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Annapurna's Porters: Labor Conditions and the Factors that Shape Them

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Annapurna's Porters: Labor Conditions and the Factors that Shape Them

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South Asia, Nepal, Kathmandu, Pokhara and Mustang
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Nepal: Development and Social Change, SIT Study Abroad

Spring 2016

Abstract

This project sought to determine what the labor conditions of porters working in Annapurna are and the factors both immutable and human-influenced that shape them. To do so, I interviewed government bodies, national and regional trekking organizations, unions, agencies, guides and porters to ascertain what issues a broad term such as "labor conditions" encompasses. Participants highlighted the importance of insurance, wages, weight carried, equipment, access to employment, job training and topography as important factors. I will argue that large advocacy organizations shape these issues, and therefore the porter market, at a national level. Discrepancies in employment experiences between porters are therefore only somewhat shaped by region; more influential are the employers, who apply, ignore, or distort nationally set labor standards. While this paper will focus on large organizations, their policies, and the application of those policies by agencies, other "objective" factors such as topography and the new road from Pokhara to Jomsom and Muktinath will be examined as well.

Key Words:
labor conditions, trekking, Annapurna, unions, collective bargaining, organizing

Dedication

For my parents, Ted and Deborah.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the help provided to me by all of the interview participants. Specifically, I would like to thank the men and women who work as porters who took time out of their days and rest breaks to discuss their jobs with me, and who were so patient with my Nepali.

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Introduction

Porters in Annapurna, like their counterparts who carry loads in popular tourist destinations across the globe, are situated at the bottom of an economic hierarchy that includes tourists, guides and trekking agencies. While the Sherpa people of Nepal's Khumbu valley have received considerable attention from academics and journalists alike (Miller 1965, Von Fuher-Haimendorf 1972, Brower 1991, Reid 2003, Chambers 2016), these studies have largely focused on Sherpa culture and their famed technical ascents of Mount Everest. Examinations of the labor conditions of porters in Nepal, especially those who engage in non-technical trekking tourism outside of Solukhumbu, are largely missing from the scholarship. Scholars who have written on the subject have looked to Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania as a case study, where they have documented considerably hazardous and exploitative working conditions (Melubo 2015, Peaty 2012). The lack of corresponding research in the Annapurna region, Nepal's most popular trekking destination, has left unknown the degree to which labor standards there are correspondingly low.

The purpose of this report was to uncover what the labor conditions in Annapurna are like for porters, including the human and immutable factors that influence these conditions. The findings of this paper suggest a sizable gap between the labor standards in Annapurna and those described by Melubo (2015) and Peaty (2012) at Kilimanjaro. Yet the difference does not stem from the multitude of regional specificities identified at the onset of this research period as possible factors. Ethnic composition of the workforce, local customs, regional governance and migratory labor surpluses only somewhat impacted the porter

market. Instead, nationwide organizations such as the Trekking Agencies' Association of Nepal (TAAN) and the largest tourism unions, foremost among them the Union of Nepal Travel, Trekking, Rafting and Airline Workers (UNITRAV), set industry standards at a macro-level.

These policies were found to be implemented in an uneven manner, however, as it is up to individual agencies to apply them in employment relationships. Moreover, for "freelance" porters working outside of agencies for tourists directly, these policies are often skirted altogether. Employers, therefore, represent the primary subjective factor in the application of large-scale agreements regarding wages, insurance, weight carried, equipment and trainings. While the 'business ethics' of agencies were found to be the greatest subjective factor in creating varying labor conditions within Nepal, other regional factors appear to play a secondary role in impacting porters' employment experiences. Annapurna's topography, with its lower altitudes and relatively easy routes, makes trekking in Mustang safer and more comfortable for porters. The construction of a road from Pokhara to Muktinath, alternatively, has possibly degraded labor conditions by shortening the Annapurna Circuit trekking route and with it the number of days porters are employed.

Previously conducted research has provided an important framework for the fieldwork done for this report. Broadly speaking, Camou's (2009) analysis of day laborers working in the construction sector in the United States is instructive. Camou elucidates the various pressures on the wages and work standards of day laborers, including low social solidarity, informal employment, immigration status, and low hierarchical status (Camou 2009). Camou also discusses the

challenges inherent to the 'horizontal organizing' of workers. Her research shows that organizing businesses rather than workers to go union often leaves employees dependent on benevolent employers instead of empowered (Camou 2009). Porters are similarly situated as 'low level' and often-informal workers who compete with one another for temporary jobs with revolving employers. The findings of this paper also suggest that labor-organizing efforts in Nepal have also been somewhat horizontal. These structural commonalities between the two cases make Camou's analysis useful for analyzing how challenges to labor organizing are erected and sometimes overcome.

The respective works of Peaty (2012) and Melubo (2015) focus on porters in the Kilimanjaro region. In Kilimanjaro, the income generated from tourism has been unevenly distributed and the porters who enable many tourists to visit the mountain remain heavily exploited and poorly equipped (Peaty 2012). High wage competition and subsequent undercutting are major sources of pressure on porters (Melubo 2015). Additionally, pressure from guides to carry heavy loads and undertake quick ascents increase porters' susceptibility to High Altitude Sickness (HAS) (Melubo 2015). These findings suggest the factors that impact labor standards for porters are possibly generalizable rather than regionally specific.

Newcomb has also studied the impact of HAS on porters, with Solukhumbu as a case study. Though instances of HAS are relatively low among porters in the Khumbu Valley, roughly half of the porters surveyed in 2008 perceived that they were at greater risk of developing HAS than foreign trekkers (Newcomb et al. 2008). Additionally, fewer than 30 percent of surveyed foreign

trekkers knew the insurance status of their porter and 39 percent reported that they would not pay for their porter to be evacuated if need be (Drew et al. 2011). This puts porters at substantial risk considering the dangerous Himalayan climates and topographies they work in.

Browers' study of the Sherpa in Khumbu also provides a further framework for research. Trekking tourism has had an "enormous" impact on Sherpa peoples, allowing many to enrich themselves through hotels, shops, and porter labor (Brower 1991: 80). The division of labor, however, stratifies this enrichment with *sirdars* and hotel managers standing to earn far more than porters, who compete among themselves and with yaks for jobs (Brower 1991).

Vinding's research on the Thakali found high profitability for innkeepers in Mustang as well (Vinding 1998). Yet while Vinding found the sale of labor to be an important source of income for poor Thakalis, at the time of his research very few Thakalis worked as porters for tourists (Vinding 1998). Eighteen years later it is unclear if this remains the case.

These case studies provide several examples of factors that may impact the porter market of Annapurna. The authors raise several common issues: wage competition, lack of precautions taken for safety in terms of equipment and insurance, the inherent danger of high altitude trekking, and ethnic identity influencing employment relationships. It is indeed likely that all of these factors combine to influence the labor conditions of Annapurna's porter market. Yet absent from the literature reviewed is an examination of how these factors operate in an economic context heavily structured by massive advocacy organizations that compete and collaborate with each other to set industry standards, as was

found to be the case in Annapurna. The dynamic between these organizations, the trekking agencies below them, and the aforementioned factors will be the focus of much of my findings.

Methods

I began my research in Kathmandu where I conducted interviews with the leading staff members of the Kathmandu Environmental Education Project (KEEP), the Trekking Agencies' Association of Nepal (TAAN), the Himalayan Rescue Association Nepal (HRA) and International Porter Protection Group (IPPG). Following these interviews I travelled to Pokhara. There I interviewed staff at the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), TAAN Western Regional Office, and the Union of Nepal Trekking, Travel, Rafting, and Airline Workers (UNITRAV). Additionally, I interviewed the managers of four trekking agencies, Yak and Yeti Treks and Expeditions, Three Sisters Trekking Adventures, Sisne Rover Trekking, and Swissa Mountain Way Trekking. I interviewed porters, porter-guides, guides, and former porters who worked for these agencies and others in Pokhara as well. I then travelled to Jomsom where I met with staff from the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) local office and the District Development Office. In Muktinath I interviewed staff at the local ACAP check post, as well as four porters who worked for a fifth agency.

All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with prepared questions that were asked in accordance to their relevance to the participant. In each interview, I stressed that the nature of this research was undergraduate and that my results would not be published. In interviews with officials from the aforementioned organizations I used an 'Informed Consent' form to make sure

participants understood the voluntary nature of the research and the rights and protections afforded to them. When interviewing participants who spoke or read little or no English, I explained the contents of the 'Informed Consent' form verbally. With porters and guides especially, the cultural context prohibited me from requesting a signature. These men and women often enter into formal and informal employment relationships with tourists and agents and it would have been inappropriate for me to replicate a contract as a foreign researcher. All names referenced in this report are done so with the explicit permission of participants. All of the trekking employees who were interviewed for this project, guides and porters, are listed as "Anonymous" to ensure additional protection from any economic retribution for their participation, unlikely as it is.

During the course of these interviews, I attempted to ascertain what factors were most influential in shaping work experiences for porters. These factors, supplied by participants, became the basis for my understanding of labor conditions. The interviews were also a tool for me to understand how these various factors interact with one another and how each one comes to shape the labor market through employment relationships. My research has benefited from interviews with a variety of sources representing diverse interests. Yet drawing conclusions on the labor market from this pool of participants certainly presented challenges, as the information provided by individuals representing different groups was often conflicting. Ultimately the diversity of the participant pool served my research well, and I was able to gain a fuller understanding of both large-scale and informal employment relationships.

Yet these methods had several shortcomings. While interviewing in Nepali or English, there were language barriers that could have distorted my questions or the answers of participants. Language barriers were most relevant in interviews with porters, which could have led to misunderstandings and misinformation. Most of the questions were straightforward, as were the answers, yet this always remains a possibility. In terms of participant selection, my research relied heavily on the participation of staff members from large national and regional organizations and smaller NGOs. While I held nine out of twenty-two interviews with employees working as porters (six), porter-guides (one), and guides (two), the reliance on organizations for information could have biased my findings. This is especially relevant given the emphasis I place in my findings on the ability of large advocacy groups to shape the porter market. Though ultimately I believe this conclusion to be correct, it remains a possibility that my participant pool has influenced this finding.

Findings

MARKET-SHAPING ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR POLICIES

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), advocacy groups and umbrella organizations have played large roles in shaping Annapurna's porter market. Of these groups, TAAN and UNITRAV have wielded the most influence in establishing labor standards. These two organizations are made up by trekking tourism employers and employees themselves, and advocate for the respective interests of these two classes accordingly. Other groups, such as the Kathmandu Environmental Education Project (KEEP), Himalayan Rescue Association Nepal (HRA), the International Porter Protection Group (IPPG), and Annapurna

Conservation Area Project (ACAP) act as secondary influencers of the porter market. The government, embodied by the National Tourism Board (NTB), Ministry of Labor, and Mustang District Development Office, has played a far smaller role.

Founded in 1979 as an umbrella group for the hundreds of trekking agencies throughout Nepal, TAAN has grown to become an enormous organization. According to their webpage, TAAN is comprised of seventeen departments led by an elected executive body that represents over one thousand members ("About Us" 2016). Though it is made up by trekking agencies exclusively, TAAN claims to act in the interests of government developers, conservationists, local communities, tourists and trekking workers as well ("About Us" 2016). Interestingly, this belief is not an isolated claim made by TAAN. Other individuals involved in the porter market claim that TAAN represents the interests of private enterprise, the government and trekking employees alike (Gurung).

This perception is not because TAAN involves itself directly with workers. By the organization's own account, it has no connections whatsoever to porters or guides as individuals (Anonymous TAAN Employee). Yet advocates for porters' rights acknowledge that TAAN, despite the fact that it lobbies on behalf of businesses, has taken significant steps towards elevating the "wellbeing" of workers (Adhikari, Gurung). Indeed, Prakash Adhikari, one of the founding members of the IPPG and current chief executive of the HRA explained that, far from a public relations claim, it was TAAN's job to ensure the wellbeing of porters. Moreover, Adhikari believes that in the past few years

TAAN has made good on its claim to protect the interests of porters, much more than it did in the past.

The credit extended to TAAN by porters' rights advocates is largely derived from TAAN's role in providing employee insurance to its member agencies. Indeed, when asked about the most important services their organization provided to porters, Sabitra Joshi of TAAN's Western Regional Office in Pokhara identified the provision of insurance as paramount (Joshi). Emergency evacuation, medical, and life insurance, once a rarity in the porter market, has become perhaps the centerpiece of labor standards, and is viewed by many as its most critical component (Adhikari, Gurung, Joshi, Bijaya K.C.). Through money raised by the Trekker Information Management System (TIMS), TAAN has been able to provide 'blanket policy' employee insurance to member agencies (Anonymous TAAN Employee, Joshi). By using the TIMS fund for this purpose TAAN estimates that it has succeeded in covering 75 percent of porters with insurance to pay for medical attention, evacuations, and to families in the event of a porter's death (Joshi). While the amount paid to porters and guides varies by situation, remuneration for bereaved families has been raised to one million rupees (Joshi). Thus in regards to the provision of insurance, TAAN has dramatically reshaped labor standards across the entire country through its TIMS funded program.

TAAN has helped elevate labor conditions for porters in other ways as well. In its Western Regional office in Pokhara, TAAN runs a clothing bank for porters. The walls of their office are lined with boots, jackets, and windproof pants, all available to porters for a daily 15-rupee "wear and tear" charge (Joshi).

Both the heads of KEEP and HRA identified proper trekking equipment and clothing as a top priority for porters, as appropriate gear substantially reduces risk of injury or the development of HAS (Adhikari, Gurung). This clothing bank is easily accessible to porters hired in Pokhara to work in Mustang. A corresponding clothing bank exists in Lukla for porters working in Solukhumbu as well, further indicating TAAN's national impact on the porter market (Joshi).

TAAN's third noteworthy effort to ensure the safety of trekking employees is the trainings it runs. It operates regular sessions regarding medical knowledge and first aid for porters and guides alike (Joshi). TAAN staff explained that this protects employees from contracting HAS and improves the safety of trekkers as well (Joshi). Importantly, TAAN also runs "guiding" trainings that allow porters to become certified as guides (Anonymous TAAN Employee, Anonymous guide). Such trainings, also nationally run, create something of a career path for porters who are able to develop English language skills (Anonymous guide).

These services are not open to all trekking workers, however. Though they are run across the country, TAAN limits these services to the employees of trekking agencies. Therefore, porters operating outside of agencies and for tourists directly, termed by some "freelance porters," are excluded (Joshi, Anonymous TAAN Employee, Lamichhale). This policy of providing insurance, gear, and training to employees of agencies exclusively means that there is likely a major qualitative difference in the labor conditions of freelance and agency porters (Adhikari, Gurung, Chhetri, Lamichhale, Joshi). Given the breadth and importance of these services, it appears as though most porters in Nepal have

chosen to work through agencies, making TAAN a macro-level influencer of labor conditions (Joshi).

Yet TAAN, an organization made up by companies that are first and foremost concerned with the profitability of their businesses, does not provide these services to workers out of benevolence or solidarity. TAAN's more recent effort to improve labor conditions for porters has been driven in large part by trade union pressure (Anonymous TAAN Employee). Though there is no union for porters specifically, porters are active members in four different tourism workers' unions: the All Nepal Revolutionary Tourism Workers Union (ANRTWU); Union of Nepal Travel, Trekking, Rafting and Airlines Workers (UNITRAV); the Nepal Tourism Workers Association (NTWA); and the All Nepal Tourism Workers Union (ANTWU) ("TAAN Hikes Daily Wage" 2014). Of these, UNITRAV is the most well known, and claims to represent 70 percent of union-affiliated porters (Bijaya K.C.).

According to UNITRAV's president, Bijaya K.C., members do not pay dues and the union does not collect precise data on its membership. Yet there is a somewhat formal affiliation process, according to one porter who is currently a member, involving attendance of trainings and meetings (Anonymous Porter). These trainings are often language, medical, and "workers' rights" based, and occur several times a year all across Nepal, mirroring TAAN's own trainings (Bijaya K.C.). UNITRAV often advocates for its members when disputes arise with agency-employers, providing a powerful voice to those porters who would otherwise be afraid to speak up given the possibility of being blacklisted (Joshi).

Yet UNITRAV's main role in the porter market is collective bargaining. Every two years it submits proposals to TAAN regarding employee "wages, weight limits, and facilities" (Bijaya K.C.). Two years ago, the four unions and TAAN negotiated a rise in the minimum wage for porters by three hundred rupees, bringing the current daily wage to 1,150 rupees ("TAAN Hikes Wage" 2014, Joshi). Though negotiations were scheduled to occur again this year, UNITRAV has announced that it will not pursue a wage hike given the downturn in trekking tourism resulting from the 2015 earthquake (Bijaya K.C.).

Because negotiations between the unions and TAAN occur outside of the purview of government legislation, the baseline set by the unions and TAAN is not legally binding. Rather it represents a national standardization of the expected wage for porter labor. K.C. has credited these massive bargaining agreements with limiting the downward pressure on earnings that results from competition and wage undercutting among porters. Though TAAN and UNITRAV acknowledge that bargaining between porters and employers persists outside of the macro-level agreements, both organizations believe that these wage deals have overall raised earnings for porters and put pressure on companies to adhere to certain basic labor standards (Joshi, Bijaya K.C.).

Largely, the relationship between the unions and TAAN is collaborative (Joshi, Anonymous TAAN Employee, Bijaya K.C.). Yet the unions have been known for their militancy as well. TAAN staff interviewed cited the organization's fear of lockouts and strikes by the unions as a reason for the frequent negotiations (Anonymous TAAN Employee). Indeed, the unions have succeeded not only in getting wage hikes for trekking employees, but in

standardizing the provision of insurance across all the professions they represent. Previously, guides had been paid substantially more in insurance claims than had porters (Bijaya K.C.). Recent rounds of negotiations have ended that practice, however, as TAAN now ensures that all employees claims will be treated equally (Bijaya K.C.). The unions have also succeeded in getting TAAN to set weight limits for its member agencies, at 15 kilograms for men and 12 kilograms for women (Joshi). Though these standards are not always upheld or applied, they are nationally set, which ensures that deviations from the negotiated labor standard is not dependent on region, but on the relationships between porters and agencies, as will later be discussed.

In addition to the massive aforementioned organizations, smaller NGOs have also shaped Annapurna's and the national porter market, but to a lesser degree. With much smaller budgets and reach, these groups focus on targeted issues of education, public advocacy, and safety provisions. Of the NGOs involved in trekking tourism in Nepal, the Kathmandu Environmental Education Project (KEEP), the Himalayan Rescue Association Nepal (HRA) and the International Porters' Protection Group (IPPG) are known for their efforts to shape the porter labor market.

KEEP may be the best known out of these three NGOs. It is heavily involved in engaging with tourists and publishes pamphlets on porters' issues in English in print and online (KEEP 2013, KEEP 2015a, KEEP 2015b). KEEP's executive director D.B. Gurung explained that this kind of English language 'information-advocacy' is directed at tourists in hopes that they will elevate labor standards for porters through their role in the market. These pamphlets stress the

importance of fair employment terms for porters who are often trying to supplement a life of subsistence farming (Gurung, KEEP 2013). Gurung explained that KEEP's staff informs tourists that agency-porters are more likely to be insured than freelance ones, and for that reason tourists should always hire through an agency. KEEP's English language publications also encourage tourists to inquire about the insurance status of the porter they are hiring and as to whether the porter has proper equipment for a trek (KEEP 2013). These efforts represent KEEP's belief that by educating tourists, who become employers either directly or through an agency acting as a middleman, labor standards can be raised.

KEEP's approach is dual, however, in that it organizes porters as well. If its first approach is somewhat akin to the 'horizontal organizing' described by Camou, in which employers are pressured to adopt labor friendly practices, KEEP's second strategy is closer to 'vertical organizing,' whereby employees are organized to improve their own labor standards. KEEP runs trainings in popular trekking areas across Nepal, including in Pokhara where most of Annapurna's porters are based (Gurung). These programs usually center on English language acquisition and "porters' rights" workshops that are meant to enable porters to advocate for themselves (KEEP 2015a, KEEP 2015b).

KEEP also runs a clothing bank for porters, where tourists and workers alike can go to acquire proper gear at little to no cost (KEEP 2013). Yet despite the growth of this project, KEEP only has clothing banks in Lukla and Thamel, meaning that the porters who work in Annapurna do not receive the same benefit as those who work in Solukhumbu or who are hired in Kathmandu (Gurung). Yet

how much this has actually hurt the porters hired in Pokhara is unclear, given the high quality gear available from TAAN at its Western Regional Pokhara office.

Adhikari, HRA's chief officer and IPPG's Nepal coordinator, also runs efforts to improve labor standards for porters. He described the purpose of HRA as "helping to save porters' lives" (Adhikari). Active in Solukhumbu and in Annapurna, HRA attempts to do exactly that, with health posts that specialize in treating the symptoms of HAS (Adhikari). According to his staff in HRA's health post in Manang, roughly 70 percent of the patients they treat are Nepali trekking staff, many of them porters. Adhikari explained that although his organization tries to mitigate the risks of HAS, the root cause of porters developing altitude sickness is overexertion due to the heavy loads they carry.

Though he believes his organization is doing critical work in Manang, Adhikari stressed that it was up to organizations like TAAN to ensure that porters are well equipped and not carrying loads that endanger there health. Since cofounding the IPPG, Adhikari believes that the situation for porters has indeed improved dramatically, and credits TAAN for the work it has done to promote higher labor standards. Though HRA and the IPPG continue to do yearly trainings on HAS and medical safety, Adhikari argued that only ongoing and on the job training will resolve these issues, and that only TAAN has the capacity to provide those types of long-term services. With training as with treatment of the root causes of HAS, HRA finds itself constrained in its ability to dramatically shape the labor conditions of porters. Instead it seeks to provide life saving help and information, and looks to TAAN to address the fundamental issues of on the job training, weight limits and equipment in macro-level negotiations.

Peripherally, governing bodies are involved in the labor market as well, but to a much smaller degree than even the NGOs. ACAP, though it is responsible for the land through with the Annapurna Circuit trail runs, is much more engaged in conservation than in labor issues (Joshi, Thapaliya, ACAP Jomsom Staff). Occasionally the staff at the Muktinath checkpoint attends to trekkers and porters with HAS, but they defer to HRA in Manang for those issues (ACAP Muktinath Staff). What ACAP has done, importantly, is erect several emergency shelters near the Thorung La pass, the highest point on the Circuit trek (ACAP Jomsom Staff). These shelters are available to porters who cannot afford to stay in an inn, or are unable to find a room (ACAP Jomsom Staff).

The Nepali government is largely absent from the labor market of trekking porters, in Annapurna or elsewhere. The Mustang District Development Office, situated in Jomsom, claims to have no part in trekking tourism or labor issues (DDO Staff). According to the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), the Ministry of Labor is part of negotiations between TAAN and the unions (Thapaliya). According to a Western Regional TAAN staffer, however, it is the NTB that sits in these meetings (Joshi). Yet TAAN's website makes no mention of any government representative at negotiations ("TAAN Hikes Wages" 2014). What can be drawn from this confusion is that the government is not an important player in shaping the market nationally or regionally, and that it leaves this job to representatives of capital and labor in collective bargaining negotiations.

THE IMPACT OF AGENCIES

While macro-level interest groups set labor standards at a national level, with smaller advocacy groups supplementing their work, it is through private

agencies that the terms of these agreements are applied. These companies were found to be the greatest subjective factor that shaped work experiences for porters. Depending on the agency, labor standards negotiated between TAAN and the unions were obeyed, elevated, distorted or degraded in economic relationships between employers and employees. The issues that agencies had the greatest ability to influence were wages, weight carried, and hiring practices. To a lesser extent companies were able to influence the quality and availability of job trainings, equipment and insurance.

Regarding wages, it is well established that bargaining between employees and employers occurs despite collective bargaining agreements (Joshi, Bijaya K.C.). This bargaining rarely occurs in favor of the porters, however. Due to underemployment and the low barriers to entry inherent in unskilled labor, the number of jobs available is outstripped by the number of porters willing to take them (Joshi). Often porters are negotiating well below the established wage baseline, agreeing to work for as little as 800 rupees per day (Dahal, Joshi). The degree to which this sub-baseline bargaining is occurring is unknown; no data is collected by TAAN or UNITRAV on the wages agencies actually pay. Yet anecdotes from the participants interviewed, workers, agents, and organizational staff alike, suggest that the large scale agreements have limited the scope of sub-baseline bargaining, preventing a major 'race to the bottom' in terms of wages (Hira K.C., Bijaya K.C., Chhetri, Joshi).

A similar dynamic exists in negotiations over how much weight a porter will carry on a given trek. Though TAAN and the unions have agreed to limit the amount at 15 kilograms for men and 12 kilograms for women, this agreement is

also subject to agency influence. A former porter and current guide explained that during treks, tourists often add to a porter's load regardless of what the weight limit may be, indicating that some companies do not make an effort to restrict the actions of trekkers (Anonymous Guide). As with wages, the permanent reserve of porters willing to work has pressured workers able to find jobs into accepting whatever weight the company tells them they will carry (Joshi). It is not unheard of for porters to carry as much as 30 kilograms (Joshi).

The nature of how and why this bargaining occurs is disputed. According to UNITRAV president Bijaya K.C., it is the larger agencies that are most frequently at fault. These agencies draw from pools of unemployed workers rather than relying on regulars, and use the long-term unemployment of these porters to the advantage of their bottom line in negotiations (Bijaya K.C.). Smaller companies on the other hand rely on repeat porters to avoid the cost of staff turnover, resulting in a better work environment for porters and higher wages (Bijaya K.C.). Denish Bahadur Lamichhale, the owner of a smaller trekking agency, Yak and Yeti Treks, also expressed this belief. Lamichhale claimed that at larger agencies a guide was sent to collect the porters, which he believed yielded a worse work experience because porters were unfamiliar with each other and with their employer.

It is hard to assess the validity of these claims without quantitative data on wages and company size. Though there are no official criteria for what constitutes a large or small company, three agencies that participated in this research project can be described as large. Three Sisters Trekking Adventures, Sisne Rover Trekking, and Swissa Mountain Way Trekking all are either

reviewed by Lonely Planet, have offices in multiple regions of the country, or have multiple permanent staff members in a large office or building.

Out of these three, only Sisne Rover uses the TAAN-union agreement to pay its employees and limit the amount of weight they carry (Hira K.C.). Sisne's manager, Hira K.C., is an advisor to TAAN and believes that the negotiations with the unions are a good way to set wages and prevent excessive bargaining. The management of Three Sisters has adopted its own pay scale that is slightly higher than the nationally set levels (Chhetri, Anonymous Porter, Anonymous Porter). Lucky Chhetri, a manager at Three Sisters, explained that porters at Three Sisters were paid a daily wage of 1,200 rupees for a trek in Mustang and 1,400 for the more challenging treks in Solukhumbu or Langtang (Chhetri, Anonymous Guide). Moreover, Three Sisters has set its own weight limits at 12 kilograms for men and 10 kilograms for women respectively (Chhetri). Porters interviewed from Three Sisters confirmed that they had never carried excessive weight (Anonymous Porter, Anonymous Porter). Swissa, alternatively, charges trekkers 900 rupees a day for a porter and pays the porters 800 rupees (Dahal). The manager at Swissa explained that is not due to porters undercutting each other in negotiations. Rather, he argued that paying sub-baseline wages was the result of competition between agencies that has driven profit margins so low that wages have been cut into (Dahal).

Because the large agencies interviewed seem to be on all sides of the TAAN-union agreements over weights and wages, it is hard to come to a conclusion regarding Bijaya K.C.'s assertion that big companies engage in poor labor practices. K.C.'s belief that large companies draw from pools of the

unemployed rather than using permanent or repeat staff is similarly difficult to assess. Again, Three Sisters has chosen to elevate nationally set labor standards for its staff, relying on permanent employees instead of revolving ones (Chhetri, Anonymous Porter, Anonymous Porter, Anonymous Guide). Swissa's employment policy better fits the allegations made by the UNITRAV president, with its manager hiring porters from a pool of "seventy or eighty" (Dahal). Sisne Rover is perhaps the most typical, with ten different porters who are repeatedly approached for treks, though not permanent staff members (Hira K.C.).

The manner in which employers hire porters to work for them raises another way in which agencies display ability to influence the labor market. Porters who are permanent or repeat employees of an agency have a greater chance to advance up a career ladder than those who are working for revolving employers. Again, Bijaya K.C. and Lamichhale insist that this has to do with company size; smaller agencies have staff that know each other and build good relationships, easing the path from porter to guide (Bijaya K.C., Lamichhale). A guide and former porter who works for Lamichhale's Yak and Yeti Trekking exemplifies the upward mobility found in small companies. He became a guide through a TAAN training after three years of working as a porter (Anonymous Guide).

Yet the dichotomy between large and small-scale agencies seems to once again be overstated by the UNITRAV president and the Yak and Yeti manager. A look at the three large-scale agencies involved in this project complicates the view that big companies follow a monolithic hiring process that promotes rigid employment hierarchies. Three Sisters Trekking offers its permanent staff

members intensive on-job training to provide them with the skills to become porter-guides and later guides (Chhetri, Anonymous Guide). So ingrained is this career ladder at Three Sisters that they refer to porters as "assistants" to the guides; Lucky Chhetri confirmed that it is the view of both management and the employees that all the trekking staff is on an upwards career trajectory (Chhetri, Anonymous Guide).

Again, Three Sisters proves to be the strongest outlier in its approach to raising labor standards for its employees. The staffing practices of Sisne Rover are perhaps a better indicator what the standards for careers and labor hierarchies are in a large agency. Though it does not provide its own on-job training, Sisne does promote porters who have worked with the company for several years to guides once they have completed a TAAN guiding training (Hira K.C.). Sisne's manger said this practice amounted to something close to a career path for porters involved with his company. Swissa, alternatively, does not appear to have a career ladder for porters who work for it. The manager of the company said he does not have contractual papers with his staff and gave no indication that he hires guides from a pool of repeat porters (Dahal).

Regarding safety precautions, it remains true that some companies do not provide insurance or proper equipment to their employees (Joshi, Bijaya K.C.). Yet these agencies are increasingly few, given the availability of insurance and gear through TAAN's TIMS fund and clothing bank. Therefore, the ability of agencies to alter negotiated labor standards regarding insurance and equipment is very limited. The only company that deviated from these standards was Three Sisters, which provides its own insurance and equipment to its staff in addition to

the TAAN insurance and clothing bank (Anonymous Porter, Anonymous Porter, Anonymous Guide, Lucky Chhetri). Short of ignoring the nationally set labor standards regarding safety precautions, it appears as though companies only have the ability to improve work conditions.

Thus the horizontal organizing of employers through broad collective bargaining agreements appears to not be strong enough to uniformly raise the labor conditions of porters. Though highly influential in in shaping work experiences, the organizing of employers to uphold certain wage and weight agreements has left them with leeway to distort or degrade those standards. Additionally, the lack of a negotiated agreement regarding hiring practices has led to vastly different work experiences and career trajectories for permanent, semi-regular, and revolving workers. Instead of a market shaped through agreements between the representatives of employers and employees, market forces and the 'business ethics' of private actors still yield significant influences over labor standard outcomes.

TOPOGRAPHY AND INDIOSYNCRACIES OF ANNAPURNA

Up to this point, all of the findings have pointed to labor conditions for porters that are generalizable across Nepal. Nationally negotiated agreements first and foremost set the contours of the labor market, with agencies influencing work conditions in a subjective way depending on their employment practices. Yet regional specificities have influenced the work experiences of porters in Annapurna on a secondary level. Though the ethnic identity of porters was found to have little effect on employment, and regional governments and administrators are mostly uninvolved in the market, topography and local hotel management

schemes were mentioned by participants in many interviews as local factors that shape labor conditions.

Save for the Thorung La Pass, the Annapurna Circuit is located at a relatively low altitude for a Himalayan region. Adhikari explained that while it is still very important to take HAS and other altitude related illnesses seriously, altitude is much less of a danger in Mustang than Solukhumbu. HRA runs medical outposts in both regions, and according to Adhikari the trekkers and Nepali staff who visit the Manang outpost are in much better health than those who visit the Pheriche post in the Everest region. Though Thorung La is at a high altitude, and only two years ago dozens of trekkers, guides, and porters were killed there in a landslide, none of the porters who participated in this study reported developing any altitude related illnesses while crossing it. Outside of the cataclysmic event on Thorung La, merely working in Annapurna as opposed to other areas increases the safety of porters, as the low altitude acts as a natural buoy for labor conditions there.

Additionally, Mustang's lower altitude and gentler topography has produced markedly easier trails along the Annapurna Circuit than are found in Solukhumbu or Langtang (Anonymous Guide, Anonymous Porter, Gurung, Lamichhale). These easy trails increase Annapurna's desirability as a work site, given the difficulty of trekking with a heavy load (Anonymous Porter, Anonymous Porter, Anonymous Guide). Chhetri reported that her staff was generally happier with jobs in Annapurna and that Three Sisters compensated staff that worked in the more difficult Langtang or Solukhumbu regions with higher wages (Chhetri, Anonymous Porter).

These easier trails have made Annapurna the most popular trekking destination for foreign tourists as well (Thapaliya). The high number of foreign trekkers means that Annapurna produces the highest numerical demand for porters, creating more available jobs there than in Solukhumbu or Langtang (Thapaliya). In 2015, 7,698 porters checked in at the Jomsom ACAP check post, one for every two non-Indian tourists ("Number of Foreign Visitors" NTNC-ACAP). Such employment opportunity is another boon for porters working in the region.

The availability of jobs in Mustang has led to a corresponding influx of porters to the region looking for work, however. Some participants raised the possibility that this massive inflow of porters could in fact be eroding wage standards. Both Gurung and Chhetri mentioned the possibility that there is an especially large reserve of unemployed porters seeking work in Annapurna because of its desirability as an easy route with many trekkers. Thus the same features that provide porters in Mustang with a natural advantage for work standards could also be contributing to the bargaining that lowers wages (Gurung, Chhetri). Again, without wage and employment data there is no way to truly verify this claim. If true, this phenomenon is likely only a small contributor to sub-baseline bargaining, as reserve pools of labor exist in all trekking regions and in most employment involving physical labor.

Unrelated to topography, but similarly particular to the Mustang region, the presence of a united hotel cartel has also effected labor conditions at the margins. Run in conjunction with ACAP, the cartel has set prices for many of the hotels along the trekking route. This has increased the cost of housing for porters

working along the Circuit, cutting into their earnings (Bijaya K.C.). TAAN, ACAP, and the unions met to try to resolve this issue and set guidelines, but no agreement materialized (Anonymous TAAN Employee). Though this alliance of guesthouses, idiosyncratic to Annapurna, has marginally eroded earnings, it has not had a large enough effect to diminish the topographical benefits that make the Annapurna Circuit the preferred route of many porters (Anonymous Porter, Anonymous Porter, Chhetri). In particular, the emergency shelters erected by ACAP have mitigated the damage the hotel cartel has done to earnings (Jomsom ACAP Staff).

THE NEW ROAD, JOB KILLER?

The recent construction of the road from Pokhara to Muktinath has impacted the local labor market of Annapurna's porters as well. The Circuit trail has been dramatically shortened by the growth of roads on each side of the Annapurna range. In 2006, a trek around the entirety of the Circuit took roughly twenty-one days. Now, with roads connecting local villages and Pokhara, the Circuit can be completed in as few as eight days (Bijaya K.C.). The number of days porters are hired for a trek has fallen accordingly. Fewer workdays have been an additional source of pressure on earnings for porters that cannot be solved through bargaining agreements (Bijaya K.C.). Instead of several full-length treks taking upwards of twenty days, porters now have to accept multiple five-day treks in a season to supplement their work on the shortened Circuit (Anonymous TAAN Employee).

While no one disputes that the road has shortened the number of days worked by porters, there appears to be an ongoing disagreement over whether it

has also lowered the number of jobs available. The staff at the ACAP checkpoint in Jomsom believe that the road has made trekking easier as well as shorter, meaning that fewer tourists feel the need to hire a porter (Jomsom ACAP Staff). Historically, the Jomsom staff had checked in more porters than tourists at their outpost, yet now tourists outnumber porters two-to-one ("Number of Foreign Visitors" 2015, ACAP Staff). D.B. Gurung argues that the decline in jobs for porters predates the road, and begins with the advent of teahouse trekking. According to Gurung, trekkers no longer hire porters at the same rate as they had historically because they do not need to carry gear. The road, according to the KEEP executive, has only accelerated this existing trend.

Others contend that if the number of jobs has fallen, it is because of a downturn in tourism, not because of the road (Anonymous Guide, Anonymous Porter-Guide, Anonymous TAAN Employee). With only short-term data on porter and trekking traffic in Annapurna, it is hard to discern which side is correct. Regardless, Annapurna remains the most popular trekking destination in Nepal. If there is a decline in the number of available jobs, it is has yet to overtake the continued influx of tourists to the region that make Annapurna the biggest job creating site for porters.

Yet both sides agree that without alternative trekking routes that diverge from the road, the number of jobs available to porters will not grow and those working in Annapurna will be relegated to short treks (Anonymous TAAN Employee, Jomsom ACAP Staff, Bijaya K.C.). These routes have recently been opened for trekking, yet they remain unpopular due to their "ruggedness" (Jomsom ACAP Staff). The potential of these alternative routes to one day act as

a catalyst for an increase in the number of days porters work, in conjunction with the fact that despite the new road the Annapurna Circuit is still preferred by many porters, suggests that ultimately the Mustang region itself is a positive influencer of labor conditions.

Discussion

The structuring of the labor market through large-scale negotiations between class interest groups has had an important and positive impact on porters. Union pressure has compelled one of Nepal's most visible business lobbies to take up the issues of labor in a genuine manner. The tangible benefits of this have been life saving in many cases. Insurance, a historic rarity for porters has become commonplace in the market; not providing insurance is now considered an unscrupulous and poor business practice even among agencies (Chhetri). The provision of proper equipment has been of similar importance for porter safety. Though porters working in jeans and sandals are still visible along trekking routes, they are quickly becoming a minority, as most porters have gained access to free equipment from their employers or through TAAN. The wellbeing of porters has seen another dramatic rise in the form of higher and standardized wages. There is a sense among union leaders that the wages will continue to rise in subsequent negotiations (Bijaya K.C.). These victories by labor strike a marked contrast with the continued decline of labor unions in the United States and the defensive bargaining they are engaged in.

Yet the strategies pursued by unions and other porter advocacy groups have clear drawbacks as well. Because the government does not legally enforce the minimum wages the unions and TAAN establish, bargaining persists to the

disadvantage of porters. While extra-governmental strategies exist to fight this kind of bargaining, the unions have not pursued them. A hiring hall, where porters who are not regular employees of companies could wait for employment could allow porters to enforce the minimum wages themselves. Day laborers and manual workers in many professions have utilized this strategy. Pursuing it would represent a departure from the horizontal organizing that has left many porters beholden to agents to implement good policies rather than empowered to fight for higher labor standards themselves.

Horizontal negotiations between the unions and TAAN have also left freelance porters to fend for themselves. While they are a minority of the porter population, these workers are the most vulnerable in the industry. So long as union efforts only target TAAN, these workers will continue to fall through the cracks of what is otherwise a progressively improving labor market. Short of a recalibration of strategy by the unions, freelance porters will have to continue to rely on the charitable work of NGOs, with their limited reach and targeted projects. Notably, hiring halls have provided informal workers with the ability to set wage floors for themselves in the United States (Camou 2009). The creation of these hiring sites with union support could also narrow the wage gap between freelance and agency porters, in addition to reinforcing the minimum wage.

Other challenges remain in the porter market. Porter work is a seasonal job, leaving workers without employment outside of tourist seasons in the spring and fall. Even during peak season, porters may find themselves out of work for long periods of time. For similar situations in the United States labor market, unions have stepped in to provide short-term income to their members during

spells of unemployment and make an effort to distribute jobs to those who have not had recent work (Camou 2009). Without a collection of dues UNITRAV is certainly highly pressed for money. Yet this form of union provided unemployment insurance along with a labor queue has alleviated work conditions in other similar professions and is applicable to the porter market as a long-term plan.

Additionally, there is a relatively early retirement for porters. Once they reach an age where they can no longer carry heavy loads, porters lose the ability to participate in this labor market. Without any system of social security and with earnings not yet high enough to promote long-term savings, porters lose a valuable source of income without a clear way to replace it if they do not become guides. This dynamic provides a third possible avenue for unions to better labor conditions outside of horizontal organizing tactics. By spending some of the money they raise on non-manual job training programs or funds for impoverished retired porters, unions can ensure higher standards of living for older workers.

The difficulties wrought upon the porter market by the new road through the Annapurna Circuit pose a different challenge for trekking unions. While the unions can promote the alternative trekking routes in a public way, it is unclear what the popularity of these routes would be with porters themselves who have stated their preference for easy paths. Again, the provision of unemployment insurance is a possible way for unions to ameliorate the damage done by a shorter trekking route.

In terms of horizontal organizing, there remain possible agreements that TAAN and the unions could reach that would be to the benefit of porters. Both

parties would benefit from the absorption of freelance trekking labor by agencies. This would eliminate a low cost labor practice that undercuts the business of agencies, while bringing all porters into a formal labor market with access to insurance and negotiated wage and weight levels. This could be accomplished by issuing TIMS permits only to tourists that are Free Individual Trekkers or who have hired staff through an agency. In exchange, the unions could demand the formal hiring of porters by companies, thus eliminating bargaining and increasing the likelihood that porters will have access to a career ladder.

Conclusion and Avenues for Further Research

The findings of this report suggest that the labor conditions of Annapurna's porters are improving due to the highly structured nature of the market. Large advocacy organizations have negotiated important agreements that have tangibly increased safety and wellbeing for porters. Because these organizations operate on a national scale, the region in which porters work was found to be of secondary importance to whether they work for an agency, and the nature of that agency. Because these agreements take place in negotiations with employers, numerous economic relationships have emerged depending on the employment practices of agencies. To combat this, unions should pursue agreements regarding employment practices, as well as commit to various kinds of vertical organizing to empower porters.

Yet much more research on the subject of the porter market needs to be done. Though this project succeeded in gaining the perspective of many of the organizations involved with the trekking industry, as well as many employees and employers, ethnographic research among porters is needed to truly

understand the porter market. Specifically, this type of research could provide an idea of how long periods of unemployment are and how common career paths are, absent of quantitative data.

Additional research should be done as to the nature of the decline in jobs over the past two decades. Many theories have been put forth as to why it has occurred, with some denying its occurrence all together. For future researchers, it will be important to ascertain the role of the new road in this phenomenon. Did it create job loss, merely shorten the number of days worked, or did it accelerate a longstanding trend? With current levels of employment in Annapurna standing at roughly one porter for every two tourists, it seems unlikely that the number of jobs has fallen because of the road, yet this theory persists. What is the nature of this belief?

Finally, though it was not addressed in the findings, many interview subjects brought up the issue of outmigration in conversations. Several porters stated that they would prefer to stay in Nepal, but if they could not find work they would have to go to the gulf countries to seek it out (Anonymous Porter, Anonymous Porter, Anonymous Porter). This was also an issue addressed by TAAN, the Nepal Tourism Board, and trekking agencies alike, all of which were fearful of the consequences that outmigration might have on the trekking economy (Anonymous TAAN Employee, Thapaliya, Lamichhale). Research should be done as to whether outmigration really does have a ‘brain drain’ effect on the trekking market. Additionally, researchers should focus on the amount of working days needed to prevent outmigration and the conditions under which it most commonly occurs.

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