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The Hands Behind the Handicraft: How “Fair” is Fair Trade?

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The Hands Behind the Handicraft: How “Fair” is Fair Trade?

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Abstract

Nepal's male-dominated society, tradition, and culture have left its female population to experience an undermining of their gender socially, politically, and economically. There are fewer opportunities for women in education and in the labor market. In an effort to encourage equality and decrease levels of the widespread poverty existing among Nepal's female population, thousands of Fair Trade skills training programs have been established. By teaching simple tasks like weaving, sewing, and dyeing, such programs strive to teach those who would otherwise struggle to sustain themselves to perform tasks that will allow them to earn a living. Research and observation of the Women's Skill Development Organization in Pokhara revealed that Fair Trade skills training organizations are highly beneficial. Although the skills taught by Fair Trade organizations are nontransferable and often only applicable to the organization providing the training, the tools are provided that allow for self-sustainability, financial independence, and personal empowerment so beneficial that the non-transferability is inconsequential.

Dedication

To the women and administration of WSDO: Thank you for welcoming my visits, sharing your time, and for telling your stories.

Acknowledgements

First, thank you to Anup and Ramkali Khadka. Thank you for introducing me to the women of WSDO and for helping me translate and appropriately understand all of the interviews. Also, thank you for what you do for the women in Pokhara. After getting a first-hand look at just a few of the hundreds of lives that you have touched, I have become increasingly impressed with your dedication and hard work.

Secondly, I want to say thank you to the women of WSDO who took the time to share about their lives and experiences with the organization. Your honesty, openness, and ability to help me feel welcome is was greatly appreciated.

To my Pokhara Pal, Junes: Thank you for being there to brave all the new restaurants and “friendly” hotel owners, to hide from the hailstorms, and to do some quality bonding with Meredith and McDreamy. I would have never made it through weeks on my own without you, or without the blue bag peanuts. Duty calls!

And finally, to my dearest friend, Buko: Thank you for letting us steal you away from your mountain abode to hike up never ending stairs, get followed by a bloodied dog, and have the best Easter morning of my life! Oh, and *aajabholi* true friends share fleas.

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In Nepal, lifestyles, opportunities, and socio-economic status cannot be defined regarding the country's population as a whole. Rather, Nepalese society is largely based on the Hindu caste system; one wherein ethnicity, class, and gender all play important roles in defining one's social status (Dangol, 2010). For women in Nepal, the affects their country's tradition and culture have left them to experience an undermining of their gender socially, politically, and economically (Clark, 2010).

Women in Nepal have fewer opportunities than men for education or employment, which feeds the flame of inequality in the household; simultaneously encouraging the obstacles separating them from exercising personal rights. According to the United Nations Development Program in Nepal, "The overall adult literacy rate in Nepal stands about 57%, but for women it is less than 30%" (UNDP, 2011). In more rural areas, these numbers are significantly lower, and the pattern of women receiving much less education than their male counterparts is consistent. In one study done, approximately 63% of female Nepalis are illiterate compared to a significantly lower 37.1% of males. It was also discovered that, following lower secondary education, the number of females enrolled in schools significantly decreases in comparison to males (Pandey, 2006).

Following the pattern of women's lack of educational opportunities, chances of women achieving a reputable income are even slimmer. Those who *do* have jobs typically work only steps outside their own home as farmers. Census data exposes that only 16.5% of the Nepali women who are economically active are doing work outside of agriculture; drastically different from the 46.7% of

males who make their living beyond the fences of the fields. Rather than wasting their time on hard labor that hardly brings in a profit, men make up the majority of the “paid sectors of the economy,” employed in areas from teaching to carpentry or masonry (Pandey, 2006). Most women are forced to find jobs within the informal sector, restricting any chance for income availability to jobs with low payment, long hours, and poor conditions.

“Over 70% of women workers (in Nepal) are confined to self-employed, unpaid and low-wage informal sector work with few formal job opportunities. The problems faced by women in the job market stem from a number of factors including stereotypical roles confining women to the household, limited access to education and skill/vocational training, exploitive and unsafe working conditions, and discriminatory wage rates.” (Clark, 2010).

With significantly fewer women receiving education or participating in jobs, men in Nepal are viewed as the “breadwinners” and the main powers of the familial unit. This typically requires women to be fully economically dependent on their husbands, fathers, or brothers. Rather than having the opportunity to contribute to the family financially, women are expected to take care of all familial responsibilities on a maternal level, being responsible for children, cleaning, and household upkeep. “They carry the weight of the caste system, the pressure of the dowry system, and the guilt of being a burden to their family” (Clark, 2010).

As Nepal’s male-dominated society and economy continues to leave many women in the shadows, Nepali women are often considered some of the poorest of an already poor country. Their lack of decision-making abilities or control combined with their financial struggles often contribute to many

“personal factors, including low literacy skills, self-esteem, financial security, and level of awareness of their rights” (Endeley, 2001).

But perhaps hope for Nepali women to regain newfound power and confidence has finally arrived. Since Nepal’s reinstatement of a multi-party democracy in 1990, there has been a newly implemented focus on poverty alleviation and sustainable development through inclusion of various different peoples. This also means that women have begun to be included in the “development process” as opportunities for employment and learning new skills are providing empowerment (Dangol, 2010).

In recent years, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and nonprofits striving to change the face of women’s opportunities in Nepali society have been springing up all over South and Southeast Asia. Some unofficial estimates propose that there were more than 40,000 NGOs operating in Nepal as of 2009, the majority of which have been organized to aid the female gender (Dunham, 2009).

A successful tactic NGOs and nonprofit organizations are using to bring relief to poverty-stricken societies is the introduction of Fair Trade practices to the market of handicrafts, foods, and other goods sold by marginalized producers struggling to achieve financial stability. Fair Trade offers a means by which to achieve poverty alleviation through sustainable development by creating opportunities for producers to receive higher wages and avoid being marginalized by the standard system of trade. Therefore, success would mean helping them “overcome barriers to development” by providing a new path of self-sustainability (Fairtrade Foundation, 2011).

Conveniently, the concept of Fair Trade has become widely popular as customers worldwide are able to spend money on things that they would be buying anyways, with the knowledge that their money is supporting a “good cause” at the same time. “Fair trade is a niche; an ‘alternative market’” (Lewis, 2006, 139). This contemporary system of trade is one that involves a newly implemented focus on the people behind the product rather than the advancement of the company involved. Partners’ aim in such companies is to help bridge the gap between producer and consumer (Brown, 1993, 156). The consumer is to be told the truth (not only about the product but also about its producer), providing a sense of transparency meant to eliminate the separation between the two in order to establish “fairer” methods of transaction. When it gets down to it, Fair Trade is a partnership based on a series of standards that seek greater impartiality in the trading world. By achieving a better system of “fairness”, there is a contribution to sustainable development “by securing the rights of marginalized producers and workers” (Fair Trade Foundation, 2011). “Fair Trade... highlights the need for change in the rules and practice of conventional trade and shows how a successful business can also put people first,” allowing the producers to receive higher wages (World Fair Trade Organization, 2011).

In order to seek out those who are really in need of producer-focused employment and financial assistance, Fair Trade organizations often implement skills training programs. Usually targeting women, those who face the most marginalization, such programs provide a way for participants to learn a skill (such as weaving, sewing, or dyeing) that can give them increased employment opportunities, the ability to sustain themselves on their own, and consequently, a whole new sense of self-confidence and empowerment. Such skills training

organizations have found their niche in Nepal, where extreme poverty among women is a chronic problem, particularly in rural areas.

On the surface, it seems that Fair Trade and skills training programs provide a favorable situation wherein the consumers can feel good about themselves and their contribution to Third World poverty alleviation while the producers are simultaneously achieving promotion for their products and a new sense of market “fairness”. But admittedly, there is a risk that Fair Trade organizations are solely about the business’ progression and not the producer’s struggle. Skills training programs also run the risk of teaching nontransferable skills that trap women, forcing them to work for the organization because they don not have any other options. In the end, are Fair Trade skills training programs truly beneficial for the producers involved?

Also, does having a source of income truly change the life of a Nepali woman? It takes time for a society’s attitude to change, and “Nepal is caught between its traditions and the call of modernity” (Aarti, 2010). Though women are continuing to play a large role in Nepal’s progressing development, society’s expectations for roles to be filled in the home have not lessened, and struggles remain problematic.

Objectives

Through a series of interviews and observations of working conditions, the objective of my research was to observe the workings of a Fair Trade organization to distinguish whether or not receiving a skills training is truly economically beneficial and personally empowering for the women involved. It was a priority to see Fair Trade skills training through the women’s eyes; learning

how they viewed its affects on their lives and assessing whether their involvement provides an improvement in their daily lives, or if it is a mere “trap” that teaches nontransferable skills that are not productive enough to prove worthwhile.

Location of Study

The study took place in Pokhara, Nepal, near Lakeside. Research was based at the Women’s Skill Development Organization near Srijana Chok, a non-governmental organization “that provides vital opportunities to the most unfortunate local women” (About WSDO, 2011). I spent time observing the women in their work environment, discussing company inner workings with the administration, and interviewing some of the women who have received the organization’s training and are now permanent employees. By spending time with the workers and questioning them with respect to their work and lifestyle changes subsequent to joining WSDO, a more accurate determination could be made concerning whether or not working as a part of a Fair Trade organization truly benefits the producer.

Methodology

Research was conducted through in-depth, open-ended interviews with five women who are members of a Fair Trade organization’s skills development program, Women’s Skill Development Organization (WSDO). WSDO is a nonprofit NGO that is a member of Fair Trade Group Nepal and the International Federation for Alternative Trade (IFAT) and has made its goal to extend its Fair Trade practices to “employ women who are most in need” (“WSDP: Women Skills Development Project”).

The women were interviewed regarding their lifestyles before their involvement with the organization, their expectations of what their work would be like, and how their work lines up with those expectations as well as how it has shaped their current lifestyles. I sought answers to questions relating to their ability to earn enough through their employment in order to make a large impact on their family and lifestyle. By questioning multiple women, I was able to analyze the organization's impact through a consensus from multiple viewpoints.

Initially, I began by making contact with Women's Skill Development Organization's executive director. After establishing a tentative meeting time, I traveled to the WSDO site located near Srijana Chok in Pokhara. During my time there, I spent many hours observing the women's work, conversing with them, and taking photographs of the tasks they were completing. During break times and in between their projects, I interviewed five of the women to learn more about each of their lives.

Prior to beginning my research, I had not planned on including interviews from the administration in addition to the ones I was conducting with the women who have received training. But after talking to the trainees, I decided that it was important to know more about the organization's objectives and how they are being carried out. WSDO's work seemed to be successfully charitable for the women employed, but it was also important for me to find out if its focus is on the business' own success or if women's empowerment is their concentration.

Therefore, interviews of the women who have received skills training and are current employees were followed by meetings with the organization's executive director and two other administration members concerning the organization's goals, challenges, and future prospects for its workers. By

speaking with the leaders of the organization, I was able to make a more direct comparison of the organization's goals to the women's experiences.

The biggest challenge faced during the study was in conducting the interviews with women who had received training from WSDO. Being that none of them spoke any English, questions were presented in Nepali and notes were taken by hand while a recorder was also used to document their answers. A member of the organization's administration also provided translations of the women's answers during each of the interviews.

In order to ensure the protection and privacy of the women involved, I requested verbal consent to use the information they gave, and none of their real names were recorded in my notes or in this paper. Additionally, I asked for verbal consent before taking photos, and verbal consent was also obtained from the administrators of the organization for their names and information provided to be used. Lastly, interviews were conducted in a side room on the program site in a private setting away from the other workers.

One factor that could have had an impact on the results of research findings was the presence of a translator. As previously discussed, one of the organization's administrative staff members offered his assistance in translating during our discussions. Admittedly, this could have had an effect on the women's answers if they felt uncomfortable regarding what this particular administrator thought and information could be skewed.

It is important to note that conclusions established in this research concerning Fair Trade skills training programs were based on the observation and questioning of a single organization. Hence, the results – though reflective of skills training at WSDO – may not be reflective of all skills training programs.

Additionally, measurements of happiness and satisfaction are subjective, therefore results were based on personal understanding and interpretation of the answers given.

Research Findings

Women's Skill Development Organization Operations

According to the Women's Skill Development Organization's executive director, Ramkali Khadka, the goal of the organization is to empower women through skills training and employment opportunities. "By having money here (in Nepal) women receive respect in their family and have the chance to be treated equally" (Ramkali Khadka, 2011). Though many females in Nepal face great difficulties finding available jobs, WSDO provides skills training for disabled and financially struggling women - teaching them how to sew, weave, and dye fabrics to be made into the final products that are sold. Once women have received the training provided, they transition to positions as regular staff members who work for WSDO to produce Fair Trade crafts to be sold both locally and across the globe.

Presently, there are approximately 300 women involved in the organization, including those who are currently receiving training as well as the "regular" staff members. Women at WSDO are instructed in sewing, weaving, and dyeing (Anup Khadka, 2011). When a woman first arrives for training, the director takes time to assess her work abilities. Weaving is typically the first skill to be taught since it is a traditional Nepali craft that many women are already familiar with, though each new trainee is assessed on a personal basis, and what she starts with depends on her prior knowledge and what she is comfortable with

doing. For many women, the initial training of more simple skills like weaving or sewing is followed by more complicated organizational tasks including working with quality control and export (Toda, 2011).

Each week, there is one day designated as a time when women from the community are able to come to WSDO, explain their personal need for the training and job opportunities available, and leave their contact information (Ramkali Khadka, 2011). Once the organization's board committee inspects the individuals' issues, a vote is taken to determine whether or not to accept the potential trainee into the program. Priority is given to women who are economically disadvantaged and those with disabilities that may hinder them from other job opportunities. Regrettably, the list requesting training has been well over 800 names long, but WSDO is not able to provide training and jobs to all of the women who are substantially qualified to receive it.

In order to better accommodate the lives of its workers, WSDO runs under a system of operation that allows women who have already received training and are working as permanent employees to work both on-site and in their own homes. Depending on the tasks being done, they have the opportunity to simply come to the program site to pick up materials that can be completed when time is available. Some choose to do nearly all of their work this way, while others complete all work at the site, and still others choose to do a combination of the two (Anup Khadka, 2011).

Each year, WSDO holds an annual program during which prizes are awarded for women in each department. There is a design competition and a festival, and all of the women have a great time dressing up and enjoying each other's company. Besides its festivals, WSDO also organizes a general assembly

that is held biannually that allows all of its members gather together in order to share their opinions. (Anup Khadka, 2011).

According to Ramkali, “this organization is like a family” (Ramkali Khadka, 2011). Whenever one of the women is involved in a wedding, festival, or any other occasion, the whole community of workers is invited. And if someone is sick, the director deliberately makes it a point to check up on them and see how they are doing. Every so often, Ramkali also visits the villages that the women are from, getting to know each of her employees on a personal level and questioning them about their progress. By conducting regular visits, she is also able to notice when or if there is a visible difference occurring in the women’s lifestyles. For instance, Ramkali explained that when she visited one woman before offering her a position at WSDO, the soon-to-be trainee did not even own enough teacups for the visitors who had arrived. Understanding and willing to be accommodating, each guest took a sip from the same cup and passed it along, sharing it amongst the rest of the group. But more recently, Ramkali is proud to report that the same woman’s home is “very nice, very clean, and very well-stocked” (Ramkali Khadka, 2011).

Women’s Skill Development Organization Trainees and Employees

Interviewing five different women who have received training at WSDO and are now permanent employees of the organization, I came to find that much of the information they provided reflected very similar results. First of all, there was a consensus among all of the women interviewed that they feel a sense of community within the work site and amongst its employees. For instance, Vinu,

an WSDO employee of the last two years, described her time spent at the work site as something she looks forward to each and every day. Unfortunately, afflicted with Leprosy, illness has limited Vinu to doing most of her handicraft work in her own home. But she still looks forward to finishing with each batch of materials she is given just so that she can return to the work site. “I’m happy, that’s why I’m working here,” she said, proudly.

WSDO’s strong sense of community is also strengthened through the help of its executive director, Ramkali Khadka. To Mira, a second interviewee, Ramkali serves as an important mother figure. Mira views WSDO as her “stronger house,” stronger than her own home where she is faced with fears of her husband leaving her. With the work that WSDO has provided, she knows that she can support herself and use the help of the support system of an entire “family” of women who are always standing right behind her.

A second item of consistency in interviewee’s experiences was their lack of expectations regarding their employment at WSDO. Most simply come to the organization in search of a stable job that will provide them with an income they can rely on. When women first arrive, they expect to receive salaries, but beyond that, presumptions of their time spent at WSDO do not exist.

Mira explained that before her arrival, her only knowledge concerning WSDO was what her friend told her, that they “make bags and provide jobs for women”. It sounded like a fine arrangement, though the means of work did not really matter to her. All she was truly in search of was the respect that comes with earning your own income and wages. Fortunately, with the help of WSDO, Mira was highly successful in achieving her goal. Her income level has greatly increased, and though she still has to tend to the daily tasks she is responsible for

at home, she finds the work well worth it and says that she enjoys being busy.

Without WSDO, Mira's life had been drastically different. Besides completing few menial tasks at home, she spent the rest of her time sitting without agenda; watching helplessly as her family struggled to pay for even the basic necessities in life. But fortunately, Mira's life has taken a turn for the better and she is proud to be a strong, empowered member of her family. She also explained that she is happy to be a part of something that so positively represents her culture. "I am proud to be part of an organization that is making truly Nepali products, handmade in Nepal by Nepali women."

The job provided by WSDO is one that provides its workers with a stable income, a sense of community, and a means by which to achieve personal empowerment. WSDO has provided jobs to hundreds of women who would otherwise not have any kind of income to contribute to their family. The majority of the women I spoke to did not do any kind of work besides household tasks before they joined the organization, and though others did previously hold jobs, the income that was generated was not substantial enough to have an affect on their lives.

For instance, I also spoke with Manisha, a woman who has been a part of WSDO for the past thirteen years. Manisha explained that she had been in need of a job "due to the male-dominated Nepali society." She did not do anything during the day, though it was not due to laziness or lack of desire to be busy with a job. Rather, there were not any other jobs available for women in her area. With her husband being the only income generator of the family, she was required to request "small money" from him every time she needed to make a purchase. And since her husband's income was low, each day was a desperate struggle. She was

never sure if they would be able to make ends meet, but “now life is much easier,” Manisha explained. Rent is consistently paid and the house is consistently stocked with food; a concept foreign in her life previously.

Mira’s story is a bit different. She did work before receiving skills training at WSDO, but her self-employment was unable to bring in enough income to have a tangible affect on her family’s life. Her time was spent knitting hats for tourists, but without an organization to sell them through, she was making a fraction of the money she does now, and it was a fraction of the money that was not enough to keep her financially afloat.

Saphal is another member of WSDO who had a job before her arrival. Before moving to Pokhara, she lived in a village where she worked in the fields as a farmer. Though she did technically provide herself with a source of income, she explained that the work required of her was difficult, tiring labor that had “no earning”. Now, things are different. Working as an employee of WSDO for the past twenty years, she has been able to save up her earnings to pay her children’s school fees and move into her own home.

As is the case with Saphal, another consistency among the women who work at WSDO is their ability to afford school fees for their children, something that was not a guarantee for all of them previously. Often a trying aspect of an unemployed Nepali woman’s life is the common inability to have any control over the division of their family’s finances. Now, with the women contributing to the family’s income, many women at WSDO are now able to control how a great portion of their family’s money is spent. Hence, they also have the ability to make sure their children are given high priority.

When asked how motherly responsibilities are attended to in addition to the work required at WSDO, all five interviewees gave similar replies. Working at WSDO is a challenge when one is also trying to raise children, and the responsibilities of being a mother and worker in the household are not lessened with the addition of employment. But, by working partially out of their own homes and putting in a substantial amount of hard work, the women are able to tend to all of their required tasks. Saphal explained that she brought her youngest children to the WSDO office with her until they were old enough to stay with her husband in his store. Overall, WSDO employees are in agreement that it is possible to balance their lives as “working mothers”, and in the end, it is well worth it.

Many of WSDO’s employees don’t have plans to leave the organization unless their health forces them to stop working, but there are some who do have plans for their lives following their time at the nonprofit. Mira explained that she cannot afford to remain in Pokhara permanently, so she plans to move back to the village where she grew up. She will continue making the handicrafts she has learned to create at WSDO, and if all goes well, she will teach the other girls in the village to do the same.

Manisha also had ideas for how she would spend her time after WSDO. Eager to continue working as an empowered woman, she told of how she would like to open her own small store where she would sell rice and food, “like any other typical Nepali market.” But owning her own business would mean more for Manisha than it does for the typical Nepali man who owns a corner market. For her, it would mean having the ability to own a business under her own name without anyone else’s help. She hopes that the money she has been able to earn

through her work at WSDO will be enough to springboard her into a life of self-sustainability, explaining that the money she earns here is what can “get her on her feet.”

Discussion/Analysis

With the combination of the community activities organized by WSDO, the motherly attentiveness of Ramkali, and the close friendships that are displayed, WSDO displays a successfully established pleasant working environment for its trainees and employees. Though it might not be part of the written guidelines of the World Fair Trade Organization, this positive environment is a vital part of Fair Trade organizations’ operations. Without it, the focus on the producer that Fair Trade fights for would be futile.

The organized activities that WSDO holds are geared toward its employees and are meant to provide an enjoyable time and a stronger sense of community. The orchestration of such activities is a good way for WSDO to emphasize the importance of its workers and to build on the already strong bonds between employees. Furthermore, the director’s visits to her employee’s homes allow her to establish a sense of sharing and openness that adds to the women’s positive experience. “They are able to say more about the organization in a private setting and I ask for their feedback,” Ramkali explained.

The annual meetings held for all WSDO members also provide a sense of structured openness. By having a specific time and place where opinions can be shared, questions can be asked, and ideas can be suggested - not only does WSDO provide itself with more opportunities for self-improvement - but it also

displays its administrators' desires to be servants to the workers involved. It reflects the idea that WSDO was not established for the personal gain of its founders, rather, it was created to help assist those in need with a way to achieve self-sustainability.

This goal of helping women develop into self-sustaining individuals has been highly successful. First of all, WSDO has an established system of application and board review that enables its administration to provide help to women who are truly in need of it. Women with an illness or disability are given the highest priority, and every woman who works for WSDO is in high need of the financial assistance. But regardless of the help provided, WSDO's true success is not in its ability to give charity. Rather, it is in its aptness in providing women with the employment opportunities to support themselves with their own work and to live as self-confident, empowered individuals.

Though working for WSDO means the women who are employed must learn to balance the tasks they are responsible for at home, there is ample evidence that the women find the trade-off well worth the extra work. For one thing, each of them greatly stressed their enjoyment of being busy. Though Nepali society runs on a considerably slower pace than most western cultures, the women I spoke to all agreed that they would rather keep busy than be at home without things to do. Rather than merely being "boring," the lack of a job leaves these women to stand by helplessly as their families struggle financially.

Since the women who receive skills training are in extreme financial need and often suffering from disease or illness, the impact that their income has on their families and lifestyles is markedly positive. To begin, the extra money is substantially helpful on a basic economic level wherein the extra income simply

provides a means by which rent can be paid easier, food can be purchased consistently, and children's school fees can be paid with ease. But beyond the obvious financial help that the extra income provides, it also allows for a useful way for the women of WSDO to gain empowerment through increased familial power.

Vinu told of how, before providing a portion of the family's income, she had been unable to choose how any of the money her husband earned was spent. Unfortunately, her husband wasn't responsible enough to save up money for the family, and he had a habit of taking out loans that he was unable to pay back. Working at WSDO, she now finds herself looking forward to prospects of a new future. She hopes to save up her money to purchase her own land, and she plans to work at WSDO until her health doesn't allow her to continue.

Though skills training programs like WSDO's clearly provide their workers with additional income, there is a risk with any skills training organization that the skills women are being trained in are non-transferable, ensuing a very serious problem of "trapping" them, forcing them to work for the organization that provided the training without any alternative options. Admittedly, learning how to weave and sew small handicrafts does not do much to widen the possibilities of trainees to get work elsewhere. On one hand, the women may be able to use such skills to open a small tailor or to sell handicrafts on their own, but it would not be accurate to let that be a reason to call such skills "transferable".

As administrative worker Anup Khadka explained, when the women receive their training, they are not necessarily able to use it again. "The skills they learn are only useful at WSDO unless they want to open their own

organization. Otherwise they could use (their) sewing training (to open) a shop” (Anup Khadka, 2011). But since WSDO is a nonprofit organization that relies entirely on its own income, it must be a sustainable business, so training is done according to the product line. Currently, the product line is limited to bags, bracelets, and small toys.

Although skills taught by WSDO are decidedly nontransferable (ones women cannot use in other locations) the skills’ non-transferability is not an issue since it is more important that the women who are receiving the skills have a job in the first place. The women who are currently working at WSDO are working there because their alternative would be unemployment or an alternate job with an income level so low that their labor would be futile, and working with WSDO provides economic stability that outweighs any issues of non-transferability.

Conclusion

Nepal’s age-old traditions and culture have left its current population living a life wherein gender, ethnicity, and class play a significant role in determining one’s social status. For women, their gender has been undermined socially, politically and economically. With fewer opportunities for education and a strong expectation for them to fulfill the responsibilities of the maternal role in the household, women face great difficulty in the labor market. Few women work outside of their own homes, and those who do receive substantially lower wages than their male counterparts. As a result, the females of this poor country are often considered the “poorest of the poor”.

In an effort to combat the chronic problems of poverty that women face in Nepal, NGOs and nonprofits have begun to implement Fair Trade skills training programs. Most often targeting women, these programs teach their participants to learn skills they can use in their work for the affiliated Fair Trade organization. By learning such skills and becoming producers of Fair Trade products, women are simultaneously being given the tools to become self-sustaining, financially stable, and empowered individuals.

WSDO is a Fair Trade organization that offers skills training for financially struggling and disabled individuals in Pokhara, Nepal. Through its director's attentiveness and community activities, WSDO has established a positive environment for its employees to learn weaving, sewing, and dyeing. Once the women have completed training, they are given the opportunity to become permanent employees receiving steady pay for their work.

The women who have been fortunate to be a part of WSDO experience significant increases in familial income generated, and hence a great deal of lifestyle changes. First, since the women are given the opportunity to contribute to the money being earned by the family, they are also empowered with the ability to help determine where their money is spent. Though many WSDO employees had no control over their family's finances before being hired, today many of them are able to put priority towards their children's education, make essential purchases of food and necessities, and prudently save their earnings.

The increased control over familial finances allows the women at WSDO to experience overall changes in their family dynamics. For one thing, they often receive increased levels of respect and the opportunity to have power over family decisions, even those that aren't financially based. Secondly, the women have the

ability to support themselves and work as entirely self-sustainable individuals if need be. These changes also have a hand in a change in the women's demeanor, increasing their self-confidence and pride of their work.

Though the employment provided is exponentially beneficial, the skills taught in skills training programs like WSDO's are nontransferable. Women cannot use them to become self-employed, or even to work for many other organizations, though in the end, the lack of flexibility of the skills being trained for is outweighed by the program's effectiveness in financially and personally helping the women of WSDO.

But there are still questions to be asked. Could there be a different product line that would allow WSDO to be a sustainable nonprofit while also providing alternative employment options for the women who receive training? If women were able to receive training, then move on to be self-employed or to work for another organization, perhaps more women could be trained and given financial assistance and personal empowerment.

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Khadka, Anup. 2011. Interview with staff member, April 10, 2011.

Khadka, Ramkali. 2011. Interview with executive director, April 18, 2011.

Toda, Yuko. 2011. Interview with volunteer, April 13, 2011.

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Title of ISP: The Hands Behind the Handicraft: how “Fair” is Fair Trade?

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