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Himali Didi: Finding the Strength in the Women of Nepal

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SIT Graduate Institute - Study Abroad

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HIMALI DIDI

Finding strength in the women of Nepal

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Cover photograph by Emily Cheung. Frost-covered flowers at Paanch Pokhari.
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Photograph by Emily Cheung. Radha and Maya at breakfast.
ABSTRACT

The intent of this project is to bring to light the role of Nepalese women in adventure sports; a phenomenon that has existed in Nepal for the past few decades but has been widely unappreciated, if not unnoticed. In this study, women from various adventure companies in Nepal were interviewed to reveal the experiences and obstacles these women face in these occupations during their lifetimes. Some of them agreed to share their stories.

Their journeys have taken them on (quite literal) climbs that have proven their physical strength and made tremendous moves to achieve gender equality in Nepal. Through this occupation, women not only gain the training and knowledge associated with outdoor sports, but in addition gain experiences, education, and finances that leads to further empowerment. These opportunities open doors in their lives that would have otherwise remained closed. Hopefully, the progress these women have made can be used as a model for female empowerment worldwide.

METHODOLOGY

Research for this study was conducted throughout the month of November 2015. Research areas included Kathmandu, Sindhupalchowk, and Pokhara. The study focused on members, clients and staff from the following adventure sport groups; Seven Summits Women Team, Everest Women Treks Pvt Lt, Himalayan Adventure Girls Pvt Lt, and Three Sisters Adventure Trekking Company. A total of fifteen women were interviewed, their ages ranging from twenty-one to fifty. When possible, multiple interviews were held with the participants. In most cases, extended periods of time were spent with the participants. For example, I was able to spend a full week with the guides at Everest Women Treks and an additional week with the guides at Himalayan Adventure Girls. During this time, I was able to observe the guides plan and organize treks, travel with them to trekking sites, spend time with their clients, participate in trekking, share a living space with the guides, and in some cases meet their families and stay in their homes. As a young woman spending time with other young women, I found myself very lucky to be able to fully immerse myself into their lives in such a short span of time. The times where I was able to become a sister instead of a researcher were the times that the best information was given to me.

All participants in this study verbally consented to the use of information obtained in interviews and conversation for the purpose of this research project. Although none of the participants requested to remain anonymous, in the case where information given was determined to be sensitive, names were changed to protect the identity of the participant. All formal interviews were recorded with an audio device and subsequently transcribed into documents. Any informal interviews that had not been scheduled were either recorded in a field notebook during the interview or at the end of the day.
A BRIEF HISTORY

The Himalayan range. Home of the tallest mountains on Earth, and to the local people of Nepal, home of the gods. In the past, folklore discouraged anyone from setting foot on the mountains, and out of respect, the local people left their slopes undisturbed for years. It was not until the nineteenth century, when the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India was conducted, that the elevations of the highest peaks in the Himalayas were determined. Subsequent surveys confirmed that behind the closed borders of Nepal, the most challenging peaks in the world remained unclimbed. Among them, Chomolungma or Sagarmatha, (in Tibetan and Nepali respectively) and known by many others as Mount Everest, was found to be the highest of all. The lure of this challenge attracted explorers from all over the world. In 1949, when Nepal opened her borders to foreigners, countries leapt at the chance to claim a spot on the summit.

In 1953, the British secured the annual permit to send an expedition to Everest. Tenzing Norgay of Nepal and Sir. Edmund Hillary of New Zealand were selected as members of the team to attempt the summit. That May, the pair became the first to successfully stand on her peak. Due to hypoxic conditions, they only had fifteen minutes to bask in triumph before returning to the safety of camp, where they were greeted with congratulations and hot soup. Their success sparked a call to adventure, and since then, hundreds have flocked to Nepal to try their own luck on the mountains.

A relationship between the foreign desire to explore the Himalayas and the locals’ familiarity with the terrain blossomed. From this interdependence grew the foundation of the local economy. Tourism began to flourish. Nepalese men, who initially had no interest in mountaineering, slid into the expedition lifestyle with ease. With their bodies already conditioned to the high altitude and steep slopes, they began to make their living working for foreigners as porters and guides, and were paid heftily compared to their previous earnings as farmers and traders. Some went on to be part of great expeditions; their successes were celebrated, and failures were mourned. Their stories spread, but the story of the Nepali women was usually omitted. Back at home, women were left alone waiting with uncertainty for their husbands and sons to return from the mountains.

The traditional role of a woman in Nepal is contained by strict gender roles. Family structure in Nepal is patriarchal, and can sometimes be polygamous, where a man may take more than one wife in his lifetime. Women are expected to marry early, to mother children, and to tend to the fields and animals owned by the family while the men find work as traders and porters. Cultural expectations allow Nepali men much more freedom than women. For example, by no means would it be acceptable for a father to remain at home and care for the children while a mother ventures into the wilderness to lead a group of strangers up a mountain. However, such an occupation is allowed and even encouraged for Nepali men.

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3 Ibid.
WOMEN OF THE MOUNTAINS

Nepali women were not the only ones excluded from mountaineering in the Himalayas. In a realm dominated by men, foreign women also encountered difficulties while immersing themselves into trekking. It was not until the 1970s that women, both foreign and Nepali, were able to truly get a foothold into mountaineering. Coinciding with the feminist movement in the United States, foreign women began pioneering the first all women’s expeditions into the Himalayas. For example, the 1978 Annapurna women’s expedition, which was thoroughly documented and described in Arlene Blum’s account Annapurna: A Woman’s Place.

However, examples of Nepali women in the mountains during this time period are rare. There are legends of a female porter on Everest in 1933. Nicknamed Eskimo Nell, she was the wife of one of the porters on the expedition and “had been the driving force among Sherpas... her caustic tongue had spurred the others on to carry to even greater heights”. Another record of Nepali women in the mountain notes that “two daughters and a niece of Tenzing Norgay climbing Cho Oyu in 1959”4. It would seem that by using familial ties, Nepali women were beginning to trickle into the tourism industry. Their presence became more prominent in the seventies, when many of the all-women’s teams would request female porters to assist with their expeditions. However, at the time, it was still very difficult for a Nepali woman to find acceptance in the field.

In fact, many male guides and porters were opposed to hiring Nepali women out of a concern for the safety of the expedition. In Nepali culture, it is believed that a woman’s menstruation is impure. The presence of a menstruating woman on the mountain would risk angering the gods, who some guides believed controlled the success of the expedition. Thus, some thought that hiring a woman would mean disaster for the entire team. In addition, many porters and guides chose to hire men instead of women because women were unable to carry as much weight and would only cause complications when mixed with men5. These reasons only alienated Nepali women further.

Another forty years after Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary made their legendary climb, a Nepalese woman finally set foot on the summit of Everest. Pasang Lhamu Sherpa was thirty-two when she returned to Everest for a fourth attempt at the summit6. Pasang came from a family of mountaineers in Solu Khumbu, the region surrounding Mt. Everest. As a young girl, she grew up watching women from foreign lands come and climb the giants in her backyard. Now, as a young woman, she dreamt that women from Nepal would begin to do the same. Pasang already had a few impressive experiences under her belt, including

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5 Ibid.
summiting Mont Blanc, the highest peak in the Alps. Now, in 1993, she was shooting for the highest of all.

“I am doing this to inspire other women,” she explained in a statement to the press prior to her Everest expedition. However, in order for Pasang to attempt the summit, she had to obtain the necessary permits. When she applied, she hit a wall. The government refused to issue a permit to a Nepalese woman. In the end, her husband, Sonam Tshering Sherpa, and his brother were forced to “negotiate back room deals.” Pasang was forced to raise $50,000.00 (the equivalent of a tourists fee) in order to receive a permit. She overcame her obstacles, and in May of 1993, became the first Nepalese woman to stand on the highest mountain in the world. But bad fortune and bad weather hit the team on the descent, and days later Pasang’s body was found lying in a bed of snow below the summit.

Nevertheless, she had succeeded in her goal and set an example. Pasang immediately became a national hero and was praised across Nepal for her achievements. From then on, her story was taught in schools, and many girls found inspiration in her journey. Although some found her decisions controversial, her actions blazed the trail for Nepalese women to pursue their dreams and find themselves in places where women may not traditionally be found. Along with her inspiring story, Pasang Lhamu Sherpa left behind three children; one of whom would adopt the name Pasang Lhamu Sherpa Akita and go on to climb Everest and become the first certified Nepali female Mountaineering Guide. Although Pasang may have been lost, in her wake, other young women found the space to blossom.

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9 Ibid.
Still, in 2007, only seven Nepali women had climbed Everest; mountaineering remained in the domain of men. Shailee was working as a journalist at the time when she came across a call released by the Climber’s Club. The call was for any Nepali woman from any background to come and join an expedition to Everest. “Growing up in Kathmandu, my school didn’t have any sports for girls,” she explained, “it was that missing component that drew me to try adventure sports.” Shailee was one of ten to sign up. These ten women represented the great diversity of Nepal; all had come from different regions, they were all different castes, they all spoke different tongues, and all had different stories. Together, they embarked on their expedition as the First Inclusive Sagarmatha Women’s Expedition, in 2008.

“We didn’t go there knowing each one of us would be on the summit. For us, at least one teammate on the summit would make this a successful expedition,” she recalls. Although ambitions, the team was realistic. Most of the women had never experienced serious mountain climbing before. Before embarking on their expedition, the women took a basic mountain training course to prepare. For Shailee, this training course was her first exposure to trekking. Her team drove out to Langtang in the midst of monsoon season. It was summertime and the mountains were lush with greenery and waterfalls skipped down cliffs. “I got lost in nature,” Shailee remembers, reminiscing on her first trekking experience, “I remember on the following morning I could feel from my hips down that everything was so sore, and almost paralyzed. I thought, Can I move? Have I lost my ability to move? Oh my god, everybody knows I am a member of this Everest expedition. I’m this young woman, this girl, who’s going to climb Everest and on the first day of this trek, I become paralyzed!” After some stretching and a bit of anxious pacing, Shailee discovered that she was not, in fact, paralyzed. She would go on to finish the trek and training course, and in a few busy months of organizing and planning, she would be ready to face her next challenge: Everest.

The morning that Shailee stood on Everest with the rest of her team, it was clear that the past year of hard work had paid off. “We even danced a little bit,” she admitted, thinking back on the adversity the team had faced. “We met all these people on our journey who would doubt us because we were women. But you know what, the trail doesn’t become easier for me because I’m a woman. Everest doesn’t discriminate against gender.” Upon their return to Kathmandu, the team was greeted at the airport by a crowd of supporters. Shailee rushed through the masses, looking for her parents. She found her mother with the rest of her team, hugging and congratulating the girls as if they were her own daughters. The

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13 Shailee Basnet. 10/19/15. Lazimpat, Kathmandu. 32. Coordinator of Seven Summits Women Team.
15 Shailee Basnet. 10/29/15. Lazimpat, Kathmandu. 32. Coordinator of SSWT.
team took a moment to celebrate, but before long they were up and running again, with their sights set on the future.

Not wanting to lose the momentum that their mission had gained after the major success on Everest, seven of the women decided to stay together. In 2009, they formed the Seven Summits Women Team, with the goal of becoming the first all-women’s team to climb the highest summit on each continent\(^\text{17}\). Each mountain brought its own challenges. On Aconcagua, in Argentina, Shailee succumbed to frostbite two days below the summit and was forced to turn back to base camp while her teammates pushed on. In Antarctica, the team had difficulties raising the two million in USD to fund the expedition and unfortunately, three of the seven team members were unable to go and climb Vinson Massif, including Shailee\(^\text{18}\). Nevertheless, the team persevered and in December 2014, their goal was finally reached; the last peak had been climbed, and they had become the first all-women’s team to complete the Seven Summits Challenge.

Their success was monumental, and their story made international news. Once again, Shailee and her teammates took the time to evaluate their impact, “As a team, we’re constantly talking about how we can make this platform more meaningful and useful, especially for young women and girls. While we are proud of this achievement, our focus is more on what is next,” Shailee explained. Upon their return to Kathmandu, the team immediately began giving motivational talks to schools all across the country. They told their story of a dream that unfolded into a journey of a lifetime, and encouraged the students to follow their own. In particular, they focused on female students and hoped that by setting an example, young girls would be less intimidated by the idea of breaking cultural norms.

Their interest having been provoked, young women began to approach the team asking how they could become involved. In response, the team began to sponsor the training of young Nepali women who showed interest in becoming mountaineering, trekking, rafting, or climbing guides but could not afford to receive training on their own. In 2012, they had started a trekking company, Everest Women Treks. Partnered with Courageous Girls, a non-profit from California, and Shakti Samuha, an organization in Kathmandu, the company aimed to use the environment as a platform to empower women who come from troubled backgrounds\(^\text{19}\).

It was springtime, and plans were being set to trek to Everest Base Camp in the fall with the new guides-in-training. Five survivors of human trafficking from Shakti Samuha along with members of Courageous Girls would be accompanying teammates of the Seven Summits Women Team on the expedition. The goal was to promote healing and empowerment through the outdoors, and so much still needed to be organized. Shailee had just returned from the United States, anticipating a heavy workload. Instead, everything came to a standstill when the April earthquake rattled Nepal.

\(^\text{18}\) Shailee Basnet. 10/19/15. Lazimpat, Kathmandu. 32. Coordinator of Seven Summits Women Team.
Photograph by Emily Cheung. Paanch pokhari.
MAYA

The Everest Women Treks office is nestled into a network of buildings, perched above the tourist-filled roads of Thamel. On a bright November morning, I sat in the office across from Shailee, listening as she explained how the recent blockade by India made it impossible to find kerosene, so our team would be cooking meals with helicopter fuel. We were set to leave the next morning, and there was still so much to be arranged. As we talked logistics, another woman entered the office. Shailee jumped up and hugged her, and the two began to chatter away in Nepali. After a few minutes of excitement, they realized I was unable to keep up with their fast-paced Nepali. Sympathetically, Shailee turned to me and explained in English, “This is Maya, the Seven Summits Women Team leader, and your guide for the next week”. I stood to shake her hand, and immediately felt like a giant looming over the heads of these two petite women below me. They were both ten, fifteen years my senior, but just pushing five feet. We exchanged smiles, but hardly got the chance to speak. Just as quickly as she arrived, they were running off on a last minute mission to purchase supplies for the trek. With a quick hug goodbye, Shailee shouted to me as she rushed out the door, “Oh… one last thing: bring warm clothes. It’s going to be very cold.”

The next day, I was seated cross legged on a bamboo mat in Maya’s kitchen eating dal bhaat with what seemed to be the entire village of Bhotenamlang. Family and friends loaded inside the tiny house, and a small crowd collected outside the door. Everyone was welcoming Maya home and hoping to sneak a peek at the foreigners inside. Villagers passed around baskets of guavas, picked moments before from the trees outside her home. I stuffed my pockets full of the little green fruits in an attempt to stock up on trail snacks before going off into the wilderness. We lounged and chatted, slowly becoming familiar with the faces we would be spending the next week with. Our crew consisted of two guides, eight porters, the kitchen crew, three clients, and myself. The clients had also come from the United States, and were good friends of Shailee and Maya. They had met the Seven Summits Women Team in Los Angeles the previous year. Bojana had already visited Maya in her village earlier in the summer, and this time she had brought her two friends, Rachele and Carson, with her.

The village of Bhotenamlang is part of the district of Sindhupalchowk, which was the epicenter of the earthquake that hit earlier that April. Due to poor infrastructure, nearly all homes, hospitals, and schools were damaged or destroyed by the disaster. Looking to Maya as a figure of leadership, many of the villagers reached out to her for help. At the time, she was living in Kathmandu, while her mother remained in the village. Within four days of the earthquake, Maya and her teammates had mustered enough aid to send a truck of supplies out to her village. Over the next few weeks, while the media focused on the destruction in Kathmandu, the team worked on assisting the villagers in Sindhupalchowk. It did not take the team long before they realized that something was wrong. Since all the schools in the area had crumbled, academic activity had come to a halt. As a team, they agreed that the situation in Sindhupalchowk would only get worse if the children were not being educated. With the help of their international friends, notably Bojana, Everest Women Treks began

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20 Shailee Basnet. 10/29/15. Lazimpat, Kathmandu. 32. Coordinator of SSWT.
21 Ibid.
supporting the complete reconstruction of six schools in Sindhupalchowk in addition to supplying the afternoon meal to another two.\footnote{Shailee Basnet. Interview on 10/29/15.}

The intention of our trek was to visit these schools in order to see the progress that had been made, and to also see what still needed improvement. We walked for miles, up cliffs and across ridges. We met families coming down from the mountains, leaving their broken homes behind, seeking shelter and safety for the winter. Following their trail, we came across entire villages abandoned by their villagers. In other places, we found people living far from any sense of civilization. Everywhere we went, the people had all heard of Maya and her inspirational story.

Maya was fourteen when her parents arranged for her to be married to a twenty-two year old man in a nearby village. Although she had no intention of abandoning her studies and becoming a housewife, her parents’ decision was final. The night before the wedding, Maya stole money from her father’s drawer and caught a night bus away from Sindhupalchowk. With no idea where she was headed, she continued travelling east and got off at the last stop. By the time the police found her and returned her home, her father had already completed the traditional death rituals. His daughter was dead to him.

Maya remained close with her mother, but all relations with her father had been severed from then on. She finished her studies and went to live in Kathmandu with her uncle. It was there that she began exploring her athletic talents. At the age of twenty-three, she was the national bowling champion of Nepal. She would win the title for four consecutive years. Maya went on to try other sports such as SCUBA diving, paragliding, and bungee jumping. “I never tried a sport that wasn’t for me,”\footnote{Maya Gurung. 11/5/15. Bhotenamlang, Sindhupalchowk. 36. Team leader of SSWT.} she admits to me as she explains how she became the first woman to skydive in the Everest region. She has a long list of accomplishments and titles, but remains incredibly modest about her achievements. Now, at age thirty-six, her focus is on improving the quality of life in her district. “My number one priority is to create jobs for village people. After that, I would like to explore the area more to increase tourism, and lastly improve the infrastructure. Right now, there are no public toilets, there is no water, the infrastructure is very poor,” she explains, “the district of Sindhupalchowk has a lot of potential for trekking and climbing, but the government doesn’t pay much attention to it”. As the President of Tourism in Sindhupalchowk, Maya’s goal is to find ways to attract more tourists to her district. With an increase in tourism, more villagers will find employment, and slowly the quality of life will begin to improve.

With no map or compass, our group follows Maya faithfully through ancient rhododendron forests and up stone steps sheathed in ice. No matter the gradient of the trail she forges the lead, moving steadily forward with both hands in her pockets. The rest of us follow clumsily behind, clutching walking sticks in an attempt to stay balanced while our knees buckle from exhaustion. Every once in a while she turns back and smiles at us in encouragement, like a mother deer watching her newborn fawns struggle to take a first step. I can only imagine the patience she must have.
Photograph by Emily Cheung. Maya taking a rest in a tree stump.

Photograph by Emily Cheung. Maya at a river crossing.
The beauty of the landscape is undeniable. Wilderness stretches out in every direction. Below us lies jungle, above us snow. Our trail seems to pass through every season and every terrain; each day is filled with new sights and senses. As we climb higher and higher, we begin to feel the emptiness of being alone. Sometimes we go days without seeing anyone except for members of our own team. The hustle and bustle of civilization falls away and we stumble into the rhythm of life as nature intended. It becomes clear why Maya intends to make Sindhupalchowk a destination in Nepal. There is a certain magic in these people and this place should be shared.

We pause in a grove of young rhododendron trees. Their roots intertwine with the cliff we have been walking against, delicately holding the thin strip of trail, and our team, securely to the rocks. We take rest with our backs to the mountain, gazing down the steep slope to certain doom. Maya grasps the thin trunk of a tree in one hand and tests one of the limbs with the weight of her foot. Effortlessly, she lifts herself onto the branch and perches herself. Someone gasps at the sight of her dangling in the air, and warns, “Maya! Please don’t fall, we can’t afford to lose our leader and guide”. She smiles and leaps off, landing safely on semi-solid ground, “I love falling,” she replies.
Photograph by Emily Cheung. A group of trekkers in a Rhododendron forest.
RADHA

Holding up the rear of our pity-train is Radha. She is from the same village as Maya, and the two were friends growing up. Years ago, she hiked this same trail while on pilgrimage, but this is her first time guiding a commercial trek. Despite her lack of experience in trekking, Radha seems to have no problem hiking all day. “When I was younger, every day I had to walk four hours to school and back,” she says, “Maybe that’s why I feel used to it.”24 At the end of the day while the rest of us collapse in exhaustion, she and Maya run around camp laughing and singing, showing no sign of fatigue. Out here in the midst of snow-capped mountains, she is in her element, but her true love for adventure lies in the river.

Years earlier when Radha was spending time in Pokhara, she was introduced to Inka Gurung. Inca was a Swedish kayaker who was growing frustrated with the absence of Nepalese women in the whitewater kayaking scene. After meeting multiple young Nepali women who had an interest in learning to swim and kayak, Inka decided to sponsor their training. She started a nonprofit, Himalayan Adventure Nepali Girls, and held an intensive forty-five day training course for the girls she had met. Radha was the first to graduate from the Himalayan Adventure Nepali Girls river guiding and instructing course25. Inka saw potential in Radha and continued to support her after her initial training.

According to Radha, “Inka encouraged me every step of the way. I owe her so much. After I graduated, she arranged a passport and a small allowance and sent me for specialist kayak slalom training in Thailand. Back in Nepal, even though I was the first female river guide in my home country and had extensive technical knowledge and experience, it was still difficult to get work. River guiding is seen as physically demanding and employers are reluctant to hire women. In 2011, once again with Inka’s help, I was given the opportunity of a season with Arctic Adventures, a tour operator in Iceland, as a river guide. One stretch of the river I was working on has a class-five rapid known as the Green Room. I was kayaking there in particularly fast-moving water when I flipped. I was pushed down into an underwater hole and held there for more than a minute. I tried not to panic and to concentrate on my training. I started seeing visions of my mother and truly thought that these were my last moments alive, that I would drown in a river thousands of kilometres from my home. I was badly shaken, had a dislocated shoulder and knocked out my front tooth, but somehow I managed to swim to safety. I not only survived, but I came back even stronger and with valuable technical knowledge that would help me in the future. I returned to Nepal for the following season when tragedy struck again. On the Bhotekosi River in September 2011, I was kayaking with two male support kayakers. On a fast rapid we all flipped. I tried to roll but couldn’t. I lost my kayak and was once again swimming for my life. I made it out alive, but I was the lucky one – both my friends drowned. I’ve learned to face fear, but more importantly, I have also learned the hard way about the importance of safety.”26

Photograph by Emily Cheung. Radha.
Recently, Radha started her own adventure sports company with three other women that participated in Inka’s training program. They call themselves Himalayan Adventure Girls. When the earthquake struck in April, they were able to gather aid from their clients in Sweden and provide their villages with clothing and food for the winter. In her village, Radha is a role model. Her achievements as the first and most successful female rafting guide in Nepal has gained her a place of respect in the community. As a twenty-seven year old woman, her accomplishments are outstanding. Her reputation in kayaking has given her the opportunity to travel all over Nepal and abroad. In addition to Thailand and Iceland, she has secured jobs in Japan and the United Arab Emirates. She has competed in countless kayaking competitions, and has oftentimes come out the winner. She aspires to travel the world, to raft the Grand Canyon, to climb Everest. She has the energy of a thousand suns. She also happens to be my tent-mate.

I can hear her giggles getting louder as she approaches the tent. After a battle with the laces of her hiking boots, Radha crawls through the door and collapses on her sleeping bag. I am already curled up like a cocoon, anticipating the chill that accompanies Himalayan nights. A gust of wind shakes the tent, smelling of smoke. I catch a glimpse of the porters gathered around a campfire eating dal bhat as Radha rushes to zip up the doors. “Do you want to hear about an adventure?” she asks. I nod in encouragement. She bursts into a tale, starting with the earthquake. That April, both her apartment in Kathmandu and her mother’s home in Bhotenamlang were destroyed. She was able to arrange for her mother to meet her in Kathmandu, where they set up a tent in a nearby field until they could find a safe place to live. Only days after the earthquake struck, Radha was scheduled to fly to Japan to guide clients. Although leaving her family was difficult, four days later Radha was miles away from home. Out on the river, disaster struck. On a section of rapids, one of the rafts carrying supplies flipped. Although no one was hurt, all of the food for the trip was lost. In the evening, Radha and her coworkers walked to the nearest village and bartered for food. They managed to return with enough rice to feed everyone, but had no way to cook it. Ingeniously, they cut sections of bamboo and poured in water and the rice. Over the fire, they boiled the bamboo containers. Twenty minutes later, dinner was served.

Radha finishes her story and looks at me. Laughing at my shocked expression, she admits, “After that, I knew I could survive anything.”

THREE SISTERS ADVENTURE TREKKING COMPANY

In 1993, Lucky, Dicky, and Nicky Chhetri moved from Darjeeling, India to Pokhara, Nepal to open a guest house\(^{31}\). At the time, it was uncommon for three women to be running a business on their own. The nature of the guesthouse attracted solo female trekkers, and over time, the three sisters noticed that there was a demand from female trekkers for female guides. In response, they began to guide the women themselves, even though they faced discrimination for their choice to abandon traditional gender roles. As the first Nepali women to guide foreign trekkers, they were also faced with the challenge of finding other women to come work for the company. At first, the sisters had to seek out new women to train. However, as word of their mission spread, girls started coming to them. Currently, two training sessions are held each year, and about forty Nepali women receive training annually\(^ {32}\). The company currently employs about thirty guides, thirty assistants, and thirty porters, the majority of whom are female, however they do offer male guides and porters as well. In addition to the trekking company and guest house, the sisters also run Empowering Women of Nepal, a nonprofit that funds the training and housing of the young women. They also manage an orphanage for young girls and provide them with food and education up until their tenth standard.

SEVEN SUMMITS WOMEN TEAM

In 2007, ten Nepali women came together with the mission to climb Mt. Everest. They were, and continue to be, the largest and most successful all-women team to scale the tallest mountain in the world\(^ {33}\). After their success on Everest in 2008, seven members of the team set their aim on the Seven Summits Challenge: to climb the highest peak on each continent. These women were Maya Gurung, Shailee Basnet, Pema Diki Sherpa, Chunu Shrestha, Nimdona Sherpa, Pujan Acharya, and Asha Kumari Singh. In December 2014, they became the first all-women group to successfully complete the challenge. Since then, the team has visited over two-hundred schools across the globe where they give motivational talks that focus on education, environment, and empowerment. Additionally, after the April 2015 earthquake, the team immediately began to provide relief efforts and aid to villages in Sindhupalchowk. They are currently sponsoring the reconstruction of six schools and providing the afternoon meal at an additional two\(^ {34}\).

\(^{31}\) Lucky Chhetri. 11/17/15. Lakeside, Pokhara. 50. Owner of Three Sisters Adventure Trekking Company.


\(^{34}\) Shailee Basnet. 10/29/15. Lazimpat, Kathmandu. 32. Coordinator of SSWT.
EVEREST WOMEN TREKS

In 2012, members of the Seven Summits Women Team began the adventure trekking company called Everest Women Treks. The company sponsors the training of young Nepali women who have a desire to receive training in becoming a trekking, mountaineering, rock climbing, or rafting guide. Five young women from Shakti Samuha, an organization in Kathmandu staffed by female survivors of human trafficking that aims to educate and rehabilitate other survivors, are currently receiving training from staff at Everest Women Treks. Together, Everest Women Treks and Shakti Samuha, alongside members of Courageous Girls, a nonprofit from California that supports female survivors of domestic abuse, aim to use the environment as a way to heal and empower these underprivileged women. In November 2015, a group of twenty women representing members from all three organizations embarked on an expedition to Everest Base Camp. Everest Women Treks hopes to work with these women until their training is complete, and then offer them a position in the company as trekking guides.

In addition, Everest Women Treks has begun to offer trekking programs in Sindhupalchowk in an attempt to increase tourism and revenue in the district. The trek that is currently offered ends in Paanch Pokhari and consists of six days of camping and trekking. The trek employs villagers from the district in order to ensure that the locals benefit from the increase in tourism. For all of the commercial treks, a portion of the clients’ fees will go to support the rebuilding of local schools and training of young women to become guides.

HIMALAYAN ADVENTURE GIRLS

In 2014, Radha Tamang, Kamala Magar, Sita Thapa, and Anu Shreshtha began the company Himalayan Adventure Girls. Their company offers trekking, rafting and kayaking adventures all over Nepal, all of which are guided by the four women. The four met each other in 2008 when the Swedish kayaker, Inka Gurung, began training Nepali girls in whitewater kayaking. Together, they began the nonprofit, Himalayan Adventure Nepali Girls, which hosted annual kayaking training sessions free of charge for Nepali women. Inka owns the adventure company Far Away Adventures. Based in Sweden, she organizes trips to Nepal and hires the women from Himalayan Adventure Girls as guides. Many of the treks focus on supporting the local community, for example, the porters will all be hired from villages that clients will trek through. In addition, clients will be housed in homestays and eat at the community lodge. This not only gives the clients an intimate view of the lives of their staff, but also directly supports the financial needs of the village.

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36 Maya Gurung. 11/5/15. Bhotenamlang, Sindhupalchowk. 36. Team leader of SSWT.
37 Ibid.
EXPERIENTIAL EMPOWERMENT

For a young woman in Nepal, conventional gender roles constrict her to a life with minimal education and responsibilities that rarely venture outside the home. “Most girls marry around the age of sixteen,” Maya informs me, “So my father thought I only needed a basic level of education for household work,” although Maya made her own decision to escape her arranged marriage and continue her education, other Nepali girls are unable to do the same or are unaware that there are other opportunities are available to them.

The opportunity to become an outdoor adventure sports guide opens up these opportunities to young women. Either by recruitment or word of mouth, more Nepali girls are realizing that if they reach out to female trekking companies, they will be able to receive training free of charge. These training sessions cover a wide range of educational topics, including but not limited to, foreign languages, the environment, flora and fauna, weather patterns, religion, and cultural differences. The women receive certification in First Aid and Acute Mountain Sickness, in addition to training in trekking, mountaineering, rafting, kayaking, or climbing.

Following their training sessions, these young women are sent out into the field. The experiences they gain while working may prove to be the most valuable. Outside of the classroom, the guides-in-training are given the opportunity to meet foreigners from all different places and backgrounds. While on the job, they are able to immerse themselves in their education by practicing their language and people skills. For some women, such as Radha, these connections may turn into lifelong friendships. For example, with the help of Inka, Radha was able to travel abroad to Thailand for specialized training and afterwards secure jobs in Iceland, the United Arab Emirates, and Japan.

While a career in adventure sports can give Nepali women incredible experiences and knowledge, in a culture where women are still expected to abide by certain gender roles, standing out can put them in a vulnerable position. When Lucky, Dicky, and Nicky started their trekking company, they were the first women to do so. In the beginning, many of the male porters and guides refused to believe they were Nepali women. “They would insist that we were Chinese,” one of the guides, Nirma says, laughing. “They would not accept that we were Nepali women doing a Nepali man’s job.”

In fact, many of the female guides reported harassment and verbal abuse from both Nepali men and women during their first few years of work. When Inka began training young women in the river, her girls became targets of jokes and name-calling. “One of the male Nepali guides on the trip was suggesting the Nepali girls should not become river guides or they would turn in to bad girls,” she said, “it was a term that had been used a lot then

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40 Maya Gurung. 11/4/15. Bhotelang, Sindhupalchowk. 36. Team leader of Seven Summits Women Team.
about Nepali female kayakers.” In addition, many girls were accused of being romantically involved with their clients, and their reputations took a beating.

But the guides also agree that recently perspectives have begun to change. Within the past few years, locals have grown used to the sight of a Nepali woman guiding strangers through the wilderness. Slowly, locals are supporting the idea of an independent, working Nepali woman. Still, caution must be taken. “We don’t send a female guide out with a man or group of men,” the three sisters admit, “We do have to respect some of our cultural rules.”

EMOTIONAL EMPOWERMENT

When building self-esteem, Shailee and her team have found that bringing women into the wilderness gives the most powerful results. “We realized that the outdoors is the best platform to empower, not lectures or readings,” Shailee explains, “We would meet, maybe a young woman would say, ‘That hill? Never. I don’t have that willpower, I don’t have that physical strength, and it’s never going to happen in my life,’ and then we take that person with us and when this person makes it to the top and does something she thought she never could do, that empowerment is priceless.”

Through physical strength, they learn that pushing themselves will result in accomplishing their goals. After completing a goal that was previously viewed as impossible, confidence is built, and empowerment is gained. Radha for instance, felt that she could accomplish anything after her adventures in Japan. Additionally, many female guides admitted that having an occupation that was physically demanding helped them to feel healthy and strong.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Ultimately, in a country where the average income is $730.00 per year, the opportunity for a young Nepali woman to earn $15.00 per day as a guide is remarkable. When interviewed, most informants stated that they were paid from $12.00 to $30.00 a day for guiding in Nepal. Their wage depends on a number of factors, including their level of experience, size of the group, and location of the trek. Additionally, although tipping is an etiquette not usually practiced in Nepal, guides and porters do expect to receive tips. On average, guides will be tipped an additional $10.00 per person per day, and porters will be...
Photograph by Emily Cheung. Radha at the river.

Photograph by Emily Cheung. Kamala with a client.
tipped $5.00 per person per day. The downside to this lucrative occupation is the uncertainty of whether or not there will be work, and the unpredictability of the season. The normal tourist season runs from October to December. Therefore, if the guides are lucky, they will go for about twelve treks per season, with an average of four to five days per trek. Some treks may only last a single day, while others can extend for up to twenty days\(^{50}\). When the season is busy, the women will be booked with back to back treks for months on end. In general the money earned during the season should last them during the off season. However, when the season is dry, such as in 2015, due to the fear that followed the earthquake, the less qualified guides will go unemployed.

Interestingly, knowing that the more qualified guides will be employed first drives the less experienced guides to ripen their own skills. Clients prefer guides with good communication skills, knowledge in history and culture, and experience in the field. Within this community of young women, a hint of competition encourages them to succeed by improving these skills. With the money they earn from their occupation, many of the young women choose to further their education at a university.

This choice is powerful. Many of the young women hired by these organizations come from rural mountain villages, where girls are usually handed the short end of the stick when it comes to education. Becoming a female trekking guide encourages these women to pursue an education, and gives them the financial freedom to afford it. “There is nothing like the freedom when you have money in your hands,” Shailee explains, “We could see that economic empowerment is really the answer to a lot of discrimination that women face”\(^{51}\). Once a woman has financial stability, she no longer has to seek out a husband for support. Due to the prevalence of child marriages, more than half of Nepali women marry before they are eighteen\(^{52}\). However, out of the eleven guides interviewed who ranged in ages from twenty-two to thirty-six, only one was married, one was divorced, and one was currently filing for divorce. The rest were unmarried. This trend suggests that economic empowerment delays the average age of marriage, and allows Nepali women to consider other opportunities before becoming a mother, such as a higher education.

When asked, all of the participants said their parents were subsistence farmers, and unfortunately, many had lost family members in the earthquake. In some cases, parents were too old to continue farming and were unable to make a living. In response to this, many of the guides had been using a portion of their salaries to support their families at home. Not only were guides sending money to their parents, but they were also assisting their brothers and sisters with their education fees. In a patriarchal society, it is revolutionary for a young woman to be the financial support in her family. Although parents are often reluctant to allow their daughters to pursue a career in guiding, financial contributions seem to erase their

\(^{50}\) Sarmila Nepali. 11/18/15. Lakeside, Pokhara. 23. Guide at Three Sisters Adventure Trekking Company.  
\(^{51}\) Shailee Basnet. 10/29/15. Lazimpat, Kathmandu. 32. Coordinator of SSWT.  
worries and in some cases, parents are beginning to encourage their daughters to seek training.

**GIVING BACK**

After studying the workings of these four women-run organizations, a pattern began to emerge. Typically, a woman from another country, with the education and means to do so, would identify an issue within the Nepali community. For Inka, it was the absence of Nepali women in whitewater sports. For Bojana, it was the heartwarming story of seven Nepali women with a dream. In most cases, these foreign women become the financial and motivational support to a network of Nepali women, and in turn, these women are able to receive the proper training and begin a career in adventure sports.

What happens afterwards is incredible. In the case of all four organizations studied for this research project, there existed an unwavering desire by these women to improve the world around them. For example, after founding their company, the guides at Himalayan Adventure Girls began hosting training sessions for Nepali children around the country. At these sessions, they would give swimming and basic kayaking lessons to children for free. Again, with the Chettri sisters at Three Sisters Adventure Trekking Company, after they began their company, they also started a nonprofit and orphanage to educate and train as many other young women as they could.

**CHANGING THE STORY**

Most notably, I found the work being done by the Seven Summits Women Team and Everest Women Treks to be incredibly thoughtful. From the beginning, the team has promoted the three Es: education, environment and empowerment. By collaborating with Shakti Samuha and Courageous Girls, the team began to empower women using the environment as a platform for education. The women they selected were all survivors of human trafficking that had been rescued and brought back to Nepal from India. By providing them with the opportunity to become trekking guides, Maya and Shailee from Everest Women Treks hoped to give these women a new start.

Maya had a particular investment in the well-being of these young women. For decades, Sindhupalchowk had been, and continues to be, the hub for women trafficking in Nepal. Some of the women from Shakti Samuha had come from villages nearby Maya’s own village of Bhotenamlang. As Maya and I sat on a stone wall overlooking a primary school in one of these villages, I could sense her feelings of responsibility not only for the future of these girls, but for the future of her district. Among the broken down rubble of poorly built cottages, Maya pointed out a few wealthier looking homes that were made of thick concrete and even had multiple floors. In the depths of the mountains with poor road access, in this little village at the furthest reaches of civilization, these types of homes did not belong. When we came across villagers, we were surprised that they could speak English, but for some

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53 Shailee Basnet. 10/29/15. Lazimpat, Kathmandu. 32. Coordinator of SSWT.
reason could not speak Nepali. Things just weren’t adding up. Delicately, Maya explained that the wealth in these villages does not come from farming or craft. Instead, when a child is born, families pray for a baby girl. When she is older, at about twelve or thirteen, she is sold for the equivalent of fifty dollars, and sent to India to work the sex trade\textsuperscript{54}. Both the family and child are aware of where she is going and what will happen to her while she is gone. Years later, when she \textit{hopefully} returns as a young woman, she comes home speaking English and Hindi; the languages she was exposed to.

It is a story that Maya had heard too many times, and she is determined to change it. Although the earthquake in April was devastating, perhaps it offered a tiny blessing in disguise. The destruction left behind a blank slate; an opportunity to build a better life, starting with the reconstruction of schools. “Trafficking is not a singular problem,” Shailee explains, “It is an outcome of a web of various aspects including poor economy, lack of education, bad road access, and how women are looked at”\textsuperscript{55}. By rebuilding schools to be earthquake-proof, providing schoolchildren with bags and supplies, and recruiting qualified teachers, the team hopes to improve the quality of education in Sindhupalchowk. If more children in the district have the ability to attend school, perhaps the next generation will be less inclined to participate in the human trafficking trade.

Additionally, Maya’s plan to increase tourism in Sindhupalchowk will hopefully give villagers the opportunity to pursue a career as a porter or guide. With the option of earning a secure salary, families may not have the financial stress that may cause them to sell a child. She hopes to offer this opportunity to men and women alike. Although Maya aims for the empowerment of her entire district, she does recognize that there still exists a divide between men and women. Ultimately, what needs to change is the way women are perceived in Nepali society. Even when a family is facing financial stress; the daughter is sold, not the son. This goes to show the value that is placed on Nepali girls.

After working her whole life to challenge gender roles, Maya’s most beautiful gift to her community was setting an example. Through her actions, she was able to prove that a woman can accomplish the same physical feats as a man, that a woman can run a team and start a business, and that a woman can improve the quality of life in her community. The villagers look up to her with the wish that their daughters will follow in her footsteps, and I believe that those hopes will prove to be the driving force in changing people’s perspectives.

“Even in a place that has been hit, not just by trafficking, but by the earthquake, something good can still happen if people are given the opportunity, the basic infrastructure, and above all, education. Change can happen. We hope that this becomes an example of that. Will we be able to eradicate trafficking on our own? I don’t think that would be a realistic goal. But we are a team of very over-ambitious women. So why not? We’ll do our best. That’s what we did with the mountains. It always starts as an impossible goal, but we’ll keep going.”\textsuperscript{56} – Shailee Basnet

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\begin{enumerate}
\item Maya Gurung. 11/4/15. Bhotelang, Sindhupalchowk. 36. Team leader of Seven Summits Women Team.
\item Shailee Basnet. 10/29/15. Lazimpat, Kathmandu. 32. Coordinator of SSWT
\item Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
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Photograph by Emily Cheung. A group of trekkers.
THE END?

So far, the movement to incorporate more Nepali women into adventure sports has been successful. In fact, hundreds of Nepali women have had the opportunity to receive instructional or guiding training. Unfortunately, out of the hundreds of young women who have been trained by either TSATC, EWT, or HAG, few choose to pursue a career in adventure sports after training. Circumstances such as family issues, lack of support, or loss of interest contribute to the high frequency of drop outs. For those who do choose to continue, the future poses an interesting question: what happens when they get married?

Anu from Himalayan Adventure Girls, for example, continued to work in the rafting business after marriage. When her daughter was born, she took a two year break, and then returned to rafting. The only reason this was possible was because her parents help her watch her daughter while she is at work\textsuperscript{57}. A similar situation occurred with Sita, a coworker of Anu. Sita has an eleven-year-old son, but has been able to remain in the workforce because her mother supervises him\textsuperscript{58}.

Without the support from their families, others may not be as fortunate as Anu and Sita. In some cases, wives must abide by their husbands wishes, which may entail giving up their job and remaining at home. In other cases, wives will continue their work until they bear a child. However, after a child has been born, it is usually difficult for a woman to reintegrate herself into the adventure sport business. But when asked, many of the female guides were uncertain of what the future held. They did not yet have plans for marriage or settling down. Their ultimate hope was that they could continue their work until their bodies could no longer handle it.

\textsuperscript{57} Anu Shreshtha. 11/13/15. Tikot, Pokhara. 29. Owner of Himalayan Adventure Girls.
\textsuperscript{58} Inka Gurung. 11/17/15. Lakeside, Pokhara. Owner of Far Away Adventures.
FEELING AT HOME

As a young female travelling alone in Nepal, I would like to say how precious of an opportunity it was to have the option of hiring a woman to be my guide. In Nepali culture, one may often see two men interlocking arms or walking hand in hand, and the same between two girls. However, while physical interactions between male and female are becoming more prevalent in public, traditionally it is not considered appropriate. Thus, if I were to have hired a male guide instead, not only may I have been putting myself in a culturally unacceptable position, but I believe that I would not have received as rich of an experience as I did by hiring a female guide.

At first, my guides treated me like a client; a stranger they respected. However, as the days passed, friendship began to blossom. We began to share jokes, and sometimes snacks. In the mornings, they would insist on braiding my hair. As we hiked, sometimes they would hold my hand and walk beside me as we chatted. Observing the way these women behaved with each other, I could see that I was slowly beginning to receive the same treatment. I was becoming part of the family.

One of the most precious moments was in a small village called Tikot, on the edge of the Annapurna range. It was the last day of the Hindu festival Tihar, and our guides were ecstatic. Radha and Anu were dancing around the lodge with malas\textsuperscript{59} around their neck and tikka\textsuperscript{60} on their foreheads, singing at the top of their lungs. When they saw us enter the lodge, they took us by the hands and seated us on the floor. Soon, Radha was decorating us with marigold garlands as Anu began the meticulous process of painting tikka on our foreheads. One by one, she would paint a long white line down to our nose, then dot it with symbolic colors as a blessing. When Anu made it down the line to me, Radha crouched down and stopped her, “I will do it,” she said, smiling at me as she smeared paint on my face, “She is my Baini\textsuperscript{61}”.

The time I spent trekking and researching in Nepal with these women truly shaped my experience. It is my hope that the friendships that I have made with them will last for the rest of our lives. To any female traveler that wanders this way, I hope you also make the decision to spend their time with these beautiful souls. They will constantly surprise you.

\textsuperscript{59} Nepali for a garland of marigolds.  
\textsuperscript{60} Nepali for a paste applied to the forehead.  
\textsuperscript{61} Nepali for little sister.
CONCLUSION

For centuries, the women of Nepal have been held to certain cultural expectations that have constrained them to a life in a field or behind earthen walls. Only recently have they begun to wander past these barriers. After growing up in the mountains, they are adapted to high altitude and extreme terrain. Interestingly, but logically, when they test their limits, they find that their physical strength is unmatched. It would appear that these mountain women reflect the strength of the environment they are from.

Shailee, Maya and Radha are only a few of the young women beginning to experiment with the hidden talent they hold. Unfortunately, there were many other notable Nepali women I did not have the time to discuss in this project. For example, Mira Rai, a Nepali woman who is winning marathons across the globe62. Or Nimdoma Sherpa, the rock climbing champion63. They represent the most daring young women of Nepal; those who recognized their strength and were not afraid to let it grow. But what of all the other young girls and women, still living in the mountains? Not all women can be as rebellious as the ones discussed in this paper. Perhaps if more young women were given the opportunity to shine, more gems would emerge.

These women are an untapped resource, one that has the potential to draw the spotlight onto Nepal and showcase the strength and endurance the Nepalese people possess. If encouraged to blossom, the heights they may reach are inconceivable.

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LIMITATIONS

While researching adventure sports, I found that keeping my health insurance in mind was my primary limitation. It is difficult to immerse yourself into a topic that is both dangerous and expensive. In particular, there was one situation where I had to make the decision between an opportunity and rationality. While in Pokhara, I was invited to accompany three female guides on a whitewater adventure. Of course, this is forbidden by SIT. In addition, any injury by a variety of adventure sports was not covered by my insurance, including rafting and kayaking. Still, I was going mental over the possibility of letting this golden opportunity to witness these legendary female kayakers in their element slip through my fingers. In the end, food poisoning made the decision for me, and I was forced to say goodbye to my guides.

Sickness was another limitation that caught me off guard. With only a month to conduct research, time is of the essence. Food poisoning knocked me off my feet and brought my momentum to a halt. I’m afraid I lost valuable opportunities and research time. Ideally, I would have had much more time to truly immerse myself into my topic. One month is not sufficient for a project of this magnitude. If I had not been networking and preparing for my ISP a month and a half in advance, the extent of my project would have been negatively affected. An additional six months to a year would have been beneficial to the quality and depth of my research.

While conducting research, the language barrier did prove to be an obstacle I was not necessarily expecting. Although most of the guides spoke proficient English, when conversing with each other, they chose to speak Nepali. There is no doubt that learning the language would give me an entirely new perspective into their lives, and allow me to learn so much more from them. Perhaps next time.

Due to the special circumstances that Nepal is currently facing, travelling from place to place proved to be difficult. In fact, due to the blockade, we were forced to use helicopter fuel to cook because kerosene was impossible to come by. Other more insignificant limitations were lack of Wi-Fi or electricity which would have helped with the efficiency of the writing.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

During my research, a topic that continued to arise was that of relationships. Many of the women I interviewed had been able to meet men from abroad, or go abroad themselves. It was evident that other cultures had begun to shape the way they valued their relationships. Perhaps it would be interesting to research sexuality in this next generation of Nepali women. From what I gathered, it would seem that traditions regarding relationships are beginning to change.


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Photograph by Emily Cheung. Radha and Anu.
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Shailee Basnet. 10/29/15. Lazimpat, Kathmandu. 32. Coordinator of SSWT.


Photographs by Rachele Schank. The author, Emily Cheung, at work.