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Shaped by Changing Space: Exploring Gender and the Discourse of Empowerment in Sikles, Nepal

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Shaped by Changing Space: Exploring Gender and the
Discourse of Empowerment in Sikles, Nepal

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Fall 2017

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Abstract

Development work as it relates to women in Nepal is an ongoing topic of debate and discussion that may never have a concrete end. In the late 1970's Indian women took a stand in defending their livelihood against commercial logging operations with authorities. This event was known as the Chipko movement and is often cited within the history of women and development as it caused people to “engage the question of gender and gendered livelihoods in the Himalayas” (Gurarani and Berry, 2015). It was women who served as the backbone of this movement in organizing nonviolent demonstrations against commercial deforestation. This movement also illuminated the unique burden women faced in the context of environmental degradation. Since then, many academic works and development projects have sought to analyze, “a politics of gendered exclusion that has resulted from the overlay of development discourses on state-led resource management endeavors” (Gurarani et al., 2015). In Nepal, specifically, projects devoted to women's empowerment are prevalent and have emerged with their own set of discourse. There remains debate as to whether or not this often participatory approach is effective in achieving its intended goals.

Key Terms: Gender, Development, Empowerment

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I would like to dedicate this to my family at home for all of their support and encouragement throughout this entire process. Also, I want to thank my host family for inviting me into their lives with open arms and an open mind. And of course my teachers, Chandraji, Minaji, and Sanjibji for guiding me to challenge myself and providing invaluable support beyond just language instruction. Finally, to all of the *sabbandaa baliyo* women who were willing to lend some of their time to share personal stories and experiences with me during my time in Sikles.

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Introduction

Naumaya Gurung pulled her scarf resting on her hair over her head to cover her eyes. In contrast, she pulled the scarf back to its original position and sat up straight, this time her face fully exposed and not hiding beneath the fabric. She did these two gestures once more and paused to make sure I understood. She was describing the women in Sikles, Nepal.

In attempting to understand how women in Sikles fit within their own community I sat with Naumaya Gurung, the chair person and overseer of the five local mothers' groups. We sat on the floor of her home and behind us the television buzzed with Hindu soap operas while her granddaughter lay wide-eyed. I had just asked what she thought mothers' groups have done for the individuals involved and she responded with this gesture. What she meant by this was that women in Sikles village do not hide. They sit up straight, face exposed because they are not shy. Did this mean women in Sikles were *empowered*? And, how would that question translate if I tried to ask Naumaya?

This ethnography is an exploration of the notion of empowerment in how it relates to gender development in Sikles. While, my intent and focus shifted throughout the process what remained was an underlying desire to understand the way difference took shape between outside, non-local development workers and local members of the community. In Siera Tamang's *The Politics of Developing Nepali Women*, she claims that development "has compounded the structured inequalities relating to class, and ethnicity, and it has erased the heterogeneity of women's lived experiences in Nepal" (2011, p.161). She takes this claim further when she explains that the conception or creation of the 'Nepali woman' "was as much the work of development agencies in search of 'the Nepali woman' to develop as it was the result of the active dissemination of state-sponsored ideology" and that the very concept of this "patriarchically oppressed, uniformly disadvantaged and Hindu, 'Nepali woman' as a category did not pre-exist the development project"

(2011, p.163). Tamang highlights the erasure of identity that accompanies development projects that seek to improve or empower women. What follows is my exploration of women and this notion of a 'Nepali woman' as defined by my own experience talking to people in Sikles. It is in no way a comprehensive exploration of women in Nepal, but rather, an attempt at placing the Gurung and Dalit women I met in Sikles within and among the greater context of gender development as it is defined and constructed by the state.

Landscape and Discussion

Development work as it relates to women in Nepal is an ongoing topic of debate and discussion that may never have a concrete end. In the late 1970's Indian women took a stand in defending their livelihood against commercial logging operations with authorities. This event was known as the Chipko movement and is often cited within the history of women and development as it caused people to "engage the question of gender and gendered livelihoods in the Himalayas" (Gururani & Berry, 2015). It was women who served as the backbone of this movement in organizing nonviolent demonstrations against commercial deforestation. This movement also illuminated the unique burden women faced in the context of environmental degradation. Since then, many academic works and development projects have sought to analyze, "a politics of gendered exclusion that has resulted from the overlay of development discourses on state-led resource management endeavors" (Gururani et al., 2015). Understanding these events helps to contextualize the history of women and development in the region.

My ethnography is centered in Sikles. It is a village that lies at 2,000 meters in the Kaski District in mid-western Nepal. Sikles falls within the area of the Annapurna Conservation Project and Pokhara is the nearest city (Parker, 2011, p.7). What once was a full day walk to Pokhara is now only a three to four-hour trip by bus—a relatively new development in Sikles that has changed individuals' ways of living. Sikles rests just above the Madi River. And, from Sikles, one can see a

neighboring town across the river valley called Tanting. At first glance, Tanting does not seem too far, but the journey there and back takes many hours as one must walk all the way down to the river and back up. During my time in Sikles, I rarely saw foreigners. It is a very popular destination for Nepali tourists, perhaps, one of the least traveled areas for foreign tourists in the Annapurna Conservation area. An important, defining feature of Sikles is its predominately Gurung population making it one of the largest Gurung villages in the Annapurna region. In Alan Macfarlane and Indrabahadur Gurung's *A Guide to the Gurungs*, they explain, "It is clear from their language, which is classified as a variant of Chinese and Tibetan, and from the physical characteristics, the short stature, upturned eyes, flat noses, and general mongloid features, that the Gurungs originally came from further north" (1990, p.3). One of the most challenging and defining aspects of my time in Sikles was the indigenous Gurung language that proved far different than the Nepali I was used to in other parts of the country.

Methods and Ethics

Before embarking on my research, I read about feminist ethnography. I decided I would like to follow a framework outlined by many feminist anthropologists with an awareness of the "explicit and implicit inequalities of power between the researcher and the researched" with what I hoped would be a "collaborative, participatory, and dialogic research process" (Gururani et al., 2015). Many anthropologists have explored whether or not the concept of feminist ethnography is even possible. There are barriers to feminist anthropology in the assumption of a "we" or universal identity. And, in an ethnographic attempt to explore and document others' lived experience there may emerge a self/other relationship between the researcher and the researched. Gururani and Berry explain "location work in the field" as "researchers' mobility across places, sites, institutions and self-reflexivity identifies and acknowledges the differentials of power that inform such mobility" (2015, p. 11). They also explain that for Radhika Johari, this sort of work is an "open ended journey of

methodological becoming” (2015, p.11). I attempted to remain conscious of my position as an outsider with this “mobility across places” and like Johari saw this as a process—one that does not necessarily have an end, but instead an ongoing self-reflexive project in which I tried to challenge my own biases.

Throughout my time in Sikles, I had many formal and informal conversations with local people. And, through a process of verbal and informed consent, I was able to explain the purpose of my questions and interviews. Attaining this consent was never a difficult feat as many people I met were happy to share their stories and experiences with me. Where I gained my most valuable insight was simply through spending time with people in the community. A sampling of my experience through participant observation, interviews, deep-hanging out and self-reflection is representative of the fluid, dynamic, and evolving nature of women, development, and empowerment in Nepal. And, lastly, it is important I acknowledge the barriers that accompanied talking to people in Nepali as it relates to ethics. Not only, is Nepali a language I lack fluency in, it is also not most people’s first language in Sikles. In Rubel and Rosman’s *Translating Cultures* they explore the complications and misconceptions that may arise from translation in ethnographic writing and posit, “When we translate words and their meanings, we are ascribing intention to a speaker” (2003, p. 13). They also question whether or not translations have the capacity to encompass culturally specific belief systems “including their counterintuitive aspects and inconsistencies” (2003, p. 15). I, too struggled with this question and my tendency to perhaps ascribe meaning onto certain interactions as a consequence for my lack of language. And, with this barrier, I was usually unable to communicate with older people who often did not speak Nepali. In addition to this limitation, I talked to mostly Gurung women as a result of my home-stay connections and the prominence of Gurung women in Sikles. I talked to Dalit women as well, but,

my findings are certainly not distributed equally and thus, not completely representative of the entire Sikles community.

Defining Key Terms

In trying to gain an understanding of what it meant for women in Sikles to be empowered or if the concept itself existed, it was necessary that I define this word for myself first. For the purpose of this ethnography, I will define empowerment as a feeling of agency over one's life and the ability to make decisions and participate in a community with respect from others. Gender development projects and organizations often define empowerment as something for local people with an emphasis on participation and the ability to have free choice—economically and politically. In a 2004 Human Development Report on empowerment and poverty reduction in Nepal it is defined as, “people's capacity to gain understanding and control over personal, social, economic, and political forces to act individually as well as collectively to make choices about the way they want to be and so things in their best interest to improve their life situation” (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2004, p. 12). This report goes into great detail about aspects of empowerment and reiterates that a “sense of belonging engenders the trust that allows societies to function and enables individuals to act together to secure, safeguard and further what they value” (UNDP, 2004, p. 13). It is important to acknowledge that development organizations and projects that seek to define this term are biased in the sense that free economic choice and income-generating initiatives are beneficial to the national economy. And, part of my exploration in Sikles was an attempt to understand what this word meant to people I interviewed—the definition is certainly not concrete.

The Nepali word for development, *bikas*, is another term used often in discourse about Nepal's developing status. Stacy Leigh Pigg explains that “In Nepal, development has a different, more profoundly social meaning, a meaning that weaves *bikas* into the fabric of local life and patterns Nepalese society” (1990, p. 496). She places development within the specific context of

Nepal and claims that it has cultural effects. I found this definition was consistent during my time in Sikles as the word *bikas* was widely understood by local people and referred to changes like a road and access to television, mobile phones, and electricity. The word also seemed to encompass the cultural changes as a consequent of these economic changes. Another important term in talking about social relations among people in Sikles is the word *Dalit*. This is a term used to identify low caste, marginally and institutionally oppressed individuals. In Sikles, there are predominately Gurung and Dalit people. And, historically, Dalit people took on service jobs in the Sikles community. Macfarlane explains, “the Gurungs regard the service groups who live with them as effectively lower caste. Gurungs have traditionally not worked with iron, leather or made up cloth. Thus, each village has for centuries had small settlements of blacksmiths, leather-workers and tailors who worked for the Gurungs...” (1990, p.3-4). I did not observe these service roles and it was unclear whether or not these jobs and practices were still as prevalent. But, there were certainly still dynamics that illuminated the existence of lower caste individuals. In exploring the way in which women fit within their community I base a lot of my observations and discussion on *Aamaa Samuha* or “mother’s groups.” These are groups that exist in many parts of rural Nepal, implemented typically by non-local actors for the purpose of gender development through participation. These groups are often run by local people and the community members involved may receive training. This training often includes tourism skills, sanitation practices, money managing and income-generating skills, and community development programs. In the case of Sikles, there are five groups that were implemented by the Annapurna Conservation Project in the late 1990’s. I will go into greater detail about the Sikles context in my ‘findings’ section.

Finally, I also would like to preface my findings with some key informants whose names appear frequently in my observations. During my time in Sikles, I lived in a home-stay, which served as an important factor in connecting me with key people. In my home, I lived with *bauju* or “sister in

law”, her husband who I called *Maila Daai* which means second son, and their two kids Asish and Tara. Through my host family, I met Kristi and Gita Gurung, siblings who were *bauju’s* sister’s children and young women I spent a fair amount of time with. Kristi is 22 years old and Gita is 19. They also became my friends throughout this process.

Findings

In an exploration of the history of the link between spatial limitations and gender, Massey explains, “One of the most evident aspects of this joint control of spatiality and identity has been in the West related to the culturally specific distinction between public and private. The attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity” (1994, p.179). Here, he outlines how the space individuals are confined to can create a “spatial control” on identity. In following with this idea that an individual’s identity can be transformed and defined by the space they occupy, I have divided my findings into categories. These categories are based on public and private reproductions of space as they relate to individual identity.

I outline these findings within the context of a fluid and changing political state. It is important to place all of my observations within the context of Nepal’s “not ahistorical and unchanging” (Tamang, 2011 p.162) landscape. And, I recognize that during my time in Sikles, all of Nepal was in the midst of political transition with an upcoming election. This helped in allowing me to observe relevant political happenings, but also caused me to draw on the importance of the fluid nature of a changing state. Thus, I acknowledge how the spaces and the identities I observed and describe in the following are always subject to change and were perhaps changing as I witnessed them.

Rankin and Nightingale explain that their research “emerged from our long-standing engagement with feminist theories that seek to understand the relationship between social inequality

in everyday contexts and its manifestation in ‘public’ domains” (2015, p.163). In building from this and other works of feminist scholarship, I also wanted to observe how “the spaces of socioeconomic exchange and environmental governance are crucial contexts wherein a wider sense of citizenship and belonging is contested and established” (Rankin et al., 2015, p.160). And, in attempting to understand a shifting identity and belonging for Gurung and Dalit women in changing space I will highlight the inconsistencies among private and public space and their ability to illuminate difference in identity. Through these varied contexts, I noticed inconsistencies in productions of inequalities and women’s cultural practices and roles.

I. Public Sphere

Within this category, I will include the Annapurna Conservation Project (ACAP) and any local or national run government programs. I believe that all of these spaces have something in common. They are ‘public’ spaces with the ability to shape local individuals by outside influences. Thus, I use space here to describe physical entities with places like the Annapurna Conservation office, and other government operated buildings. I also use ‘space’ as an ideological concept to define structures that may formulate a community or state identity like government representation, compulsory quotas, and aid-funded community development programs. Within this domain I often observed or learned about ways in which non-local people gave local individuals information or training. In these contexts, local people were participants for the sake of the community or state. I found that within these spaces and representations of the Sikles community members, there emerged a sense of identity among women that was different than what I observed in more informal, interactions within the home or during day to day life.

a. Annapurna Conservation Project

“When we give awareness to women, we give empowerment...if I am not interested to go to front, that is not good,” said Madhu Baral, one of two senior administrative assistants in the ACAP office. He looked up in anticipation for my next question.

Within my first few hours upon arriving in Sikles I was given an extensive glance into what the Annapurna Conservation Project (ACAP) and the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) do for the Sikles area. Sikles is one of seven locations where the ACAP is based with a branch office. This project developed in the 1990s with an objective detailed on the website “To achieve sustained balance between nature conservation and socio-economic improvement in the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) thereby assist National Trust for Nature Conservation in achieving its goal.” During my first visit, I entered a conference room with large posters each outlining a specific focus in ACAP’s work in the Sikles specific branch. One of them read “Gender Development” with categories like “Issues of Concern,” “Program Objectives,” and “Activities.” Beneath “Issues of concern I noticed, “Social constraints deprive women of opportunities” and beneath the activities category I read, “Empower local women group.” The ACAP website has a page titled “Gender Equity and Empowerment (GEE).” The overall focus of GEE is “the importance of mainstreaming women, marginalized and socially outcast people in conservation and development efforts...” with an aim to “empower them [women] and to encourage them to take part in the decision-making processes to achieve sustainable conservation and development.” By this mission, ACAP implies that with a greater stake in conservation and development projects women will feel more empowered.

Madhu Baral and I sat in the front yard of the ACAP office on my very first day in Sikles. It was a Saturday and the office staff is housed right next to their working space so they are often found within close proximity to the office even on weekends. In inquiring about ACAP’s gender

development programs, Madhu explained that local women in Sikles are able to grow their own food, generate an income from the tourist industry, are able to go abroad, and sell their own goods to outside consumers because of the programs ACAP has implemented. He added that women's lives in Sikles are generally good as a result of these abilities and skills. I noticed that most of his examples of programs and attribution to a "good situation" included income-generating activities. I asked about the mothers' groups to which Madhu responded, "They control in Sikles village." He did not go into further detail about this but instead added that men always play cards instead of doing work, "They lost their time here..."

As an office staff member, it is his job to represent ACAP's mission for community development and I was careful to remain conscious of this inherent bias while speaking with him. I was told women are "in control" and men lose their time due to laziness. This conversation set an expectation for my interactions with local people. Though Madhu did not define empowerment, I understood that to "give empowerment" in his opinion (or by ACAP's mission) was to enable local women with income generating skills and to give them a stake in development work. With this agency they were then perhaps able to "go to front" or gain newfound confidence. Did ACAP truly "give empowerment" or have their programs simply provided women with new skills to shoulder a burden that has always been theirs to handle? Our talk ended with me inquiring about the use of discourse. I asked if local women in Sikles understand words like empowerment and awareness, which are frequently used within the realm of ACAP's development goals and programs. He told me these words are too big and Nepali is a second language for Sikles locals – as far as he was concerned, people would not understand.

The employees I met in this office were not from Sikles, but instead hired by the government and placed in this location. For the two weeks I lived in Sikles, I rarely saw any of these staff members outside of their office area, which included a courtyard, a garden, office/living space,

and an “eco museum” about Gurung culture. The space they occupied felt very separate from the local Sikles community. Within their separate space they slept, ate all of their meals, and worked. They worked on conservation projects and used words like “empowerment” and “awareness” which Madhu claimed local people could not understand. In my following days, I asked many local people about ACAP. I posed the simple, straightforward question, *Tapaaiko bichaarmaa ACAP raamro ki naraamro kura ho?* meaning “In your opinion, is ACAP a good or bad thing?” I was always met with positivity. People cited things like programs, toilets, and community groups or just simply said ACAP is good. To debate whether ACAP is “good” or not would lead me nowhere. Instead, I thought about the idea of “gender development” and the way in which Madhu described women in Sikles. Can women in Sikles be empowered by ACAP’s standards without an understanding of the concept itself? In explaining the discourse used in gender development contexts, Tamang affirms this disconnect between certain frequently used words and the inability for local people to understand these words. With this disconnect, she explains how some people propose “a certain simplification or pruning of complex theories in order to render their meanings more concise and ‘implementable’” (2011, p.168). But, she believes, “in the Nepali context the simplifications have resulted in a weakening of the political power of concepts as they are made to fit the discourse of *bikas* in a sanitized form” (2011, p.169). I certainly observed this disconnect but was unsure whether or not words like “empowerment” or “awareness” lost any “political power.” How could these words lose power if they had never carried any meaning to locals in the first place? Does power, in this sense, refer to projects like ACAP? In talking to women in the following days, I tried to use the Nepali word for “awareness” and quickly realized this was not effective. I also wondered if the physical boundary I noticed between the ACAP staff and the local people was a source of tension in program implementation. And, with ACAP’s evident focus on income generating activities and inclusion in development projects for women I thought about other aspects of an individual’s life

that could contribute to a feeling of empowerment. I felt as though these approaches were missing something or perhaps equating individual agency with the ability to exhibit mainstream forms of equality. I was left with a strong desire to speak to local women and a need to extend my exploration of women's lives in different, more personal spaces.

b. Local Representation and Government

Attempting to understand and navigate local government in Sikles was a challenging process that often led me in circles. The very nature of this difficulty reflected the way in which many local people seemed to conceive of their own government as well—confusing and generally hopeless. And, in the context of the upcoming election during my time in Sikles, this lack of faith felt quite transparent when asking local people if they were looking forward to voting. I received responses ranging from apathy to complete dismissal and in one account, a simple: “politics is a dirty, dirty game” (Gholman Gurung, Nov. 2017).

As of this year what was previously known as “Village Development Committees” was dissolved and replaced with the *Gaupalika*. This Nepali word translates to “rural municipality” and is the lower administrative section of the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development. Within *Gaupalika* there are districts to identify areas. These districts are then divided into wards. The purpose of this organization is to ensure an effective relationship between local villagers and the state while also implementing structural organization at a village level. At the ward level there is a chairperson and four ward members. According to the restructuring as of this year there must be at least two female ward representatives, one of which must be a Dalit female.

In learning about this very recent district representative formation, I sought out the two female representatives for Ward One in the Kaski District. With such a newly formed group of representatives and compulsory quotas I was interested in how a rule imposed by the state for the sake of equality took shape in practice. Could a compulsory quota for representation have a visible

impact on a local level? And, what does this mean for the incorporation of women in local government?

I went to Sikles Guest House to talk to Khasamaya Gurung, the female, non-Dalit Ward One representative from Sikles. I gave a brief introduction and felt a lot more nervous than I thought I would be. I had just walked into her home and place of work in the hopes of gaining insight into her role as a representative—a sizable task for a first encounter. I started with a very simple question, *tapai ke ke kam garnuhunchha?* meaning “What work do you do?” It was apparent from this initial question that my Nepali would prove hard for her to understand. She called her husband in as she smiled and laughed quietly. He assumed the role of a partial translator, reiterating my question to her in Gurung and relaying her responses to me in Nepali and a bit of English. I was grateful for his presence to help us to better understand one another. But, at times I felt as though his presence was impeding her ability to answer me in full. For instance, when asked about what is discussed at ward meetings she began to speak, *kasari mabilaa maathi banaaunhunchha...* meaning “how to make women higher...” but her husband interrupted to translate. As a representative elected by her fellow community members I expected her to be forward and informative. Instead, this interaction was awkward and she was timid. I am not claiming that she is a shy individual, but rather, our language barrier and the presence of her husband left room for misinterpretation and silence. I walked away from this interaction surprised and feeling like I had not truly interviewed Khasamaya Gurung—instead, I felt I had interviewed her husband. Throughout the following days, I saw Khasamaya around Sikles village. We greeted each other fondly in Nepali as I watched her take part in welcoming government officials and others to Sikles on multiple occasions.

A few days later I decided to seek out Rupaa Nepali, the female Dalit representative for the Ward One committee. I was told she lived in Parche, the neighboring village about a fifteen-minute walk on a dirt road and when I mentioned her name almost everyone seemed to know whom she

was. A day earlier I had visited Parche and stopped at the health post, which, like the ACAP office, also houses government employees. I spent a whole afternoon there talking to a young woman named Sushmita Gyawali from Pokhara. I learned she was 22 years old and had been working in Parche for 6 months. In inquiring about Rupaa Nepali, she agreed to go with me and translate.

The next day we set out to find Rupaa. We climbed to the top of the village up stone steps and picked up a young Gurung man along the way who helped us locate her home. We arrived to the front of a home with many people. Two middle-aged women sat in the doorway, kids were returning from school and a man sat on the ground weaving behind us. When we arrived Sushmita told me this was a low caste community up here. It was great to have her there to give an introduction on my behalf after I also gave a brief one of my own. But with her doing most of the talking it felt as though I lost the opportunity to be personable and connect on some level with Rupaa. In fact, this was the first interview in which the person I interviewed rarely made eye contact with me (especially while answering my questions).

Rupaa seemed passionate and angry. She spoke fast and furrowed her brow as her tone varied in pitch. I asked about what has been talked about in ward meetings with an understanding that there have only been a few meetings of this newly formed group. I learned they have talked about roads and development of agriculture. Throughout this interview, I asked for translations but oftentimes Rupaa did not pause to wait for Sushmita to translate. For this reason, the translations I got from this point forward were simple and redundant. Sushmita often said she would translate after or that Rupaa had simply repeated herself presenting the same information in a different matter.

In Rupaa's opinion, Parche households and the greater community is at fault when it comes to untouchability and Dalit identity in perpetuating discrimination. She reiterated perhaps five times that in *samaj ghar* (community house) meetings in her own community of Parches (where Gurung

people and Dalit people come together to discuss community happenings) she must wash her own glass after she drinks tea. Gurung people do not have to do this. This was the example she cited over and over again (from my understanding). Each time she brought this up, Sushmita turned to me and said she was saying what she had already said about tea. I continued to ask for a translation even when it was obvious to me that Rupaa was again talking about the glass washing in community meetings. As I sat with Rupaa on her porch I wanted to understand her. I wanted to understand every word she said because every sentence was fraught with frustration. A frustration that she was willing to express and that drew others in, and, perhaps this is why she was elected—because she is frustrated.

As she proceeded to describe the way this discrimination takes shape her speaking sped up and people gathered around-- presumably all Dalit individuals aside from the young Gurung man who had led us up there and was sitting and listening as well. I was struck by the way in which this interview captivated others around us. People listened and looked over my shoulder to make sure I was writing everything down. Rupaa believed that the problem is rooted in a lack of education. People in Parche are completely unaware of this social inequality. She claimed that the same problem does not exist in Sikles. This claim was surprising seeing as these villages lie next to one another and share both a local government committee and a health center. I learned that the Dalit community in Parche has their own meetings in which they have been discussing better road construction, though it was unclear how they activate these discussions.

I asked if she had ever voiced these opinions in a ward meeting to which the response was no. She has not spoken in a meeting because she feels as though she cannot. In talking about her inability to relay her feelings and concerns at the local level I noticed many people including Sushmita encourage her to do so. They exclaimed in Nepali, “you must speak!” I could not fully pick up on her responses to these pleas, but her frustration certainly continued. Even the young Gurung

man with us exclaimed that she must tell them how she is feeling or else nothing will change. As a female, Dalit representative on behalf of an institutionally oppressed group and a historically disadvantaged gender this puts her into two socially constructed marginalized identities. She is faced with the pressure to represent her own views, which consequently should then reflect these identities as well. Compulsory quotas exist for the purpose of equal representation but how can one person hold all of this responsibility? How can she be expected to simply voice her opinion with these inherent barriers to overcome?

The new ward level committee quotas seemed to have a purpose that aligned with ACAP's mission to involve women in development. But there seemed to be a step missing in ensuring that this was happening effectively. Certainly there is a focus in participation on a community level. But, once participation is achieved, perhaps there must be a further step in ensuring that the participation itself is effective. How can entrenched barriers like Rupaa's inability to speak be overcome? Tamang presents the argument that "The idiom of 'rights' in the political arena defines women as autonomous, purposeful actors capable of making choices in the full knowledge of their legal and political personhood." While, on the other hand, the language in which women's issues are framed present them as "agency-less subjects in need of assistance in order to fulfill their potential" (2011, p.168).

In talking to both female representatives I gained insight into the effectiveness of compulsory quotas. I noticed a tension between the state's requirements that women are a part of local government and the personal sentiments rooted in societal norms. Tamang presents a similar tension between the claims that women should be autonomous beings and a simultaneous depiction of women as victims to be uplifted. Is there achievable balance in this evident tension that exists in the inclusion of women with the goal of uplifting? And, is it this underlying notion of the "agency-less" woman that contributes to a women's inability to fully exercise individual rights when given the

opportunity to do so? In talking about women and politics in Nepal, Rankin and Nightingale explain “household limitations” for women where political meetings were often held during the day when women had to be working in forests or fields. They explain, “These familiar and hardly surprising findings highlighted to us the need to ‘place’ institutions and governance in order to understand how social exclusions continue even as political reforms seek to undo such exclusions” (2015, p. 167). I had observed this phenomenon – these compulsory quotas were evidently not undoing the exclusion they sought to undo. Perhaps compulsory inclusion was not enough to ensure all women’s voices were heard in the context of local government.

c. Important People Come to Sikles

I witnessed the welcoming of important people to Sikles two times during my stay. In watching local people interact with visitors I thought about the ways in which state and local identity play into a woman’s perceived role. Tamang says, “‘culture,’ thus seen as ‘open,’ ‘flexible’ and changing, also permits an understanding of the active role played by the state in defining ‘culture.’” (2011, p. 173). In this sense, I was interested in how these outside visitors may function as an “active role” in defining aspects of Gurung and Dalit culture. On both occasions it was quite obvious that it was the women’s duty to make the garlands of bright orange flowers, prepare Tika, and wait at the bus park to welcome visitors. I noted this unspoken duty for women to welcome outside visitors and wondered if such practice was empowering. Does it imply that women are important figures in Sikles if they are responsible for presenting this welcome or is it simply a duty embedded in gendered norms? The recognition of this alone was interesting when considering the representations of women in political and non-political settings. On one morning I joined the row of Sikles women to welcome government officials from the Kaski district and watched as the community lined up for the welcoming of district government and military officials. I was somehow included in this

welcome line up and multiple people asked me how we welcome people in America to which I said we do not have a ritual for welcoming. The people who arrived walked down the line receiving garlands and Tika and I was handed silk scarves by a friend from ACAP to put around their necks. When a military officer reached my place in the row of people, garlands piled high past his chin he said, said “You are welcoming us in our own country, thank you...” I appreciated this candid statement as it was surely the reason I felt so uncomfortable to be a part of this line.

The day after this I witnessed the arrival of yet another important group of individuals. I had been told that there was a meeting at *Saba Chowk*, the center of town. I had walked passed this area before but did not know it was a frequent community meeting spot. A banner hung in the middle of the open outside area that morning which read, “Ward Level Advocacy and Awareness Campaign on Early Grade Reading.” I learned this was a program already put in place by overseeing district officials and they were back to talk to community members about the effectiveness of the program. The program instills *Aamaa Samuha* members with the initiative to encourage parents to study with their children every day for at least ten minutes. The details of the program itself remain unclear to me, but I was more interested in observing how local individuals interacted in a community meeting setting. Before the program began, I watched as everyone stood in unison to sing a Nepali song. As I looked down the line of people to my right and left I noticed that people were singing along to this anthem I had yet to hear until now. The people to my right and left were the ward level advocates who had come to discuss the program. Across from me, however, where the community members stood I noticed only two people singing. Was this a national anthem? Did it hold the same weight or purpose for everyone? And, how did everyone know to stand yet only the visitors knew the words to the song? Perhaps this discrepancy illustrates the same tension I had seen earlier between state and local identity in Rupaa’s inability to voice her opinions with the state’s requirement for her presence.

After many introductions, a formal welcoming and thank-you's, the visitors asked for local people to speak. They opened up the floor asking individuals to share their 99experiences about how the program has been successful and unsuccessful. When asked to speak one Gurung man spoke followed by five Gurung women. Many of the government officials kept expressing delightful surprise because so many people shared their *aaphno* (own) experiences and most of these individuals were women. At one point, Naumaya Gurung, the head chairperson of all the *Aamaa Samuha* groups in Sikles was invited to the front to speak. I was not able to understand what she said but in watching her gestures and onlookers, it was obvious she was unafraid to speak her mind. People laughed and smiled while she looked into the crowd of community members, her voice unwavering. When most of the other women did speak, they seemed timid. Some did not stand up or show their face to everyone. Regardless, this gathering seemed revealing by demonstrating who felt comfortable speaking in public spaces. From this single experience, it would be lofty to assume that Gurung women are the most confident individuals in the Sikles community. But, from this single experience I was able to observe that out of the people willing to share most were Gurung women. The willingness to share their own thoughts (even without an understanding of the thoughts expressed) revealed that a significant amount of Gurung women feel comfortable speaking in front of their community. Further, the delightful surprise expressed by the outside visitors demonstrated that this participation by women was notable and welcome. Is this participation a result of programs like ACAP or other development training? Or, is the notion of Gurung women speaking in front of their whole community one that already existed? I was conscious in my reflections on this event to avoid prescribing too much importance—it was the reactions from the ward level advocates and the far greater proportion of women who spoke that struck me as notable. I was unsure how significant this was in relation to other everyday practices of equality and willingness to speak.

II. Private Sphere

In this next section of my findings I define what felt like a separate space. These observations felt like more ‘private’ representations of women in Sikles. In that these activities I witnessed were less community focused and instead for the sake of individuals. By simply living in Sikles and spending time with women both formally and informally I was able to understand how women fit into their more individual and specific communities within the home and performing daily duties. Most of this information was gathered through informal participation, conversations, and observations. Rankin and Nightingale claim,

“In much of the thinking on political revolution and transition, gender and households are typically treated as secondary ‘social problems’ that need to be addressed down the line once the core business of establishing institutions of liberal democracy is achieved. We argue, however, that they have a more foundational role to play in everyday processes of state and political transformation” (2015, p.160).

During my time spent with Gurung and Dalit women within the home or in the fields, I thought about this. I thought about practices within the home as formative in shaping the ways in which women are seen by their family or other community members; or, the ways in which women’s duties affected their ability to participate. Alternatively, I thought about these more private roles as I thought about a more nuanced notion of empowerment in gender development. Can we deem household practices “social problems?” And, how could I talk to and question individuals about their household roles if they had never questioned it themselves?

a. Contextualizing Gurung women

Tamang prefaces her article with the recognition that many types of Nepali women exist. She cites orthodox Hindu groups’ beliefs in sexual purity associated with women alongside Thakali and Sherpa women known for business and marketing skills. She explains, “It is clear that not all

women in Nepal have been sequestered in the realm of the domestic, nor has wage-labor, business and other realms of 'the public' been uniformly imagined as only masculine" (162). This was clear of Gurung women upon my arrival noticing that most of the physical labor was done by women. Most mornings I walked by women carrying loads of buffalo manure down from the very top of the village to their farmland down below. And, in the evenings I ran into women returning from the forest carrying piles of wood on their back. Not only, did I notice far more women than men engaging in strenuous physical labor, I noticed a collaborative approach to many types of work. Harrison and Macfarlane explain, "The whole thing reminds me of an orchestra, conducted by the humans, who call into play all the resources as needed" (2014, p. 6). I certainly witnessed this "orchestra" conducted by men and women and people young and old making use of all their resources in a seemingly communal approach.

Historically, Gurung men would leave their homes to join the British or Indian army, often referred to in Nepali as *Labure*. The prospect of leaving to join an army was not only common, but also revered as a valiant and desired pursuit. For this reason, oftentimes, women were left to care for the home while men worked abroad and sent money home to their families. In Sikles, it was evident that the *Labure* was still a priority in many households. In keeping with the theme of men leaving the home, I also met many families with brothers or husbands abroad not necessarily for the army but for other work. Perhaps one of the most frequent conversations I had with women I talked to began with the explanation of where their family members were. I found the history of Gurung men leaving for the army relevant in contextualizing the role that Gurung women took on in households. Macfarlane explains,

"Even a short acquaintance with a Gurung village will reveal that, if anything, the women work even harder than the men. While men relax by talking or gambling, women seldom rest... They are immensely tough, resilient and cheerful. They mix with young and old men without any

noticeable signs of deference. They join with gusto in the sometimes bawdy joking and singing, and they often lead the family rituals” (1990, p.12).

In my exploration to learn about the ways in which women could perhaps feel disempowered by household values and roles based on what I had read or observed in other parts of Nepal, I was struck by what I found in Sikles. Like Macfarlane, I noticed this sense of immense responsibility and lack of strictly divided, gendered practices. What began in Kathmandu as my interest in the more covert gendered roles within the home did not seem to be as prevalent here. During my time in Kathmandu I watched every night as my host mother served food to men of the family first, only sitting down to eat when her son and husband were completely done. In Sikles, I observed my *bauju* and daai cook food together and eat with one another over a discussion about their day. I bring this up not only highlight the way in which Nepali women differ but also to illuminate my own surprise with this difference. After one of my first long conversations with 19-year-old Gita Gurung, I wrote *I want to challenge the idea of this need to for a “developing women” and illuminate the constructed nature of such concept. The women I’ve met here are the strongest people I know. They hold the community together and take care of everyone.*

As I spent more time in Sikles I added to this initial, general thought. I noticed instances that, complicated the notion of women as respected, free agents in their community. There were certainly still things that women were not encouraged to do by way of embedded cultural norms. Whether these things made women frustrated or not was what I wanted to find out. And, in observing certain cultural norms I wondered if all gendered practices were worth being challenged if they did not seem to present any obvious problems. How could I critique a practice as an outsider with a vastly different perspective? Tamang takes a strong stance on this front claiming that to simply attribute gendered practices to culture is too conservative and that “this deployment of culture as a justification of gender inequalities can be challenged” (173). She cites divorce as a widely

known unacceptable practice in Nepal, but illuminates divorce practice among Limbu women, which “obscure patriarchal structures” (p.173). I struggled with my authority to question cultural practices without a framework like Tamang which encompasses many Nepali women across places and cultures of difference.

b. Talking to Women in Sikles

During my time in Sikles, I went about talking to many women in an informal manner. As I walked I would encounter people who often engaged with me and at times would invite me into their home. Other times I would meet someone, inquire about free time, and return on a different day. I found that people in Sikles had varied free time and I could never completely predict when would be the best time to go out and seek women to talk to. What follows is a mixture of narratives and accounts in my conversations with different people.

Early on in my interactions I realized that the questions I had intended to ask people were not proving successful. I recounted, *Nepali women are not too keen on talking about themselves and don't really understand the question, “what do you like about yourself?” as a concept alone because perhaps this is just not something they think about. Maybe it is a lack of thinking of oneself because even in the way that work is done here, there is a group focus.* I had to reconsider my questions.

My *banju* was perhaps the woman in Sikles I spent the most time with and got to know pretty well. We had countless informal conversations over tea in the morning and dinner at night. I would join her to do work during the day on multiple occasions on her farm and to climb up to the top of Sikles to gather buffalo manure. During the time in my homestay, *Maila Daai* was often outside of the home, as his work required him to be. He was a jeep driver constantly shuttling back and forth between Pokhara and his home in Sikles. When he came home at the end of long driving days it was obvious he was tired and worn down. In this sense, I observed both *banju* and *Maila Daai* engage in time-consuming work for the benefit of their family. While it appeared that women

performed the bulk of the work in Sikles around and in the home, I would not feel completely confident claiming this was the case in my homestay. They both worked all day and when *Maila Daai* returned home he often spent his free time helping *banju*. One evening I watched as three women came over to our home to make a puffed rice snack. Pots of rice were crafted into large solid balls and then put in a machine, which turned the balls into thin strings of rice. *Maila Daai* rolled the rice into large balls and handed them over to the women in an assembly line. He would say “Now, I have a duty” whenever it was his time to do something kitchen related.

One morning, I went with Gita, *banju* and two other women to work on their farm. The farmland was below all the houses, terraced along the hillside. Terraces stretched all the way down, farther than I could see. The area of land we arrived at was relatively high up, with houses from the village still in sight. It took some convincing to let us use sharp tools to help hack away at overgrown fields in preparation for planting potatoes and millet. After we finished a section we would be told to follow all the women to the next section. Each time, I asked whose land we were working on the answer was different. Whenever I accompanied *banju* to do work around Sikles, I met other women. When we worked on the fields we worked in a group, moving from one person’s plot of land to another, everyone working on each other’s land. When we went up to collect manure, we had a picnic where snacks were laid out and women gathered around laughing and chatting. While *banju* did this work for the sake of her own family, the work itself always felt communal.

I spent a lot of this time on the farm time talking to Gita Gurung. I was interested in getting to know someone around my own age. I asked Gita lots of questions as we hacked away at the land. I learned that once you get married in Sikles, you get possession of your own land. The husband is responsible for choosing this land. I immediately found that ironic, as it seemed to be women who spend most of the time on this land. But, Gita declared that the work between men and women in the fields was equal. I believed her but jotted down reflections in response when I returned home

that evening *This may be true, but after the fieldwork is done, it is the women who return home and immediately begin cooking for their families.* I asked Gita if she wanted to get married in the future to which she immediately responded “yes.” Unlike much of Nepal, I found marriages in Sikles were not typically arranged. It seemed they were oftentimes for the sake of love and a choice that individuals were encouraged to make on their own. Macfarlane explains “Marriage among the Gurungs had traditionally been too important a matter to leave to the whim of individuals” (1990, p.8). At the same time, he points out, “Curiously, the usual theme in this arranged-marriage society is love” (1990, p.10). When asked to draw a family tree, my *Daai* explained that whichever family a woman marries into, this becomes her family. In other words, the husband’s family is now the wife’s family, but the wife’s family would not become the husband’s family. This did not mean that *Maila Daai* was not close with *bauju*’s immediate family, but that perhaps they spent more time with his family. And, this was the reason I called her *bauju* or “sister in law,” but called him “brother.” So, even within the Gurung’s more love focused marriage practices, there seemed to be a greater emphasis on the husband’s side of the family. I did not know how consistent this was among other families and met countless family members from both sides of my host family, all received and welcomed with the same warmth. *Maila Daai* had simply reiterated a gendered, cultural norm. He reiterated it to me like one would a simple rule or fact. It did not seem like any source of tension within the home, and, to me, this difference was only signified by the difference in kinship terms I was told to use.

In talking to Gita and Kristi Gurung, I noticed a desire to find love and date. Kristi joked about me finding her an American boyfriend and we joked with one another about dating. On one occasion *bauju* chimed in claiming that Gita had a boyfriend who lived far away. Gita claimed otherwise. I reflected on a contrasting dynamic in which the younger women I interacted with were very liberal in their thinking as in they want to be in love and are openly dating whereas older people

often asked if I was married and seem shocked when I said I may not marry or I may not marry for a long time. At the same time, some older folks seem to have married for love.

My conversation with Gita on the farm ended with me inquiring about her future plans. She told me she wanted to be a teacher, which meant that her job would likely determine her residence. Like the teachers who worked at the school in Sikles from different parts of Nepal, teachers hired by the government could be placed anywhere. But, Gita loved Sikles and she told me this countless times. She aspired to be the chairperson of the *Aamaa Samuha* groups when she was a mother. Gita's aspirations seemed to pull her in opposite directions. And, as a young woman like myself I assumed she was still unsure about her future. Oftentimes she would laugh in response to my questions about her aspirations. I can say with clarity that Gita loved Sikles and took pride in her home. Rankin and Nightingale argue, "Individual women practice modes of informal subversion that serve to diminish gendered modes of authority and blur the hegemonic boundaries between public and private even if they are not engaging in more overt collective protest." (2015, p.171). By their argument, one may see Gita as someone who exercises "informal subversion." She talks openly about dating, she goes to school outside of her village, and she uses a cellphone to connect with friends frequently. She exhibits an independence that may potentially "blur the hegemonic boundaries" that often confine women to certain roles. I believe, however, that arguments like this seek to define the behavior of individuals based on standards that fall outside of the given, specific context. Is Gita blurring lines, or does she simply represent the changing, younger generation of women in Sikles? Similarly, are women in Sikles empowered or are they simply faced with responsibilities that require them to act and perform the way that they currently do? It seemed to me many women were strong, resilient, and honest as a result of their culturally driven responsibilities. If qualities like this manifest out of necessity is it still empowerment?

c. Interviews with Women

I found myself frequently asking women if they were *Aamaa Samuha* members in formal interviews. I wanted to understand if women were taking part in a community group that ACAP claimed empowering. If they were members, what had they gained from it? And, if they were not members, why? Was this a choice or were there other reasons driving the outcome? In addition to these questions, I often asked about daily duties, other family members, favorite things to do, and about problems (if any) for women in Sikles. In talking to Gurung women I sometimes asked about their perception of Dalit women's social situation in Sikles. I was curious about the social dynamics among women in Sikles and the potential social hierarchies between women of different castes. And, finally, in reshaping my previously large and over encompassing questions like "What do you like about yourself?" I asked questions in simple terms. In some sense, this prevented me from receiving answers with a lot of personal sentiment—an inherent barrier with limited language and the need for simplicity.

I met Aasmaya Sunar in Namaste guesthouse while sitting in front of my computer. We exchanged greetings and she began to ask how long I was staying in Sikles (as many of my conversations started). Her smile was warm and inviting and she seemed eager to engage. I noticed her speaking Nepali to others, which came as a surprise as I had observed the default language for most people was Gurung. I guessed she was Dalit—from her name and appearance as well. As our conversation progressed I asked if she would be willing to answer a few questions. I explained I was interested in talking to many Nepali women. She told me she was not an *Aamaa Samuha* member because she was unable to read and write. I wondered if this was a barrier preventing others from becoming a member as well. I had met a woman in passing the previous day who told me she was not an *Aamaa Samuha* member because it was *jau laagyo* meaning "boring." When asked if this was a common problem among other women Aasmaya said yes. My train of thought drove me to ask

about ACAP. Didn't they give training to alleviate these problems? She dismissed the question immediately. She explained that her husband was no longer alive and most of her children no longer lived in Sikles. One of her son's children or *batchaa* (baby) lived with her in Sikles and attended primary school. When asked what she thought the biggest problem in Sikles was, she explained there was not enough work in the village; people are *garib* (poor). She exclaimed, *bikaas raamro tara haamisanga paischa chhaina*, meaning development is good, but we do not have money.

After Aasmaya left, the Namaste guesthouse owner, a friend of mine, came over to ask me about how it went. He filled in some information gaps. He explained that her husband had only died six months ago from severe elevation sickness, foraging for medicinal herbs high in the mountains. Her husband had been an alcoholic who did not treat her well. In explaining this he used the word *chipnu*, the verb "to hit" in Nepali. In fact, when certain instances with her husband occurred, she had confided in him and *Aamaa Samuha* groups for help. He contacted the police, but they never came. The *Aamaa Samuha* members wrote a letter on her behalf, but nothing much came of it. I wondered if things would have been different if she was a member and if there were many others suffering from abusive relationships in Sikles. Consequently, I felt the need to talk to more Dalit women as most of my time had been spent with Gurung women.

Gita agreed to take me to a Dalit household to conduct an interview. I had learned that within Sikles there were clusters of Dalit communities, interspersed within the village. At first glance one would likely not be able to set these clusters apart. I met at Gita's home and followed her to another home that was only a few houses over. We entered and crouched into a small kitchen area to meet Bolmaya BK and Ganjaman BK. We learned that this husband and wife had seven daughters and one son (the son was the youngest and two of the daughters were married and living in other countries). Immediately upon arriving Ganjaman started talking to us about their life. He explained how many children he has and talked about the amount of work he must do to sustain his

family. He said he saw me earlier when he was working on maintaining the stone paths in the village and that this work was now done. He explained they have no clothing while touching my jacket and no shoes while gazing at my feet. He talked close to my face and touched my leg frequently to get his points across. He often added *sunus, babini* meaning “listen sister...” Much of his speaking was unprompted by questions. We came in and he told us about his inability to support his family and reiterated points in which he compared my privilege to his family’s struggles, but simultaneously reiterated that we are all simply people. It is difficult to ask struggling people from a marginally oppressed caste how and why they are struggling—especially when an outsider asking these questions is in a place of far greater privilege. At one point, Ganjaman pointed to Gita and me and said you are the same—this underscored the clear divide between Dalit and Gurung people. Wasn’t she more similar to this family from her own village than me? Evidently, to him, she was not. He said that money is not what would make him happy but that ensuring the future of his children would. I appreciated all his honesty but felt uncomfortable in the closeness of his speaking, the touchiness, and his unwillingness to let anyone else talk. Gita would chime in and he would talk over her, or his wife would add something and he would continue to talk over her. I had to say *Tapaaike bichaarmaa* (in your opinion) to his wife over his voice to make clear that I wanted to hear from her. And, Gita would put her hand out as to signal that it was Bolmaya’s turn to speak. I had Gita ask if they experience discrimination in their community after he had already declared that Nepal is not a good place but that Sikles is. Bolmaya explained this does exist in Sikles. They are not able to enter Gurung homes and they cannot touch the same glass at the same time as another Gurung person. In her opinion the change in the government offers no hope and Gita agreed with this sentiment.

The ease with which I walked into their home with Gita by my side presented a striking contrast when learning that they are not permitted to enter any Gurung home. We walked right into the tight kitchen space and they made room for us. At a certain point near the very end of our

conversation, the man apologized and said he had been drinking *raksi* or alcohol. Perhaps this attributed to his close talking. Throughout all of this, Bolmaya was cooking over the fire directly across from me and would smile from time to time. One of the things she expressed in a brief moment when her husband was not talking was that she feels she cannot speak, she is not allowed to talk. I asked if she is an *Aamaa Samuha* member to which she said no because she does not have the proper training; she cannot read or write. Not only did she lack the proper skills to be a member, but also she explained her inability to talk in front of others. Even in her own home it felt as though her husband would not acknowledge her voice, speaking over her and answering questions that were obviously and directly posed to her.

My last interviews were with *banju*. I had been getting to know her over the entirety of my stay in Sikles, but, on one occasion, over tea, I asked her more formal questions. I began with what I had been asking most women, which was whether or not she was an *Aamaa Samuha* member. The answer was no. I asked why and cannot say that I fully understood the response. What I did glean from her response was a sense of apathy. It seemed that perhaps that she thought the *Aamaa Samuhas* were good but what they attempt to accomplish is not that productive. Alternatively, the apathy I observed could have been because she did not meet the reading and writing requirements to be a member. Though I did not understand the response to this, I understood that her answer wasn't as simple as I like them or I don't like them. Next, I asked her about Dalit women and Gurung women. How were they treated differently in the Sikles community? She proceeded to list out some cultural norms I had already heard about. She said Dalit women are not allowed in Gurung homes, they are often very poor, and their family members often go far away but not for the army. She said they will go anywhere for work. I wanted to ask how she felt about this and what this means. Did she have an understanding that these cultural boundaries were a form of discrimination? When I tried to ask how she felt about these unspoken rules, it did not translate well. I attributed

this to her lack of Nepali, my lack of Nepali, and the likely fact that these ideas and practices associated with Dalit people were almost never overtly challenged; they were unquestioned cultural practices rooted in history. I found her immediate listing of these practices reminiscent of their unquestioned, embedded nature.

In these more formal conversations with women I learned a lot about the social dynamics amongst Gurung and Dalit women. These social dynamics were not overt in practice. I often witnessed Gurung and Dalit women in Sikles occupying similar spaces. There seemed to be no clear, visible tension that I observed. But, in talking to women, a true divide revealed itself.

III. *Aamaa Samuha* as an In-Between

In this final section of my findings, I detail the mother's groups in Sikles as spaces that seemed neither private nor public. Sara Parker explains the formation of these groups in Sikles in her book accompanied by photos, "For centuries, women have worked together, often within their own wards within the village, to maintain religious sites and maintain pathways. The ACAP built on this tradition and has placed the tradition of *Aamaa Toli* at the center of its approach by focusing on mobilization amps on women and also encouraging education initiatives" (2011, p.69). In the 1990's, ACAP implemented adult literacy programs for women and took what was already a community of many women working together and helped to create formal groups. Thus, these groups are rooted in facilitation by ACAP, but the idea of women working together in the Sikles community had already been a long-standing practice. ACAP facilitated with formal training. The groups seem to embody collaboration between local women and ACAP with an intention to arm local women with abilities through literacy and skills programs thus enabling women with authority to govern themselves. I was interested in whether or not this collaboration was effective in ACAP's mission to empower local women. In 2003, Parker returned to Sikles for a second time to work with ActionAid Nepal

and Education Network in Kathmandu to implement an approach to empower local people through literacy programs called “REFLECT.” It “offers an approach to literacy and empowerment that responds to the uniqueness of place, recognizes that ‘place matters’ and that development is an internal process that cannot be introduced from the outside” (2003, p.15). What prompted her work with this program reflects similar sentiments that I felt while talking to ACAP and local women in questioning whether or not ACAP’s approach to local engagement was effective. She questions, “to what extent are the women being empowered and consulted in the participatory process and to what extent are they being co-opted to participate in a predetermined agenda?” (2003, p.10).

My primary contact in talking about the role of *Aamaa Samubas* in Sikles was Naumaya Gurung. I went to her home one evening with Gita for a long informal conversation. As I mentioned earlier, my conversation with Naumaya was an interaction that sparked much of my curiosity in the collaboration with ACAP and local women. According to Naumaya, the 5 *Aamaa Samubas* in Sikles were created 25 years ago and did not exist before ACAP. She claimed that with the formation of these groups and formal training, women were able to speak more freely and confidently. Her sentiments associated with ACAP felt overwhelmingly positive. She explained that the literacy and money managing classes were instrumental in forming *Aamaa Samubas*. What I found most interesting about our conversation was the politics associated with who could be a member. This was something I was eager to discuss as I had met countless women who were not members because they could not read or write. She said they chose members based on “good habits” (Gita’s translation). It was unclear how exactly these “good habits” were determined or assessed. But, there were other requirements as well. To become a member, there was a required fee, a required understanding of how to handle money, and education. Thus, to be a member seemed to require a lot. Not only was there a subjective evaluation of “good habits” but other requirements that were only possible with resources like money and time. I inquired about lower caste women and she

explained there were Dalit members, but there were far more Gurung women. When I asked why she thought this was the case she said there were very few Dalit women in Sikles. Finally, I asked how she was chosen as the head chairperson of all the groups and she explained, *ma dberai bolchha*, meaning “I speak a lot.” She added that others do not speak a lot (or perhaps not as much as she does) and Gita responded to this by saying Naumaya was a very talented person. So it seems as though she was selected through an unofficial group consensus (the main chairperson changes every 3-4 years).

In reflecting on this conversation, I could not stop thinking about who was and wasn't an *Aamaa Samuha* member. Not only had I been asking many women this question, I had just learned about all the necessary requirements. Naumaya's assertiveness in declaring that there was simply far less Dalit women in Sikles also struck me. Even if this was the case, there were clearly barriers to entry in the case of Dalit women. In Parker's evaluation of ACAP's limitations in the implementation of literacy programs she explains, “Many people were not being reached by the adult literacy classes, in particular the ‘poorer’ members of society were not attending classes” and “Social relations and norms within the Gurung community prevented members from the ‘scheduled’ caste community entering Gurung households. This resulted in these people being excluded from adult literacy classes that were generally held in Gurung households” (2003, p.11). By “scheduled caste” she is referring to low-caste Dalit women like the ones I met during my time in Sikles. She highlights clear barriers rooted in social relations that prevented Dalit women from experiencing the same opportunities as Gurung women. I was convinced that Naumaya was aware of these barriers. In Parker's work with the REFLECT approach in 2003, she attempted to make sure that Sikles women acknowledged this imbalance. But, Naumaya did not acknowledge this imbalance in opportunity. Could I attribute this to our language barrier or was Naumaya simply expressing what she thought to be true?

The next day I joined Naumaya to observe the monthly cleanup campaign created and practiced by *Aamaa Samuha* members. I watched as people crowded her with massive bags of trash to be weighed and compensated according to weight. She stood in the middle of this crowd conducting the operation. She was clearly respected by other women. I saw this in the authority she exhibited and the reactions during her speech to the community for the USAID education program as well. But, she seemed to lack an awareness and perceptiveness in recognizing an inherent barrier for lower caste women. And, if this was true, how could any outside program like REFLECT or ACAP make her aware? Similar to the way in which *banju* stated the inequalities Dalit individuals face in Sikles as mere facts, these barriers also seemed unchallenged. Would it come down to Dalit individuals to express their own frustration? And, in thinking back to my conversation with Rupaa, how could this happen when social relations made it difficult for lower caste women to voice these frustrations even when encouraged to do so? It seemed as though this was something ACAP could not fix. And, this conversation presented an aspect of the Sikles community that felt overlooked in general—both in scholarship about Gurung communities and in practice. It illuminated an importance in the difference of womens’ experiences even within the same small village. Women in Sikles, generally, took on more responsibilities than men. I had no doubt they were strong and instrumental in their families and community. But, within certain social dynamics like the politics of becoming an *Aamaa Samuha* member, there were latent cultural biases and structures that illuminated barriers for some women. Tamang offers her opinion on what may be needed in gender empowerment projects, “Women attempting to build networks need to go beyond the necessity of ‘raising the consciousness’ of illiterate, ‘backward’ and ‘undeveloped’ women. They need to seek to understand and share knowledge with women who have very concrete ideas of their wants and needs based on their specific experience of oppression and struggle” (2011, p.173). Perhaps a consciousness of

difference is required that goes beyond just participation and calls for greater collaboration among local women in order to truly address these deeply embedded hierarchies and social practices.

IV. Conclusions

In most literature and ethnography on Gurung societies, women are highlighted as “powerful within both the home and the community” (Parker, 2011, p. 69). In other writing it is also noted that communities regard the sexes as equal. Macfarlane believes, “while their life is usually physically hard, it would appear to Westerners to be preferable to the cowed existence of women in other parts of the world, or even that of their Brahmin neighbors” (1990, p.12). Both Parker and McFarlane claim that Gurung women hold much power in their communities in comparison to other Nepali women. And, their works on Gurung societies are separated by nineteen years.

In Sikles, I certainly saw Parker and Macfarlane’s observations embodied in my own observations of women; their strength and resilience was indescribable. However, it proved all too simple to claim women in Sikles were “powerful” or that their lives were “preferable” to others. Nepal is defined by a wide range of personal identities, cultures, languages and practices. Before my pursuit to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of empowerment among women, as it has been defined by development discourse, I considered this broad diversity. I knew the very nature of this exploration would not illuminate anything about Nepali women in general, but instead provide me with a snapshot of one type of Nepali woman. What I could not have predicted, was the multitude of difference within Sikles alone. Through the perspective of outside development work, community-participation projects, and talking with local women I found myself wavering between an observer, a participant, and a student. I asked questions, I worked in the fields with *banju*, and sometimes I simply watched as an active observer in an attempt to take in as much as possible. In

the end, I offer no solution or fix to the structural and social inequalities I witnessed. Instead, I am left with more questions.

In human development discourse, there seems to be an inherent erasure of personal narrative in an attempt to create goals for groups of people. The discourse is universalizing in what seems like an attempt to reach as many people as possible and make a noticeable difference. And, the local women in Sikles do not even understand or utilize the discourse that is being used to describe them. Tamang believes, “such a method of building solidarities without erasing difference, it seems, is critical for the progress of women from Nepal’s diverse communities” (2011). But, I still wonder: in trying to empower women, is it possible to build solidarities without the erasure of difference? Feminist ethnographers often argue that the household is an important place of interest in looking at representations of equality for gender development studies, but, I observed community-state collaborations like *Aamaa Samuba* and compulsory quotas as spaces in need of greater exploration. It was this combination and tension between the private and public, and the self-governing of local individuals that illuminated more concealed differences and social practices among Gurung and Dalit women. And, with a consciousness of changing place I saw how identity could be shaped by spatial context, making it even harder to define empowerment as a singular concept for Sikles women. The strength of the women I witnessed carrying loads of wood to their homes, for instance, was not the same strength I observed in a community meeting where some women timidly spoke into a microphone. Nor was it the same in clusters of interspersed Dalit communities. Identity is fluid just as the political state of Nepal is unpredictable. Further, Nepali women are not singular, and neither is empowerment—its definition changes across different political contexts, spaces, and cultures. And, in turn, it appears that gender development work must cater to these differences with an awareness of the idealized conception of the ‘Nepali woman.’

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