produce many children in an effort to bear a son (Kabeer, 2001, p. 48).<sup>116</sup>

I met women who were under immense pressure from their husbands to produce a son. In one case, the woman had recently given birth to a son. However, throughout

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<sup>115</sup> In her PhD thesis based on a mixed caste Hindu community in the hills of Central Nepal, Skinner (1990, p. 79) points to men who exhibit such behaviours, describing them as ‘bad men’ (*kharab manche*). She states (1990, p. 79), ‘bad men get drunk, gamble and beat their wives, they try to cheat everyone, and/or they are useless at work’. Skinner (1990, p. 79) notes that bad men deviate from the prescriptive life path for males, as set out in Hinduism, in which men work ‘diligently and honestly to meet their family’s and community’s needs. They are the ones who get along well and cooperate with others in the community for the welfare of all. Good men are called *sojho* (straight, simple, guileless)’.

<sup>116</sup> The culture of son-preference in Nepal has led to women taking extreme measures in response to this social norm, including female foeticide. One of my participants (one of two daughters) spoke of her mother’s five abortions after the second daughter was born. She was unsuccessful in bearing a son.

her pregnancy she had considered suicide due to her concern that the baby would be another girl and her husband would fulfil his threat to leave the family. The couple already had two teenage daughters and the mother had considered her reproductive days to be over. In another situation, Sita, a member of the Bahun caste, was experiencing immense pressure from her husband to bear a son. Her husband, whom she was forced to marry at seventeen by her parents, had already identified a possible second wife—Sita’s cousin—and instigated overnight stays for her at the house (one room) with his wife and two young daughters. Polygamy is illegal in Nepal, however it is a socially acceptable practice for men. Sita was not coping with this arrangement and was considering suicide. During my visits she appeared very upset, describing herself as ‘very tense’. Women often used variations on the word tension (*chinta*) during conversations about their lives: ‘too tense’, ‘so tensed up’, ‘I was tensed’, ‘I have too much tension’. In turn, Sita’s tension was affecting her caring capabilities for her daughters, who were both underweight. I asked Sita if it was possible for her to seek a divorce. Her response reflects the dominant high-caste Hindu beliefs regarding marriage and highlights the internalisation of gender norms:<sup>117</sup>

No, we don’t have such kind of thinking. Maybe with an education I would have had such thoughts but I cannot think of marrying again. Even if he leaves I will live alone but I wouldn’t marry someone else. I can’t tolerate, but if he brings a second wife I will have to agree. I will not live together but he will keep her somewhere else. I will have to accept...I know after he will bring another [wife] he surely won’t look after me the same, not even the daughters. Even now he doesn’t take care that much. Afterwards, surely he won’t bother about us.

Sita’s husband exhibited a number of other behaviours that were deemed ‘not supportive’, including refusing to send his daughters to school,<sup>118</sup> citing financial constraints, and prohibiting his wife to leave the house unaccompanied by him. However, the husband owned two restaurants in partnership with his brother and the

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<sup>117</sup> Focus group discussion conducted with high-caste young female Masters students reflect the gender norms related to high-caste women and marriage. Sabitra, a 22-year-old Bahun woman, noted: ‘if a girl is 25-26 it’s her time to get married. This is how we are socialised. We cannot even think anything else’. I asked Sabitra, ‘Does it increase your social standing to be married. Is it good socially to be married?’ She replied: ‘Yeah. We will get respect from everyone’.

<sup>118</sup> This is another form of discrimination and further, perpetuates discrimination against women over generations. Sita herself was illiterate and forcibly married at a young age, both of which had an impact on the choices available to her and increased dependency on her husband.

family was in a good financial situation. This was apparent by the material goods inside the room, including a television, a new gas cooker with a large gas bottle, and rugs on the floor. Even though Sita was finding the situation intolerable, she could not envision leaving her husband; she was reluctantly accepting of her circumstances. This highlights the centrality of marriage to women's lives in this context and their desire to avoid undermining the institution—even while experiencing abuse from their husbands and contemplating suicide. As the notion of the 'good woman' emphasises, a woman's status is in relation to men. Marriage, therefore, is extremely important to a woman's social and economic status, particularly for high-caste women. Divorce would mean that she was no longer a 'good woman', thereby bringing dishonour to her family and resulting in ostracism from her family and stigma within the community. As a senior staff member stated, 'within the ethnic *Janajati* group they will separate but the Brahman and Chhetri, it is difficult... they have so many conflicts between them but they want to remain as husband and wife. This is because of the social norms and values, which we have to think about'. Maya offered Sita a way to respond to her husband without jeopardising the relationship:

Yes, he has said that he wants a son. But you don't have another child...But in front of your husband don't say 'I won't have'. Say 'I will have'. Say what has happened to me not to have another child. You should work, even to give education to your daughters...There is no guarantee that there will be a son. You have seen it by yourself.

Sita's situation was not unusual in this field site. At this point in my research I had already encountered many women who described their husbands as 'not supportive'. However, every woman to whom I asked this question at the Growth Monitoring session replied with the same answer: 'yes, he is supportive'. At the time I felt that this exercise was entirely useless—it was clearly not the way in which to spark a meaningful conversation with women about their marriage. However, since leaving the field I have reflected critically on this encounter. Notwithstanding that I was a white foreign woman who stood out in the crowd of women gathered for the activity, it appeared that women did not want to be seen or heard by others to be speaking of their husbands in a negative way. Indeed, experience taught me that women would open up about their marriage but only on their own terms (if at all) and typically in a

more private setting. Furthermore, it was sometimes the case that program participants would speak to me about their difficulties—openly criticising their husbands—while the CF sitting with us would be hearing these details for the first time. This points to the way in which I was positioned by some participants as a neutral outsider—as someone far removed from the social and cultural context of Nepal and as a woman who was not subject to the gender norms and expectations operating in this context. Thus, criticising their husbands privately, or to me, as an outsider, was regarded as less risky in terms of incurring negative consequences, such as provoking gossip, stigma, and domestic violence.

Parish (1996, p. 15) addresses a similar theme in his work on the Newars of Bhaktapur, where he writes about what it is safe to say and what it may be unsafe to say. He notes:

Given that people have learned that dissent may expose them to danger, may stigmatise or isolate them, we can understand how they may wish to keep their critical thoughts to themselves. Often, they may hide their less-than-orthodox attitudes and practices even from the relatively gentle scrutiny and incomprehension of the anthropologist.

Parish (1996, p. 15) argues that if critique is kept from coming to the fore when the anthropologist is present, ‘a vital part of culture is rendered invisible, while socially acceptable ideology stands out’. Moreover, he cautions the anthropologist not ‘to identify culture too closely with a dominant ideology’ (Parish, 1996, p. 15). In the context of Sangam, the program activity shaped what women were able to say and, to some extent, their behaviour. Indeed, there were noticeable differences between activities, which in Goffman’s (1959) terms, constituted ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ regions. Growth Monitoring and Awareness Programs were ‘front stage’ regions; they were held in the public domain and women were highly visible. Here women were more likely to perform (Butler, 1990) as ‘good women’, thus reproducing the dominant ideology. By contrast, Home Visits were private—although not entirely, particularly in high-density dwellings—and as a ‘back stage’ region, this activity was more conducive to women speaking openly, even if it contradicted the notion of the ‘good woman’. Home Visits were also the forum in which Sangam staff implemented

a strategy that was directly related to the organisation's objective of 'women's socio-economic empowerment'—encouraging women's participation in paid work.

### **Empowering women through work: 'We should stand on our own legs'**

In a context where many men were not supportive and daily survival occupied a central place in the everyday lives of many women, a key objective of the program was to facilitate women's participation in the productive economy. The rationale for focusing on women's economic status was reflected in the comments made by staff members of the CDC in the slum area. CF Laxmi stated: 'we won't get to eat simply staying at home. We have got to work. We cannot be dependent...We should stand on our own legs'. Similarly, CDC caretaker Bhumika noted, 'It's good to be independent'. These statements resonate with a key tenet of the nutrition program, as pointed out to me by Sangam co-founder, Rupa Pandey: 'you cannot empower people with charity'. They also reflect a key argument long since espoused by feminists, that empowerment is not something that can be done to or for anyone else (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall, 2014; Kabeer, 1999; Rowlands, 1997). We saw a glimpse of this strategy earlier, in Sita's story, where Maya counselled Sita to find paid work to be able to educate her daughters. Many women who were receiving Home Visits were, like Sita, mothers who were experiencing difficulties, such as domestic violence, a lack of financial resources and unsupportive husbands. For these women and their children, life was precarious—their lives were dictated by insecurity and scarcity. As Sita's story highlights, and Chant argues, the level of household income 'may bear no relation to *women's* poverty because women themselves may not necessarily be able to access it' (2008, pp. 174-175; original emphasis; cf. Sen, 1990).<sup>119</sup>

CFs suggested paid work to women as a way to enact changes in their lives. For some women, paid work was a survival strategy—a way to put food on the table and clothe their children. But Sangam also presented it as a way for women to exercise control over their own lives, which could include increasing self-confidence, improving their

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<sup>119</sup> This relates to the 'feminisation of poverty', a term that was first coined in the 1970s but only entered development discourse in the mid-1990s following the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women in 1995 (Chant, 2008, p. 166). Chant (2008, p. 171; original emphasis) notes that while this term is 'poorly elaborated', it is 'a succinct and hard-hitting slogan' that effectively underscores the way in which poverty is a '*gendered experience*'.

sense of self-worth and deciding how to spend self-earned money. As Program Manager Shanti noted, ‘I would like to suggest to women that please, start working and earn. Even you are able to earn just a rupee, you will feel proud of yourself. Do not sit idle at home’. Shanti elaborated further:

When you do not earn you have to ask your husband for everything. They give the money but in the meantime, they also abuse their wife. During our Home Visits we come across some women who do not ask for money and keep all their desires within themselves. If these women are able to earn for themselves they can spend the way they want to.

Reflected in Shanti’s comments is her own experience of change as a result of participation in economic activities. Indeed, it has been well documented that earning money does not necessarily correlate with having control over expenditure (Kabeer, 1994). However, not every woman participating in the nutrition program was in a precarious position and many spoke about changes paid work had brought to their lives that resonated with Amrita and Shanti’s narratives of empowerment, including mobility outside of the home, speaking up, connecting with other women, developing a sense of pride in their own economic contributions, increased social status and garnering respect from their husbands.<sup>120</sup> Here we see the way in which the multidimensional processes of change differ between variously positioned women and the importance of context. How a woman is positioned in a particular domain may determine the scope for change in that context. Kabeer (1999, p. 460) underscores this, pointing to the need ‘to be sensitive to the ways in which context will shape processes of empowerment... women will be influenced by the intersection of social relations and individual histories which form the vantage point from which they view these new possibilities’. It was also highlighted earlier in relation to CF Maya, where her contrasting positions as paid worker in the public sphere and mother/wife in the private domain circumscribed her lived experience in those contexts.

### **Enabling ‘economic empowerment’ through the nutrition program**

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<sup>120</sup> This is not to suggest that women in precarious circumstances could not experience these changes, however if they did, they did not speak of them in any interactions with me.

The objective of women's participation in the productive economy was promoted through activities that explicitly targeted income-generating opportunities, including the marketing and sale of SP+ (*Sarbottom Pitho Plus*) and Savings Groups. There existed 39 Savings Groups and staff, volunteers and members qualified for participation in the scheme. Each Savings Group member held a passbook and deposited a set amount once a month into the group account (in a government bank)—between NRs. 25-1000 per month, depending on what an individual could contribute. She could then draw a loan on this money (up to NRs. 10,000) to start up an income-generating endeavour.<sup>121</sup> Savings Groups were highly regarded by women involved with Sangam, as CDC Caretaker Sunita noted: 'this saving scheme is helping us a lot... Yes, I have taken a loan. My husband is a driver and sometimes he earns and sometimes he does not. I took a loan from our Savings Group to open up a shop with my husband'. Amrita commented:

Even husbands are now happy with their wives because they are capable of supporting the family in the time of need. If anybody is going through a hard time in terms of finance, then we also collect money in the group and help the needy ones.

The objective of involving women in the labour market was also promoted in program activities that ostensibly targeted other aims, for example improved health and nutrition, but were also forums conducive to encouraging women to participate in paid work outside of the home. The CDC (Child Development Centre) was central to this strategy. CFs actively encouraged women to place their child in the CDC and engage in paid work. Sangam believed this strategy to be fundamental to opening up spaces for women to bring about their own changes. This strategy was clearly evident in Sangam's interactions with women participating in the program as recipients, particularly during Home Visits. For example, during one Home Visit a CF spoke to a socially and economically marginalised 19-year-old pregnant mother of one daughter: 'You have to be strong and not rely on your husband. You can put your child in the CDC and work and support yourself and your child. Do not rely on your husband. He is not supportive. You can do this for yourself. Women are strong'. I witnessed

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<sup>121</sup> Sangam contributed NRs. 15,000 in seed money to each group. Loans were decided upon at each monthly meeting. A deposit of NRs. 25 bought NRs. 1000. Interest was charged at NRs. 10 per NRs. 1000 and the loan was required to be paid back to the group within three months.

numerous encounters during Home Visits in which Sangam staff and volunteers articulated such sentiments to program participants, encouraging economic participation while also helping women develop self-confidence and self-esteem. Nevertheless, despite the various approaches of Sangam aimed at enabling women to enact changes in their lives, women still needed to live in this setting and face the difficulties and constraints within it. These constraints and the practice of the program are brought to bear in the following case study of Ghita, a recipient of Sangam's nutrition program.

### **Ghita's story: 'I feel I am in a pothole and I cannot go up'**

Ghita first came into contact with the organisation at a Growth Monitoring session, which was typically Sangam's first point of contact with women. She received monthly Home Visits because her two daughters, aged 4 years and 5 months, were both underweight. I first met Ghita at the very beginning of my research with Sangam when I accompanied Program Manager Shanti to Ghita's rented room in inner Kathmandu where she lived with her husband and daughters. Ghita was well educated, holding a Bachelor of Commerce. However, as I sat with her on the bed in her small, sparsely furnished room it was difficult to imagine Ghita venturing outside of the building—such was her lack of confidence and low self-esteem. She held up a jar containing approximately two cups of white rice: 'this is all I have to feed my children and myself for the next three days'. She went on to explain how life had become unbearable for her, so much so that she had considered suicide on numerous occasions.

Ghita and her husband—both high-caste Bahun—grew up in a very large village in Eastern Nepal, not far from Kathmandu. It was not until after she married him—an arranged marriage—that Ghita came to know that she was the second wife and that her husband was an alcoholic and addicted to gambling. Before their first daughter was born, Ghita and her husband migrated to Kathmandu in search of work and an improved life, however things did not go according to plan.<sup>122</sup> Shanti noted, 'people

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<sup>122</sup> Since the 1970s established residents of Kathmandu have moved from the old, inner city areas to settle in new residential neighbourhoods as the number of urban poor continues to proliferate in the old city (Liechty, 2010, p. 7). These inner city areas, in which Ghita resided, were the first working areas in

usually have a misconception that people in Kathmandu have a better life but this is not the case usually. There are places or rooms that are like storerooms and are without windows. Thank god at least this room has two windows for sunlight'. Nevertheless, conversations with women who had migrated from rural areas to Kathmandu told of an easier life, specifically because they no longer needed to engage in the hard physical work rural life demanded. However, city life posed new and different difficulties for women. For instance, many women experienced social isolation after moving from rural-based joint family households to single, nuclear families in Kathmandu—often far from their natal home, cut off from their own families and friends. Sangam sought to address this by bringing women 'out of the four walls' to mix with other women in the community through program activities, thereby offering them the possibility of support and friendship. But while Kathmandu offers new opportunities and possibilities, particularly in terms of education and employment, they are not available to everyone. How a person is positioned, in terms of caste, ethnicity, class, and gender, shapes opportunity and experience. As McHugh (2004, p. 594), writing on Nepal, notes, 'social change has a profound effect on well-being, but the benefits and drawbacks of social change are not evenly distributed across classes, ethnicities, or genders (cf. Seymour 1999), because pre-existing inequities condition the circumstances—cognitive, emotional, and material—into which change is received'.

During her first pregnancy Ghita worked as a wage labourer constructing houses. She earned only enough money to pay the rent of the room, noting, 'sometimes, I had nothing to eat'. Her first daughter was born underweight. It was during her second pregnancy that Ghita came into contact with Sangam. She stated, 'I was supported by Sangam to go for a health check. They pitied my condition and they provided me with food twice during my pregnancy'. Ghita was referring to a Rescue Package, which contained basic provisions such as rice, pulses, spices, cooking oil, SP+ and kerosene to last a month and, if needed, cloth for nappies for a young child. This package was given to very poor people experiencing extreme hardship, but only after support by first a volunteer and then a CF had not helped to improve their situation. However,

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Sangam's nutrition program and formed key field sites in my research with the organisation. However, it is important to note that other key field sites with Sangam were also populated by poor, relatively recent arrivals of various ethnicity and caste.

even with this support, Ghita's situation had not improved. She stated, 'now the condition is even worse. I do not have money to buy food. My husband does not support me... He sold some of my traditional utensils... He used to beat me a lot. I cannot say anything to him. He does whatever he likes... I am troubled by my husband'.

On my second visit three months later Ghita's situation had not improved. Maya stated, 'her husband is a **drunkard**. It's not even that he does not work. He earns money painting and wiring but does not give it to her'. Ghita's husband regularly spent the household earnings on gambling and alcohol leaving little money to buy basics such as food, clothing, or fuel for cooking and heating. Alcohol-fuelled violence was not uncommon as the husband often came home inebriated (even during the daytime), expecting Ghita to produce a meal even when there was scant food in the house. Further, it was widely known in the community that this man was regularly unfaithful to his wife, which was an added humiliation for Ghita. These issues were the cause of many arguments between them, which often led to the husband beating Ghita. Maya highlighted a widely used strategy that Sangam brought to bear on situations such as this: holding men accountable to their socially sanctioned obligations as husbands and fathers. She noted, 'I have talked to him so many times but he always **blames her**. I ask him, why are you doing this? He said I went to work and my wife did not cook anything. My wife is good for nothing'. It was not always the case that this strategy had little or no effect on the situation; indeed, there were many instances where it had resulted in positive changes in male behaviour. For instance, Maya recounted a positive change in another household as a result of this strategy:

I tried to convince him that you have a wife, you have children to look after so you should not be doing things like this. I kept saying the same thing—that you should not be drinking. Finally, he gave up that habit...Now, her husband asks what is the medicine that need to be given is someone needs to gain weight. Even in the session of weight monitoring he brings his children. Likewise, he even takes the children for the immunisation. He cares a lot and in fact I am amazed to see him changing so much.

Maya's focus turned towards Ghita and she began to talk about possible options, in particular highlighting the advantages of paid work outside of the home: 'If you keep one child in the CDC and other in **school**, you can always work. You should have confidence in yourself. Do not think what your husband will think or what others will think. You have studied so much... make use of it. Think that and move ahead'. However, Ghita was not optimistic: 'What I think is after the children grow up there will be some peace. Then only I hope I can do work. My mind does not work now. I have a lot of tension for my daughters, my mother, and my family. What to do? It's like this. I feel I am in a pothole and I cannot go up... How to stay like this?' Maya continued trying to boost Ghita's spirits and encourage her to act: 'You should increase your **confidence**... You have your degree, job experience in marketing. You can do it. This is the chance for you to *take the decision* (emphasis added). If you let this opportunity go he will take over you completely. You can never rise. Think now when you are still young. Later you can do nothing about this. Okay Ghita?' Ghita responded: 'Yes. You are right... **100 per cent**'. Maya concluded the conversation: 'Do not just say this. Think hard about it'.

Despite the ongoing support of Sangam and Maya's efforts to help Ghita develop self-esteem and confidence as well as offering practical solutions to make positive changes in her life, Ghita could not see a way out of her circumstances. For Ghita, taking the decision to act on the possibility options presented by Maya was not something that she could even contemplate. Earlier, Sita's story highlighted the centrality of marriage to women's lives, particularly for high-caste women, and the reluctance of women to leave the marriage because of the consequences such an action would bring. While Ghita did not articulate this as a reason to remain in her situation, as a high-caste woman she was subject to these norms and values. As these women's stories illustrate, a woman's ability to take decisions and make positive changes in their lives cannot be conceptualised simply in terms of individual choice, but must be situated within the wider social context.

I now turn to a program activity that was designed by Sangam to educate men in the community about the nutrition program with the objective of eliciting their support for women's involvement with the organisation. While the gender issues related to women's non-involvement in projects are complex (Rowlands, 1997, p. 6), it was

often the case that a woman needed her husband's permission to become a volunteer or, if she was a trained volunteer, to carry out program activities. For some women, the decision to join Sangam was fraught with risk, as it required stepping outside of their domestic roles with the possibility of resistance from their families. Sangam's Male Orientation program went some way to address this. As Program Manager Shanti Shrestha noted, 'the male voice counts in the family, that is why Male Orientation is required'. Further, Male Orientation can be regarded as an enabling strategy for opening up possibilities for women, particularly if we consider Shanti's earlier narrative about women's empowerment and the processes through which this is achieved, including coming out of the house, becoming skilled, connecting with other women, mobility in the public domain and speaking up.

### **Garnering male support: enabling women's participation**

Male Orientation was held on a Saturday—a non-working day for many Nepalis. I attended one session that was conducted by Shanti Shrestha and three volunteers.<sup>123</sup> The session was held in a local community building, which was usually used by a youth club. Sangam coordinated with many clubs to use buildings for no charge as it was a way to save money and also generate a presence in the community. This was a reciprocal arrangement whereby Sangam fulfilled a club's request if there were sufficient funds, for example, providing cushions or mats. At this session ten men were present ranging from 23 to 48 years of age. There were posters on the walls in Nepali that read: '(i) Stop AIDS. We all are responsible to prevent HIV and AIDS (ii) What does bullying mean? (iii) Signs of problems in pregnant woman (iv) Prevent infants from cold, and (v) Make your society a leprosy-free zone—do your check-up in time'.

Shanti began the session by stating: 'women could not apply whatever they were taught by Sangam which is why we have male orientation'. She then presented an overview of the organisation, detailing where it worked and the program's aims and activities. As Shanti spoke, the volunteers held up posters reiterating the main points through pictures. Some of the men asked Shanti questions—about Sangam's savings

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<sup>123</sup> According to Sangam, 232 men participated in Male Orientation in 2010.

groups, children's health and one question that especially sparked my interest, why Sangam did not train males as volunteers. Shanti responded to this question by stating that the nutrition program was a program for women and children and further, 'we keep only the married women, not unmarried women'. There was then a break from this format and a participatory session on food, nutrition and health began in which the men were invited to taste the types of foods Sangam promoted. This was followed by a discussion on the psychological aspects of why a child may be underweight, focusing particularly on relations between parents. Stories of household conflict were told by volunteers to highlight key points. To end, Shanti provided information particular to this ward since Sangam's inception in 2004, including the number of underweight children and pregnant and post-partum women the organisation was helping. These statistics were also representative of Sangam's reach in other wards (with the exception of the slum settlement).

Presenting statistical information enabled Sangam to clearly show the impact the organisation was having on the health and wellbeing of women and children in their community. Critically, in terms of Sangam's aim to garner male support of the program within communities, it underscored the vital role of women volunteers in the functioning of the program and in achieving these outcomes. Garnering male support was critical for the program and for women to participate. However, Male Orientation illustrates the way that men were not incorporated in a systematic way into the practice of the nutrition program. This reinforced that the nutrition program rested on normative assumptions concerning 'women's roles', particularly 'maternal responsibilities'—or as Lind (1997, p. 1208) puts it, women 'in their roles as unpaid managers of social reproduction'. We see in the program the WID (Women in Development) approach, in which the sphere of social reproduction remains invisible or naturalised (Wilson, 2015, p. 806). The work that women undertook as volunteers was taken for granted as something that mothers 'do'; indeed, it was naturalised in this setting.<sup>124</sup> As the notion of the 'good woman' highlights, dominant cultural

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<sup>124</sup> This rendering of women has been noted in other contexts, including Latin America. Molyneux (2006, p. 438) describes the way in which Latin American motherhood has been associated with 'moral virtue, altruism and self-sacrifice'. Further, Chant (2008, p. 186) points to the way in which 'women's duty towards others is rarely questioned, which is partly to do with...[the] resilience of culturally-condoned expectations of female altruism and servility'. However, C. Jackson (2013, p. 44) states that while 'the association of women with altruism and men with self-interest is a pervasive idea—in Western gender stereotypes, in development policy', research on gender relations in south-east Uganda

constructions of femininity in Nepal are strongly identified with motherhood. Skinner (1990, p. 75), drawing on Stone (1978) notes, ‘with the birth of children, especially sons, the ideal woman acquires what some have described as the central or prototypical identity of women: childbearer or mother’. A woman ‘has proven herself in part as a good woman with a good fate because of her ability to bear children’ (Skinner, 1990, p. 76). Sangam mobilised women to promote and facilitate the nutrition program in accordance with these values (with the exception of son-preference). In turn, by shaping women to be ‘good mothers’, the organisation was reaffirming normative constructions of gender roles.

### **Notions of empowerment**

It is difficult to argue against the program objectives of healthy children and mothers; these are, ostensibly, valid goals—particularly given the statistics related to nutrition (see Chapter Three). Further, measuring these objectives is relatively straightforward, as Suresh’s comments at the beginning of the chapter highlight. However, it becomes complicated when we consider Sangam’s objective of empowering women to achieve these goals. In Chapter Three I set out Sangam’s rationale for this instrumentalist approach, highlighting the psychosocial perspective of the nutrition program, which identifies mothers as key to the health and nutrition of their children. Program activities, including awareness programs, Growth Monitoring, the CDC, and Home Visits highlight Sangam’s efforts to shape mothers to realise program goals. In turn, these activities reflect one of the ways in which Sangam perceives empowerment, specifically in terms of program recipients. However, when we look at the lived reality of women participating in the program as recipients, experiences of empowerment are multiple, varied, situational, contextual, and dependent on a woman’s positioning. Further, empirically, it is not possible to identify empowerment as a destination in this context. Rather, empowerment must be understood as a set of processes that necessarily differ between women.

The picture is further complicated when we consider Shanti Shrestha’s comments regarding empowerment at the start of the chapter. While Sangam’s stated objectives

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contests this.

imply that the nutrition program is concerned with the empowerment of program participants, there was no mention of these women in Shanti's comments. Rather, Shanti talked about empowerment in terms of staff and volunteers. Given that women move between positions within the organisation, as highlighted earlier, it is not possible to unravel completely who the empowered woman is in this context. However, it is noteworthy and speak to the way in which women—and, as Pigg (1992) has argued, people in Nepal—differentiate themselves from others in terms of development, specifically those who 'do' development and those who are in need and receive it. I observed this in the practice of the program, as the encounters in the slum settlement highlighted. But it was also apparent in the way in which women talked about their roles in the organisation. Women working and volunteering for Sangam regarded themselves as facilitators of change, opening up spaces for women to enact their own changes: 'we are working *for* the women'.

Involvement with Sangam held many benefits for women, as attested by Shanti and Uma in the narratives at the start of the chapter. For example, being able to earn was regarded as key to gaining more respect from their husbands, which in turn, changed power relations within the household. Engaging in paid work changed a woman's sense of her self as well as how she was perceived in the community—from housewife to working woman, a status that not only improved her confidence, it enabled a range of new freedoms including increased mobility and a role in decision making within the household. Women talked about these in terms of their own experiences, however it was not the reality for all women, although it was something they talked about and aspired to. Further, women's experiences in terms of these changes and freedoms were contingent and situational, depending on context and their positioning in that context at any given time, as CF Maya's story highlighted. Cornwall (2014, p. 25) suggests that empowerment is about inciting women to think differently 'about themselves, about the situations they are in, about their social worlds, relationships and horizons'. Despite Sangam's efforts to open up opportunities for women to bring about changes in their lives, including raising self-esteem, improving confidence and possibility options, many women faced a number of structural constraints that impacted on their ability to act. Sangam was clearly aware of both the constraining factors present in the context and the limitations of the nutrition program to change these constraints.

Involvement with Sangam offered a range of other benefits for women, including friendship, emotional support and an opportunity to come out of the house and meet other women. Given that many women I encountered had recently migrated to Kathmandu and lived in a nuclear family situation, spending their days alone with their child, these benefits were particularly valued. Volunteers and staff were afforded additional benefits, including skills, access to capital through savings groups and, as numerous women articulated, a sense of pride and belonging. As Kabeer (1999, p. 50) notes, ‘The fact that many...interventions are justified on instrumentalist grounds does not mean that women do not obtain any benefits from them’.

Glimpses of the neo-liberal ideals can be identified at Sangam, including individual self-improvement and participation in the market. The message that women must make changes in their own lives—i.e. empower themselves—was conveyed to women involved at all levels of the program very clearly; it was key to raising consciousness. In turn, earning for oneself was emphasised as a strategy for women to be able to make changes. I observed instances where the notion of women as ‘agents of change’, responsible for their own welfare and that of their children was expressed in the most direct terms: ‘we must stand on our own legs’. For many women involved with Sangam as program participants, this was as much a strategy of survival in the face of poverty, domestic violence and a lack of family support, as it was about empowerment. By contrast, for Sangam staff members, poverty was not the chief consideration. Rather, standing on one’s own legs related to empowerment in terms of self-confidence and social status.

## **Conclusion**

In contrast to my research with WHR, which was spent predominantly at WHR’s central office, the majority of my work with Sangam was conducted in the communities where Sangam worked. Further, while there was a range of literature available about WHR, including information brochures, booklets, and books, no such materials existed at Sangam. Rather, it was through research grounded in the micro-level, day-to-day work of the organisation—the practice of development—that I came to know and understand Sangam and the workings of the nutrition program. As

Markowitz (2001, p. 44) suggests, ‘the ethnographic staples of watching people as they work and asking them about what they do afford a starting point for seeing the ways development visions and policies are expressed in... mundane tasks’. In the next chapter I explore the ways in which empowerment is imagined and experienced in the context of WHR.

## Chapter 5

### WHR: ‘Opening the iron gate’

#### Introduction

In this chapter I explore the ways in which empowerment is imagined and experienced in the context of Women for Human Rights – Single Women’s Group (WHR). WHR is a large prominent NGO that is primarily concerned with issues related to widows in Nepal. As its name suggests, WHR focuses on women’s rights, concentrating on enacting change at the legislative and policy levels through engagement with the judiciary. Changing laws that discriminate against widows is an important part of the organisation’s multi-pronged strategy to empower widows. The central role of empowerment in framing WHR’s goals and strategies was apparent from the outset of my research. Indeed, it was explicit, as Lily Thapa, founder and head of WHR, stated at our initial meeting: ‘WHR is working in the area of socio-cultural, economic, legal and political empowerment’. Empowerment also featured as the central theme of WHR’s 2010 International Conference on Widowhood, ‘Widow’s Voices—Empowered’ and in the conference booklet: *A journey towards empowerment*. For example, the booklet states: ‘our work involves the holistic empowerment’ of widows through the creation of ‘a just and equitable society whereupon the lives of widows are strengthened and empowered’ (WHR, 2010a, pp. 3-4). Further, the booklet notes that in order for widows ‘to live dignified lives enjoying values of human rights’, they need to be empowered ‘economically, politically, socially and culturally’ (WHR, 2010a, p. 4). It is clear that empowerment is an important concept in the context of WHR. However, when we examine the way in which empowerment is brought to bear in practice, in program strategies and activities and in the lived realities of women’s lives, we see the inherent complexity and contextual specificity of the term. I demonstrate this in what follows.

In contrast to the relatively unlimited access I had to Sangam’s program and working areas, my access to WHR was mostly confined to activities that took place at the organisation’s head office. While at Sangam I was able to focus on one program, this

was not possible in the context of WHR, largely because the head office functions at multiple levels. The head office is where most of WHR's strategies and action plans are formulated, involving staff workshops and meetings but also a lot of desk work. It is the place where meetings with donors, government officials, interested researchers (such as myself), among others, take place. The head office also conducts programs for widows, known as 'capacity building programs', such as the skills identification activity that I attended, which I detail later. However, such programs typically take place outside of Kathmandu in the district groups. Thus, while it was through research grounded in the day-to-day practice of Sangam's program in multifarious locations that I came to understand the experiences and understandings of empowerment in this setting, it is through the available literature and from interviews and participant observation conducted predominantly at WHR's head office that I consider the notion of empowerment in this context.

The chapter begins by briefly considering 'rights-based approaches' to development, specifically in relation to the law. It touches on the range of resources that enable WHR to engage with the legal system, which is a key means through which the organisation addresses the discrimination of widows and pursues their rights. To situate this in the context of Nepal, I present an overview of how the judicial system has considered women's rights in Nepal, highlighting the way in which the new, post-1990 democratic environment opened up spaces (albeit narrow spaces) for women to enforce and/or expand women's rights through the courts. I focus on the legal challenges with respect to women's right to property, illustrating Nepal's legal environment and the complexities of the plural legal frameworks within this context, particularly with regard to women's claims. The cases relating to women's property emphasise the critical role of mobilisation outside the court system, including advocacy and awareness campaigns, thereby underscoring the importance of a multi-strategic approach in the quest for the realisation of women's rights. A brief overview of the history of women's mobilisation around women's rights provides contextual background for the next section, which focuses on WHR.

The section starts by providing an overview of WHR, in terms of size, capacity and reach and the contexts in which it operates. I highlight the organisation's activist agenda before moving to detail the staff of WHR's central office, including positions

occupied by widows. I then discuss the way in which the image of ‘the Nepali woman’ plays an important role in WHR’s legal and political agenda. My focus then shifts to WHR’s efforts to address the discrimination of widows and pursue their rights through legal action and the strategies and programs that support this legal engagement. I present an ethnographic account of one program, which demonstrates the practice of a program and provides insight into WHR’s understanding of the term empowerment. In the final section of the chapter I explore widows’ understandings and experiences of empowerment through the narratives of widows working at WHR. These narratives highlight the way in which WHR’s strategies of empowerment are brought to bear in the reality of women’s lives, including the constraints and opportunities that impact women’s ability to act.

### **‘Rights-based development’**

Development institutions, including international development agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), have increasingly adopted the language of rights in their policy and practice (Cornwall and Molyneux, 2006, p. 1175).<sup>125</sup> In recent years this trend has been observed in Nepal where ‘rights talk’ now pervades the mission statements and purported goals of many women’s development organisations. ‘Rights-based approaches’<sup>126</sup> to development suggest that the legal system is a key means through which the poor and marginalised, including women, can challenge inequalities and pursue rights (Joshi, 2010, p. 622). Nepali lawyer and women’s rights activist, Sapana Pradhan Malla (2010, p. 6) suggests that courts

...not only play critical roles in protecting fundamental rights guaranteed... [by the constitution] but also in expanding the ambit of such rights through judicial interpretation based on internationally accepted principles thereby effectively translating and embedding treaty jurisprudence into national jurisdiction.

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<sup>126</sup> While ‘rights-based approaches’ are pervasive in development discourse, Joshi notes the way in which ‘there is a great diversity in what different groups mean by ‘rights-based approaches’ (2010, p. 620). Thus, I do not seek to analyse the discourse and practice related to ‘rights-based approaches’; rather I aim to show the way in which WHR advances women’s rights through engagement with the judiciary.

Epp (1998, p. 3) suggests that in order to launch and sustain a court case over time (i.e. legal mobilisation), access to significant resources such as ‘rights-advocacy organisations [particularly ‘repeat players’ who have extensive experience in using the legal system], rights-advocacy lawyers, and sources of financing’ (from private sources but particularly from government sources) are necessary. WHR constitutes a ‘rights-advocacy’ organisation; indeed, since its formation, a rights-based approach had been central to the organisation’s objectives and activities. This is highlighted by its objectives statement, which aims

...to raise the legal, social and economic status [of widows], undertake advocacy to access and benefit from legal and human rights instruments, enhance and develop confidence, self-esteem and capabilities of single women to ensure their inclusion and mainstreaming in development and at all levels of decision making process (WHR, 2010b, p. 8).

Moreover, WHR has access to the broad range of resources necessary in order to engage in legal mobilisation. These include elite leadership, educated staff with knowledge of rights discourses and international human rights instruments, laws, and treaties, legal advocates, connections to power brokers and the upper echelons within Nepali society, financial resources, and donor backing. Before I elaborate on these resources it is first necessary to consider the way in which the judicial system has considered women’s rights in Nepal.

### **Nepal’s legal and political landscape and women’s rights**

The judicial system only started to seriously consider women’s rights in the last two decades following the adoption in 1990 of Nepal’s first democratic constitution<sup>127</sup> that ensured to eliminate discriminatory laws against women. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal, 1990, included an article that guaranteed equality between men

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<sup>127</sup> It was the first constitution in Nepal that was not bestowed on the population by the ruling elite (i.e. Rana elites and Shah kings), however it was neither drafted nor ratified by the people of Nepal but rather was the result of negotiations between the politically most powerful groups and promulgated by the King (Stith, 1996, p. 75).

and women as a fundamental right,<sup>128</sup> thereby opening the way for women's rights activists to challenge gender discriminatory legal provisions through the Supreme Court (Subedi, 2009, p. 37). In addition, the new democratic government initiated the recognition and implementation of treaty jurisprudence including the ratification of various international human rights instruments and treaties specific to women, notably the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (hereafter CEDAW), without reservation, in 1991 (Pradhan Malla, n.d.; Subedi, 2009, p. 42). The Nepal Treaty Act, enacted in 1990, ensures that preference be given to the international human rights provisions in the event that there is a contradiction with the provision of domestic laws (Subedi, 2009, p. 37).

Even though such changes were significant, it was not until after the 2006 democratic movement, the second 'people's movement' (*Jana Andolan 2*), and the Interim Constitution, 2007 that women's rights began to be meaningfully addressed by the judiciary to comply with the 1990 constitutional guarantee of gender equality. The legal and political mobilisation of women's advocates and NGOs leading up to this were critical to positive changes in public, political and legal attitudes to women's rights, and indeed, changes in discriminatory laws themselves. In 2007 the Gender Equality Act was enacted and the Interim Constitution was declared by the re-instated Parliament in 2007, eliminating many gender discriminatory laws and setting women's representation in the legislative parliament at 33 per cent and, significantly, granting equal property rights for women (Subedi, 2009, p. 51). With this background I now turn my attention to the post-1990 legal cases with regard to women's right to property to highlight the legal context in which women's rights are pursued.

Since the 1990s, Public Interest Litigation (hereafter PIL) has been a key strategic tool used by women activists for the enactment and/or enforcement of women's rights in the legal system. The first PIL filed by a woman relating to women's rights was in 1983 however with the promulgation of the 1990 Constitution and a more enabling political environment there was an opening of the floodgates of petitions by women advocates and activists challenging discriminatory laws against women (Pradhan,

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<sup>128</sup> While the "right to equality" was included in the 1962 Constitution, laws upholding traditional practices (i.e. norms and values based on male, high-caste, hill Hindus) continued to be hegemonic (Tamang, 2011, p. 299).

2013, p. 165). These cases concerned a range of issues relating to women's rights and gender justice such as marriage, divorce, ancestral property, sexual harassment, marital rape, and citizenship (Pradhan, 2010).

The first major constitutional challenge of the liberal era in post-1990 Nepal was the case of *Meera Dhungana Vs HMG Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs*<sup>129</sup> (1993) regarding women's right to property (Kunreuther, 2009, p. 557). Using what Joshi (2010, p. 627) calls a 'proactive strategy', the petitioners filed a PIL writ challenging the provisions on inheritance under the *Muluki Ain* (National Civil Code, 1963) that 'excluded daughters from inheriting property... [and] restricted rights of married women's inheritance' (Pradhan Malla, 2010, pp. 4-5). The case resulted in the Supreme Court issuing a directive two years later to introduce an appropriate Bill to Parliament to review the law relating to property rights, but it also emphasised a reluctance to change prevailing Hindu, patriarchal societal practices and values (Pradhan Malla, 2010, p. 4). This negative response to gender equality was seen time and again in the numerous cases relating to women's property rights filed to the court (Subedi, 2009, p. 45). Drawing on a PIL<sup>130</sup> that challenged discriminatory laws of property law in the *Muluki Ain* (National Civil Code, 1963), Subedi (2009, p. 47) highlights the court's anxiety in relation to possible changes to the status quo (i.e. legal changes to cultural practices that are guided by patriarchal norms and values and deny women their rights):

The court opines: 'constitution and laws are assumed on the basis of culture, tradition, ideology, belief and values. It is very important to note what would be the consequence if there is any change that is inconsistent with our culture and tradition. Such as situation may disturb whole social set up and structure and there is greater possibility, of creating social unrest in the society.'

The court's statement points to the work of the legal anthropologist Merry (2006, p. 6), who notes the way in which the 'global-local divide'—the divide between global

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<sup>129</sup> Meera Dhungana filed the case on behalf of a women's legal advocacy NGO, Forum for Women and Legal Development (FWLD) (Writ No. 3392, 2052, Decision No. 6013 of 2059, NKP 2059 Vol. 6, Page 462) (Pradhan Malla, 2010, p. 5)

<sup>130</sup> The case, *Dr Chandra Bajracharya Vs. HMG/Secretariat of the Parliament*, concerned sections in the *Muluki Ain* relating to property that were inconsistent with the right to equality under Article 11 of the Constitution of Kingdom of Nepal, 1990 (Subedi, 2009, pp. 46-47).

human rights and local appropriation of such rights—‘is often conceptualised as the opposition between rights and culture, or even civilisation and culture’. In the context of Nepal the notion of ‘culture’ forms an integral part of the human rights discourse however it is also invoked in an attempt to resist human rights. For instance, with regard to a PIL relating to women’s property the court declared, ‘the things to be observed are social structure, culture and tradition of country’ (Subedi, 2009, p. 47). The cases relating to women’s property ‘posed serious threats to the gender relations that were a foundation of Hindu national patrimony’, thus challenging the status quo threatened to disrupt established hierarchies and a range of patriarchal arrangements (Kunreuther, 2009, p. 546). Further, conservative opponents of the legal reforms appealed to existing property laws ‘as embodiments of “Nepali tradition and custom from time immemorial”’—despite the fact that the property laws under consideration were only mandated in 1964—thereby resisting women’s rights by claiming to be defending culture<sup>131</sup> (Kunreuther, 2009, pp. 548-549; Merry, 2006, p. 6).

On the other side of the legal contest relating to women’s property rights, petitioners invoked culture as discriminatory to women and a barrier to the realisation of women’s rights. As prominent lawyer and women’s rights activist Pradhan Malla (n.d., p. 2) notes:

Harmful or discriminatory cultural practices need to be recognised as a crime against women through the formal expression of the law...if it is discriminatory culture, universality of human rights standard should be applicable...CEDAW and other human rights instruments should be used broadly in dealing with relevant cases for making [the] state accountable.

Here we see the opposition between culture and rights where culture was invoked as discriminatory in an effort to expand and enforce women’s rights. This points to the potentially transformative power of the concept of human rights and its ‘analytical normativity’ (Goodale, 2007, p. 7) in challenging local cultural norms and existing power relations.

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<sup>131</sup> Merry (2006, p. 6) describes this as ‘the political misuse’ of the concept of culture in such arguments.

Furthermore, Pradhan (2013, p. 176) highlights the way in which the distinction was made during the court cases between a traditional, barbaric society based on Hindu norms and values and a modern, civilised society with accepted norms of human rights. The opposition between culture and rights points to the inevitable tension between the general and the particular. Human rights frameworks conceive of general principles based on legal rationality, promoting a 'unified modernity' and ideas of 'individual autonomy, equality, choice, and secularism' while in particular localities, histories and contexts are important (Merry, 2006, pp. 3-4). Indeed, as the Supreme Court's observations cited above highlight, the cases were not simply about the court upholding women's constitutional rights to equality and gender justice. As Pradhan (2013, p. 167) notes, the court cases were 'cultural contestations over gender relations and different visions of society', particularly concerning whether to retain existing social structures and customs based mainly on Hindu norms or to adopt global norms of international human rights. Moreover, these cases exemplify the difficulties in transplanting universalist notions 'embedded in cultural assumptions about the nature of the person, the community, and the state' (Merry, 2006, p. 3) into a specific context such as Nepal where distinctions such as class, caste, gender, and ethnicity, among others, are significant.

Fundamental to this discussion is the legal context within which these cases were filed. In his analysis of women's rights cases in the Supreme Court post-1990 Pradhan (2013, p. 166) draws on the notion of legal pluralism, 'the coexistence and interaction of multiple legal orders' (Meinzen-Dick & Pradhan, 2002, p. 4), to describe the way in which the petitioners, respondents (the Nepali Government), and Supreme Court judges drew on various laws, including the Constitution, international law, customary law and Hindu norms to support their arguments. Meinzen-Dick and Pradhan (2002, p. 7) emphasise the dynamism of law noting the way in which 'laws are subject to negotiation, reinterpretation, and change. The way in which people call upon different legal orders, and the negotiation between them, provides some of this dynamism'.

Pradhan (2013, p. 175) notes the way in which various laws can be in opposition to one another, pointing to two opposing laws with respect to women in Nepal: (i) women as citizens with rights as set out in the 1990 Constitution, thereby recognising women as having an independent legal identity and thus able to challenge the law; and

(ii) women as daughters, mothers, sisters etc. as laid out in the family law in the *Muluki Ain* (National Civil Code, 1963), which is heavily influenced by high-caste Hindu religious scriptures and assumptions about gender, sexuality, and property. Gilbert (1992, p. 757) has shown the way in which the *Muluki Ain* ‘organises women’s rights, both in family membership and in property, around the core of primary rights assigned to their fathers or husbands’ (1992, p. 757). As Pradhan Malla (2010, p. 2) explains:

Individual identity of women as citizens is often not granted formal recognition as women are always considered as subjects to be given away or go away from their natal families and birthplace. Rights are therefore created where the women go, mainly on the basis of marital status and on the notion of dependence.<sup>132</sup>

This passage highlights the way in which women in Nepal are constructed in particular ways within each law. For example, international law and human rights discourse construct women in secular, abstract, universalist terms, devoid of identity or culture. Pointing to the concept of human rights, Donnelly (2003, p. 16) states that through this notion ‘individuals [are constituted] as a particular kind of political subject’. Goodale (2007, p. 7), however, argues that ‘the normativity of the human rights concept configures or shapes... analytically, not empirically... the *concept* of the individual (not particular individuals in any one place or time’ (original emphasis). By contrast, the *Muluki Ain*’s representation of women’s identity as relational to men is based on Hindu norms and beliefs (Pradhan, 2013). Pradhan (2013, p. 177) suggests that disputes and arguments in the Supreme Court are always made in the context of legal orders based on both religion such as Hindu norms (*Muluki Ain*), and international law based on a different set of principles, for example international human rights. Further, Meinen-Dick and Pradhan (2002, p. 7) point to the way in which

...different legal orders should not be seen as isolated from one another, but as interacting, influencing each other, and “mutually constitutive” (Guillet 1998). How

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<sup>132</sup> Further, issues relating to women, such as domestic violence, are often relegated to the private realm where they are considered family matters, thereby shielding the violence from the state and naturalising the practice (Merry, 2006, p. 25; Pradhan Malla, 2010, p. 2).

exactly these different legal orders interact and influence each other depends on power relationships between the “bearers” of different laws.

Nevertheless, it is important to underscore the point that any discussion of power relations in Nepal, particularly in the context of women’s rights, needs to take into consideration the structure of gender norms and relations where power relations are highly unequal.

### **Political activism: mobilising for women’s rights**

Pradhan Malla (2010, p. 5) suggests that the achievements of women’s NGOs and activists in defending women’s rights to property through litigation, as outlined above, were the result of a ‘two-pronged approach’. First, through PILs challenging discriminatory provisions under domestic laws, rules and policies (Pradhan Malla, 2010, p. 5). Second, the initiation of advocacy by NGOs in the ‘submission of an initial report to the Expert Committee on CEDAW that allowed the assessment of the implementation status of the CEDAW Convention within Nepal’ (Pradhan Malla, 2010, p. 5). It is important to highlight the way in which political mobilisation outside of the court system was critical to the realisation of women’s rights at the legal level, including the intense and relentless campaigning by women’s rights advocates and NGOs to press the government to introduce appropriate bills in Parliament. Indeed, knowledge of international laws and treaties was critical to this campaign. Moreover, the seminal case relating to women’s property was a critical moment for women’s activism in Nepal insofar as it initiated the commencement of political mobilisation outside of the court system by a range of social actors seeking to change women’s subordination within society. Indeed, Subedi (2009) and Pradhan Malla (n.d.) suggest that the case heralded the genesis of a social movement for women’s rights. The case also sparked intense debate across Nepal about women’s rights including sexuality, property, and marriage, among others (Subedi, 2009). Pradhan (2010) talks about the way in which court cases, such as the PILs in relation to women’s rights during the 1990s, reflect wider debates in society, particularly about becoming modern while still retaining a sense of the national culture (although the meaning of this is highly contested in Nepal. See Gellner, 2009; Tamang, 2011).

The 1990s was a time of substantial change in Nepal during which there was a more favourable policy environment, increased international donor interest in NGOs, and a burgeoning middle class, all of which increased the accessibility of the NGO sector to the Nepali people—both as recipients of NGO programs and as staff members of these organisations (Heaton-Shrestha, 2004, p. 42). In addition, during the 1990s, campaigns intensified in the international arena for women’s rights, which in turn influenced the mobilisation of women’s rights NGOs in Nepal. For example, women’s reproductive rights were a key focus at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development while the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women underscored the notion that ‘women’s rights are human rights’, highlighting a number of women’s rights including women’s right to equality and right to development (UNWOMEN, 1995). Further, the 1995 Beijing conference was highly concerned with the question of women’s representation in political institutions (Lama, 1997, pp. 334-335). The newly enabling political environment post-1990 opened up opportunities for women’s rights NGOs and activists in Nepal to network with national and international organisations with similar interests and objectives (Bhadra, 2001). Lobbying groups were organised and women began to mobilise around issues relating to women’s rights in a range of arenas including conferences, delegations, meetings, demonstrations and the media in an effort to pressure the government to promote and protect women’s rights (Bhadra, 2001). It was in this more enabling environment that WHR emerged, formally registering as an NGO in 1994.

### **WHR: working for widows’ empowerment**

In Chapter Two I presented a brief overview of WHR, highlighting Lily Thapa’s own experience of widowhood as the motivation for forming the NGO and its subsequent growth into one of the largest organisations in Nepal. At the time of my research there were 45,110 registered members and 425 groups located in 300 Village District Committees across 54 of the 75 districts of Nepal.<sup>133</sup> According to the most recent statistics, the caste/ethnic composition of WHR’s membership comprises

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<sup>133</sup> The size and reach has grown to over 100,000 registered members and 1550 groups in 73 districts (WHR, 2015).

Bahun/Chhetri (47%), *Janajati* (38%) and *Dalit* (15%) women.<sup>134</sup> In this overview, I also highlighted the status of widows and the way in which they are perceived in the dominant gender ideology. Particularly in high-caste Hindu terms, a widow is no longer a ‘good woman’. With the death of her husband she has lost social standing and status in the community. Challenging this dominant ideology through legal channels and advocacy is central to WHR’s aim to improve the status of widows and, in turn, achieve the broader objective of widows’ empowerment.

WHR is markedly different from Sangam in terms of organisational structures, goals and strategies and the social contexts in which it operates. In particular, WHR works with women who occupy a very different position in society to the married women involved with Sangam. Accordingly, WHR’s slogan is ‘No discrimination on the basis of marital status’. While both NGOs work at the grassroots level, WHR has a reach well beyond the bounds of Kathmandu, working in most districts of Nepal, as well as at the international level within a global matrix of widows. This reach is further reflected in WHR’s numerous connections and multiple donors. Lily Thapa’s focus on widows extends to the South Asia region. In 2005 she was elected General Secretary of the South Asian Network for ‘Widows’ Empowerment (SANWED) at the Chennai Regional Meeting. WHR was officially recognised as SANWED Secretariat and the office moved to Nepal. Influencing public and political perceptions about the status of widows and raising awareness of widows’ rights has been at the forefront of WHR’s strategy from the outset. As Lily Thapa told me, ‘my mission was, and still is, to raise awareness about the plight of widows in Nepal and South Asia’.

Lily Thapa drew a distinction between WHR and other organisations during our first meeting, noting: ‘WHR is different to other NGOs. We are more movement based rather than project based’. This statement highlights the broad scope of WHR’s agenda and the organisation’s objective of bringing about structural change at multiple levels, including socio-cultural, economic, legal and political areas, as part of its multi-faceted approach to empowering widows. The notion of a movement also points

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<sup>134</sup> This was available on WHR’s website in 2011, however the link to this information is no longer available.

to WHR's activist agenda and its focus on women's rights, and further, its location within the 'women's movement'<sup>135</sup> in Nepal.

I became aware of WHR's position as a leading NGO in this movement through various encounters. For example, when I asked heads of other NGOs during interviews about the women's movement in Nepal, WHR was typically mentioned as a key player. Further, Lily Thapa held a leadership position in a women's alliance—a network of ten women's NGOs that purported to be 'working to strengthen the Nepali women's movement'. During an interview with me, the coordinator of this alliance described the NGO members as 'the ten most prestigious women's organisations in Nepal'. WHR's participation in a 2010 International Peace Day event (which I attended), that was promoted as 'showcasing women's work for peace and development', also demonstrated the organisation's active role in the women's movement. The NGOs at this event all exhibited an activist agenda insofar as their objectives rested on a platform of rights and advocacy in relation to women, although the focus of each organisation varied.<sup>136</sup> This activist agenda was clearly stated on the organisations' posters that were pinned to the walls of their booths and in the printed literature and handouts that I collected. Further, it was also visible on the placards held by NGO staff during the closing 'peace march' at the end of the event. Indeed, it was clear to me that this event was not just a showcase of women's work; it was also a display of women's NGOs involved in the women's movement.<sup>137</sup>

Lily Thapa's status as widow forms a prominent part of the organisation's narrative. Central to WHR's background story is Lily's own experience of becoming widowed, which provided the impetus for starting WHR. Lily's status as widow also adds moral authority to the organisation's ongoing work—as a widow working for the issues of widows, which is highlighted in blogs and on-line articles about widows in Nepal and the work of WHR (for example, see UN Women, 2015). However, at the time of my

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<sup>135</sup> While there is consensus concerning the existence of a women's movement in Nepal, there is much debate surrounding its form, structure, purpose, and goals (see Acharya, 2005; Des Chene, 1997; Rajbhandari, 2009; Tamang, 2009a, 2015). While I have substantial data on the women's movement in Nepal, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore it in depth.

<sup>136</sup> Examples included women with disabilities, *Dalit* women, women who have been trafficked, female journalists, and women and politics.

<sup>137</sup> Tamang (2009a, p. 61) points to three major players within the women's movement: (i) women from mainstream political parties; (ii) women of the NGO sector; and (iii) the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-M—Maoist).

fieldwork, Lily Thapa was the only widow in a managerial role at WHR's head office. Given WHR's focus on improving the status of widows, it surprised me to learn this. The women in managerial positions were all married women, drawn from relatively privileged positions in terms of caste, class, and education. Most were tertiary-educated with strong English speaking and writing skills, attributes that are important for interacting with donors and state officials.<sup>138</sup> Further, married women, described by WHR as 'non-widows', made up the greatest proportion of employees at the head office, comprising eighteen of 35 staff members—the remaining included six men and eleven widows.

Widowed women were employed in a variety of duties, most of them domestic, including cooking lunch for WHR (staff and visitors) and organisations nearby as part of WHR's catering service, and making tailored products and handicrafts to sell at the head office. These activities are run by WHR's Single Women Entrepreneurs' Group (SWEG), which focuses on skill development training for income generating activities for widows, including handicraft and tailoring products, catering services, candles, and solar lanterns. The SWEG brochure describes the group as a 'social enterprise', whose main objective is 'to develop economic independence among vulnerable single women' (WHR, n.d.). According to one widow I interviewed, who features later in this chapter, these roles fitted with her qualifications and education. When I asked if she had aspirations to work in managerial roles at WHR, she noted: 'I am not qualified enough to work in other positions'.

The importance of the notion of 'the Nepali woman' also featured at WHR. While my research with Sangam showed the way in which this notion manifested in the form of women as agents of change, critical to the nation's development and duty-bound to become developed (Enslin, 1998), at WHR, women's role as agents of change was emphasised less. Rather, it was the depiction of 'the Nepali woman'—in particular, the *Hindu* Nepali woman—as victimised and oppressed by patriarchal norms, in need of having her consciousness raised (Tamang, 2002), that was most prominent. This excerpt from WHR's literature exemplifies this kind of portrayal:

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<sup>138</sup> For a critique on the dominance of Hindu, high-caste women in leadership positions in women's NGOs and the women's movement in Nepal see Tamang (2002, 2009a, 2015).

In a society where women are shackled in prejudiced societal values and a rigid patriarchal system, it is anything but obvious for them to lag behind...While this is the situation of women as a whole, it is even tragic to talk about the difficulties a single woman faces throughout her life. Tormented by baseless religious and social norms, she is subjected to a lifelong misery (WHR, 2010b, p. 1).

This image of ‘the widow’ is central to the narrative told by WHR—in the organisation’s literature, in online articles and blogs, and in my interviews with staff members. It was also brought to bear during an encounter I observed between WHR and a European donor organisation that was visiting a project it was funding. As mentioned previously, this image resonates with the image of the ‘third world woman’, a ubiquitous category in mainstream development policies and initiatives. Both images have been criticised, particularly for homogenising women.<sup>139</sup> However, Lily Thapa sees this categorisation as a way to highlight the difficulties common to all widows, thereby differentiating widows from other women in Nepal. As she stated during an interview with me: ‘Women in development tend to be lumped together in one category but women are very diverse...widows face different issues to other women. This is another reason why I started my organisation’. This generalised category of widow plays an important role in a number of WHR’s strategies, particularly its legal and political strategies. In terms of WHR’s rights agenda, creating a generic narrative may be an oversimplification but it is a necessary strategy for engaging in international law and human rights discourse—which construct women in secular, abstract, universalist terms. Abstracting the specificity of widowhood into a generalised narrative is also necessary for engaging with the courts.

### **Pursuing widow’s rights through legal channels**

Lily Thapa suggested in one of our interviews that ‘there is a lot of rhetoric of women’s rights but only on paper—not in reality. It is still very hard for women in Nepal’. Nevertheless, Lily Thapa’s ongoing court action through WHR in an effort to change discriminatory laws against widows is testament to her belief in the power of the judiciary system. She noted in an email to me: ‘we try to open the iron gate by

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<sup>139</sup> It is the grouping of all widows into one category, largely conceived in Hindu terms, which has been at the centre of critiques (see Rajbhandari, 2009; Tamang, 1999).

changing the discriminatory laws [against women] through court with the belief that women will be empowered enough to demand for their rights in future'. WHR's focus on the formal recognition of the rights of widows was apparent during my first meeting with Lily Thapa at the organisation's headquarters in Baluwatar. Lily talked at length about WHR's legal action in relation to expanding widow's rights, pointing to numerous human rights articles and instruments such as the CEDAW and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325<sup>140</sup>. It was immediately clear that WHR was working within the global discourse of rights, and further, that Lily Thapa was highly conversant in the language of human rights, including the numerous human rights instruments. Lily Thapa noted the way in which 'things appear to be good for women on paper—provisions are made however this is only on paper—in reality things are not like this. WHR tests these things in court'.

Lily Thapa spoke proudly about the organisation's litigation efforts, which included: (i) Widows are no longer liable to return the property inherited from the deceased husband after remarrying; (ii) Widows no longer require the consent of their adult sons and unmarried daughters to sell or hand over property ownership; (iii) Widows do not need to reach the age of 35 to inherit their husband's property; (iv) there is no longer government policy to award money to men who marry a widow; and (v) widows no longer need permission from a male family member to obtain a passport.

In order to engage in litigation WHR draws on a range of resources including staff, legal advocates, far-reaching supporters and extensive networks. These form an important part of the support structure necessary for the organisation to pursue rights for widows through the judiciary. As mentioned earlier, many of WHR's staff members are highly educated. For example, the organisation's female legal advocate holds Masters Degrees in Law and Political Science and at the time of fieldwork was studying for her PhD in Law focusing on human rights and widows. Critical to WHR's capacity to engage and sustain ongoing court action are its numerous and wide-ranging connections including 'partners',<sup>141</sup> 'contributors',<sup>142</sup> advocates and

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<sup>140</sup> Adopted in 2000, it was the first resolution on women, peace and security (Peacewomen).

<sup>141</sup> WHR describes partners as 'those organisations providing both economic and technical assistance for some specified project' (email communication with WHR Program Coordinator).

supporters<sup>143</sup>—ranging from large international donor organisations and local Nepali businesses to both Nepali and foreign academics and women’s rights advocates.

The long list of Nepali, foreign, and international guests, delegates, and participants (including myself) who attended WHR’s 2010 International Conference on Widowhood, ‘Widow’s Voices—Empowered’, in June 2010, is testament to the wide network of supporters and advocates of the organisation. There was also a relatively large government presence at the conference including secretaries from various ministries of the Nepal government including the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Law and Justice. Further, the involvement of the first president of Nepal, Dr Ram Baran Yadav, in the conference and WHR’s public acknowledgement of the government’s ongoing support highlights the organisation’s connections with the upper echelons and power brokers within Nepali society. Given that WHR has long been agitating the government for change at the policy level—particularly in regard to legislation pertaining to the rights of widows—these connections are not surprising. Lily Thapa highlighted to me the importance of such connections, noting: ‘in our country where there are more influences from political party [sic], it will not be possible without mobilising them that's why we sensitise them a lot on issues’. At the conclusion of the conference, WHR promulgated its own advocacy tool, ‘The Kathmandu Declaration’, aimed at raising awareness at the government level about the needs of widows.

WHR is well funded, thereby providing it with the necessary economic resources to litigate. Tamang (2003a) notes the way in which the cycle of funding for Kathmandu-based NGOs is ‘circular and self-referential’, based on ‘an established funding track record’. Tamang (2003a) suggests that the ‘continuous transfer of resources to these ‘proven’ organisations’ is legitimised by the fact that they are already the recipients of funds. Here we see the importance of a proven funding track record to an NGO’s financial resources, which in turn impacts on an organisation’s capacity to litigate. As a ‘repeat player’ in terms of both litigation and receiving financial backing, WHR has the capacity to pursue single women’s rights causes through the courts.

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<sup>142</sup> Contributors are described as ‘those organisations or individuals specially providing support to our Opportunity Fund’, which provides young widows and the children of widows with education scholarships (email communication with WHR Program Coordinator).

<sup>143</sup> These include foreigners and Nepali female academics and professionals.

WHR mobilises its doctrine of anti-discrimination and improved status of widows through litigation and it also employs a range of other strategies to support this legal action and to bring about changes in attitudes towards widows. These strategies include advocacy, lobbying the government and awareness campaigns through newspaper and magazine articles, books, pamphlets, and newsletters, online forums and focus group discussions. For example, WHR's 'Red Color Movement' (*Rato Rang Abhiyan*) is a national campaign aimed at raising awareness of the discrimination of widows, particularly in public where a widow's status is highly visible by her lack of red clothing, red jewellery and red vermilion powder in her parted hair. Through the slogan, 'Color is a birth-right', WHR encourages widows to wear red with the belief that it will offer them protection from abuse, particularly in public. Since 2001 WHR has conducted national workshops aimed at 'institutionalising' the concerns and issues of widows into the state agenda (WHR, 2010, p. 9). Government officials and media representatives attend these events, thereby significantly increasing the visibility of WHR and the situation of widows in Nepal. To date, the issues of widows have been incorporated in the government's national development plans, including the 10th Five Year Plan (2002-2007) and 3-year Interim Plan (2008-2010) (WHR, 2016c).

In addition to its legal, political and advocacy strategies, WHR implements a range of programs—known as 'capacity building programs'—aimed at enabling widows to access rights. The programs include legal awareness and skills training, which involve tutoring women in issues related to access to justice and training of para-legal volunteers and para-counsellors. Other programs include a savings and credit program known as *Aadhar* (support) and a scholarship program for the education of children of widows and for widows to pursue tertiary education. *Raahat* (relief) is a program that provides support for widows affected by the decade-long civil war and SWEG (Single Women Entrepreneurs' Group) provides training and income generating activities, as mentioned earlier. I now turn to an ethnographic account of a skills and training program that I attended at WHR's central office. This account illustrates a program in practice and highlights key features of WHR's strategy to empower widows.

## Skills identification program: ‘transforming’ widows

During an interview with Lily Thapa I was given an impromptu invitation to attend a program activity that was taking place that day for young widows at the central office. It was held in a large room on the top storey that was brightly lit due to the numerous windows. The walls were covered with WHR slogans related to various campaigns (e.g. ‘Color is a birth right’), maps outlining its reach, and photos of WHR members engaged in program activities. The activity, known as Skills Identification Program, formed part of a larger program for 20 young widows who had come to Kathmandu from far-eastern Nepal for one month. This was the first visit to the nation’s capital for many of the participants. The women stayed at WHR in *Chhahari*<sup>144</sup>, a house set up to temporarily accommodate widows. It functions as both a ‘safe haven’ for widows, providing ‘shelter, counselling and healing services, skill development trainings, psycho-social and legal services and rehabilitation and reconciliation’, and offers accommodation for widows engaged in training (WHR, 2016b). Lily Thapa outlined the criteria for participation in the overall program and its aims:

Most of them are conflict-affected but some of them, you know, are not conflict-affected but they are more vulnerable. So the groups in the districts have made the selection on the basis of the criteria we have set up. They must be young, below 35, very vulnerable, no means of income, no choice of income, no jobs, very vulnerable. They will be here for one whole month. We can do those trainings on their own districts also but we wanted to bring them here, out from the house. For the whole month they will be sensitised on many things...The counselling, the legal, the lawyers, they will be have exposure visits in many places in Kathmandu. Visiting government groups...many things. You know we wanted to just transform them.

The skills identification program aimed to help the women identify a skill that would enable them to start up their own business, as Lily stated: ‘today we are going to do the need identification so we can work out which training they will fit in. So training will be divided into groups. Some take the interest to get the driving [taxi/chauffeur], some the beauty parlour, some tailoring, others cooking’. After providing the skills

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<sup>144</sup> *Chhahari* refers to ‘the shade of the tree where weary travellers can re-energise and continue with their journey’ (WHR, 2016a).

training over the coming weeks, WHR would present each woman with NRs. 1.5lakh<sup>145</sup> to start a business. The women were divided into small groups to discuss local resources, market demand and the training required. Following the small group discussion each woman stood up and talked about her ideas and plans to the whole group while a WHR staff member wrote key points on a large white board.

Afterwards, Lily Thapa said to the group, 'you don't have the resources, in terms of money, but you have the motivation and a market'. Lily talked with the young women about their goals and their limitations. She said that WHR can skill them and provide small loans, with interest, noting: 'you have to take a risk'. The women then divided into groups to write up what they would do once they were skilled. A WHR staff member sat in the middle of each group, writing the details on large sheets of coloured paper. I sat with eight women who chose tailoring. There was a feeling of excitement in the room as women discussed their plans for the future. The woman next to me said that if she could take a large loan she would open her own business, otherwise she would use the skill and work for someone else.

The skills identification program provided me with a rare opportunity to meet widows from outside of Kathmandu. However, the insights that emerged were shaped by the context (sitting in a seminar room) and offered only a glimpse of the workings of these rural-based groups and the lives of participants. In addition, the program was highly structured, leaving virtually no time to talk with women, let alone build rapport. Nevertheless, my observations of the program were revealing of a highly participatory process and a good rapport between head office staff and widows from district groups. Further, the program enabled insights into how WHR works to empower widows, and in turn, how it conceives of the notion.

The program focused on empowering women economically, through skills training and entrepreneurial activities and access to capital through a loan. It also focused on empowerment in terms of a woman's sense of her self, insofar as envisioning the kinds of change that paid work would bring could improve her self-esteem and increase her confidence. Given that the women participating in the program were

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<sup>145</sup> One *lakh* is equivalent to NRs. 100,000.

without significant means and little or no employment opportunities in the remote region in which they resided, these were regarded by WHR as critical to bringing about positive changes to the women's lives. Further, Lily Thapa's comments about the overall program are revealing of key aspects in WHR's approach. Empowering widows involves bringing women out of the house, providing them with counselling and 'sensitising' them on a range of issues, including legal rights, in an effort to 'transform them'. Notably, the notion of transformation—as an open-ended process of social transformation and in terms of the subjective transformation of individual women—is critical to feminist notions of empowerment (see Batliwala, 1994; Kabeer, 1999; Leve, 2007).

In the next section my focus shifts to consider widows' understandings and experiences of empowerment. Articulating widows' experiences is necessary to understand the rationale for WHR's goals and strategies but it is also important for bringing to the fore the diverse experiences of widowhood, including the constraints and opportunities individual widows face in realising these goals. By drawing on women's own accounts, I seek to provide insights into what empowerment might mean for them.

### **Empowerment and experiences of widowhood**

Earlier I touched on the issues related to widows in Nepal, highlighting the discrimination and stigma attached to this status through Lily Thapa's experience of becoming widowed. Here, I build on this discussion, drawing particularly on interviews conducted with four widows working at WHR. While all widows are expected to partake in particular mourning rituals, there are differences based on caste, ethnicity and religion (Uprety & Adhikary, 2009, p. 248). For example, certain foods are forbidden only to high-caste widows, including 'foods classified as "hot" and generative of passion (*tamas*)' (Cameron, 1998, p. 149). While low caste widows are required to wear white clothing for a month, high-caste widows are expected to wear white for a year (Cameron, 1998, p. 150). Further, untouchable widows can remarry relatively easily with few social restrictions, whereas it is unacceptable for those belonging to the high-caste (Cameron, 1998, p. 150). However, the individual

experience of becoming widowed is deeply personal, which is brought to bear in the stories that follow. The narratives also highlight the significance of a woman's positioning at the time of her husband's death on the lived experience of widowhood—particularly in terms of caste, class (especially economic position), geographical location (urban/rural), her status within the family, and relations with her in-laws. Thus, while there are shared experiences, for example the disdain and rejection all widows face upon losing their husband, the severity of the experience is circumscribed by how a woman is placed when her husband dies.

I begin with Anjali's narrative, which highlights the behaviour expected of high-caste women upon becoming widowed. This is followed by the story of Upasana, who did not follow this expected path. Next we see in Laxmi's story the devastating consequences of ostracism by her in-laws and her ongoing struggles. Lastly, Jamuna's narrative highlights the experience of widowhood from a Kathmandu-based Newar perspective. The section concludes by considering the narratives in terms of empowerment, highlighting the changes the women have enacted in their lives, particularly as a result of their involvement with WHR, but also factors that constrain women to act. The organisation granted me permission to conduct these interviews in the meeting room of the head office before the working day began. Each of the women worked in WHR's Single Women Entrepreneur's Group (SWEG), a program that I outlined earlier. I was particularly appreciative of these women agreeing to meet me, given the time constraints they faced as they single-handedly managed work, children, home, and, in some cases, also study.

### **Anjali's story: 'You have to fight with everything that comes your way'**

Anjali, a Bahun woman, had been widowed for ten years. She was seventeen years old when her husband died, aged 22. They had been married for two years, had a six-month-old daughter and were living in a village in an Eastern District close to Kathmandu. Anjali was fifteen and studying Class 8 when she entered into an arranged marriage with her husband. She soon dropped out of school as she found it difficult to manage both her studies and the household chores. Her husband was working as a security guard the night he died. The post-mortem could not explain the

cause of death. Anjali was not allowed to see the body and she still lives with the pain of not knowing what happened to her husband. While trying to cope with the shock of suddenly losing her husband, Anjali engaged in the mourning rituals for widows, as she explained:

After my husband's death I was occupied with different rituals for a year and was in white dress. I was looked down upon by the villagers then. Plus, I had a hard time due to financial problems...Being an elder daughter-in-law, I had many responsibilities on me. I was so depressed. I could not manage things properly...I was not supposed to eat anywhere and was not allowed to drink the water touched by others. I had to go and fetch water for myself. Sometimes, I used to eat once only. I could not visit my [maternal] relatives. I used to hear about my friends, who were still enjoying their jolly days and were playing around. In contrast, I was restricted with rituals and had so many responsibilities.

In addition to these restrictions and requirements, Anjali was also blamed for her husband's death:

It is within our tradition that when a husband dies the people or society blames the wife. I was blamed, too. My daughter was born on a Tuesday and Tuesday is considered a bad day for birth. Even my daughter was blamed for her father's death. My parents-in-law were not aware of his drinking habit. When they discovered his drinking habit, they considered me the cause for his drinking. Moreover, the society also looked down upon on me and considered me an evil star.

After completing a year of mourning, Anjali went back to her *maiti* (home of her birth and childhood) in a nearby village to live with her parents and attend school, where she passed her School Leaving Certificate (Class 10) exam. It was at this time that she heard about WHR. She started attending programs organised by the local WHR office and then moved to Kathmandu where she volunteered for a year at WHR's head office before being appointed as staff. She described her role at the organisation:

I am involved in the kitchen. I am a staff of the training centre...The organisation invites single women from various districts of the country. Such **trainings** are aimed to enhance skills of single women. During such training programs it's my

responsibility to manage food for the trainees. During training programs I stay in the organisation itself and prepare food for a group of 30-35 women. When no trainings are going on, I deliver **lunch** to different organisations in the area.

I asked Anjali if joining WHR was a turning point for her. She replied:

Yes, after I joined WHR I met other single women who went through similar circumstances in their villages. I then realised I was not the only one to suffer. I heard similar kind of stories from others, which helped to regain my confidence level. That's why I now laugh at others comments. But soon after my husband's death, I used to cry if anyone said anything. Now, I am also aware of my rights and I regained my confidence...Nowadays, I do not react to people's comments. I remember those days, where I had to fight in each step of life.

Throughout her struggles Anjali did not ask for anything from her in-laws, as she explained:

My husband was not rich. He did not have much. I did not ask for his property after his death. The villagers used to talk to me that my father-in-law was not in favour of giving me anything...Though I was abused, I did not say anything to my in-laws. I struggled myself and came to Kathmandu. Now, I am financially strong and I am able to educate my child. This made them realise about their ill behaviour on me...My father-in-law handed over his property to me and his younger son...Now, I also support my in-laws financially when they are in need of money. Maybe this is the reason they include me into decision-making.

Anjali talked stoically about the trajectory of her life. She carried out the mourning rituals expected of widows and experienced difficulties as a result of becoming widowed, including being blamed for her husband's death. Anjali's story resonated, to some degree, with those articulated by Upasana and Laxmi. All three women were young and living in rural Nepal at the time of their husbands' deaths and each of them experienced difficulties, including discrimination and marginalisation. However, there was a distinguishing feature—Upasana and Laxmi were widowed as a result of the decade-long civil conflict (1996-2006) between the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) and Nepali state forces. They were still visibly traumatised by the violent

circumstances of their husbands' deaths, both of whom were murdered in near proximity to them. I begin with Upasana's narrative, which, in contrast with Anjali's experience, is a story of non-conformity.

**Upasana's story: 'Nowadays, I earn for myself and will wear and eat whatever I want to'**

It had been eight years since the night Upasana's husband was dragged out of bed, beaten and killed by Maoists while Upasana and her young sons—then aged eight and three years—were locked in a separate room, within earshot. The trauma Upasana continued to experience was palpable throughout the interview. Upasana's husband was a wage labourer in the brick kilns and the family lived in the house they owned in Far West Nepal. One month after the murder, Upasana and the boys were involved in an accident. Her younger son sustained serious injuries to his head and leg. At the time of our interview, at age eleven, he could not read or write properly, had trouble walking and required ongoing medical treatment for his leg.<sup>146</sup> The villagers blamed Upasana for the accident and her husband's death. Upasana noted: 'They called me an inauspicious woman. I used to cry all the time. I understand what sorrow means. I am so habituated with the blames of people that nowadays, I do not feel anything'. Upasana elaborated on her experience:

I did not face any difficulties from my husband's family, as they were not alive. But the neighbours and society did not treat me good. This happens to all widows in our country. I was considered inauspicious and I was forbidden to attend auspicious occasions [such as religious ceremonies]. My sons were blamed for their father's death by their friends in school... This is why I decided to shift to Kathmandu. Here they do not have problems going to school.

Upasana, a Bahun woman, did not follow all of the rules high-caste widows are subject to in the first year after their husband's death, as she noted, 'In Nepal, widows

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<sup>146</sup> Upasana sold her house to pay for an operation to put a steel plate in his leg, however it was unsuccessful and required more surgery. Towards the end of the fieldwork period WHR agreed to pay for Upasana's son's surgery. I was able to assist Upasana in gaining access to the children's rehabilitation centre that was situated close to our house in Patan through a foreign volunteer physiotherapist I had befriended early in the fieldwork.

usually do not wear any other colours except white. I wore pink *kurta* in the village'. By wearing pink Upasana subverted the requirement of high-caste widows to wear white during the year long mourning period. Nevertheless, it would have been more controversial for Upasana to wear red, which has significant meaning in Nepal. Cameron (1998, p. 236) notes the way in which it 'symbolises female fertility through its association with the onset of menstruation and blood'. Red is also the bride's wedding colour—her wedding garments, jewellery and the vermilion powder put in the part of her hair by the groom are red (Cameron, 1998, p. 237). According to Hindu ideology, red is the colour of auspiciousness and only married women whose husbands are still alive should wear red (Kondos, 2004, p. 4).

Upasana also contravened another stipulation required of widows: 'I did not bother to listen to the villagers. I stayed at my parents' place'. During the first year of mourning, a widow's father and brothers should never see her in the plain white clothes of widowhood because, as Bennett (1983, p. 245) notes, the *maiti* 'should never become the permanent home of an adult woman'.<sup>147</sup> Short visits are cherished, however prolonged or permanent stays can cause 'serious structural problems and deep mutual resentment', particularly by her brothers' wives (Bennett, 1983: 245). However, with no in-laws alive and a seriously injured son, Upasana and her sons stayed with her parents before moving to Kathmandu three years after her husband's death. Here, Upasana earned money house cleaning. She then found work at an NGO before securing employment with WHR, where she had been working for almost one year in a similar capacity to Anjali. She noted:

I help in the kitchen and I cook. I also supply lunch to other organisations...I also look after the cleanliness and make sure everything is arranged properly. It is my duty to make sure each room in the organisation is supplied with drinking water.

I asked Upasana, 'Do you, as a single woman, have many constraints put upon you by society? Are you feeling more confident to wear red, to wear red *tika*<sup>148</sup>? Upasana

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<sup>147</sup> At the end of the mourning period the widow's natal family gives her a set of clothes (they must not be red) to put on when she takes off her white clothes of mourning (Bennett, 1983, p. 149).

<sup>148</sup> *Tika* is an auspicious forehead mark that is made up of a mixture of yoghurt, coloured powder, and uncooked rice. Bennett (1983, p. 141) notes: 'The giving of *tika* involves a whole complex of ritual

replied: ‘Nowadays, I do not care what people say if I put on a *tika* or put on red clothes. I can freely do what I want to and even explain [to] the society of my desires and wants. I earn for myself and will wear and eat whatever I want to’. Upasana’s outlook on her status of widow has been influenced by her involvement with WHR, as she commented:

The organisation is supportive. They are always encouraging me to express my feelings and do what I feel like...I feel confident now. Before, I used to cry all the time and could not even express myself. I was scared to see a group of people too. Even my children were going through psychological trauma. But the programs that are organised by the organisation are helping them to overcome it.

While Upasana was feeling positive about her life, her counterpart, Laxmi, was still struggling with her circumstances.

### **Laxmi’s story: ‘My job is a medium to fight against my loneliness’**

Laxmi was a serious woman whose pain was etched on her face. During the interview she broke down in tears as she talked about her husband’s death, her son, and the trauma she was still experiencing eight years after becoming widowed. It was upsetting listening to Laxmi’s story and witnessing her distress. I suggested we stop the interview, emphasising: ‘I do not want to traumatise you more’. However, Laxmi wanted to continue telling her story, noting: ‘No, it’s a big relief when you get to share your things with others’.

Laxmi, a Chhetri woman, was married at seventeen to a man of the same caste. Four years later the Maoists killed her husband in their home, which they shared with their young son in a joint-family situation in Western Nepal. Threatened by the Maoists, the family moved to Kathmandu. However, the living situation became untenable, as Laxmi noted:

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actions, each of which conveys a message about the status relationship between the giver and the receiver’.

After his death, my in-laws blamed me for everything. It's within our **Nepali culture** that people always have **negative** feelings for widows. This happened to me as well. They did not treat me good...But my sisters-in-law were impossible. It was a **torture** living with them. They called me inauspicious.

The difficulties Laxmi experienced with her in-laws are not uncommon. After marriage, a woman's in-laws are responsible for supporting her, although as is widely attested by widows, following the death of the husband this responsibility can be resented and problems ensue. In some cases, this results in a widow separating from her in-laws, as Laxmi did:

I decided to get separated and live on my own...my in-laws did not allow my son to follow me. Moreover, I was not in a good financial condition to support for his living. I do not feel safe myself and how can I look after my son?

I asked Laxmi if she received anything from her in-laws. She replied: 'Yes, they have given me a small fraction of land in the village along the river bed. I did not force them for property, neither had I demanded for anything. I accepted whatever I was given'. Nevertheless, Laxmi will not return to the village because of the impact of her husband's murder. She commented: 'I am terrified by the incident. After that incident, I always get the **negative** feelings. Nowadays, I have stopped trusting people. I cannot trust anyone'. Laxmi became visibly upset as the conversation turned to her son. It was apparent that this was still a great source of pain for her:

I lost my self-confidence after the incident [her husband's death]...There is something that is **torturing** me all the time...My son is with my in-laws now and he was two-years-old when I left him. This is another **torture** that I am going through now. Now, I do not have a good financial condition. It's difficult for me to look after my son. Our long distance relationship is a mental **torture** for me. I have a dream to do something and be financially strong to bring back my son with me.

Nevertheless, since Laxmi began working at WHR five years ago her self-confidence had improved: 'I had lost self-confidence. I learnt a lot from the organisation and gained experience. The organisation also has enhanced my capacity as well'. Like the other widows employed at WHR, Laxmi was involved with SWEG working as a cook

to feed the staff of WHR and supply lunch to other organisations. She had participated in a number of programs for single women, noting: ‘These workshops teach you to move ahead in life. These are meant to enhance your **skills**. They help develop **self-confidence** in you’. Laxmi had friends working at WHR however she was reluctant to open up to them, fearing stigma. She stated: ‘I cannot discuss my personal life in the office. Otherwise, they will develop negative attitude towards me. So, I do not discuss it’. The interview concluded with Laxmi’s closing remarks about her life now: ‘I was a family person. But now I am apart from my family and my son. So, I feel very lonely and I am filled with negative thoughts’. I asked her, ‘Is there a way WHR can support you and lift your spirits?’ Laxmi responded:

I feel better when I am in the organisation. But I feel lonely as soon as I enter my house. I get negative feelings as soon as I see my neighbours and I feel **tortured**. Now, I have a job. My job is a medium to fight against my loneliness.

At the end of the interview I arranged a time to meet with Laxmi outside of the organisation. There were a number of reasons for this. Despite Laxmi’s assurance that she was comfortable to continue with the interview, I felt responsible for her distress and uneasy about leaving her in an emotionally vulnerable state to begin her working day. Nevertheless, further meetings never eventuated due to the difficulty in setting a time that suited us both (my caring responsibilities and Laxmi’s work commitments).

Laxmi was not the only widow to speak of the relief she felt from sharing her experiences. Indeed, the sharing of pain and grief amongst a small group of widows on a weekly basis back in 1992 shaped the beginnings of what would formally become WHR in 1994. Moreover, widow’s narratives and the sharing of stories remains a core component of the organisation’s programs. Women outside of the context of WHR also articulated to me the benefits of sharing stories. For example, Sumitra, a *Dalit* woman, spoke of this in relation to the *Dalit* women she worked with in her role as Project Officer for a *Dalit* women’s organisation. She stated:

I feel everyone is suffering from violence in one way or the other. When we talk about empowerment and violence, then people start sharing things. We listen to them and they feel relieved...These women had a feeling that the fight between

husband and wife is not supposed to be shared with outsiders. If their in-laws abuse them, they are not supposed to discuss these matters. But when we go in groups to them, we not only hear their stories but also share our things. When they tell their story, they feel relieved and they have a group in their support. This is helping them to share their stories and they are developing a habit of expressing their oppression.

I now turn to the story of Jamuna, who, in contrast to Laxmi, was a confident 29-year-old Newar woman of mid-caste status from Kathmandu.

### **Jamuna's story: 'I will to earn for myself and not be dependent on a man'**

Jamuna married young and had her daughter at age seventeen. She was 21-years-old when her husband died eight years ago in a motorcycle accident. While her husband was alive she had a good relationship with her husband's family—two brothers and three sisters (his parents were deceased). However, the family blamed Jamuna for the accident, particularly one of her sisters-in-law, who treated Jamuna badly. For example, the sister-in-law would throw out water if Jamuna touched it or scold Jamuna for speaking to her husband. Soon after the death of Jamuna's husband, the rumour that she was seeing other men was rife in the community. The legal provisions on inheritance required that a widow be chaste to her dead husband in order to qualify for inheriting his property (Pradhan Malla, 2010, pp. 4-5). Spreading such rumours was a strategy often used by a widow's in-laws to prevent her from getting the property. Even eight years on, Jamuna's in-laws still regularly commented that she would find another husband. Jamuna was open to the prospect, stating in the interview, 'Okay, if he is a good man. But even if I remarry, I will earn for myself and not be dependent on a man'.

Jamuna recounted how insecure she felt during the period following her husband's death and the pressure she felt from society and family. She wore white for a year, during which she felt acutely visible and judged in public. She commented: 'For twelve days I was not allowed to comb my hair and for one year I was not allowed to tie it. I must have looked like a beggar'. After thirteen days she did not want to wear white clothes but was pressured by her in-laws to do so. At the end of that year her

mother came with a red sari and red *tika*. At the time of the interview there was still an issue with her in-laws regarding the house. Jamuna had already missed out on any money from the land they sold following her husband's death. She said, 'I was young and had no idea about what was happening'. Jamuna and her daughter now lived in the house but in a separate room that has been equipped with a kitchen, bathroom and bedroom. Jamuna noted, 'Since we are in the same house I get invited to *puja*. I go with a happy face. I won't be showing tears to them'.

Six years ago Jamuna was listening to the radio when she heard an interview with Lily Thapa. She contacted the organisation and secured a position sewing clothes in SWEG, where she worked as a leader amongst fifteen widows. She felt very confident and efficient in her work. I asked Jamuna about the possibility of changing her role in the organisation. She responded, 'I am not qualified enough to work in other positions. I have not passed my certificate level. But I am smart. People think that I am more qualified than I am, that's how I come across'. She was currently taking night classes to learn English and computer training. She talked about the way in which money was a key factor in her decisions, particularly in relation to her daughter, who she hoped to send to the United States for study via a scholarship. Jamuna was determined that her daughter would not experience the difficulties she herself had gone through. However, she also articulated the way in which her life was relatively good now, pointing to a field trip in which she had accompanied Lily Thapa to a rural area where she met other widows. She noted, 'compared to them, I am doing well'.

### **Narratives of empowerment**

At the end of the interview with Jamuna I asked, 'do you feel empowered'? She smiled and said, 'I am an example of an empowered woman. I do not rely on anyone. I live for myself and for my daughter. I will not cry anymore. I am confident now. This is empowerment'. While I did not directly ask the other widows about empowerment, they spoke about forms of change in their lives that they valued. All of the women spoke of similar changes they had experienced since becoming involved with WHR, including the realisation that they were not alone in their experiences of

widowhood. An awareness of this collective experience had a transformative impact on their lives. It was key to setting them on a different path where they proceeded to develop self-confidence and the ability to express their thoughts and desires, although to varying degrees. We see in their stories the way in which the acknowledgement of pain opened up the possibilities for healing and the role of WHR in assisting with this process, as Laxmi commented: the ‘workshops teach you to move ahead in life’.

On a practical level, WHR was instrumental to the women acquiring new skills. The women articulated the importance of being financially strong and independent, thereby enabling them to educate their children. For Anjali, this included the capacity to financially support her in-laws, which highlights a significant change—particularly in light of the way in which married women are typically financially dependent on others, be it their husbands and/or in-laws. Anjali was also aware of her rights, which she learned upon joining WHR, although notably, she was the only woman who talked about rights. Upasana spoke of the way in which economic independence gave her the freedom to make choices, as she stated, ‘I can freely do what I want’—even if it transgressed social norms. This included choosing what to wear and eat and voicing her ‘desires and wants’.

For Laxmi, however, WHR provided more than skills and an income. It was a place of comfort, where she could immerse herself in her work, be in the company of others and alleviate her loneliness. Further, Laxmi was still developing self-confidence. The trauma of her husband’s murder, the breakdown in relations with her in-laws and the subsequent estrangement from her son continued to impact on her everyday life and shape how she viewed new possibilities. Thus, while she held aspirations for many of the changes the other women spoke about, particularly the capacity to be able to look after her son, these possibilities were viewed through the prism of her life trajectory and the strained relations with her in-laws. As Kabeer (1999, p. 460) notes, processes of empowerment are shaped by context and grounded in the everyday realities of women’s lives.

## **Conclusion**

By using the framework of international law and the emergent global discourse on human rights and engaging in litigation in order for the rights of widows to be formalised, WHR has brought the issues of widows into the national mainstream. In turn, this has resulted in influencing changes (albeit slowly) to attitudes and beliefs within society. Lily Thapa's own positioning and WHR's wide-ranging legal advocates, supporters and connections provide the resources necessary for the organisation to challenge discriminatory laws relating to widows. Nevertheless, as Lily Thapa has emphasised, success at the legal level does not ensure the realisation of rights in practice. As she stated in an email to me: 'there are more gaps in implementing what is on paper...because women know little about the policies and because of gender roles'. Further, as Lily Thapa suggests, engaging with the courts and changing discriminatory laws against women is akin to opening an 'iron gate'. It is just the first step in the quest for gender justice for the widows of Nepal.

The widows' narratives highlight the way in which the women's scope to make and implement change was both constrained and enabled by their individual positionings. The positive changes the women talked about resonate with the aims of WHR's skills identification program, highlighted earlier. The women articulated the importance of confidence, freedom to choose, independence, voice, skills, employment and financial security to their lives, themes that featured in the skills identification program. While Anjali mentioned rights in connection with gaining self-confidence, the women did not speak about changes and possibilities in terms of the autonomous, 'rights-bearing individual' that features in legal and political claims for gender justice. Rather, these were understood in terms of their relational status with others, specifically their children.

From the perspective of WHR empowerment involves legal action to change laws and policies that discriminate against widows, advocacy to change societal beliefs in order to improve the status of widows as a collective group. Further, empowerment involves implementing programs for widows to increase self-confidence and self-esteem, develop new skills, open up income-generating possibilities and create an awareness of widows' rights. Empowerment is also understood as an individual experience, wherein the positive changes of the collective will open up opportunities for widows to bring about changes in their own lives. Empowerment is thus conceived as both a

means to uplift widows, and an end unto itself. Widows' narratives highlight diverse experiences of empowerment that are contextual and situational, and shaped by a woman's positionings, revealing empowerment as a set of processes rather than a fixed destination than can be reached.

## **Thesis conclusion**

Empowerment is one of the most widely used terms in the global development discourse on women. In international development, women's empowerment has become akin to a 'magic bullet' for a range of development goals, including poverty alleviation and economic development (Batliwala, 2010; Cornwall, 2014). The ubiquity of the term in framing the goals and strategies of women's development organisations in Nepal highlights the currency of the word in this context. A central aim of this thesis has been to explore what is being done in the name of women's empowerment through the lens of two women's NGOs operating in Kathmandu—Sangam and WHR. In both organisations, empowerment features as an important concept, framing the stated objectives and interventions of each group. In seeking to understand the ways in which women involved with these organisations imagine and experience empowerment I focused an ethnographic lens on how these objectives are brought to bear in practice, in specific development encounters and in the social spaces where women work and live. The insights that have emerged are far from straightforward, although this on serves to highlight the inherent complexity of the term empowerment and the complicated terrain of development. Moreover, my study reveals the complex realities of women's everyday lives as they negotiate between competing discourses, norms, and values.

As I have shown in the thesis, there are marked differences between Sangam and WHR, in terms of size, intention, motivation and the social contexts in which they operate. In particular, the women who are targeted as 'beneficiaries', as well as those who work within the organisations, differ according to their positioning within Nepali society. Sangam is a small volunteer NGO that focuses on the nutrition and wellbeing of young children, and pre- and post-natal women in various locations across Kathmandu. Married mothers are central to the group, constituting the staff and volunteers as well as the target audience of Sangam's nutrition program. By contrast, WHR is a large NGO that operates in every region of Nepal for the advancement of the rights of widows through an activist agenda. It is well known in Nepal and South Asia and has an international reach. Described by its Director as a 'movement' rather than an organisation, WHR is a key player in the women's movement in Nepal.

In this context, both organisations understand and implement the notion of empowerment in terms of different social categories of women—as married mothers (Sangam) or widows (WHR). These categories shape program aims and objectives. At Sangam, women’s empowerment is perceived largely in instrumental terms, as a solution to realising program objectives of nutrition and wellbeing by shaping women into ‘good mothers’. Empowerment is also conceived of as a goal, in terms, particularly, of improving women’s general social and economic status. Overtly challenging gendered power hierarchies or structural inequalities is not part of Sangam’s agenda. By contrast, empowerment in the context of WHR involves challenging the dominant gender ideology in an effort to improve the social, economic, legal and political status of widows. The notion of empowerment is key to a multi-faceted strategy aimed at changing discriminatory laws and societal beliefs through legal mobilisation and advocacy and enacting change at the level of individual widows through capacity building programs.

WHR’s multi-pronged strategy reflects key elements identified in the feminist literature as critical to women’s empowerment, particularly the emphasis on structural transformation (see Batliwala, 2010; Cornwall, 2014; Kabeer, 1999). In comparison, Sangam recognises its limited capacity to change structures that disempower women. Nevertheless, women’s narratives of empowerment explored in the thesis, from those women who work in the organisation as well as those who benefit from the programs available at Sangam, revealed the ways in which involvement with Sangam did actually challenge if not change gendered hierarchies within the home and in interpersonal relationships. While this may not correlate with the transformative change sometimes envisaged by feminist scholars and advocates of women’s empowerment, it is significant nonetheless, and could, arguably, lead to changes in these structures and practices over time. Further, while WHR is bringing about significant transformation at the legal and political levels by foregrounding widows’ issues in mainstream agendas, and, in turn, influencing societal attitudes and beliefs, there is still a long way to go for widows to fully realise these changes—individually or as a collective.

Scholarship on women’s empowerment illustrates the way in which the notion is inherently complex; interpretations of the term are many and varied, both

operationally and analytically, measuring empowerment is difficult and defining it remains elusive. While the complexity of the term is acknowledged, the dominant narrative of women's empowerment in international development typically posits empowerment as a destination complete with a set of aims, targets and measurable indicators. Getting to the goal of empowerment is often assumed to be quite straightforward: spurred on with an injection of money, women will gain the confidence and capacity to exert greater control over their lives, thereby enabling them to pull themselves out of poverty along with their families and, potentially, communities (Cornwall, 2014). This notion of empowerment resonates with development's linear, results-focused approach and reflects the ideals of neo-liberalism of the autonomous, self-actualising entrepreneur, able to invest wisely and look after their own affairs (Leve, 2001).

The complexity and ambiguity of definitions of and assumptions about empowerment were evident in my research with both Sangam and WHR, to the extent that empowerment was understood and utilised in multiple ways—as a destination, a goal with measurable targets, and as a means to reach this goal. For individual women, understandings and experiences of empowerment were multiple, diverse and often contradictory. The central narrative of the process of empowerment was also clearly identifiable in the contexts of Sangam and WHR. In particular, gaining confidence and the ability to earn money almost always featured in women's narratives of empowerment, as key to their understanding of the term and central to their experiences of it. Financial security and confidence were seen as critical to opening up opportunities for women to bring about changes in their lives. However, as this thesis has demonstrated, the reality is far more complicated than this narrative of empowerment suggests: it does not account for the complexity of women's lives or the constraining factors that have a significant impact on a woman's ability to act, make choices or take up financial or other opportunities. This became clear through the ethnographic exploration of the two organisations where we saw women travelling along diverse paths in their own and/or collective journeys of empowerment. In the process, women negotiated their way through a variety of different discourses, including local discourses of gender and development, global ones based on empowerment, and notions of 'woman', including the 'good woman' and 'the Nepali woman'. The multiple and dynamic ways in which women were positioned were

critical in these negotiations. As result, women's understandings and experiences of empowerment were diverse, contingent and situational, dependent on context and their position in that context at any given time.

In light of the many voices evident here in this thesis, there are a number of points I wish to make in order to conclude my thesis. First, when we either define empowerment too narrowly, or do not define it all—assuming its meaning and impact—we elide the social, political and economic complexity of the lived experience of women in urban Nepal and reduce the concept to a set of measurable goals and indicators. Further, if we conceive of empowerment in terms of success or failure in relation to these indicators, we overlook the changes that women themselves value in the 'path' to empowerment through development. The notions of and paths to empowerment that I have identified through women actively involved in development practice in this thesis are multiple, laden with different meanings for different women, as well as organisations, and do not fully resonate with the mainstream development discourses typically associated with empowerment. For many women who offered me an insight into their lives, seemingly small changes were highly valued and had a significant impact on their lives and wellbeing.

In conclusion, then, I argue that in order to formulate development programs that will bring about change that can have a positive impact on women's lives in terms that are meaningful to them, it is critical to understand the contexts in which women are situated and women's multiple and diverse positionings within those contexts. As this thesis has highlighted, women are not a homogenous category, either conceptually or in Nepal. Focusing on women's lived experience enables an understanding of what works for women and anthropology is well placed to reveal this in ways that can meaningfully engage with development discourse.

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