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Gaaro: Nepali Women Tell Their Stories

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SIT Study Abroad

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Gaaro: Nepali Women Tell Their Stories
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Fall 2007

Dedication:

For every Nepali or bideshi who can learn something from it or already has. For everyone who knows something of human empathy and for those who wish to strive for more.

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Introduction: Nepali Women in Development

“In the 1970s, women were discovered to have been “bypassed” by the development interventions. This “discovery” resulted in the growth during the late 1970s and 1980s of a whole new field, women in development (WID), which has been analyzed by several feminist researchers as a regime of representation” (Escobar, 13). This “regime of representation” was a way in which development discourse linguistically, and consequently practically, imposed a homogenized identity on these “bypassed” women, in order to bring them into development programs. This homogenizing discourse was constructed by Western development efforts and takes place by constructing all third world women as the opposition to “Western woman”. According to Chandra Mohanty, as quoted by Escobar, “This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being third world (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc)” (Escobar, 8). Further, this third world woman exists as these thing in opposition to and by the imposed constructs of the idea of the liberated Western woman who are self-represented “as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions” (Mohanty in Escobar, 8). Because Western women have these advantages over third world women, the latter are posited in a dependent relationship to the former. While “third world women” are constructed as “in

need of help”, Western women are constructed as those able to give that help, thus positing “third world women” in a dependent relationship to their Western counterparts. “What emerges...is the image of an average third world woman constructed through the use of statistics and certain categories” (Escobar, 8). Statistics and categorizations allow outsiders to treat others’ lives as homogenous and thereby a tendency arises to treat all women as representative of a specific, non-fluid identity, regardless of individual and group differences. Also contributing to this tendency to homogenize is the fact that “Women’s empowerment” and “gender equality” have become catchphrases of sorts within development discourse. Donors sometimes require these things to be built into programs that are largely unrelated or on too small a scale or of too short a duration to do any real work towards achieving such aims (Chan, 9/28/07). The necessity of their inclusion leads many programs to homogenize women and their needs in order to fit their program into a donor specified framework that may be largely disconnected from the actual needs of target recipients of said programs.

The Nepali woman, as a sub-category of the third world woman, has not been impervious to this imposed construction of identity by such discourses. Nepali women, like other ‘third world women’ have been homogenized and stereotyped in order to form a single, manageable idea of female oppression for development to attack. Not only is the “Nepali woman”, as constructed by development discourse, ‘ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, and sexually constrained’ because she is a ‘third world woman’ but also because she is specifically victimized and oppressed by the

Hindu caste patriarchy of Nepal (Schneiderman, 10/2/07). This definition of the Hindu woman has been supported by the "Panchayati conceptions of the modern Nepali woman' [which] involved an active feminization and thus narrowing of roles deemed acceptable and indeed necessary for the Kingdom's women" (Tamang, 164). According to Tamang, this Panchayati conception, though ahistorical, has been widely accepted as representing historical truth. She goes on to say that "what is ignored [in this current acceptance of the 'Nepali woman' as product of historical factors] is that the specific form of 'traditional Hindu patriarch' that exists in Nepal today is actually quite 'modern', traceable via legal and developmental activities to the attempts by the male, Hindu, Panchayat elites to construct unifying national narrative with which to legitimate their rule over a heterogeneous populace" (Tamang, 170). "State-initiated reforms on political actions during the Panchayat era served to actively demarcate what constitutes 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' activities by women-demarcations that continue to inform current activist initiatives" (Tamang 167). These identities created and upheld by the Panchayat elite dovetailed nicely with the identity that development discourse was shaping for all third world women and therefore were adopted as the picture of the typical Nepali woman. What were constructed as the specifics of this identity's repercussions for the women this patriarchy subjected will be detailed later on in this paper.

Despite being nominally a Hindu kingdom, Nepal also has a large population of Buddhists and adherents to other non-Hindu religions. Therefore, if certain women did not fit into the main constructed identity, probably as a result of not

being Hindu, the Nepali woman was of the opposite breed, one that didn't need to be helped by development discourse because she was a "Buddhist, liberated, free, empowered woman of the hills" (Schneiderman, 10/2/07). Because of these two opposing stereotypes of Nepali women, all development efforts were focused on liberating the former type of woman from the oppressive Hindu patriarchy. In reality, most of the benefits of these efforts were indeed reaped by Hindu woman but mainly by upper caste elite women (Brahmin, Chhettri, Newar) who were taken as the paradigm of female oppression but who in reality already had greater access to state institutions like health-care, education, and involvement in the political process due to their higher socio-economic and/or class status in the country. The Janajati or "ethnic" women of Nepal who were supposedly outside the Hindu caste hierarchy and therefore "more free" were perceived as already empowered and were either ignored by development efforts or encouraged to conform to the idea of the 'Nepali woman' in order to access these development programs. As a consequence, the freedoms of these women in some cases actually eroded.

The problem then was two fold and it resulted not only from stereotyping in the manner previously discussed, but also by the application of "empowerment" as a single, homogenous goal for every woman without breaking it down to look at its implications on various levels. The Janajati women, while perhaps more empowered at the level of individual, family, and community, had no power at the level of the state. But because of their "empowerment" at some of these levels, they were viewed as totally empowered women (in opposition to their Hindu

counterparts) and their areas of disenfranchisement were consequently ignored. At the same time, Hindu women, who were disempowered at the individual and family levels, if they were of a higher caste, still had more access to state-level institutions (Schneiderman, 10/2/07). Disregarding these nuances of levels of empowerment, the development effort ‘offered empowerment’ at the state level to those already in the best position to access it and, after encouraging the Janajati women to conform to the ideal of the ‘Nepali woman’ disempowered at lower levels, sought to empower (or re-empower) them at these individual levels—the levels at which they’d previously been empowered.

Siera Tamang, later in her article, “The politics of ‘developing Nepali women’”, speaks on the idea of “new politics of solidarity in difference” saying, “each participant brings into the conversation her own membership and identity, but is also able to shift her own orientation in order to understand women whose background and identity are different from her own. Such a method of building solidarities without erasing difference, it seems, is critical for the progress of women from Nepal’s diverse communities” (Tamang 173). The ideal scenario for development, then, would be if women could retain their individuality while simultaneously attempting to understand others’ viewpoints. This would allow efforts to best target individual needs while creating the greatest good for the greatest number. A principle underlying this idea seems to be allowing women to dictate their own needs and therefore their own identities instead of being draped with an identity imposed by outsiders. Taking this idea, I began my project as an effort to deconstruct the homogenizing development discourse which has been so

much criticized of late. While Tamang takes significant steps in theoretically deconstructing discourse by pointing out its flaws, and making recommendations for these ‘new politics of solidarity in difference’, I decided in my research, to further these ideas by taking more practical steps towards de-homogenizing the discourse at the ground level. In order to do this, I decided to let Nepali women tell their own stories. My hope is that in presenting a number of viewpoints of Nepali women in different life situations, their stories will differentiate themselves from one another and begin to de-homogenize the discourse surrounding “Nepali woman” as a static identity. Jennifer Rothschild’s statement in her book, *Gender Troublemakers*, seems particularly relevant to my research. She writes, “Because women and men’s gendered experiences vary individually and by socio-cultural context, an examination of the social construction of gender inequality needs to be rooted in individual standpoints and understood in the context of different experiences” (Rothschild 6). Uncovering and understanding these “individual standpoints” was the focus of my research.

With this aim in mind, I decided to look at the way women talk about women, and themselves, in two different ways. I wanted to look at discourse created by NGOs at the national level about their work regarding women as well as to individuals about their own life and the ways they view the lives of other women. The NGOs I decided to talk to were NGOs who claim women as their main beneficiaries. Because many of these NGOs are now run by Nepali women, I wanted to reaffirm whether or not this homogenization holds true at this level, and not just the international level. After talking to about a dozen of the myriad

woman-focused NGOs operating in and around Kathmandu, I began talking to individuals.

Methodology:

During the first phase of my research, I met with various NGOs to talk to them about their work. Through talking with a representative (or multiple) of each NGO and examining their literature, I hoped to gain an understanding of how these NGOs talk about women and consequently whether the myth of the homogenous “Nepali woman” still holds sway at this level of development discourse. I met with Mitini Support Group, Women for Human Rights (WHR, ABC/Nepal, Citta Himalaya, Women Acting Together for Change (WATCH), Maiti Nepal, Nepal Disabled Association, Nepal Disabled Women’s Association (NDWA), Shakti Samuha, and Shakti Milan Samaj. I also previously met with both Tewa and Women’s Foundation of Nepal (WFN) but these interviews were conducted in a different research period and therefore may only be referenced briefly, compared to the space given to the former organizations. Because my research period was so short, I didn’t have time to meet with all of the woman-focused NGOs operating in the area. I therefore interviewed a random selection of organizations, the selection of which was mostly dictated by which organizations were the easiest to contact. Most of my interviews took place at the staff office of each organization, respectively.

The second phase of my research (which was second only figuratively and not chronologically as both phases were carried out more or less simultaneously for the duration of my research) involved asking individuals about their lives and/or

their views of Nepali women. I met some of these individuals through personal contacts and some through their involvement with organizations I interviewed. When talking with women involved in a given organization, I tried to make a distinction between woman as representative of said organization and woman as simply representative of herself. This was largely accomplished by in many cases having a separate meeting for her to talk as individual which sometimes took place in a setting outside of her office.

My main research question at this phase of my research became, “*tapaai ko bicharma, Nepali mahilako jivan kasto chha?*” (In your opinion, how are the lives of Nepali women?). In asking a deliberately homogenizing question, I wanted to see if informants would take the initiative to differentiate between different types of women in their answers. Some of them did while others did not. Often, if the subject of the answer they gave was simply “Nepali women”, I would ask them to specify if all women have the same problems or not (*pharak mahila pharak samasya chha? Ki chhaina?*). This often elicited a more nuanced answer which described the differences between Nepali women of different kinds.

Talking with NGOs about women:

In interviewing a variety of organizations, I found that the discourse has already shifted, at least at the national level, towards a more de-homogenous view of women. Though most people still agree that women are worst off than men in Nepali society, these organizations seem to put forward the idea that different women have different problems and therefore cannot be regarded as a homogenous identity any longer. In some ways, different identities even seem to

supersede the identity of “woman” and this other identity becomes the primary target of these NGOs’ efforts. With these other identities or situations as the primary cause of the need for organizational intervention while being a woman is secondary and exacerbates the problems caused by the initial condition, instead of being in an of itself the primary concern.

Firstly, I found that the national NGO scene, on a structural level, has already de-homogenized itself through the fragmentations of organizations based on different focus groups. Many of these organizations, instead of taking “Nepali women” as their focus, instead focus on specific subsets of women. Even just this structural de-homogenization is a large step towards building the capacity to not only address but also to conceptualize women’s issues in context and individual specific ways rather than tending towards over generalization and a continuation of the construction of homogenous “Nepali woman”.

While I feel that all of the organizations I interviewed de-homogenized women to some extent, the depth of this de-homogenization differed by organization. The de-homogenization that currently exists mainly operates by looking at identities other than simply “woman”. A remark by Peter Grais sums up this continuum. “What’s interesting is looking at the primary category of operation”, Peter remarked in the course of an interview on December 3, 2007. Are NGOs conceptualizing individuals as ‘woman, sub-set: other identity’ or ‘other identity, sub-set: woman’, or anywhere in between? In my opinion, these conceptualizations exist on a continuum. Some organizations tend more towards a focus informed by the idea that it is largely the identity “woman” that informs the

need of development interventions (with some pressing issues that affect different women differently informing the situation). Other NGOs fall more on the other side, with these other identities being taken as the main focus while “woman” compounds the principle identity. Because of the nature of my project, I won’t make any broad statements about which side of the continuum currently holds the greatest weight or which side seems to be addressing issues in a better way, as this would be just another instance of false homogenization-and a poorly informed one at that. I will instead present the case of each organization individually in order to illustrate this continuum with concrete examples from my research.

A) Women for Human Rights (WHR)

According to Hyshyama Hamin-Buckman, a volunteer at WHR, the patriarchal nature of Hindu society, along with other religious and cultural practices, subordinate women not just in Nepal but in much of South Asia. In this context, women gain status via their relationship to men, as the wife of someone. Therefore, if a woman’s husband dies, she is regarded as if half her life and body are gone. In the past, this ideology led to the practice of *saathi* wherein a widowed woman was expected to throw herself on the flames of her husband’s funeral pyre and perish as his body burned. This practice has been denounced but its ideological underpinnings are still active in society. This ideology leads to the marginalization of widows in contemporary Nepali society and WHR was formed as an answer to this marginalization (Hamin-Buckman 11/16/07).

The chairperson of WHR, Lily Thapa, was widowed fourteen years ago and despite being a middle class woman; she found that she faced much

discrimination because of her new marital status of widow. Ms. Thapa saw, firsthand, one of the issues that cuts across the category of women and creates a subset of women demarcated as different from other women because they face problems specifically related to a different marital status. Consequently, Ms. Thapa founded WHR on the idea that widows need a forum specifically their own in which to receive support and continue their lives. WHR further recognizes fragmentation in women's identity by specifying that rural, uneducated women living a "conservative lifestyle" are especially affected by widowhood. These considerations highlight two more considerations in putting forth the idea of heterogeneous identities for women- geographical considerations (urban/rural) and educational background (Hamin-Buckman 11/16/07).

WHR takes a "holistic approach" to supporting widows. The basic unit of this approach is the individual. Immediately following the death of her husband, or her later enrollment in WHR programs, WHR attempts to provide the individual woman with "what she needs first", including psychological counseling and/or legal support. (Legal support is often necessary because women's property may be taken away during their grief, "when not in their proper senses" to guard against such action). The initial profiling stage includes assessing whether the woman needs financial help to send her children to school, in which case her children (especially girl children) are immediately enrolled in WHR's scholarship program, the Opportunity Fund. WHR also talks to the woman about how much education she has and whether she wishes to return to school. There is a skills assessment component which seeks to determine what she can do and what she

would like to do in the future, including skills WHR might be able to help her acquire. The final goal of all of this, at the individual level, is to give women the skills to become economically empowered in a situation where the death of her husband would traditionally leave her in a completely helpless and dependent state (Hamin-Buckman 11/16/07).

Despite their initial focus on the individual, WHR ultimately believes that work can only be done in a group. For this reason, WHR encourages women to join one of their local single women's groups in which members provide support for one another and sometimes participate in community mediation, including intervening in situations of violence. Income generating training is also provided to these women based on their interests. The training WHR provides is moving from traditional to non-traditional with the impetus for this shift coming from the women themselves. For example, one woman's former husband had been a driver. After his death, she also had a desire to drive so WHR provided her with the training she needed to realize this goal. Other non-traditional skills acquired by WHR women are computer skills and mobile repair, both of which can lead to fairly lucrative employment opportunities (Hamin-Buckman 11/16/07).

WHR realizes that changing mentalities and discourse are their biggest challenges and the most important step to permanently improving the lives of widows in Nepal. The first example of their attempt to revamp discourse comes in the form of their relation to an actual word. WHR, in their own discourse, replaces the Nepali word *bidua* (literally, widow) with the term *ekel mahila* (single woman). According to Hyshyama, *bidua* has an extremely negative

connotation, like a slur or a curse word does. For this reason, WHR is encouraging the use of *ekel mahila*, a label which has no such history of negativity and resultant oppression. Through this change in terminology of discourse, WHR seeks to liberate widows from a label which dictates society's relation to them in a very negative way (Hamin-Buckman 11/16/07).

WHR is also trying to change discourse in a legal way by pushing to change discriminatory laws, literally the words that dictate some of the practicalities of a widow's life. Some of these laws have recently been successfully changed. Whereas old laws stated that in the event of remarriage a woman must return her share of her husband's property to his family and that she must ask her son's approval to use her share of her late husband's property, these laws have been changed to allow women more agency (Hamin-Buckman 11/16/07).

Another challenge has been to change people's mentalities which tend to construct widows as agencyless individuals whose lives are virtually over at the time of their husband's death. Certain cultural practices highlight these underlying ideas. Traditionally, widows are expected to wear white, refrain from wearing jewelry or eating meat or salt (Hamin-Buckman 11/16/07). Sometimes widowhood is officially affirmed through a ceremonious breaking of a woman's red bangles which she is no longer allowed to wear after her husband's death (Des Chene, PAGE). To symbolically combat these symbols of a very real oppression, women in WHR have initiated the "Red Movement Campaign". This campaign began with two women who asked their family members to give them red saris and red tikas for Dasai. When their families agreed and did so, their actions

symbolized an acknowledgement that these women are still people and not just widows. That their personhood is not something that is realized only in marriage and that color is not something marriage gives to a woman or that her husband can take with him when he dies (Hamin-Buckman 11/16/07). It is important for this acknowledgement to come from outside the woman herself because society has the power to oppress widows and therefore the power to set them free by reconstructing ideologies that are manifested in such symbols. It is also important, however, for widows themselves to acknowledge the fact that “color is our birthright” and not something given to them by marriage. In order for the reconstruction to be complete, widows must reconstitute themselves as more than just the half person society has told them they are.

Widowed women are also beginning to remarry, something they traditionally did not do. But a problem of society’s viewpoint again comes up to dictate their ability to do so. As Hyshyama put it, “who would marry a widow?!”). Recently though, young men have begun stepping up and saying they will marry young widows (Hamin-Buckman 11/16/07. By remarrying these women, these men are acknowledging that these women’s lives do not end with the lives of their husbands. They are themselves whole persons with their own identities, independent of their first marriage and husband. It is ironic though, that it is men who have the ability to give this identity back to women. Without their consent, women cannot claim this part of their personhood back from society’s victimization of widows. It reinforces the idea that women are dependent on men for their definition of their life of their life, though a living man rather than a dead

one. It is, however, what we might expect as it is consistent with the idea that identity can be imposed on an individual from the outside and become just as real as any internal construction of identity. Despite this, it is a very real step towards widows becoming full participants in a more equitable society, an identity so far denied to them.

B) Mitini Support Group

The Mitini Support Group is another organization that addresses a specific subset of the female population. Mitini delineates their target subgroup from woman writ large along the lines of sexual identity, specifically different sexual orientations. According to their brochure, “The target group/beneficiaries of Mitini Nepal is LGBT community of Nepal [sic]. Since Blue Diamond Society already works with MSM [men who have sex with men], Mitini Nepal works for the LBT women of the country” (Mitini pamphlet). The individuals of Mitini, because most of them are lesbian or transgender themselves, recognize the difference in the challenges faced by the LBT community and other women in Nepal. While there are no legal codes against lesbianism or historical precedent involving LBT issues, there is a large atmosphere of societal rejection of those who identify as LBT. The specific challenges facing these individuals can include physical violence if they’re married to a man who finds out about their identification with a minority sexual orientation or emotional violence from their families for similar reasons. These instances though, are few compared to the structural violence faced by the LBT community. If an employer decides to dismiss an individual because said individual’s sexual orientation comes to light

(which occurrence is common in such circumstances) there is nothing to be done but look for a new job. The individuals of Mitini stressed that job security is the biggest problem for LBT individuals (Group Interview 11/13/07).

Their LBT identity is important enough to these women for many of them to have moved to Kathmandu from elsewhere in order to find companionship and support in the Mitini programs. Their sexual identities are the point of coherence of the group, rather than the fact that they are all Nepali women or identify with the female gender (which they don't). The LBT identity, then, is another identity which cuts across the broad concept of "woman" and recognition of these identities further invalidates the idea of homogenous "Nepali woman". Mitini claims an allegiance to and identification with no overarching identity other than that of biological females with alternative sexual orientation though they do express the desire to "link our [sic] to those of others struggling for social and economic justice" (Mitini pamphlet). They acknowledge that other groups are marginalized without attempting to homogenize identities and completely integrate their cause into a larger idea of homogeneously marginalized personhood. In their pamphlet they also state that, "As LBT women not limited to any one group in Nepal, we serve any LBT people who need our help and therefore our constituency is as diverse as Nepali" (Mitini pamphlet). Not even this narrow subset of "woman" based on sexual orientation is constructed as homogeneous within itself. The facet of similar sexual orientation, in opposition to mainstream sexual identity, makes them identify with one another in some ways yet they recognize diversity even in this small group.

C) ABC/Nepal

ABC/Nepal, while acknowledging that overall, the power of women in Nepali society is less than that of men, because of its focus on women who have been trafficked or are at risk, simultaneously acknowledges that some women are more susceptible to violence than others and therefore are not a homogeneous group. For ABC/Nepal, rural women are more susceptible to trafficking than urban women and likewise, uneducated women are more susceptible than educated women. From my interview with administration officer Kalpana Kafle, it seems that ABC/Nepal's main method of addressing these risks for certain women is through economically empowering them. Many women receive professional training in order to learn skills that allow them to generate income quickly and empower themselves. ABC/Nepal focuses mainly on women who are disempowered at the level of their family. Disempowerment at this level is the main type of disempowerment that can lead to trafficking and according to Kalpana, the source of this disempowerment is that women (especially rural women) have no authority in their own lives or in the home and no education which further leaves them powerless. At the same time, they are so overloaded with work that they cannot leave the home. This creates an unending cycle of disempowerment which ABC/Nepal attempts to break through providing adult education classes and awareness raising activities among other things.

On the other hand, in one of their publications, ABC/Nepal points out that sometimes merely the fact that an individual is a woman, regardless of other possible identities, makes her more vulnerable to violence but the prevalence of

sexual power games in dictating human interactions. They say, “Both trafficking in women and girls are situated in a continuum of sexual exploitation that perpetuates and continually reinforces the subordinate status of women” (ABC/Nepal 1). “Other forms of sexual violence such as rape, incest, genital mutilation, sexual harassment, pornography as well as sex tourism and the bride trade” are all cited as examples of sexual power that subjugates women (ibid 2). “They [women] are subject to discrimination in social, economical, legal, and political sphere. Obviously, they are vulnerable to more criminal victimization, both inside and outside their homes” (ibid 3). This survey is important to consider because while attempting to deconstruct “woman” it is important to remember that sometimes the identity of “woman” is the only identity of a person that makes her vulnerable to certain situations. While it is invalid to falsely homogenize this population, sometimes “woman” is indeed the identity that creates a vulnerability in a person, regardless of her other identities.

D) Citta Himalaya

Citta Himalaya, founded by American Michael Daube and currently run by partners in the USA and Spain while managed in Nepal by Nepali Prakash Bhurtel, has opened the Tej Women’s Center in Bhaktapur which seeks to employ women from “unstable backgrounds”(Bhurtel 11/14/07). When I asked Prakash for clarification of what constitutes an “unstable background” he named “poor”, “widow”, and “prostitute” as women who would fall under this category. Likewise, founder Michael Daube states “I felt when I started this program, to have an air of unity within the community as well. I hired a few women that were

of good social standing to work along side of the majority of women living in dire poverty. I felt it was a healthy way of bringing the community together through barriers and differences and helping them also understand and bring them closer to reduce suffering within the community” (Daube 11/21/07). He felt that “this helped prevent the stigma of the center being only for “those women” and a possible target for expulsion by the community under the guise of a Maoist mandate. When I started this program in the rural areas it was important to mix the women in the communities for stability and support. Also, I find its a healthy situation in the city as well because it helps the women feel part of something more than a charity for the poor and empowers them in ways I feel are very successful” (Daube 11/21/07). Besides acknowledging the socio-economic difference between women and the importance of trying to eliminate discrimination based on these differences, Michael also recognizes differences in the situations of women which cause them to become a part of the lower socio-economic and stigmatized group. He writes, “About the women hired from poverty. I try to focus on women that are abandoned, single, low-caste, rescued prostitutes and victims of human trafficking” (Daube 11/21/07). In response to my question, “Which women/what kind of woman need development programs? Why?” he writes, “I feel there is an overall stigma that women face in developing nations. Nepali culture faces these problems as well. But there are sub-strata to the societal dilemmas faced by women within the culture. Rural vs. Urban, Caste, education, marital status, etc.” (Daube 11/21/07). Michael, despite being a Westerner shaping this discourse through his organization, acknowledges a

variety of identities that can create an unfavorable situation for a Nepali person and that these problems are often compounded by the problem of being a woman in a society which traditionally oppresses women. Michael's acknowledgement that the problems of women differ depending on the individual is evidence that at least some of the development discourse is definitely shifting towards de-homogenizing "Nepali woman". A practical example of this shift, embodied by Citta Himalaya is the fact that despite the fact that they seek to hire women of varying circumstances, all of the women currently employed there are Newar (Malla, Karuna and others 11/30/07). The fact that these different backgrounds cut not only across the category of "woman" but also that of the caste identity "Newar", is further evidence that women cannot be homogenized based on surface identities like gender or caste.

E) Women Acting Together for Change (WATCH)

WATCH, as an organization, has made a commitment to work with the marginalized and disadvantaged population. In a personal interview, WATCH representative, Sharmila (who has been working with WATCH since its founding), clarified that there are lots of different identities which could fall under the heading of "disadvantages" in Nepali society such as being HIV positive, being a woman, or being part of a "backward community". WATCH's aim is to promote a judicial and equal society and to help women "to have a life like others, like man" (Sharmila 11/16/07). Women's positions are constructed by religious and cultural norms which tend to hold women back as they are expected not to talk to those outside the family, to stay in the house (as in some communities it

would be impolite for a woman to do so) and to help children and family. WATCH feels that these norms have caused most rural women to lose confidence and self-esteem and therefore WATCH seeks to help these women realize that they are human beings, just like others. One exercise in creating a change in mentalities which led to the humanization of a marginalized group took place within the WATCH office itself. One of the first girls hired as WATCH staff was a young girl living with HIV which she had contracted after her sister and sister's husband sold her to an Indian brothel. When WATCH heard of this girl, she was in danger of dying in police custody. WATCH persuaded the police to release her and agreed to hire her. At first, other staff members wouldn't even sit in a chair after she'd occupied it, illustrating a formerly widespread ignorance of the causes and consequences of HIV in Nepali society. WATCH built her self-confidence at the same time as trying to educate other staff members about HIV and as a result, more people are aware of the truth of the situation and she has been humanized to them (Sharmila 11/16/07).

According to Sharmila, in some communities (she gives the example of Tamang) women are not thought of as human beings. If a wife falls ill, she is not taken to the hospital. The women who are subject to this mentality in others begin to embody this identity in their own thinking. They think that they should be strong in their bodies and have immunity and power to withstand diseases. "We are women so we have to care for ourselves", is a mentality which arises in order to try and avoid "wasting" their husband's family's money. Sharmila thinks this dehumanization is taken even farther than not caring about the sickness of

wives. She thinks that there is also the mentality that the death of a wife is “not a problem” because men can just take another wife. While she talks of these problems of problems of “women” she also specifies that these are largely problems of rural, largely illiterate communities. These, then, are the communities which WATCH seeks to work with.

WATCH decide to address women by forming groups to talk with them. The groups are not formed to provide services but to organize the women and provide a platform for discussion as well as an environment conducive to sharing experiences. These groups are formed at the community level. When enough groups were formed, WATCH formed a federation to oversee the groups and to mediate between the groups and WATCH. This federation consists of members elected from within the women’s groups. Because of this structure, WATCH allows women to speak for themselves, to decide their own needs. This helps WATCH to fulfill its commitment to humanizing women and boosting their self confidence and self esteem as well as providing skills training when it is desired to further empower women in an economic sense (Sharmila 11/17/07). It seems that letting women not only speak but also act for themselves, is an ideal way to promote an idea of individual identities being able to show through homogenized categorical identities. In WATCH’s case, it seems that they are structural de-homogenizing women to a greater extent than linguistically de-homogenizing them, but these are steps towards de-homogenization, nonetheless.

F) Maiti Nepal

Maiti Nepal's programs specifically target survivors of trafficking and those they feel are at the greatest risk of trafficking. Because of this specific focus, Maiti's programs are generally directed at a very specific part of the female population of Nepal. For survivors of trafficking, Maiti provides hospices, rehabilitation centers, and income generating training followed by help in reintegrating into society and their family. For those who are at the greatest risk of trafficking, Maiti provides two types of awareness programs: student training/orientation and a community safety net program. Maiti seeks to use these awareness programs to train certain individuals and, in the ideal situation, to have these individuals spread awareness to others. According to Maiti, the subset of female population that they describe as those at greatest risk for trafficking, are girls seven to twenty four years old (age specific), especially those living in districts that border India (geographical considerations). Risk is further increased in illiterate women (educational background) and those from unfavorable environments fraught with gender discrimination (Acharya 11/16/07).

G) Nepal Disabled Women's Association (NDWA)

During my meeting with members of NDWA, they put forward the idea that though disabled women are most certainly more marginalized than disabled men, their marginalization is not simply based on the fact that they are women. Teeka Dahal repeatedly expressed the idea that people regard them as "only disabled women" and therefore not capable of doing anything. Though Teeka herself is educated and could theoretically hold all kinds of jobs, her label as "disabled" prevents people from putting their faith in her. This lack of faith persists at a

structural level as well as the women believe that they cannot possibly accomplish any projects on a large scale because of their categorization as “disabled women”. For this reason, the money they need for projects is denied them by donors.

While structurally, the idea of NDWA is homogenizing of a sub-category of women-many very different types of people can fall under the category of “disabled”(physically disabled, visually impaired, hearing impaired, mentally disabled)-in practice, the members of NDWA have no illusions about all disabilities being the same. When talking about different people or themselves, the members often specified to me exactly what kind of disability each person had. Also, since disabilities are something that cut through other socially constructed identities such as caste, the membership should be heterogeneous in this respect as well. I became skeptical of this when I found that all the women I spoke to were Brahmin/Chhettri and began to suspect an example of identity discourse completely dominated by the socially empowered top of the caste hierarchy. However, they did tell me of a woman they knew who was about to be married. She was a Dalit woman without a hand who was about to enter into a love marriage with a non-disabled Tamang man. Perhaps this one example cannot prove that these elites do entirely dictate the discourse of this organization but it at least shows that people living with disabilities who have differing social identities are acknowledged by these women and even talked about as a kind of equal, in that they are all living with a disability-an identity that brings them together by cutting across other boundaries of identity.

H) Shakti Samuha

Shakti Samuha is a “self-organization” which was founded by survivors of trafficking in order to help other survivors of similar situations. Shakti Samuha recognizes that the needs of survivors of trafficking are specific to this group of people. They differentiate themselves not only from women as a generalized category but also from other women who are or have been sex workers. For example, when I asked Januka Bhattarai whether or not Shakti Samuha works with the *Badi* population (a Dalit caste traditionally recognized as born into prostitution) she replied that they don’t work directly with them though they sometimes network with organizations doing such work. She clarified that the difference lies in the fact that prostitution is an occupation for Badi people while survivors of trafficking were forced into such work, often after facing extreme emotional and/or physical torture. Also, while some organizations focus on trafficking almost solely as a means of sexual exploitation of women, Januka points out that sex work and sexual slavery are not the only components of slavery. There are other survivors of trafficking who faced equal torture in order to be made to work in different realms than just sex work, such as for the circus (Bhattarai 11/29/07).

The needs of trafficking survivors differ from those of other women because survivors often need psychological support and may sometimes also have to cope with being HIV positive. Both being a survivor of trafficking and being HIV positive can lead to extreme marginalization of women beyond that which other women face. Survivors are often rejected by their family and society and

therefore must overcome extreme stigmatization in order to find a job or have recourse to legal action, among other things (Bhattarai 11/29/07).

The special facet of Shakti Samuha's work is its status as a self-organization. All of the staff members except for two technical support staff are survivors of trafficking. The philosophy underlying a 'self-organization' is that the people creating discourse are in the same category as those subjected to the discourse and are therefore in the best position to create said discourse. Identification of individuals with each other throughout the traditional vertical disconnects of an organization because of a common identity will hopefully create a discourse that is sensitive to the actual situation at the "ground level". In the past, when "woman" was considered a homogenous identity, "woman" was seen fit to create discourse for other women, regardless of the particularities of "woman" creating discourse and "woman" being subjected-"woman" was a homogenous concept. Because of this, oppression and false homogenization were just as rampant as in Western imposed discourse. The development discourse was in the hands of urban, upper class, Brahmin/Chhettri/Newar women who applied their discourse to a totally heterogeneous mix of individuals (divided by caste, geographical considerations, educational background, etc) claiming a common identity solely based on their shared female sex. The fact that this self-organization was created to address those with a very specific shared experience (which creates a very specific and distinct identity with all of its attendant problems) rectifies many of the former problems of development discourse which was validated solely by the fact that it was "woman" who both created it and was subjected by it.

D) Shakti Milan Samaj

Shakti Milan Samaj is another self-organization which had its birth in Shakti Samuha. When certain members of Shakti Samuha realized that women living with HIV have their own set of issues separate from issues of women who are survivors of trafficking (both because women living with HIV are a sub-category within survivors and because not all women living with HIV are survivors of trafficking) these women decided to form their own organization which was registered one and a half years ago to specifically address issues of women living with HIV. Shakti Milan Samaj provides a hostel for HIV positive women who have been sent out of their homes and where they can learn income generating skills so they can become economically independent. A specific of HIV positive women's lives is the need to get timely treatment via ARVs. Shakti Milan Samaj provides funding for those who cannot afford the needed treatment as well as free HIV testing for those who feel they may have been exposed (Sedair, Dayabati 11/29/07).

Many of the women in Shakti Milan Samaj have been infected by their husbands. Despite the fact that they have done nothing wrong, if they contract HIV from their husbands, HIV positive women are still subject to as much stigma as if their condition were a result of their own bad character or poor judgment. Sometimes women even face more stigma than their husbands whose risky behavior infected them both (Struggles, Shrestha). According to Dayabati, there is a huge difference between the treatment of men and women with HIV, even within their own family. It is not uncommon for the husband's family to blame

their daughter-in-law for infecting their son instead of the other way around.

There is also still a widespread misunderstanding of HIV in Nepal. She told me that even in educated families, sometimes an infected woman is not allowed to cook for fear she will cut herself and will consequently infect others (Sedair 11/29/07).

Despite their focus on the struggles specific to HIV positive women, Shakti Milan Samaj also reaches out to the wider community through awareness programs. I was able to observe one such program, a street drama. With the help of a translator (Mina Rana) I was able to understand that the drama was about both a young man who abused his wife and a daughter returned to her mother after surviving trafficking. In the drama, the young man was a man educated in the city who still abused his wife. The message seemed to be that anyone can be a victim of violence and that it is not the woman's fault. Also, when the daughter was returned to her mother, her mother at first disowned her. She found it shameful that her daughter had been sold by her son-in-law and didn't want her husband to find out. The same young man who abused his wife championed the cause of the trafficked girl. A social worker came onto the scene and pointed out the hypocrisy of the situation. She pointed out that, even if you consider this girl as a sister and your wife as not, your wife is still somebody's sister. This drama seemed to be an attempt to humanize the plight of all women and that line-that everyone's wife is somebody's sister, summed this message up well. While being a bit homogenizing in nature, the use of a street drama which was by necessity context specific, individualized this particular story and therefore, instead of

reading it as homogenizing, I would read it as being an attempt to create wider human empathy among all people, regardless of very different situations.

Talking to Women about Women:

While interviews with these different NGOs served to illustrate a de-homogenization of discourse at a structural level, it is also necessary to look at discourse on an individual level to further deconstruct homogenizing discourse. Because these organizations each target a specific subcategory of “woman”, they also at times construct homogeneous group identities. While looking at cultural norms and historical precedents to inform ideas about the politics of certain group identities is important to policy making, it nevertheless comes with a certain homogenizing component. Now, for example, instead of the homogeneous identity “Nepali woman”, we have the homogeneous identity “Nepali widow”. For this reason, I sought to take my research one step further, to talk to individuals about their lives and how they view themselves and other women. It is at this stage of my research that I began asking women, “*tapaaiiko bichaarmaa, Nepali mahilako jivan kasto chha?*”. Overwhelmingly, the responses I got were usually either *gaaro*, hard, or *dukha*, sad. One woman that I asked this question to responded with *thik chha*, pretty well. I was surprised by this and I said so. Immediately, another woman present contradicted her saying that she was only speaking for urban women. In the rural areas, women’s lives are still very *gaaro* (Worec 11/30/07). Some women I spoke with gave me extended life histories of themselves. I present some of their stories here in an effort to de-homogenize the *gaaro* of different women. Though the women whose stories I present here may

fall into one or another of these smaller subcategories of identity that have already been discussed, they are not to be taken as representative of this subcategory.

Each story should be read as the story of an individual who is in and of herself, a unique intersection of many different identities. I agree with Mary Des Chene in her statement “I suspect it may be inevitable that conclusions that seek to make the particularities of life illuminate general principles of cultural phenomena will be found to be thing, for they necessarily strip away detail, idiosyncrasies, even cultural specificities” (Des Chene 39). For this reason, I will not attempt to make any of these “thin” conclusions. Each woman has a story all her own which is hers and only hers. And while certain general principles of her cultural, historical, and religious context may influence her story, her story cannot be seen only as a manifestation of these influences. To read them as such would be to reduce her to a symbol and thus deprive her of her personhood.

On Alternative Sexual Identities: Mina daai

Mina has identified himself as transgender (female to male) for six years now. His family, still living in Kavre, doesn't know about his identification as transgender though they know he has a lot of “girl friends”. He moved to Kathmandu and with this geographical move, had a new birth into his open transgender identity. He worked for some time at a women's organization in the city but found that this organization was not supportive of his identity. He claims that though this organization was supportive of women going into the army or the police force, they refused to support him and only gave him negative feedback. They used to give this feedback in front of an assembly of his co-workers,

claiming he was “spoiling” other girls. This organization demanded that he changed his habits and though he tried he found he could not-it was just in his nature and no amount of trying could make him change himself.

After leaving this organization, he went to work in a hotel but after his sexual identity was discovered, he lost that job. Finally he asked himself, “How much do I tolerate?” and went out to search for his own rights. Now he works with Mitini, an organization that supports LBT individuals of Nepal. At Mitini, he found a partner, a co-worker who was a lesbian. They recently broke up because of the jealousy of his partner. He feels that this is a problem many transgender individual face in such circumstances because they must work with many other women, often provoking the suspicion and jealousy of a partner.

When someone asked the question, “How did you know you were this way” he replies in a collected manner that when he became mature he realized he was only attracted to women. He’s not offended by the question because it’s a commonly asked question. He actually thinks it’s a good question because he can give an answer that he feels comfortable with and thereby inform people of the situation. By asking such a question, people give him a chance to speak for himself, a chance for him to make them understand a little bit of his life.

Misunderstanding seems to be a large problem surrounding lesbians in Nepal. Many of the stories of he tells involve violence which occurs as a result of society’s unwillingness to accept lesbians. In Jhapa, a lesbian woman’s partner’s family asked the UML to beat this woman. She was subsequently beaten and taken to the police station three times in one day. Mitini intervened afterwards

and met with UML leader Madav Nepal at which time he guaranteed she wouldn't face any more violence. But the violence had already been perpetrated. Two members of Mitini, Sarita and Nikita (partners) were kidnapped by Maoists at the request of Nikita's mother. The Maoists held them for two to three months and kept them separated in an attempt to break them up. Five years ago, Mira and Laxmi (the couple who founded Mitini) found themselves in another violent situation. When police intervened to protect Mira from her family's attempts to break the couple up a stand off occurred between police and Mira's family members. According to Mina, Mira's family was ready to kill the police who were protecting her.

Mina himself seems very aware of the power of labels. He has decided to keep the name Mina, a traditionally female name, and though he didn't explicitly say it, it seems like a way to point out the emptiness of labels. If an individual who identifies as a man can continue to call himself Mina, what hold does such a gender normative term still have over the identity of a person? Mina also tells us that he is sometimes afraid girls will come onto him whom he doesn't want to flirt with. His strategy makes use of traditional constructions in the Nepali language in order to avoid such awkward situations. If he sees such a situation possible coming up, he takes the initiative to address such a girl as "didi" or "bahini" (big sister and little sister, respectively). As he and my translator explain, by calling someone by these familial names, one posits oneself in a very specific, non-sexual relationship to this person.

When asked another question, “do you identify more with a Nepali identity or with some international identity as lesbian”, he replies with an answer he is obviously passionate about. “I am a Nepali lesbian”, he answers. Lesbian is not the only important part of his identity, being Nepali is important too. However, “Nepali lesbians” have no rights as such because they are not recognized by the government. When they press for rights, political leaders always put them off with empty promises. Mina believes that until this recognition is forthcoming, “Nepali lesbian” will be only a label. Without recognition of their identity as citizens of Nepal, Nepali lesbians cannot truly be Nepali. They become refugees within their own country.

(Mina, 11/28/07)

On Living with HIV: Sarita Shrestha

Sarita’s life is full of *gaaro* (hardship). It is a term which comes up repeatedly in our interview and a term I’ve become used to hearing. It’s a term I can pick out easily now, despite my mediocre Nepali. Sarita has been HIV positive for seven years now. She contracted HIV from her husband who was an IV drug user. Five years ago, she began working with the self-organization Shakti Milan Samaj where she still works as a counselor. Three years ago she was widowed when her husband died of an AIDS related infection. Sarita is currently raising a five year old son on her own. When she tells us about him her face lights up. He is healthy; the virus was not passed on to him during childbirth.

Sarita’s family has disowned her as a result of her HIV positive status. Though they live in Bhaktapur, an hour bus ride away, she has not seen them in

six years. Nor do they consent to seeing her son. She is forced to live *chutē*, apart. She lives in Assan by herself in an apartment while her son lives in a boarding school in Patan. “What is your biggest challenge?” Aarti, my friend present for the interview asks her. Her answer is a laundry list of hardships—adherence to treatment, having a proper diet, paying her rent, raising her son. All of it is gaaro.

Sarita usually can’t even talk about her gaaro outside of Shakti Milan Samaj because HIV is so stigmatized in Nepal. It’s hard to even talk about sex, not even to mention a disease related to sex. The women’s lives are very difficult and they face discrimination. It’s even hard for these women to even hold a job in this society.

(Shrestha 11/24/07)

On Living with HIV: Dayabati Sedair

After Dayabati finishes telling us about Shakti Milan Samaj, Mina (who accompanied me to translate my interviews) tells her that I’m doing research on the gaaro of Nepali women. Dayabati has much to say on the subject. Life is hard in Nepal, because it is a poor country. Dayabati’s life is especially gaaro because she’s been a widow for eight years and has to care for a 95-year-old mother-in-law and a ten-year-old son. She’s only been on ARV treatment for two years. I “can’t tell how much hardship I have”, she tells us.

Dayabati contracted HIV from her husband who used to work as a guide for foreigners. He used drugs in Thamel and consequently contracted HIV. She found out too late that he had HIV, she had already contracted it. When she took

her husband for treatment ten years ago, even the doctors wouldn't touch him. When nurses wouldn't touch him, Dayabati became afraid and decided she should hide. She wouldn't tell anyone about her disease.

Two years ago, she began to suffer from prolonged diarrhea. The situation progressed to a critical stage before she finally told a doctor at Teku, that her husband used drugs and had died of HIV related infections. She asked them to test her. Her CD4 count was only twenty one. Her doctor told her she would die. She had no money for medications and so resigned herself to death. "I wasn't worried to die because all people are born to die", she says. But she was worried about her son.

Finally, her number came up in the government queue for ARV and she began treatment. Five to six months later she found Shakti Samuha. She was very happy to find other women also living with HIV. Now she is a board member of Shakti Milan Samaj and she is not only happy but earning money. Through her work in Shakti Milan Samaj, she helps to raise awareness of the truth of HIV. In the village, she tells us, people still think HIV can be transmitted by talking. People still mark plates so they don't have to share. Many girls become crazy because of this emotional violence and sometimes even counseling fails.

Dayabati considers herself lucky. Her *aaphno paariwar*, her natal family, still loves her very much. She can even go in the kitchen and cook, unlike some other HIV positive women. Her marriage was an arranged one so her family doesn't even blame her for having a bad husband that gave her HIV. Her mother-in-law

is old and dependent so she can't say anything negative to Dayabati. And luckily, her son is completely healthy. "That's my happiest part", she says.

(Sedair, 11/29/07)¹

On Different Marital Statuses: Mina Rana

"If I stay alone, I might feel that my sadness is the biggest", Mina tells me. But then, maybe other people feel the same way about their own sadness. So she tries to be happy for herself, but it's not easy. "And to be a single mom", she shakes her head, "not joking".

"agulTole haaneko kukur bijulidekhi tarsinchha", Mina teaches me a Nepali phrase. "If you hit a dog with burning firewood then he will be scared of lightning", she explains it to me. Life hit Mina with burning firewood when she was sixteen years old. The boy she'd been friends with since childhood was going down a bad road and his parents thought marriage would be able to bring him back. Because of the close relations of their families, his parents chose her. She was young; she thought she was in love. But still she did not want to get married. "If you don't marry me, I'll kill myself", he threatened. He used emotional blackmail to get what he wanted. His family asked for her repeatedly until her parents consented. She soon found that attraction doesn't equal love, marriage doesn't necessarily reform alcoholics, and daughters can also be sacrificial goats.

When Mina was twenty two years old and working for the Peace Corps, her husband's death left her a bidua, a widow. "I was so worried what to do", she says. Peace Corps work is not stable, it depends on volunteer feedback. She was

¹ Dayabati also wrote her story for the Shakti Milan Samaj publication "Struggles", which story is included in the Appendix of this paper. This version of her story is based only on a personal interview, and may have slight differences from the version presented in "Struggles".

a young mother. And so she worried. "Think about the village widows", her director would tell her. She was educated and could find a job. Not so for the village widows. Nevertheless she thought, maybe the village widows are better off. They don't think as much about the future. They are concerned with what to eat for the next meal. They work hard physically but I was mentally disturbed. Soon after her husband's death, his father remarried. He and his new wife sent her back to her maiti, her natal home. For many, this would be shameful. For her, perhaps it was better than staying.

Mina is branded as a widow by society. With this label come certain interactions she's come to expect. Everyone naturally tends towards pity instead of encouragement. They say "poor you" instead of saying "look how well you're doing". Despite the fact that she now has a stable job and can provide for herself and her son and the fact that she's worked hard to reach this point in her life, no one is standing behind her, not even her family. Widows are a sign of bad luck in Nepal and being a widow, she feels she makes people sad. She doesn't wear white in order to make her status less obvious to people, so they don't have to feel they've been visited by bad luck in seeing her. But she also doesn't wear red.

Mina is also the subject of much unsolicited advice. Some people say "men are hell, they're disgusting" but many others say things like "you should remarry. You are alone. Girls are nothing without their husbands. You need a friend". Despite such urging, even from her friends, twelve years later Mina still hasn't remarried. Every time she sees a man, she remembers her past. Every time she sees a man take a drink, she sees her husband. She is afraid of the lightning.

(Rana 11/29/07)

On Different Marital Statuses: Anar Basnet

“In paper, there is land for Anar Basnet”, she tells me. But if she asks her family for it, she will create such an upheaval that she will no longer be able to maintain relations with them. Anar didi uses this very personal example to illustrate her assertion that women cannot make any decisions for themselves. Here she refers to the land that she is, by law, entitled to for having reached the age of thirty five without marrying, but she has other land as well. The house we are sitting in is hers as well. She tells me that this is her own house is her own; she didn’t take a single rupee from her parents to build it. Yet if she expresses a desire to sell it, she is immediately the subject of all kinds of indirect pressure from her family. She cannot even control the property she paid for with her own earnings because she is a woman.

Anar didi tells me that she is a member of a very political, liberal family and yet, she cannot stand up to the male members of her family without inviting ill feelings from others. When a widowed auntie of hers requested her share of property from their mother’s will from her brothers, they tried to refuse. “It was some kind of game they were playing. They gathered and talked about Auntie and property”. When Anar didi asked her uncle what he would do if *his* daughter became a widow, he became angry with her for pointing out the error of his ways and obligating him to give her auntie her fair share of the money. They were also trying to assert that her Auntie had plans to go away and marry another man. “Who’s that man?!” she demanded. “Name him”. This they could not do and so

they had to give her the money. This sort of thing was not only a problem faced by her auntie. They used to do it to her too. It's easy to blame a single woman's character, she tells me.

We talk more about women of different marital statuses. Anar didi tells me that a married woman's life often depends on a few things. If her husband makes money, her life is safe. If she gives birth to a son, her life is safe. In the Terai (more so than in the hill areas) if her family gives sufficient dowry, her life is safe. With all of these conditionalities, women seem to live a very tenuous existence. If a woman gives birth to a daughter, she is encouraged to have another baby. Recently, with the rise in sex-check ultrasounds, there has been a concordant rise in sex-selective abortions of female babies. Development in science and technology can create disadvantages in women's lives, Anar didi observes.

Eventually we touch on a personal subject. Aarti, again sitting in on an interview with me, asks if it would be okay to ask why Anar didi never got married. Anar didi consents to answer. In 1985, she was supposed to be married. Her parents had arranged a marriage for both her and her sister at the same time. She decided instead to finish her masters and establish herself as economically independent. She spent the year of 1986 "walking". She couldn't find a permanent job because of her family's political background. Her ego wouldn't allow her to ask her parents for money so she sold all of her gold jewelry. She was determined to be economically free, something she'd learned to value from the friends she lived with in a hostel while studying. She eventually got a position

with the Peace Corps, though this position was not permanent. She traveled for seven years doing Peace Corps work and after a time, her marriage age had just passed her by. Even breaking free of the structure that is seen by many as the basic unit of domination in Nepali society, marriage, has not given her a trouble free life. When a woman lives alone, she is subject to scrutiny from all sides. If a male relative comes to visit, her neighbors suspect immoral behavior. Like she said before, it is easy to blame the character of a single woman. And even being a property owner has not lessened her burdens. She tells us she has actually created a burden by building this house. All of her family assumes she has money when the only financial asset she has is her house. And this everyone else tries to control.

(Basnet 12/6/07)

Conclusion: Is De-Homogenization Always a Good Thing?

From the conception of this project and throughout my research and this paper, I have sought to do one thing: provide a voice to Nepali women in order to deconstruct the false homogenization which Western discourse has imposed on “Nepali woman”. Through talking to organizations and individuals, I’ve found that women already de-homogenize themselves by associating themselves with a number of different identities derived from economic status (rich/poor), geographical considerations (urban/rural), geographical considerations (Terai/hills), different sexual orientations, marital status (single/married/widowed), educational background (uneducated/educated), survivors of violence or not, HIV affected or not, to name a few that I came

across. While I still believe very strongly in the need for such de-homogenizing projects, it is time to ask a question that began to rear its head somewhere in the middle of my research: is de-homogenization always a good thing?

Firstly, there it is important to look at the practical repercussions of program implementation in such a segmented discourse. Many of the organizations I talked to, though they targeted different segments of the population, had very similar programs. Income generating skills training and adult literacy classes seemed to be two of the most common, along with awareness raising programs. I wonder if, with so many organizations implementing similar programs, there is a lot of overlap in target populations. If so, it would seem that it would behoove organizations to work together in order to reach the largest number of people for the smallest amount of resources expended. Overlapping income generating skills training and myriad adult literacy classes might not, on a macro scale, be the most efficient use of resources.

Secondly, as is evident in my list of segmented identities, many of these new identities are constructed as binary opposites, just like man/woman were in the past. Constructing identity in this way involves a constant renewal of the concept of the “other”. Because of this radical segmentation of women then, it seems that some people have forgotten the importance of finding common ground and working together. According to some students of development studies, some of whom are currently working for an NGO, women are not ready to stand up and be united on women’s issues. Women are too invested in their own specific demands to work together for the common good and therefore, the idea of women

uniting is simply an idealistic dream. “There is no empathy between groups” they say. They’re all like wolves wanting a piece of the steak. The more individuals you try to involve, the more issues they raise (Hamin-Buckman, et al 11/23/07). Anar Basnet seconded these feelings when I asked her about the presence of effective networking between groups in Kathmandu. Women dominate women, she told me. And everyone’s egos get in the way so they can never work together for very long (Basnet 12/6/07). I even saw this inability to extend human empathy to the “other” played out during one of my interviews. Because I do not want to villainize any of the groups I worked with, I will describe this interaction as anonymous. While I was talking to some women about their work, a man obviously in need of some help came up to us. He did not ask for money, he did not beg. He instead said hello, sat down and began drawing me. He’s going to ask you for money, they told me and told the man several times not to interrupt us. He decided to content himself with drawing me from the side view since he couldn’t get me to look at him while I was talking to the others. After he finished the picture he handed it to me and motioned toward his mouth, a motion that I’ve come to recognize here as meaning “I’m hungry; I need food”. I asked the women how much to give him. “Five, ten” they said. I dug out a ten rupee note and handed it to the man. He motioned his thanks and walked away without making any more fuss. After he left, the women asked to see the drawing and passed it around, laughing at it and making fun of his endeavor. As they did so I wondered, what would have made this man’s plight more human to them? If he had been a woman, would they have felt more empathy? If he had been well

dressed, would they have felt more empathy? What other identities would he have had to embody in order for them to recognize that he too is human and he too, was marginalized in some way-so marginalized that he was probably living on the streets? (Organization X 2007).

And so I'll end with the question: when does de-homogenization go too far? When does our concern with individuality take over our capacity for human empathy by clouding our vision to the similarities in every person's human condition? Is there a way to assert our individuality and maintain human empathy? Finding this balance is perhaps a new challenge which organizations should set for themselves, especially those which wish to create a more judicious and equitable society.

Appendix:

A) Poem

It's so Painful in my Whole Heart
Mamta K.C.

It was so painful in my whole heart, when I broke my bangles.
Why did you go to stab my heart with a knife?

Today it's nothing to take the ornaments from my nose and ears
Its so painful in my whole heart when I'm enduring this sad time

What was my mistake that now I am guilty?
Why are my bangles, my tika, my sindur, my beaded necklace taken away?

For all people I am like unburnable firewood
It's so painful in my whole heart to have my bangles and beaded necklace grabbed
away

You brought me here to this remote village and left me here
Today, I am have to stay crying with carrying your name

How fast you've died.
It's so painful in my whole heart to wear white clothes

Life is moving like the pottery maker's wheel
It's so painful in my whole heart to miss my life friend

(printed in "Struggles" published by Shakti Milan Samaj and translated from the
original Nepali by Mina Rana on December 6, 2007)

B) Life Story

Goma Came As A God
Dayabati

I got married when I was fourteen. The boy was the "puja doers" only son and educated so my family didn't ask my permission and gave me in marriage. My husband used to work with white people in Thamel. How can I know what he used to eat [what kind of drugs he might have done]? And he walked with white women. I took him many places [for treatment] and he stopped drugs many times. I argued with him lots of times but whatever I did, nothing happened.

When I talked to him he used to say "it's my job, what should I do?!". Sometimes I felt it happened because he was a guide. I didn't know I would get this much huge disease. He passed away five years ago. I used to fight with him when he was drunk but because he used to have lots of addictions, so when we got in fights, he used to get faint instead of beating me. I used to wait for him every night for the whole night. I used to have desire to sleep [spend time] with him. I used to worry about him. Maybe somebody killed him, maybe the police caught him. In my [husband's] house, if my husband doesn't come for a whole night or two or three days, he used to say maybe you said something to him [blame her] but they never thought he was wrong or with another woman. One year before he died, doctor said that because you have this disease so don't give birth to a baby. At that time I was really scared to check myself. No medicine available. Again, if I had this disease, other people would laugh at me. I used to think if I gave treatment to him, I could make him live for two to four years. I took him to Teku hospital many times but they used to yell at me, "he's going to die! How many times you are bringing him here!". Even after that I didn't check [myself]. There isn't any bigger pain than this, to miss husband although trying to make him live. But I thought, but nothing will happen even if I worry.

Three years ago, I had continuous diarrhea for a year. I went to Teku but they would send me back the next day. They would check for awhile and then when I came back home, immediately vomiting and diarrhea would start again. I thought, definitely there is something wrong. Then, myself, I told them my husband had AIDS, he died because of that, maybe I have that thing too. Doctor said maybe you will die today or tomorrow, he even gave a date. When I heard that, I couldn't speak for three days. Everyone in my home and my parent's home got to know these things. I was on the brink of death. Couldn't eat. Continuous diarrhea and vomit, diarrhea and vomit. Another day, one doctor came and looked at me and said, day before yesterday, she wasn't like this so now maybe she's in last stages. That night they gave me seven bottles of saline [translation sic] water [IV] and the next morning my voice came out [I could talk a little]. So everyone was shocked when I talked [because they thought I was going to die]. Even the nurse said, even if you have this disease, don't worry you won't die. Now we have medicine for that. I found that my condition necessitated medicine. CD4 was only twenty one. When I asked how much it costs, some people said one thousand rupees and some people said other things. But how to eat [the medicine]? And then one day I should die, so why not now? I thought this way. Then, when I said I don't have money, they put me in line [government queue for medicine]. Doctor said you need to have medicine, if you don't have money, bring a letter from any women's organization. I didn't know any organization so for five or six months I walked around. Because of an allergy, my face became like that of burned people-very black. I went to the doctor but they weren't ready to treat me. Also they didn't give me a bed. However [connotation of hardship], I stayed in my room. In the first months of the year, the government added people to the list of those who would receive medicine so then I got my turn. Now, I have medicine. That medicine worked really well on me. At the same time, I met Goma. So the money (two to three hundred rupees) which I get for fruits [from

her fruit shop] was like two to three thousand for me. All of the people discriminated against me but I felt that someone is there for me. I have okay talking relation with those who know about me. My family [most likely husband's family], they don't come frequently but they don't hate me. When my husband was alive, they could eat food, have clothes. Now they know my condition but I think maybe they don't hate me but they can't get things to eat or wear [here] so they don't come. I have an eight year old baby that doesn't know anything [about disease]. If he gets to know his father was like this or mother is like this, maybe it will have a bad effect on his mind so I haven't told him anything. But when on television there is HIV program, I am interested to watch and so I watch. He comes up to me and asks, you are so interested, do you have that also?

Selections from inset printed as a copy of a hand written letter:

- two babies miscarried at five months before son was born
- we found out in 2056 that he had HIV but I didn't use a condom to protect myself because I didn't want to outlive my husband
- I became almost crazy after my husband died because of grief
- my relatives gave advice to be strong because I should look after my son and mother-in-law and they agreed to help
- then I came to stay close to my brother's place in Gaurighat (from Thamel)
- I started fruit shop and mother-in-law's hand broke-hard to do all this so had to leave shop
- I had a really painful time because of gallstone and had to have operation

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