

Enni Mikkonen

Bridges over the Mountain Ranges

Ethnography on the Complexities of Transition in
Women's Social Position in Nepalese Rural Communities

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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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LAPIN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND

Rovaniemi 2017

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Abstract

Bridges over the Mountain Ranges – Ethnography on the Complexities of Transition in Women’s Social Position in Nepalese Rural Communities

While one can cite a wide range of local and international development co-operation promoting social change in the social position of women in Nepal, one also sees changes arising from local communities themselves. Local and international concepts of change do not always coincide; indeed they sometimes clash. The need for change and development in women’s social position is a given in development discourses, yet the definitions of change and development are complex, incorporating as they do colonial and imperial power structures intertwined with local hierarchies and inequalities. Alongside these considerations, one finds traditional elements that support women’s wellbeing and social change in communities, yet are not always recognised in development discourses and practices.

In this ethnographic inquiry in the field of social work, I analyse the change process(es) in the women’s social position in Nepalese rural communities. I view social change as a complex transition towards multiple goals with varying rhythms. My analysis lies at the intersections of the international and local, and conceptual and practical knowledge bases. The study seeks to contribute to the discussion on international social work, with particular emphasis on decolonising and feminist approaches.

My main research question is: How can one promote ethically sustainable social change processes with the women in globally and locally marginalised communities? I also ask how is the women’s social position in Nepalese rural communities shaped at the intersection of traditions and transition; how do the global and local driving forces reshape the women’s social position; and how are the women’s perspectives and environments that promote the transition in their social position related to the international paradigms of development and social change. My analytical focus is on the activism and perspectives of the women participating in the research in their particular environment and their links with communal and societal structures and international politics.

My primary research material consists of the data collected in six months of ethnographic fieldwork (from 2012 to 2013) and in return visits to Nepal totaling an additional month (in 2014, 2015 & 2016) working with two women’s communities in rural Nepal. The research encounters took place in the communities’ daily contexts and the registered organisations that local women had established. The data include group,

pair and individual discussions with the women, as well as my participatory observation. The study takes account of the women's perspectives from multiple social positions, from both the centres and the margins of the communities. My earlier experiences with communities elsewhere in Nepal, gained in seven different periods of living and working in the country (during 2005–2011), provided in-depth background knowledge of the context. Throughout the study I reflect on questions of ethical knowledge production and epistemological hierarchies and privileges. The research also discusses how equality and social justice are promoted within social work research, on the level of both ideology and practice.

The findings illustrate that the women assumed diverse roles and positions in their communities and daily settings. These positions were actualised in the women's social relationships and communal roles—as wives, daughters-in-law, mothers, 'sisters', community activists and leaders—as well as in their duties and responsibilities—maintaining the household, nurturing, ensuring survival, and representing culture and religion. The analysis indicates that the women were subject to multiple social restrictions but that they also played an essential role in their communities, one which expanded to bringing about transformations. The women's aims in and tools for producing social change were diverse and linked to their daily realities and traditions as well as to their close relation to the land and spirituality. Their goals culminated on a concrete level in improving their means of livelihood and fighting poverty, and on an abstract level in their being seen and heard. The research highlights the value of the traditions that supported the women's wellbeing and of the cultural and religious practices and ideologies that they sought to maintain. It also underscores the importance of taking these elements into account in development discourses and practices.

I reflect on the women's perspectives in the light of feminist and decolonising theorisation. This theoretical analysis led me to identify five goals of the transition in the women's social position: decolonisation of subjectivities, renegotiation of social hierarchies, decolonisation of epistemologies, feminisation of the economy, and redistribution of space. Achieving these aims requires critical reflection on global and local power imbalances and recognition of the hierarchies between the different actors within the transition process.

The research indicates that the focal transition in the women's social position was pervaded by power imbalances that created ruptures and transgressions in social, gendered, spatial and epistemological dimensions. The study argues that changes towards greater social justice can be achieved by bridging the gaps between the epistemologies from the Global South and North, centers and margins, practice and theory as well as spirituality and rationality. The research prompts the conclusion that ethically sustainable change in women's social position in the global and local margins is promoted by solidarity that includes dialogue, alliance and exchange, on both the conceptual level and in practice. The inquiry provides insights on the value of striving for holistic

inclusion and of respect for diversities as a basis for locally relevant and contextually specific social work practice.

Key words: Ethnography; International social work; Decolonising and feminist approach; Women's social position; Social change; Transition; Nepal

Tiivistelmä

Sillat yli vuorten – Etnografia naisten sosiaalisen aseman kompleksisesta muutoksesta nepalilaisissa maalaisyhteisöissä

Naisten sosiaalisen aseman muutos on yksi keskeisimmistä tavoitteista kansallisessa ja kansainvälisessä kehitysyhteistyössä, joka vaikuttaa laajasti Nepalissa. Samaan aikaan paikallisyhteisöt edistävät sosiaalista muutosta ruohonjuuritasolla. Eri tasoilla ajettun muutoksen suunnat, keinot ja tavoitteet ovat moninaiset, ja ne ovatkin usein ristiriitaisia keskenään. Ne sisältävät myös kolonialistisia ja imperialistisia valtarakenteita, jotka kietoutuvat paikallisiin hierarkioihin ja epätasa-arvoon, mikä monimutkaistaa muutoksen dynamiikkaa. Monimutkaisuutta lisää se, että kulttuuristen ja uskonnollisten perinteiden merkitys naisten ja yhteisöjen hyvinvoinnissa sekä muutoksen taustavoimana usein sivuutetaan kehitysyhteistyön keskusteluissa ja käytännöissä.

Tässä sosiaalityön etnografisessa tutkimuksessa analysoin naisten sosiaalisen aseman muutosprosesseja sekä niiden tavoitteita nepalilaisissa maalaisyhteisöissä. Tutkimus tarkastelee sosiaalista muutosta kompleksisena siirtymänä, jolla on moninaisia suuntia. Samalla se valottaa keinoja muutoksen eettiseen ajamiseen. Osallistun tällä tutkimuksella kansainvälisen sosiaalityön keskusteluihin painottaen erityisesti dekoloniaalista ja feminististä lähestymistapaa. Analyysini paikantuu paikallisen ja kansainvälisen tason sekä teoreettisen ja käytännöllisen tiedon risteyskohtiin.

Tutkimukseni tehtävänä on tuottaa tietoa siitä, miten eettisesti kestävää sosiaalista muutosta voidaan edistää paikallisesti ja globaalisti marginalisoitujen naisten rinnalla. Etsin vastausta tähän kolmella yksityiskohtaisemmalla kysymyksellä: 1) Millaiseksi naisten sosiaalinen asema muodostuu perinteiden ja muutosten risteyskohdassa; 2) Miten globaalit ja paikalliset muutosvoimat risteävät naisten sosiaalisen aseman muutoksessa; 3) Miten naisten omat näkemykset ja ympäristöt, jotka ajavat sosiaalista muutosta, suhteutuvat kansainvälisiin keskusteluihin kehityksestä ja sosiaalisesta muutoksesta. Tutkimukseni analyttinen fokus on naisten kokemuksissa sekä niiden yhteydessä yhteiskunnallisiin rakenteisiin ja kansainväliseen politiikkaan.

Olen tuottanut ensisijaisen tutkimusaineistoni kuuden kuukauden etnografisessa kenttätyössä (2012–2013) sekä uudelleen vierailuilla yhteensä kuukauden ajan (vuosina 2014, 2015 ja 2016) kahdessa naisten yhteisössä Nepalín maaseudulla. Tutkimuskoh- taamiset paikantuivat yhteisöjen arkikonteksteihin sekä paikallisten naisten rekisteröimiin ja johtamiin organisaatioihin, joiden tavoitteena oli edistää kylien kehitystä ja parantaa naisten asemaa. Empiirinen aineisto on tuotettu naisten ryhmä-, pari- ja

yksilöhaastatteluilla sekä osallistuvalla havainnoinnilla. Tutkimukseen osallistuneet naiset asemoituivat sekä yhteisöjen keskiöihin että marginaaleihin. Tutkimusta edeltävät kokemukseni Nepalissa vuosilta 2005–2011 seitsemän eri jakson ajan toimivat kenttätöni kontekstuaalisena ja kulttuurisena taustana. Eettisen tiedontuottamisen sekä epistemologisten hierarkioiden ja etuoikeuksien kysymykset ovat olleet keskeisiä pohdintojani läpi tutkimusprosessin. Niihin liittyy olennaisesti kysymys, miten tasa-arvo ja sosiaalinen oikeudenmukaisuus kietoutuvat osaksi sosiaalityön tutkimusta käytännöllisellä ja ideologisella tasolla.

Tutkimus osoittaa, että naiset saivat moninaisia rooleja ja asemia heidän yhteisössään ja arjessaan. Nuo roolit ja asemat toteutuivat naisten sosiaalisissa suhteissa—vaimoina, miniöinä, äiteinä, 'siskoina', yhteisöaktivisteina ja johtajina—sekä tehtävinä ja vastuina—kodinhoitajina, hoivaajina, elättäjinä ja kulttuurin ja uskonnon edustajina. Naisten tarinat kuvastivat monitasoisia marginaaleja ja erityisesti köyhyyden kanssa kamppailu oli niiden keskeinen elementti. Naisten yhteisöllinen asema näyttöytyi samaan aikaan keskeisenä ja rajoitettuna, mikä näkyi myös muutoksen edistämässä. Naisten keinot sosiaalisen muutoksen ajamisessa olivat moninaiset ja ne linkittyivät muun muassa arkeen, perinteisiin, maahan ja hengellisyteen. Heidän tavoitteensa kiteytyivät elinkeinon parantamiseen, köyhyyden vähentämiseen sekä pyrkimykseen tulla kuulluiksi ja nähdyiksi. Tutkimustulokset painottavat, että perinteisiin ja paikallisyhteisöihin kiedotut muutosvoimat—kuten hengellisyys ja tunteet—, jotka ajoivat naisia ajamaan muutosta, ovat eettisesti kestävästä sosiaalisen muutoksen ydintä.

Analysoin naisten näkemyksiä sosiaalisesta muutoksesta dekoloniaalisen feministisen teorian valossa. Identifioin viisi muutoksen suuntaa, jotka tunnistavat ja reflektivat kriittisesti paikallisia ja kansainvälisiä valtarakenteita: naisten subjektiviteetin dekolonisaatio, yhteisöllisten hierarkioiden uudelleenneuvottelu, talouden feminisaatio, epistemologioiden dekolonisaatio, sekä sosiaalisen tilan uudelleenjakaminen. Naisten aseman muutos, joka kietoutui paikallisiin ja globaaleihin valtarakenteisiin, synnytti railoja sekä rajojen ylityksiä sosiaalisella, sukupuolisella, tilallisella ja epistemologisella ulottuvuuksilla. Tutkimus esittää, että muutos kohti sosiaalista oikeudenmukaisuutta tavoitetaan rakentamalla siltoja erilaisten kuilujen, kuten globaalin Etelän ja Pohjoisen, sosiaalisten ja taloudellisten keskusten ja marginaalien, käytännön ja teorian, sekä henkisyden, ruumiillisuuden ja rationaalisuuden välille. Tutkimustulosten pohjalta väitän, että eettisesti kestävästä sosiaalista muutosta voidaan edistää dekoloniaalisesti ja feministisesti orientoituneella solidaarisuudella, joka sisältää dialogin, liittoutumisen (alliance) ja vaihdon (exchange) paikallisten toimijoiden kanssa. Tutkimukseni tuottaa syväluotaavia näkökulmia holistisen inklusion ja moninaisuuden kunnioittamiselle, mitkä ovat kulttuurisesti relevantin ja paikallisesti erityisen sosiaalityön perustaa.

Avainsanat: Etnografia, kansainvälinen sosiaalityö, dekoloniaalinen ja feministinen viitekehys, naisten sosiaalinen asema, sosiaalinen muutos, transitio, Nepal

नेपालमा महिलाको सामाजिक स्थिति प्रवर्धन गर्न व्यापक रूपमा स्थानीय तथा अन्तराष्ट्रिय विकास सहकार्य र परियोजनाहरू छन् । त्यसका साथै स्थानीय स्तरमा समुदायहरू आफै पनि समाजमा सकारात्मक बदलाव लिन क्रियाशील छन् । परिवर्तनका अवधारणाहरू सधैं स्थानीय तथा अन्तराष्ट्रिय स्तरमा एक-आपससँग मेल खान्छन् भन्ने पनि हुदैन । महिलाहरूको सामाजिक अवस्था सुधार गर्न विकास र परिवर्तनको खाँचो विकास-संवादमा सत्यवाणीभै सहजै स्वीकार गरिन्छ, जबकि यी परिभाषाहरूले प्रायजसो औपनिवेशिक र साम्रज्यवादी शक्ति संरचनाको खाका बोकेका हुन्छन् र स्थानीय श्रेणी वर्गीकरण र असमानतामा लपेटिएका हुन्छन् । साथै, महिलाहरूको हितमा सहयोग गर्ने परम्परागत तत्वहरू समुदायमा नभएका होइनन् तर विडम्बना विकास-संवाद र अभ्यासक्रममा ती तत्वहरूलाई मान्यता दिइदैन ।

यो सामाजिक सेवा मानवशास्त्रले नेपाली ग्रामीण समुदायका महिलाहरूको सामाजिक स्तर सुधार गर्न प्रयोग गरिने प्रक्रियाबारे विश्लेषण गरेको छ । विभिन्न कारकहरूलाई सँगै लिएर विविध लक्ष्य हासिल गर्न गरिने जटिल र सूक्ष्म अन्तरकाललाई सामाजिक परिवर्तन भनेर बुझिन्छ । यो अध्ययनको विश्लेषण अन्तराष्ट्रिय र स्थानीयको प्रतिच्छेदन र वैचारिक अनि व्यावहारिक ज्ञानहरूमा अडिएको छ । यसले वि-उपनिवेशिक र नारीवादी दृष्टिकोणमा विशेष जोड दिदै अन्तराष्ट्रिय समाज सेवाको छलफलमा सरिक भएको छ । सैद्धान्तिक रूपरेखालाई अभ्यासबाट हासिल भएका अनुभववात्मक ज्ञानसँग संयोजन गर्ने यस अध्ययनको भौतिक ज्ञानशास्त्रप्रति प्रतिबद्धता रहेको छ ।

विश्व तथा स्थानीय स्तर दुवैमा सिमान्तकृत बनाइएका महिलाबिच मर्यादित दिगो सामाजिक परिवर्तन प्रक्रियालाई कसरी प्रवर्धन गर्ने भनेर यो अध्ययनले प्रश्न गर्छ । दैनिक तथा सामुदायिक परिवेशमा महिलाहरूको सामाजिक स्तरलाई परम्परागत चलन र भइरहेका समयकालीन परिवर्तनविचको प्रतिच्छेदले कस्तो आकार दिएको छ ? विश्व तथा स्थानीय शक्तिहरूबीचको प्रतिच्छेदले महिलाको सामाजिक स्तरलाई पुननिर्माण गर्न कस्तो प्रकारको भूमिका खेलेका छन् ? र, उनीहरूको अवस्थामा प्रवर्धन गर्न स्थानीय महिलाहरूको विचार र वातावरणले कसरी विकास र सामाजिक परिवर्तनबारे अन्तराष्ट्रियस्तरमा भइरहेका विवादसँग सम्बन्धित गर्न सकेका छन् ? आदि प्रश्न पनि यो अध्ययनले राखेको छ । अध्ययनले महिलाको सक्रियता र दृष्टिकोणलाई उनीहरूको विशेष परिस्थितिलाई ध्यानमा राख्दै विश्लेषण गरेको छ, र उनीहरूको व्यक्तिगत अनुभवहरूलाई साम्प्रदायिक तथा सामुदायिक संरचनाहरू र अन्तराष्ट्रिय राजनीतिसँग जोडेको छ ।

दुर्गम नेपालका दुई महिलाको समुदायमा सन् २०१२ र २०१३ मा गरिएको ६ महिने मानवशास्त्र क्षेत्रकार्य र २०१४, २०१५ र २०१६ मा गरी समग्रमा गरिएको एक महिने विविध पुनः यात्राबाट यस अध्ययनको प्राथमिक अनुसन्धान सामग्री संकलन गरिएको हो । स्रोतहरूसँग भेटघाट उनीहरूकै समुदायको दैनिक परिवेशहरूमा या स्थानीय महिलाहरूले खोलेका र दर्ता गरेका संघ-संस्थामा भएको थियो । यस अध्ययनको प्रायोगिक आ"कडा (इम्पिरिकल डाटा) महिलाहरूसँगको सामूहिक तथा व्यक्तिगत छलफलका साथै यी महिलाहरूको दैनिक जीवन र उनीहरूको संस्थागत क्रियाकलापमा सहभागीता अवलोकन (पार्टिसिपेटरी अब्जर्वसन) बाट गरिएको हो । यसले समुदायको विविध स्तर र स्थितिमा रहेका - केन्द्रिय र मोफसल - दुवै स्थानका महिलाहरूको दृष्टिकोण समेटेको छ । अध्ययनपूर्व सात वर्षको विविध अवधिमा सोधकर्ताले नेपालको अरु समुदायमा गरेको अनुभवले यस अध्ययनलाई गहन पृष्ठभूमी र परिवेश प्रदान गर्छ । मर्यादित ज्ञान उत्पादन र भौतिक ज्ञानशास्त्रको श्रेणी वर्गीकरण र विशेषाधिकार सम्बन्धित प्रश्नहरू पूरा अध्ययनमा प्रतिबिम्बित छन् । त्यसका साथै, अध्ययनले समाजसेवा अनुसन्धानमा समानता र सामाजिक न्यायबारे व्यावहारिक तथा सैद्धान्तिक रूपमा कसरी प्रवर्धन गर्दछ, भन्ने छलफल गरेको छ ।

समुदाय र दैनिक परिस्थितिमा महिलाले विभिन्न भूमिका र स्थानहरू पाउने यो अध्ययनको परिणामले वर्णन गरेको छ । यो वास्तविकता उनीहरूको सामाजिक सम्बन्धहरू र साम्प्रदायिक भूमिकाहरू (श्रीमती, बुहारी, आमा, दिदी-बहिनी, समुदायको कार्यकर्ता र अगुवा) र कर्तव्य तथा जिम्मेवारीहरू (घर सञ्चालन, पालन-पोषण, जीविकापार्जनको सुनिश्चितता र धर्म-संस्कृतिमा प्रतिनिधित्व) ले देखाउँछ । विभिन्न सामाजिक प्रतिबन्धहरूले महिलाहरूलाई अधीनमा राख्न खोजेपनि उनीहरूले समुदायको परिवर्तनमा महत्वपूर्ण भूमिका खेल्ने गरेको यस अध्ययनले संकेत गर्दछ । सामाजिक परिवर्तनका लागि उनीहरूको लक्ष्य र साधन विविध छन् । यी साधनहरू उनीहरूको दैनिक यथार्थ र परम्परासँग सम्बन्धित हुन्छन् । जमिन र आध्यात्मिकतासँग रहेको उनीहरूको नजिकको सम्बन्ध पनि परिवर्तनको साधन बन्ने गरेका छन् । यी साधनहरूले जीविकापार्जनका आधारहरूमा सुधार र गरिबी निवारण गर्ने जस्ता मूर्त तथा समाजमा सुनिने र देखिने जस्ता अमूर्त परिणामहरू पउन सहयोग गर्छन् । महिलाहरूको हितमा काम गर्ने परम्परागत अभ्यास र त्यसको परिभाषालाई कायम राख्न उनीहरूले चालेको कदमका साथै विकास-संवाद र अभ्यासमा त्यस्ता परम्परागत स्थानीय प्रचलनलाई ठाउँ दिनुपर्नेमा यस अध्ययनको परिणामले जोड दिएको छ ।

वि-उपनिवेशक नारीवादी सिद्धान्तीकरणको परिप्रेक्ष्यमा महिलाहरूको दृष्टिकोण प्रकट गर्दै यो अध्ययनले अर्थ व्यवस्थाको नारीकरण, सामाजिक श्रेणी वर्गीकरणमा पुनः विचार-विमर्श, आत्मवाद र भौतिक ज्ञानशास्त्रको वि-उपनिवेशिक र स्थान-स्तरको बाँडफाँडलाई परिवर्तनको लक्ष्यका रूपमा पहिचान गरेको छ । परिवर्तन प्रक्रियाका विभिन्न कर्ता तथा तत्वहरूबीचको श्रेणी वर्गीकरणलाई पहिचान गर्नु र विश्व तथा स्थानीय स्तरका शक्तिमा रहेको असन्तुलनलाई समाचोलनात्मक विचारले हेर्ने लक्ष्य पनि समावेश छ । महिलाको स्तरमा परिवर्तन गर्न विश्व र स्थानीय स्तरका शक्तिमा रहेको असन्तुलनबाट सामाजिक, लैङ्गिक, स्थानीयता इत्यादी पक्षमा आएको फुट, मतभेद, अन्तराललाई ध्यानमा राख्नुपर्ने अध्ययनले संकेत गर्दछ । सामाजिक न्याय बढाउन केन्द्रीय र सीमान्तकृत, अभ्यास र सिद्धान्त, आध्यात्मिकता र तर्कसंगतका साथै 'ग्लोबल साउथ एन्ड द नर्थ' को भौतिक ज्ञानशास्त्रविच मिलन हुनुपर्ने प्रस्ताव यस अध्ययनको रहेको छ । वार्ता, गठबन्धन, विचारको आदान-प्रदानको ऐक्यबद्धता सैद्धान्तिक तथा व्यावहारिक स्तर दुवैमा भए विश्व तथा स्थानीय महिलाहरूको सामाजिक स्तरमा परिवर्तन मर्यादित दिगो रूपले विकास हुने यो अध्ययनले तर्क गर्दछ । अन्ततः यो अध्ययनले समाजसेवा अभ्यासमा स्थानीय रूपमा उचित तथा प्रासंगिक रूपमा विशेष आधार मानिएको विविधताप्रतिको सम्मान र समग्र समावेश प्राप्तिका निम्ति लागिपर्ने दृष्टिकोण प्रदान गर्दछ ।

Preface

Why am I writing this thesis? Out of curiosity? My personal exploration and pride? For the need to express the travels that have been so vital, so lively, so curvy and deep; so powerful that it feels almost a must to let it come out on these pages? For the story that has grown from the encounters of these trips, during these twelve years, the lights and darkneses which reflect millions of colours of life. For the stories of the people that I've met, those inspiring, encouraging, brave, beautiful people who have taught me so much along the way. People in fragile circumstances, whose beauty was bigger than the oppression they faced. For example Mamina, a woman forgotten, a 'weirdo', whose name was written as 'unknown' in the hospital's admission. Mamina who felt humanity for the last ten days of her life, before her body was thrown into a pickup truck, my friend's red shawl as the only protection for her thin and tiny body on her last trip. I want to dedicate this study to Mamina, and to the women abandoned and oppressed, women who have fallen through a hole, to the deep darkness of loneliness.

When I dedicate this study to the women in multiple margins, I share the spaces of knowing and not knowing, connecting and disconnecting, understanding and not understanding. This is for the women who created, prayed, worked, nurtured, loved, cried, laughed, danced, and hoped. This is for the wise and soulful women who did not give up despite multiple oppressions; who broke, fought back and believed in a better tomorrow. With this study, I join the intercourses of justice, love and hope.

Research diary 05.08.2015

This study is not my study alone. It is impacted by a number of inspirers, supporters and discussions, during travels and walks, around bonfires and on rooftops, in tea shops and seminar halls. My words are connected to bigger streams of ideas that try to make sense of the world. The biggest gratitude I owe for the words on these pages, belongs to the women who opened their worlds to me, who gave the gift of their time, knowledge, and inspiration. Your stories are the heart of this study.

My research journey has included several periods in Nepal and Finland, which all play an important role in the analysis. I have been writing on aeroplanes and trains,

in the silent peacefulness of Lapland, whilst watching the swans migrating above the Ii river, and in the libraries and cafes of Helsinki. I have written whilst watching the mountains opening from my window in the country house in Nepal, on the rooftop of the commune in Kathmandu, and recently also in the libraries of London. Those different environments have provided distinct spices to my writing. My travels have been enabled by the University of Lapland, especially my home faculty of Social Sciences, by allowing me to choose an exceptional path, by supporting my travels and exploration financially and spiritually, and by encouraging me to explore alternative knowledge and methodologies in academic discussions.

This study would not have been possible without the inspiration and contribution of Bikash Khatri, who became my best friend during this process. You astonished me on my first trip to Nepal by your way of telling stories to the kids in the children's home, which made them forget the coldness blowing through the walls of the crabby house; and the pain in their souls of being abandoned and separated from their families. Your passion and courage was admirable and I felt privileged to join your activism. Your in-depth reflections, considerations and stories on the Nepalese social system and traditions were a crucial inspiration for this study. Our travels and adventures, shared struggles, pains, belief and hope are written on these pages. I owe you such gratitude for your contributions. Thank you also for being a cultural and contextual interpreter and translating the research discussions from Nepalese to English.

I am deeply grateful for Rewati Gurung (Rebu), a feminist activist and development scholar from Kathmandu, who was the other interpreter of my research activities. I got to know you on my latest trips to Nepal which opened me the world of Nepalese feminism on a wider level. Thank you for contributing to this study by translating and explaining the cultural and contextual matters and commenting on my manuscript.

I have deepened and strengthened my argumentation through a number of research seminars and academic networks, both in Finland and abroad. Due to the solitary nature of my work as an academic within the grassroots level in Nepal, I was always nervous about the reception my texts would receive within academia. This nervousness was best taken care of by the encouragement and wisdom of my primary supervisor, Professor Merja Laitinen from the University of Lapland. I cannot imagine a better supervisor. You know how to be gentle and strict at the same time. You have pushed me forward: you believed in my work when I did not or when I got a slap in the face from crushing critics elsewhere. Thank you Merja for saying the right words at the right time, for your insightful structural and theoretical contributions and your heartfulness and commitment to stand beside me throughout the entire process. You have treated me as a fellow researcher, respected and listened to me; all of which has played a crucial part in making me the researcher I am today.

I was privileged to have Associate Professor Johanna Hurtig, from the University of Lapland, as my other supervisor. Our in-depth discussions on the essence of com-

munity and religion as well as contradictions of change and traditions have been very fruitful and opened new analysis spheres on my study. Thank you Johanna for your thorough reading of and commentary on my papers; and for believing in and encouraging me at every turn.

I had three pre-examiners in this study: Docent Riitta Granfelt from the University of Turku, Professor Lena Dominelli from the University of Durham, and Professor Mel Gray from the University of Newcastle. I am grateful for each of these great academics who put their effort and time to read and comment on my manuscript. Your work have impacted my thoughts and inspired me along the years. Riitta Granfelt's article on women's narratives about their homelessness was my very first introduction to social work in the university's entrance exam 15 years ago, which deeply touched and confirmed to me that I had chosen the right field. Your thorough reading and comments on my manuscript were constructive and encouraging, which gave a final boost to my study. They helped me in sharpening my analysis and clarifying the arguments and methodology. It was a pleasure to meet you and have an inspiring discussion on my research topic over coffee; and to get to know your gentleness and wisdom. I feel privileged and grateful that you approved to take on the task of the opponent of the defence.

I was also honored that, Lena Dominelli whose work I have adored from my early years of social work studies, approved to be the pre-examiner and gave critical but constructive comments for my manuscript. I am humbly grateful that the scholar who is one of the pioneers of international, feminist, decolonising and indigenous social work, and who has widely contributed to spirituality and environmental aspects in social work, was able to read and comment on my study.

There are number of other academics who have contributed to this study by commenting on my papers, asking critical questions and introducing their own studies and insights that have inspired me. All of those scholars play a part in this study and have developed my analysis.

First I want to thank the people in Social Work discipline in the University of Lapland. Thank you especially to Professor Anneli Pohjola for your constructive comments in the faculty's research seminars at the beginning of the process. I am also grateful to Professor Stanley Witkin from the University of Vermont, who is a regular guest in Lapland. Thank you for organising inspiring workshops that have encouraged me to believe that social work is artful and that there is an alternative way of being an academic. Thank you also for correcting my texts and teaching some basics of academic writing in English.

During the last couple of years, I have been able to expand my academic network to London via research exchange and different seminars that I have attended. Special thanks to Senior Lecturer Anna Gupta from Royal Holloway, University of London, who has introduced me to fascinating academic and activist networks encompassing

a counter-force for highly neoliberal politics in the country. I have enjoyed our discussions on politics, social justice and different social work phenomena, and also hosting you in our writing workshop in Lapland. I hope that we can continue our cooperation in new and inspiring projects.

Growing up to be a researcher is a bumpy road, in which the support of peers is crucial. I want to thank Anna Nikupeteri from the University of Lapland, who has been my travel companion in two ways. Firstly, in the literal sense as we have traveled together to many international conferences and seminars. We started in 2011 from the Czech Republic at the international 'Social Work & Society' Academy (TiSSA) conference, where we both were beginners and we felt everything was new and exciting. Our latest travel was to USA, Vermont, in 2016. There we attended one of the creative and fascinating seminars of Stanley Witkin, entitled 'Transformative Social Work'. You have also been a travel companion in a symbolic way: We have grown up to be researchers side by side and shared the doubts of our researching skills. Gradually we grew up to notice that we may have something to say about our study fields. Thank you for your comments on my papers and the questions that you have asked, and for your important study on stalking in a gendered framework that has taught me a great deal.

As this study encompasses elements from multiple disciplines, it has been crucial to find interdisciplinary connections on the content and the methodology of the study. I have been privileged to find such an academic and activist from my home faculty; Postdoctoral Researcher Tiina Seppälä from International Relations. You have organised workshops and introduced me to many decolonising feminists from the global South, which has been as finding my academic home. Thank you Tiina for your hearty encouragement, insightful discussions and also for providing comments on my decolonising analysis. It has been fascinating to follow your research on feminist activism in Nepal, India and Bangladesh, which has taught me a lot. It is a pleasure to cooperate with you also in the research project, 'Journeys through time and places', on the refugee situation in Lapland. I am grateful to be part of this multidisciplinary team including insightful and courageous researchers and artists; Tapio Nykänen, Saara Koikkalainen and Minna Rainio. It is also fascinating to combine social work spheres with art in 'ArtGear' project: Thanks to Mirja Hiltunen, Ninni Korkalo and Elina Härkönen from the Faculty of Art and Design for fruitful collaboration.

I was fortunate to get a 3,5 years full funding to concentrate on this dissertation from the Finnish National University Network for Social Work, Sosnet. I was also able to participate in the network's seminars and the English thematic group, 'Social Work Research'. The group has been diverse, and its members changed along the way, but nevertheless, its fellow students have commented on my papers in constructive and insightful ways: Thank you. I am grateful for the supervisors of the group, Professors Juha Hämäläinen, Maritta Törrönen and Ilse Julkunen, who presented important viewpoints to this study. I particularly thank the postdoctoral supervisor Satu Ranta-

Tyrkkö, whose insightful and critical comments and knowledge on ethnography and South Asian context contributed a lot to my analysis. Thank you also for your numerous suggestions for relevant literature.

I am thankful to the University of Lapland for financing the language editing by the Rector's Grant, and for an anonymous editor from Scribendi Editing Services for the thorough work on my language and encouraging words that boosted me at the end of my process. I want to thank Richard Foley from the university's language center for his great job in editing my abstract and the cover text. I am grateful for Paula Kassinen from the Lapland University Press, for your patience in designing the layout of the study within a tight time-frame. I am also deeply thankful to a journalist, poet and writer Smita Magar for translating the abstract into Nepalese.

My research process has encompassed living in its fullest; it has been intertwined with a shared passion with many of my friends and family members, who are my activist companions and who have made it possible to travel in between the places without feeling lonely. Special thanks go to the children and adults of Maya Nepal children's home. I have been privileged to follow the children growing up to young adults over the period of twelve years. Particularly dear to me are the memories of the evenings and mornings in the girls' room in Maya home, where joy, laughter, dance and care were tangible. I am thankful for my *bahiniharu*, little sisters; Reeta, Sanita, Reena, Rimala, Esther, Barsha, Reema, Radhika, and *bhaiharu*, little brothers; Sagar, Suresh, Hari, Arjun, Krishna, Partap, Deepak and many others. I miss you guys. I am grateful to Sovan and Sonu, for making the home for the kids. I adore you as, even though you faced a lot of misunderstanding and unfairness, you stood beside the most vulnerable and needy. And to Monju, your *dal bhat* is still the best in the world. Maya Nepal has changed, we are changed, but the memories and love will remain.

My friends, who I feel as my family, have contributed to this study in many ways. One of my closest travel companions and friend, Johanna Karjalainen (Nonna), has a special role within my journey. We have shared countless moments in Nepalese tea shops and rooftops, the children's home and hotels. We cried for Mamina and slept in mud houses in far flung villages; those shared moments have deeply affected this study. I want to thank Martta Myllylä, my friend and sister-in-law, a critical sociologist with whom I have had interesting theoretical and methodological discussions; they have inspired me a lot. It is a great privilege to have such talented and creative friends. Thank you Tiina Nissilä for designing and making a dress for me to wear at the party to celebrate the end of this process. Thank you Jenni Ulriika for saving me from my failed time-planning and designing the cover of this book. I am grateful to Bishal Sharma, who helped me in typing Nepalese letters to the photo pages. There are also many other friends who have been part of this journey in one way or another: by traveling with me in Nepal, sharing the pains and joys of being a researcher, or through in-depth conversations, music and fun. To mention some of them, I want to thank Juha

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In the old harbor village of Hamina, Ii
watching the swans' spring migration
23 April 2017

Enni

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जो सहे सो रहे
Jo Sahe So Rahe.

*Those who can practise patience,
will remain to the end.*

Nepalèse proverb

1 Introduction

This study is based on a lengthy journey coloured by diverse encounters, discussions, actions and insights. It has a strong practical basis, as it narrates the story I have experienced for eleven visits to Nepal during the last twelve years. It stands at the intersection of social work, feminist and decolonising studies by establishing an empirical analysis on my encounters with diverse communities in Nepal. The communities faced and promoted social change processes, which I analyse as one of the core aspects of social work. My time periods in Nepal together form more than three years' experience within this setting. I have accompanied local grassroots activists fighting the dire straits that many children and women faced. Connecting with numerous inspiring people has been a process led by the principles of social justice, intertwined with the questions of contextually defined and hierarchical epistemologies and social dynamics.

The journey grounds the analysis of the social change process in women's social position in Nepalese rural communities. Social change is perceived as a concept and practise encompassing transition and development, including the debates and contradictions of those concepts within international and local contexts. This study, in taking into account the complexities of social change with ethical sensitivity, contributes to culturally relevant and contextually specific social work with communities in multiple margins. It also contributes to ethical knowledge production in ethnographic social work research within epistemological and methodological borderlands. The theoretical foundation lies at the spheres of international social work (e.g. Midgley 2006; Dominelli 2014; Healy 2014), with decolonising (e.g. Spivak 2005; Banerjee 2006; Motta 2015) and feminist contributions (e.g. Gross 2002; Ahmad 2009; Lorber 2010; Gray and Boddy 2010; Channa 2013).

To explore the contextual, epistemological and methodological questions of this study, I draw upon development studies, study of religion, political studies, sociology and anthropology, but I do not claim to contribute to the debates in those fields. Rather, I stand for multidisciplinary alliances in researching increasingly complex social issues. My methodology is drawn from ethnography (e.g. Siikala 1997; Parameswaran 2001; Sherif 2001; Alexander 2004; Ranta-Tyrkkö 2010; Enguix 2014 2014; Haight et al. 2014) and anthropology (Behar 1993; Hastrup 1995) intertwined with feminist and decolonising approaches in social work methodologies (e.g. Dominelli 2010a; Deepak 2011; Jönsson 2013; Gray & Hetherington 2013; Wehbi et al. 2016).

I collected the data through participatory observation in two women's rural communities and through research discussions with different combinations of women's groups and individuals. Local contextual and cultural translators played a key role in connecting me with the women's communities. The data includes multiple voices from different social positions, which establishes the analysis of a diverse context. I do not lean on one fixed analysis method but create a critical and reflexive ethnographic analysis (e.g. Behar 1993; Coffey 1999) and combine elements from content analysis (e.g. Neuen-dorf 2011), theoretical thematisation (e.g. Morse 1994) and sensory ethnography (e.g. Pink 2009; Valtonen et al. 2010). Throughout the process, I considered the meaning of context, epistemological positions and hierarchies, and intuitive knowledge in the research. I drew special attention to questions of ethics and power by asking whose knowledge matters in academic and social work professional discussions.

Although I began this study seven years after my first trip to Nepal twelve years ago, my first encounter can be seen as its beginning. Those initial experiences in Nepal developed my contextual knowledge and helped me in communicating with the women's communities and in starting the fieldwork with them. I have also used materials, such as my reflective diaries from the periods before the fieldwork, in this research. I do not use the perspectives of the people without their consent, and therefore the knowledge from the periods before the primary fieldwork are rather general observations about the culture and my position in the context. I need to identify the differences between knowledge based on systematic data collection (recorded research discussions and participatory observation) and spontaneous experiences (like emotions, senses and intuition). Each provides crucial knowledge with its own specific distinctions. Ethnography offers tools for this methodological concern.

The strength of this study lies with its multidimensional perspectives, as I engaged with various rungs on the ladder of social hierarchies. The research encounters were located in everyday lifeworlds with the women's and their communities' struggles and triumphs. Those encounters formed the basis of my analysis, which encompasses complex and nuanced information. My analysis is openly subjective, which creates both weaknesses and strengths to the study (e.g. Ranta-Tyrkkö 2010). This approach recognises non-verbal, spiritual and intuitive knowledge (e.g. Matsuoka et al. 2013). Through the metaphors of landscapes, diary notes and images, I reach for expressions that prevalent academic writing might traditionally avoid. It is a way to 'breathe in' the research environment, to embrace this holistic journey. Nevertheless, this does not mean I develop unsystematised ideas on the processes of social change, but I present an analysis that accepts uncertainties, imperfection and limitations (e.g. Motta 2015).

The methodology of this study bridges the hierarchical and contradictory knowledge that appeared both on local and transnational encounters. I aim at recognising diversities of knowledge, which contributes to ethical social work knowledge production. This links with contextualisation: Knowledge is seen as negotiated and situational, as

a process and not as a 'noun' (e.g. Payne 2001). This includes reflection on my own epistemological locations and limitations. As part of this process, I ask myself what and from where do I see when I analyse the lives of the women in the Nepalese villages. In doing so, I try not to 'efface the reality' (Nussbaum 2000). I do not claim to create 'closed ends' or argue that the results reflect the communities' realities as such, but they are based on the epistemological spaces that the encounters I had with the communities were made of (e.g. Höckert 2015, 177). Knowledge from multiple margins deconstructs dominant discourses, including my own academic background.

The deconstruction of dominant discourses is based, for example, on emphasising the women's perspectives that did not always align with the international paradigms of 'development'. Many of the development projects in Nepal were funded from abroad, bringing global power hierarchies to the practises of promoting change. Some practises of international development cooperation had questionable, even harmful impacts on the communities. I search for bridges over divergent views of development and social change both on local and global context. This provides tools for reflecting on the debates of international social work at the crossroads of local and global as well as conceptual and practical levels. It contributes to ethically sustainable practises and concepts of development cooperation within transnational and multidisciplinary networks.

The stories and encounters of my fieldwork form a base for a wider discussion on contextually relevant social work practises and concepts. In so doing, I commit with the very core of international social work—the promotion of human dignity and social justice with communal and indigenous, feminist and decolonising approaches (e.g. Gray and Hetherington 2013). The conceptual framework is linked with the analysis of diversities, power relations, and communal morality and ethics. The fundamental baseline of the analysis is drawn from love and humanity; as one of the women said, 'After all, we all are the same'. This formed a commitment that guided the research choices and developed the knowledge processes of this study.

1.1 The path leading to the research

I see my first visit to Nepal as a turning point in my personal life story, even though I had gradually begun to question some of my internalised ideologies and ways of living before it. The turning point was influenced by the holistic impact of this new environment on me. Compelling encounters and events made this change long term and started my life between Finland and Nepal. It was affected by moments when I faced the striking complexity of global and local oppressive structures, but even more so by the inspiration and courage of a local activist, Bikash, who had started a fight for children's and women's rights.

Bikash's crusade against a corrupt, violent and oppressive children's home had fruitful consequences. It cultivated a seed for long-term activism in a society where political turbulence, the obscurity of governance and geographic disasters continue to challenge people's lives. The encounters twelve years ago inspired a network of Finnish and Nepalese individuals to act together for social justice and formed the background of my research journey that followed. Activism has included different periods of shared passion, closeness and distances, connections and clashes, and ultimately created spaces for continuous mutual learning. I do not analyse my activism in this research, but I cannot ignore its effects on my interpretations.

I started the actual research seven years after my first introduction to Nepal, and the first encounters function as an experiential backdrop of the study. The journey began with volunteer work in the children's home and continued with acting for children's and women's rights alongside local activists. The project to rescue children from the violent children's home brought a group of activists together to establish an organisation¹ to support the process financially. I deepened my insights of these experiences in my master's thesis, analysing the dynamics of children's rights in children's homes and on the streets (Mikkonen 2010). After the children's rescue process, I started to ponder the roots of child rights violations: Many of their mothers were somewhere in the rural villages, and many of the children obviously missed them. Why were they separated from their mothers? I continued my journey 'beyond the hills', searching for what led families to send their children to the institutions. I began six months of fieldwork in the rural villages with Bikash, who was one of the cultural and contextual translators of this study.

The fieldwork led me to focus on the women's social position and the changes in it. After settling into the fieldwork, I heard about two local women in separate locations who had established organisations to contribute to women's livelihoods and the overall development of their communities. They were not literate, nor did either of them have an official degree, and they were originally from the same background as the rest of the villagers. I got interested in where they got their inspiration and courage to do this. The primary empirical analysis is drawn from fieldwork with these women's communities, followed by revisits in the three following years for a total of one month. I spent altogether approximately seven months in those communities. The organisations offered a basis to explore the women's position via the women's actions and strengths, and to reflect on the internal and external relations of the communities. My analysis focuses on the everyday life experiences and perspectives of the women in their communities, including their various roles and responsibilities.

1 Maya Nepal -association: www.mayanepalry.com

While this grassroots process was taking place, broader changes were going on in Nepal, with political turbulence and economic and cultural changes inevitably extending to the social level. There were also geographic changes, as two major earthquakes in the spring of 2015 affected the lives of millions. Women living on the fringes of society are one of the most vulnerable groups in such disasters (Dhungel and Ojha 2012, 310). Although these destructive earthquakes occurred after my actual fieldwork, it was present as a potential threat during the fieldwork and was a central topic of the women's talk on my latest trip in 2016, when we had the conclusive discussions. Thus, earthquakes are part of the analysis both symbolically and concretely. Structural changes had distinct impacts on the women's daily lives, which led me to investigate the complexities of the social change. I also explore the internal and external driving forces of the changes—those arising from the local communities and their traditions and those affected by structural and international processes. Following a holistic view of the social change leads me to continue to analyse the aims, tools and partners of the transition.

It was a long way from my first introduction to the mountainous villages and dusty capital of Nepal to the international alliance acting for children's and women's well-being. The research journey combines political, societal, communal and individual levels with international and local contexts. This follows a feminist slogan: 'Personal is political' (e.g. Ledwith and Asgill 2007, 108). It also is a base for social work study one that comprehends the political dimensions of the phenomena (Pohjola 2003, 57). I embrace this task when I reflect on the structural and political changes that affected the women's daily circumstances, which sets this study to the intersection of the local and the global contexts. Inspiration for this dissertation is based on the local activities, and the ethnographic analysis provides tools for understanding them within their complexities. A combination of practical and academic knowledge provides a multidimensional analysis of the processes of promoting social change.

1.2 Research tasks and key concepts

The main aim of this research is to provide knowledge on promoting ethically sustainable social change processes within the women's communities located in global and local margins. I scrutinise social change processes at the juncture of practical and conceptual and international and local contexts. This illuminates the dynamics of social change within multiple—social, gendered, spatial and epistemological—spaces. The objective of this study is to contribute to the debates of feminism(s) and 'development' with openness to culturally relevant and local-specific knowledge, which aligns with the commitments of decolonising social work (e.g. Gray and Hetherington 2013; Dominelli 2014). Decolonising refers to challenging the imperial and colonial features

of development paradigm and practices in local communities. In doing so, the task is to reflect on the epistemological privileges and hierarchies that affect research knowledge production. In addition to this, the study contributes to the understanding of cultural and traditional elements that promote the women's and communities' well-being. It addresses the complexities as a counter-hegemonic approach to dominant development and social change paradigms that promote the 'modern' over the traditional without critical analysis.

I did not have predetermined research questions at the beginning of the process, but they were developed in parallel with my encounters with the women of this study. This was an ethical choice towards the communities that I studied with. It is contextually sensitive that the research questions draw from the encounters in the field. Thus, through the research encounters, the participants were involved in forming the research questions, which approaches participatory research methods (e.g. Garcia et al. 2011). This process developed the main research question as:

How can one promote ethically sustainable social change processes with the women in globally and locally marginalised communities?

The aim is to recognise structural injustices and their various impacts on the communities driving for social change. This includes the recognition of diverse (often contradictory) perspectives from the local and global, individual and communal, and traditional and modern angles. I approach this with three sub-questions:

1. *How is the women's social position in Nepalese rural communities shaped at the intersection of traditions and transition?*
2. *How do the global and local driving forces reshape the women's social position?*
3. *How are the women's perspectives and environments that promote the transition in their social position related to the international paradigms of development and social change?*

I perceive the communities through their diversities and aim at an intersectional analysis by recognising the gendered, social, spatial and epistemological power hierarchies. Before proceeding to the contextual and conceptual chapter, I need to locate the standpoint of this study in terms of the main contextual concepts: *women's rural community* (including organisations, groups and activism), *women's social position* as well as *gender*. I do not present a thorough literature review on them here, but I identify my position on these concepts.

Women's rural community

Community forms one of the main concepts of this study. I perceive it from multiple angles: First, I approach it from a *geographic* angle—referring to rural villages with some urban features, where the fieldwork was located, and the women of this study lived. This angle includes the infrastructure and the landscapes of the villages, which affected the women's social position, according to their locations either nearby the main road, beside small pathways on the hills or in a valley. Second, I perceive community through a *social* angle. This consists of the women's relations with their families and the other inhabitants of the village, including a specific bond among the women. The social aspect of the community had a primary role in shaping the women's position, for example, through duties and commitments or unions and hierarchies. Third, community includes a *cultural* aspect, expressed as manners, festivals, faith and spirituality. Fourth, I link community to *participation* (Gibbon and Gazottes 2001, 730), which in this research includes activism by the women in the organisations and groups that they had established.

The meanings of participation follow the women's and the communities' own words. They referred to the women's mutual action, relations and the locations where the activism was taking place. I use the term 'organisation' when I refer to the action or procedures of the registered organisations. This includes the women's formal gatherings and different projects such as microcredit programmes. The key persons in the organisations were the female leaders and their boards, and the other women in the communities were to varying degrees active in and supportive of the organisations. Thus, focusing only on the organisations would exclude some of the women—often from the most vulnerable positions in the communities—from the analysis. The organisations form a crucial part of the research context, but they also exclude domestic life, the ways that the women related to the community (kinship, extended family relationships, neighbourhoods and friendship), or how they related to the world as persons and as part of their culture (as expressed through spirituality and creativity).

When I use the term 'group', I refer to informal meetings and activities where the women related to each other for shared action. The women's groups gathered with different combinations for varying purposes. The groups were separate from the organisations' official activities and they were often spontaneous action that did not necessarily have long-term plans. Those were for example the informal groups that gathered occasionally for cleaning the village's roads, but which were not part of the registered organisations. The verb 'activism' brings forth one of the core ideas of this study: the strengths and the efforts of the women in the rural communities. It refers to the women's activities that promoted socio-economic changes in the communities, yet that were strongly personalised to the female leaders and their committees. Thus, in referring to the research context, the terms organisation, group and activism are not sufficient, as they exclude, for example, daily actions, the women's close relation-

ships to the field and land, and the water taps and tea shops where the women bonded (which functioned as spaces for sharing sorrows and joys). Therefore, when I use the phrase ‘women in their community’, it comprises multidimensional aspects of their daily contexts, including:

- Family (husband, children, parents-in-law, kinship)
- Relations to the other women and other villagers (focus on social harmony and hierarchies, coherence and ruptures, and ‘sisterhood’)
- Social locations (ethnicity, caste, socio-economic position)
- Culture (manners, rituals, beliefs, spirituality)
- Activism (registered women’s organisations, groups, meetings, development projects)
- Infrastructure and environment (geographic locations of the villages and the hills and fields that the women were in close connection with)

There were similar internal dynamics in different communities in spite of their separate locations and different cultural and social backgrounds (such as ethnicities and castes), and therefore they offer a relevant window for examining how the women’s position and gender justice is shaped in traditional rural areas. The determination of rural in this study is based on the geographic location and livelihood means. The communities were not distinctively remote, as they were located about one-and-a-half hours’ drive from the capital, Kathmandu. However, the social and economic distance was greater, and life appeared very different from the capital: The houses were fewer, the air was fresher, and the rhythm of life was slower. People based their living primarily on agriculture; they harvested, reared livestock, lived mainly in traditional mud houses and spent the most of their days in the fields. A tight-knit communal lifestyle was a prevalent feature of the villages, as people knew everybody around them and shared the fields, forests and mountain views on the horizons. This communal lifestyle forms one of the core frameworks of this study.

One of the measurements of rural was access to different official services, such as hospitals, schools and public transportation. There was a primary school in the area of this research, but the people who wanted to study further had to move to a city with more possibilities. The nearest hospital was about a half-hour walk away, which made these villages different from more remote areas in Nepal, where it could take many days of walking to reach the nearest hospital. The rural communities of this study were, in addition to their location, defined by their specific castes and ethnic groups, which determined the lives of the women. Thus, this study is not a monolithic presentation of Nepalese communities generally, but it brings up a specific grassroots context and zooms a lens deeper rather than wider. This depth contributes to an understanding of the communities’ dynamics and the wider structures that affect them.

Women's social position

I view the women's social position from practical and conceptual angles. The social aspect focuses especially on the women's connection to the community and daily contexts within their cultural specificities. This perspective includes different attributes drawn from the women's stories and the context, such as economic empowerment, decision-making, participation or other aspects that often are emphasised in development discourses (e.g. Deepak 2011). I bring forth those attributes as examples to concretise the analysis, yet I do not prioritise any of them in particular.

Embracing a holistic perspective instead of focusing on a specific attribute in the women's social position was a gradual process that reflected the research context's priorities. The process followed encounters and negotiations in the field. I approach the women's social position by analysing the women's relations to each other and to the men and children, their duties and responsibilities, and the traditions of the communities. I also explore the women's approaches to promoting social changes in their communities and their perspectives for locally relevant tools to promote the changes beside them.

Gender

Gender relations play a major role in the women's social position. Thus, gender is a central concept throughout the study. However, I need to clarify that I do not focus on the social and biological debates on the essence of gender, but I concentrate on the gendered aspect that affected the research participants' everyday lives, social relations, practises, duties and expectations of them. Gendered expectations are linked to the context, culture and societal structures, including debates of femininity and masculinity, and their social positions and performances. The gender aspect is present in social encounters and based on socialised and internalised constructions, but as personal and/or biological experiences, they are diverse and complex. The binary categorisation of gender—to females and males—are questioned by queer and sexual diversity studies, movements and policies (e.g. Lorber 2010; Pant 2015).

The communities of this study embodied mainly patriarchal power structures. Within those structures, the women embodied diverse gendered expectations and duties. This analysis on the women's position is based on recognising the gendered space and its impacts on the women's daily lives. It was seen in the feminisation of poverty, divided gendered spaces, sexual and bodily control or specific expectations towards women, and also in the shared joys of womanhood or celebrations of sacred feminine powers following the ancient stories.

Gender and sexuality were seen through a binary category in the research context, even though some Hindu teachings include a third gender, and it is officially recognised in Nepal (Pant 2015). While there is a lively LGTBQI culture in Kathmandu, sexual and gender diversities were highly taboo in the researched communities, and

gender or sexual minorities were not openly represented in them. This is a complex issue, and it would take additional research to address the gender differences and taboos around them. However, I take into account the diversity in gendered performances among different women on an individual level. Thus, the analysis is not based on the homogeneous realities of women, but it includes a variety of different gender-based performances, identities and positions.

1.3 Structure of the research

Chapter 2 starts with the introduction of the research context. It begins in Kathmandu and travels curvy paths to the countryside, to the fields, hills and paths where the changes in the women's position took place in practise. First, I describe Nepal as a diverse research setting and introduce the political and structural framework of the transition process. The conceptual frameworks of this study are drawn from the context. Thus, conceptual and contextual descriptions are interlinked. Second, I introduce the framework of social work within this study through the key concepts of the global definition of professional social work (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] 2014) and feminist debates, with particular emphasis to question the dichotomies of the epistemologies from the global South and North.

In Chapter 3, I introduce the methodological engagements of this study—ethnography and anthropology with a decolonising and feminist emphasis. I describe the research process that developed from volunteer work to ethnographic fieldwork and formed a twelve-year process. I view the research journey as a holistic experience with travels in between different worlds, in both concrete and abstract senses. I also consider the dimensions of time and the present in the ethnographic research. Following that, I introduce the field and the research partners, their social positions and the 'merging' research methods that I used in the field. Ethnographic participation, observation and research discussions were interwoven processes that formed a holistic methodological basis.

One crucial aspect of the methodology of this study is the ethical scrutiny of the epistemological hierarchies and privileges, which are linked with the analysis throughout the study. I open this through the analysis of 'hierarchies of knowledge' and 'producing good' in the research process. I also consider the 'cracks in the ethnographer's mirror' as the accounts of disconnection and failing, which provided important research knowledge. In the last section of the methodological chapter, I describe the analysis process and methods with similar epistemological concerns as within the fieldwork, and the insights and pains of writing. A lengthy methodological part is a crucial foundation to the empirical analysis, including issues of providing knowledge from my encounters within multiple margins.

In Chapter 4, I address the roles and positions of the women in their daily and communal contexts. I describe their roles through their traditional relationships as wives, daughters-in-law, mothers and sisters—in a communal sense—but also their transformative roles such as activists and leaders. I continue to explore their position through daily routines as housekeepers, nurturers, workers and cultural representatives. This is followed by a discussion of their duties and responsibilities, which were the preconditions of their positions as ‘good’ or ‘failed’ women and the spaces in between them. This empirical chapter illuminates the fragilities and strengths of the communities. It shows their centres and margins and the traditional communal and cultural dynamics through which the changes in the women’s position were promoted.

In Chapter 5, I address the intricacies of the transition. The transition comprised different rhythms in the communal and daily context, which I illustrate through geographic metaphors using the landscapes of the research context: ‘main roads’, ‘footpaths’, ‘uphills’ and ‘earthquakes’. The main roads appeared as widely spread and adapted changes that the women’s activism promoted, and which were seen mainly in the transformation of social and gendered relations. I analyse the slow undercurrents of the changes as footpaths, which were smouldering under the traditions within the communities. Uphills appeared as the obstacles and the resistance to the changes, which arose from communal hierarchies, silence of the ‘middle sort’ and patriarchal family structures. I use earthquake as a metaphor for the abrupt—often destructive—changes or the notions that affected the communities’ views of the change.

I analyse the driving forces of the changes in Chapter 6. I start by analysing the internal driving forces, such as the cultural and traditional factors that promoted the women’s well-being and fuelled some of the changes. I identified these in spirituality and ‘positional’ emotions, which pushed the women to act for change in their communities. External driving forces appeared as the processes of internationalisation and globalisation, economic transformations (capitalism and neoliberalism), political changes (new laws assuring wider women’s citizenship rights and political participation) and the complex processes of promoting women’s rights and education. Internal driving forces intersected with the external ones from societal and international (structural) levels. These intersections appeared as transgressions of socio-economic, spatial and epistemological borders, which led to social and gendered transformations.

In the last empirical section, Chapter 7, I view the aims, tools and partners of the transition. I start by examining the aims of the transition that the women indicated in their activism and diverse perspectives. I combine the women’s aims with theoretical analysis and form categories by leaning on feminist and decolonising frameworks (e.g. Spivak 1998; Motta 2015). This led me to identify the goals of the transition as decolonisation of subjectivities, deconstruction of social hierarchies, decolonisation of epistemologies, feminisation of the economy and redistribution of space. These goals of the transition formed a process that grounds the analysis of the external tools and

partners of the change. I identify the external tools and partners through the concept of solidarity and its different forms: dialogue, alliance and exchange.

Chapter 8 concludes the analysis and offers views for further discussion. It discusses the main findings as the bridges over the gaps of change process and development with a decolonising social work lens. In building those bridges, there is a need for a holistic view that considers the communal, societal and transnational diversities, nuances and power structures. The conclusion returns to the main research question and summarises how to promote ethically sustainable social change processes with the women in their communities. It aligns with the increasing importance of understanding the effects of global impacts on local contexts and working for social justice in a globally fragile time.

Throughout the research process, I have struggled with the question of whether the academic text as such can fully reach the complexities of the change processes in a context where spirituality, intuition and unwritten communication play a major role. I approach this question with critical reflection and also by using illustrative extracts of the research diaries, metaphors as part of the analysis and photographs as the images of the change process. The photos create an independent story in between the main chapters with a thought, quotation or a proverb from the field or related ideologies. They function as additional and alternative knowledge aside from the actual text, and I do not analyse them further but leave space for readers to imagine and interpret the scenes of the lively research context.



एक हातले ताली कहाँ बज्छ र ?
Ek haat le taali kaha bajchha ra?
What kind of sound does one hand clapping make?
Nepalese proverb



2 Researching transition in Nepal—Contextual and conceptual alignments

The research process has been holistic both methodologically and epistemologically; the contextual path guides the conceptual and theoretical commitments. Thus, the contextual and conceptual backgrounds are inseparable and are placed in the same chapter. I start by introducing Nepal as a research context with its distinct characteristics. I approach contextualising as a subjective matter: Because I arrived in Nepal with my initial background knowledge, I needed to question and unlearn it and recognise the epistemic spaces and hierarchies of the research (e.g. Motta 2015). During my stays in Nepal, I could not ignore the changes that reshaped the society and communities and their traditions. Therefore, I focus on the transition in the women's position on communal and individual levels intertwined with political, economic, cultural and social structures.

The research questions and the main conceptual framework of this study—transition, social change and women's social position—are drawn from the contextual analysis, not from predefined research choices. However, adding my social work lens to the contextual journey aligns with some of the concepts in the global definition of the social work profession (IFSW 2014), such as social change and development, collective responsibility and respect for diversities, and the principles of social justice and human rights. As I followed the conceptual path from children's rights (Mikkonen 2010) to the debates around them—which links with the women's rights and position—the rights concept as such did not offer sufficient tools for the analysis of the complexities of the research setting and the encounters therein. The scrutiny of the women's position led me to the roots of the transition and social change. Thus, I needed to look deeper at its complexities and the structural elements affecting transition on a communal level.

The encounters with the women and the communities of this study took me to unfamiliar epistemological space. These new spaces continuously challenged the world order and meanings that I had learned and to which I was accustomed. This led me to commit to decolonising and indigenous social work frameworks, which question the power hierarchies between the global North and South, as well as indigenous knowledge and dominant professional paradigms (e.g. Gray, Yellow Bird and Coates 2008; Dominelli 2010a). During the whole research process, I also leaned on feminist theories and critiques (e.g. Bulbeck 1998; Nussbaum 2000; Dominelli 2002; Arora-Jonsson 2008; Ahmad 2009; Abdela 2010; Drolet 2010; Gray and Boddy 2010).

When I combined the feminist theories with a decolonising lens, it guided me to the feminist epistemologies from the South (e.g. Spivak 1998; Banerjee 2006; Channa 2013; Motta 2013/2015; Kabeer 2015), which eventually took me to the conceptual and theoretical ‘home’. Thus, as the result of the conceptual journey being intertwined with the contextual one, I combine a decolonising feminist critique with the discussion on social change and transition.

The decolonising feminist critique came alive in the scenes of the fieldwork—in the homes, fields, temples and tea shops from which the women presented their knowledge. Diving into those scenes, I felt like I was swimming in deep waters methodologically and theoretically, which is both the weakness and strength of this study: It creates an in-depth analysis of the complexities of social change with nuanced knowledges, but at the same time, I struggled with the limits of my understanding. The process has included feelings of uncertainty, such as whether I was trying to embrace something too obscure and complex. On the other hand, I see it as the only way to follow this contextual journey. The conceptual and epistemological framework of this study creates space for the acceptance of uncertain and intuitive knowledge that grounds a nuanced discussion and ethically conscious considerations.

2.1 Nepal as a research context—From touristic images to diversities

As the empirical basis of this study is located in Nepal—a mountainous South Asian country squeezed in between globally remarkable India and China—I describe it as a research context with its uniqueness and complexities by identifying what specific issues there are to be considered when researching in Nepal and what kind of background information aids in contextualising the analysis. First, even though Nepal is in the title of this study, I need to point out that a ‘study about Nepal’ as such is not a relevant starting point. It is more applicable to talk about the study of a certain area or group in Nepal, or on particular issue or phenomenon in the geographic area of Nepal. Thus, as Nepal cannot be discussed as one entity, the first matter to be taken into account when studying in Nepal is its *diversities*.

I bring forth some characteristics of Nepal by leaning on literature and other research to help contextualise this study, but I also describe the research context through my own observations and experiences. As such, this is not a study about Nepal, but it is based on my interpretations and research choices with critical and reflective analysis of the empirical journey in Nepal. The observations I made on my first trip as a volunteer worker in 2005 were as tourist images as I arrived first time that far away from my origins. The life that surrounded me seemed exotic, mystical and chaotic:

The landscape seems to join into the mixture of colours: a man carrying a red refrigerator on his back, a woman with a loaded basket hanging from a headband, children playing on the streets next to the rubbish piles, women laundering along the roads. Daily routines seem to be practised in public. The advance information that I had on the cows, goats, chickens and dogs on the streets did not make my astonishment any less.

Diary note 09.01.2005

The organic lifestyle in mountainous villages, yaks wandering along paths that are blessed with Buddhist prayer flags, religious gurus repeating their mantras and spreading the ideas of the importance of presence: These are the kinds of images that cover the travel books, as a lot of foreigners journey to Nepal to experience the breath-taking Himalayas and the hospitality of the mountainous people or to search for peace. Travellers experience colourful festivals and discover there is always time to sit down and have a cup of tea. When they stay a week or a month, this mystical, religiously flavoured atmosphere may function as a spiritual or philosophical trip that they can use to extend their worldviews.

Short-term images may also include visions of the periphery, where children are mistreated, and women are dominated by men, where poverty is striking, and the environment is spoiled by pollution and rubbish piles in black rivers that flow through the cities. Magical beauty and smiley people with a significant lack of material resources is a simplified picture that, with deeper exploration, takes on more colours with diverse realities. Those diversities often are ignored in international and public discourses on Nepal. My research diaries reveal how expanding my vision and understanding was a long-term process that required continuous reflection, countless encounters, discussions, actions, incidents, insights and struggles on my trips.

Usually travellers first arrive in Kathmandu, located in a valley surrounded by green hills and white mountains on the horizon. They smell smoke and incense; they hear praying bells from the temples and the horns of traffic; they see cows wandering on narrow paths and passing by family-run tea shops, vegetable markets and artisans; they see rickshaws, packed buses, street dogs and crowds of people. For me, as an outsider, at first glance the city seemed chaotic, with a mess of noises and stress. However, once I dared to dive into traffic on a scooter, I got to know the rules, and the city started to seem less frenzied. It was like a paradox of a really busy and extremely relaxed environment at the same time, where—within the chaos—everything was in its place, in a sort of messy order. Travellers face the diversity of parallel realities when they see people on their motorbikes going to their offices, trendy young people in their jeans and globally branded clothes heading to night clubs, eating in Pizza Hut and watching YouTube on their smart phones. Certain areas of the capital are like any city, with neon lights and shopping malls. Some of the concurrent worlds hardly touch each other despite the short geographical distances.

Diversities penetrate Nepal on many levels. When travellers drive a twisting road out of the capital into the hills of the rural areas, they face distinctively different scenery: people on rice or mustard fields, the sounds of birds and grasshoppers, livestock and mud houses. It is an atmosphere where everything slows down and becomes quieter. Even though the cities are increasingly crowded, whereas the countryside appears peaceful and sparsely populated, the majority of people still live in rural areas (e.g. Gudbrandsen 2013, 159; Pandey 2014, 12). The differences between the rural and urban areas are evident in livelihoods, material resources, access to different services and social organising (e.g. Chhetry 2004, 2). However, dissimilarities within the cities are distinct, too, as demographic differences divide people into ethnic groups, castes and classes (e.g. *ibid.*). Those social categories, along with other social identities (such as gender, sexuality and bodily ability) overlap in various ways in people's lives, which makes the distinctions more complex. This highlights the importance of intersectional scrutiny (e.g. Agarwal 2001) when researching in Nepal.

One clear indication of the diversity in Nepal are its 82 languages, approximately 100 different ethnic groups and castes, and 10 different religions (e.g. Chetty 2004). Even though these numbers vary according to sources, they still imply significant demographic differences, which makes conducting a study about Nepal as one entity difficult, but encourages one to recognise those diversities that characterise people's lives and, consequently, affect research knowledge. For example, the 3,000-year-old caste system based on 'racial' divisions impacts social and geographic realities and influences groups to have their own customs, cultures and work in different sectors (*ibid.*). There also is a significant number of people who are outcasts in this system: 'untouchables' who still face major challenges in being recognised and treated with dignity (Pandey et al. 2011, 560).

However, while steps toward societal equality have been taken—the caste system was officially banned in 1962—changes on the grassroots level are much slower. Nepal's hierarchical, inherited social order still affects people's attitudes, social positions, occupations, wealth and so on (Pandey et al. 2011, 560). I was often asked, 'What is your caste?', referring to my surname. When that question was asked by a fellow Nepalese, it placed the other Nepalese person in a certain social slot with power divisions. This question had a racialised connotation and brought forth social hierarchies. People also could identify the caste or ethnic background by appearance. Nevertheless, the attitudes among the younger generation were shifting, and some of them changed their names to something neutral (often foreign) to minimise the effects of the caste system.

Traditionally, demographic divisions also have separated people geographically, as varying landscapes drew differences to the lives within them. When contextualising the research in Nepal, it is important to differentiate its geographic zones: the mountains in the north; the hilly region in the middle; and the Terai, the flat area in the south (e.g. Gudbrandsen 2013, 159). These three zones differ in climate and biodiversity as

well as cultural, ethnic and social aspects. Geographic landscapes also create different challenges to living. For example, it is more difficult to practise agriculture in the mountains than in the fertile south. Earthquakes—sometimes devastating—occur in all of the zones, but other geographic challenges include floods in the south, landslides in the hilly region and avalanches on the mountains. With fewer people, life in the mountains is characterised by long distances and roadless villages, snowfalls and coping strategies for cold winters. People may have to walk days to the nearest hospital, whereas in the hilly region, there are more crowds and roads attached to the cities. In the flat south, distinguished by its rain forests, people live in close connection to India, which impacts social and political dynamics. All of this affects people's social lives, too. Consequently, geographic differences are important factors to be considered in this research.

Geographic differences also have been categorised into different development regions (Pandey et al. 2011, 560). Development and its measurements are essential in researching Nepal, as there are countless projects promoting it on political and non-governmental levels as well as in civil society. The division for different development regions is based on the indexes of household wealth—including the questions of ownership or consumer items, as well as dwelling characteristics, such as the source of drinking water, sanitation facilities and type of materials used for buildings (Pandey et al. 2011, 560). In this kind of division, economic and material indicators appear to be the major determinants of development. However, this view is not sufficient as economic and social realities are connected to each other (e.g. Reilly 2013).

A paradigm of human development, also known as the 'capability approach' or 'capabilities approach', expands upon the measurements from the economic plane with a question such as: What are people actually able to do and be? (Nussbaum 2009, 212). With the influence of this paradigm, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has developed the Human Development Index which combines the measurements of longevity, education and income (UNDP 2016). In this comparison, Nepal is categorised into a 'medium human development' with its 144th position out of 188 countries (ibid.). The UN's 'sustainable development goals' by 2030 include the dimension of improving gender equality in the national legislation, policies and institutional frameworks, to improve maternal health, and to eliminate gender disparity in the education (UNDP Nepal 2016).

Poverty is one aspect that must be recognised and analysed when researching in Nepal. Devendra Chhetry (2004) claimed that poverty in Nepal has been more striking than in many other South Asian countries; however, the Gross domestic product (GDP) was growing for example 3.04 percent in the year 2014–15, which shows that poverty is reducing on a national level (UNDP Nepal 2016). However, this does not indicate improvements in the economic positions of the poorest. While the wealth of the richest population has grown, inequality has increased, too (UNDP 2016). This aligns with the critiques of Ken Blakemore and Edwin Griggs (2007, 96–97) on the

neoliberal paradigm that claim that general economic growth brings wealth to everyone, when it actually has been reported to increase global inequality (e.g. Deepak 2011, 782).

Poverty takes many different forms in Nepal. The different dimensions of poverty impact each other and are parallel (Chhetry 2004, 2). Poverty is linked with demographic and geographic diversities, and it has various characteristics and social impacts within the castes, ethnic groups, classes and genders (e.g. Gibbon and Cazottes 2001, 728; Blakemore and Griggs 2007, 100–103). When considering the diversities in terms of poverty, the scrutiny is connected to inequality among different social groups and communities as well as individuals within their different circumstances (Blakemore and Griggs 2007, 95–96). First, I approach the question of absolute poverty, which I see as a philosophical concern related with human dignity, and then relative poverty, which I view more as a contextual issue (e.g. Kopperi 2000, 122–124; Gibbon and Cazottes 2001, 728).

During the research process, I often heard the statement that ‘Nepal is a poor country’, both from foreigners and locals—from the local elite, the middle class and the people living in extreme poverty. Poverty in Nepal is apparent on the streets and slums, and inequality is represented on the fences and security checks that ‘protect’ the richest population. These statements and observations approach the question of absolute poverty, which is not contextualised locally but measured on a universal scale (Blakemore and Griggs 2007, 101). Poverty on the streets and slums is related to basic human needs such as food, water or health care (ibid.). Thus, I see it as a measurement of the capability for life (Nussbaum 2009). Marjaana Kopperi (2000, 122–124) distinguished the determination of a ‘good life’ to relative poverty and human dignity to absolute poverty. Human dignity belongs to everyone—thus, it is universal—but the determinations of a good life varies according to culture, religion or community.

When considering absolute poverty, I find myself pondering the meaning behind ‘absolute’. Since absolute is related to basic needs like food, water and health care (Blakemore and Griggs 2007, 101), how, for example, is ‘health care’ defined? Does it refer to medical science and doctors and nurses with degrees—thus, access to official health services? This question came to me during a discussion with a group of aging women as they presented their belief in the practises of healers as a relevant treatment in certain cases (whereas they would choose a medical doctor in other cases). They were active agents who made their choices according to the need and illness. This raises a concern about whether, if in defining absolute poverty through the measurement of health care, the faith healers—used in many indigenous groups—are counted as such. This creates a risk of ‘othering’ and victimising people, even though they might not necessarily identify themselves as victims. This shows that absolute poverty is not absolute in every way; it has cultural and contextual nuances.

Therefore, I find the concept of relative poverty, being context-specific, more relevant in scrutinising poverty in Nepal. It recognises specific contextual and cultural

distinctions as well as diversities in terms of defining poverty—what seems poor from the outside might not be as such on a local scale. I consider this through a communal mindset and lifestyle: Poverty is not only measured by living conditions or properties, but it is also linked to communal relations and social positions on a societal scale. In Nepal, the extended families shared their property, and everyone had their own place in the distribution—for example, the oldest son was generally supposed to support his parents economically.

Thus, the examination of poverty needs to be combined with communality, as family relationships play a crucial part in defining the community's economy. This, with decolonising lenses, is seen as a 'highly sophisticated social economy', which forms essential safety nets for the family members (e.g. Matsuoka, Morelli and McCubbin 2013, 276). Yet, in this social economy, single mothers and widows at the edges (or out) of the community are particularly vulnerable, as they face more challenges to find employment, too. This shows that poverty is structural and feminised (e.g. Motta 2013).

As relative poverty is linked to the context, it is difficult to develop a global measurement of it. The same amount of money has different value in different places. I also see that communality and negotiability—based on the ideals of a gift economy (e.g. Vaughan 1997)—are tied to encounters in which money as a tool for exchange is not as crucial as it is in the contexts that are based primarily on capitalism. This is concretised for example in the travelling practises of rural Nepal, which is linked with hospitality as it was common to be accommodated in local homes. Also, trading practises were negotiable; community members were able to buy goods for credit in local family-run shops. This relates with the concept of relative poverty. Even if a person or family seemed poor by economic (capitalist) measurements, communal trust and mores prevented them from falling into absolute poverty. This communality, however, had limits too, as there were individuals at the fringes of the communities living at risk of absolute poverty. They had difficulties gaining access to basic needs like nutrition, health care (not healers or medical services) and water—the measurements of human dignity. This affected women particularly, since they were more dependent on family and communal relations than men.

When studying the social and economic conditions in this context located in the global South, the link to the global North must be considered, as international politics and global impacts increasingly shape local realities around the globe. Critical scrutiny of the North-South relationship leads inevitably to the decolonising critiques. Nepal has not been officially colonised, but it is indirectly impacted by colonialism, through its relationship with India (a former colony of England) and other South Asian countries, the global market economy and epistemological imperialism (e.g. Marirajan 2012). There also is internal colonialism in Nepal, as communities that are perceived as inferior have been driven to evictions by dominant groups (Holmberg 2013, 313). There are complex and fine-grained features of colonialism in widely prac-

tised international development cooperation in Nepal (e.g. Marirajan 2012): One of the most striking aspects of it was an ‘American club’², a fenced area in the middle of overpopulated Kathmandu with a spa, swimming pool and golf course, to which the Nepalese people did not have access. This was an example of separation and a form of colonialism within international relations.

Travellers quickly notice that they are not the only tourists in the country. Tourism is the second-biggest industry in Nepal and benefits certain locations especially. Based on my observations, I have identified three categories of tourists that characterise Nepal: mountaineers, volunteer workers and hippies. The first relates with the natural landscapes, the second (paradoxically) to the unbalanced world order where ‘Western’, young people’s self-search as well as local and international business endeavours meet³, and the third with easy access to cannabis and the slow rhythm of life. Obviously, this is an oversimplified picture of tourism. It contributes to the country’s economy, but not always with a fair share and with rather questionable consequences to local microbusinesses (e.g. Höckert 2015). Tourism is a complex issue. Thus, this picture would need a more deliberate analysis to avoid generalisations. As it is not a task of this study, I do not go deeper into this matter. However, the notion of tourism is crucial in picturing the forms of ‘foreign flow’ in Nepal, as well as my role in the first trip and its questionable circumstances of ‘voluntourism’.

Along with the diversities, there were issues that connected Nepalese people, such as national cultural events and the communal lifestyle. Communal and family-bound social organising also was prevalent with the urban and elite families, where communal relations formed the basic social security net. Civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were major providers of social security and had a crucial role in promoting the women’s position and social change (Pant and Standing 2011, 413). The public sector had a minimal role, and the government was criticised as being corrupt. This was seen especially in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in 2015 when the local civil society activated in the rescue work and rebuilding, whereas the government failed in many ways⁴. The strong ideal of philanthropy, leaning on Buddhist and Hindu philosophies of giving alms to the poor (e.g. Gross 2002), led people in their endeavours. However, this philanthropy has limitations as it does not question the power divisions based on, for example, caste and class. I discuss this more in Chapter 6 when I analyse the driving forces of the changes.

2 <http://journeywithl.blogspot.fi/2011/09/american-club.html>

3 The New York Times: The Voluntourist Dilemma. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/22/magazine/the-voluntourists-dilemma.html?_r=0

4 The Telegraph: Nepal earthquake anniversary: one year on, not one home rebuilt by government <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/25/nepal-earthquake-anniversary-one-year-on-not-one-home-rebuilt-by/>

When contextualising this research located in Nepal, I could also write about spicy food, friendly people, goats and chickens on the roofs of packed buses with colourful decorations and slogans of love on their fronts—or about folk music with high vocals and upbeat drums that fills the air from houses, shops, vehicles and the speakers of mobile phones. I could write about the firmness of communal relations, tea shops with spiced *masala* tea, sunsets and sunrises colouring the hills and mountains, festivals for dogs, cows, lights or hash, mannerisms such as shaking one’s head when meaning ‘yes’, the impoliteness of pointing one’s foot towards the other, or about the habit of blowing one’s fingers if they touch their own neck. There are millions of little details that would draw the landscapes of the research context and describe the realities of women in the rural villages. This study cannot embrace all of them. I use some of those details, however, as illustrators of the analysis.

Diversities make Nepal an interesting but challenging research context. As it is not contextually relevant to talk about Nepal as one united entity, the title of this research should instead be: *The women’s social position in a hilly, rural region in Nepal, mostly in the Tamang community (ethnic group) mixed with, for example, Newaris and the different castes from Chhetris to Dalits*. The women of my study were also dedicatedly Buddhist or Hindu, which characterised their lives and has to be acknowledged. Even though these two religions have a lot in common, many of their practises and beliefs differed. The recognition of diversities forms an important basis for proceeding next to address the transition as the contextual framework of this study.

2.2 Time of transition in Nepal—The clash of traditions and modern changes

During my journeys in Nepal I could not ignore the changes on social, cultural, economic and political levels that were reshaping the structures and practises of the communities. This led me to choose transition as a focus of my analysis. I consider its impacts and possibilities, as well as challenges and contradictions in terms of the women’s social position. Analysing the transition on different levels includes the examination of the driving forces, aims, tools and partners of it. This assists me in investigating the holistic and complex processes of social change and in discussing ways to fix the deficiencies in the practises and concepts of promoting women’s well-being. Three years’ participation during twelve years’ time in Nepal revealed the nuanced aspects of the transition in daily contexts and communities. Continuous change on different social aspects was linked to a wider societal transition that was going on in a post-conflict country. Even though the first trips were not as actual fieldwork, their observations and experiences function as a mirror to the changes. The primary focus of this analysis is on everyday life, communal practises and concepts mirrored by political and structural levels. The

diversities and various concurrent realities of the context continue to complicate the analysis of transition:

They stared at us as confused by us as we were them. They had appeared all of a sudden beside the path that we were walking to reach the next village. I had heard about them, the Rautes, a tribe living in forests as nomads, but I had not expected to face them. The midday sun was hot through the big trees, as we continued to wonder at each other. Young girls carried babies on their hips and were covered by breechcloth as their only clothing. Only women, children and the oldest man of the tribe were present. The rest of the men had gone hunting. When we passed their huts made out of branches and leaves, a woman rushed to hide a piece of monkey's meat in her hut. The oldest man stared at the painkiller that our guide offered to him for his headache.

Diary note 12.01.2009

These observations during the trip to far-west Nepal, where people from Kathmandu hardly visited, remained narrow as we were only passers-by. Therefore, this diary note risks being a biased anthropological description where an outsider contemplates the exotic 'other' (e.g. Siikala 1997). It calls for recognising the power structures and the fact that the astonishment was mutual: I was as exotic for the *Rautes* as they were for me. Thus, my interpretation is based on the encounter and its dynamics rather than the reality that the tribe lived in. I do not present this diary note to exoticise the tribe but to illustrate the diversities and complexities of the transition in Nepal, as the reality of a tribe living in forests existed simultaneously with the capital's shopping malls and neon lights.

The tribe in the forest was seen as traditional and isolated in the scale of societal transition, whereas shopping malls were perceived as modern and progressive. A local newspaper wrote about the *Rautes* visiting Kathmandu and being nervous under a concrete ceiling, which I interpreted as creating the picture of the 'backward' encountering the 'modern'. Change and transition often are tied to modernisation, and the contrast of 'harmful traditions, advancing modernisation' is apparent in many development agendas, which indigenous scholars and activists have criticised (e.g. Schmidt and Hersh, 2000; Jönsson 2010, 395). While questioning this dichotomy, I wondered if the *Rautes* similarly told stories around their campfire about weird *kuires* (white foreigners) who, for example, did not know how to dress properly in the forest to hide from carnivores. Decolonising analysis aims at recognising this complexity of modernisation (e.g. Jönsson 2010, 395).

Therefore, in scrutinising transition in Nepal, a decolonising critique is crucial to see the characteristics and power structures of the globalising world that affect the change

processes (e.g. Gray and Hetherington 2013). I understand transition as a process where different social and ethnic groups, geographic areas and, for example, diverse gendered, sexual and embodied beings have their varying positions. The tribe living in the forest and the urban lifestyle in the capital were the extremes, and there were various realities in between them. None of the cultures or communities are static, and there are different dimensions of transition affecting them at varying rhythms. In the cities and growing urban centres, the transition seemed faster, whereas in the rural areas and communities, the changes appeared at a slower speed and with different features. Every year when I returned to Nepal, I found myself noticing rapid changes—not only in the infrastructure, but also in politics, social structures and legislation. At the same time I found it important to notice that many things remained the same: as the smells, smiles and atmosphere.

Alongside the societal transition, the women's position in Nepalese rural communities was undergoing a continuous change process. Focusing on the changes, however, does not suggest underestimating the meaning of the traditions; many of them were part of the women's identities and pride, as well as their security and a foundation of their well-being. At first glance, the rural villages were coloured by traditions. The women appeared in traditional dresses, jewellery and red marks—*tika*—on their foreheads as a religious symbol. Some of the traditions clashed with the changes, and some of them aligned with them. The women's organisations were concrete signs of the transition, aiming at expanding the women's social space and promoting their economic participation. One organisation was registered as an ethnic group which had been discriminated against for a long time, whereas the other one was more mainstream, with mixed castes and ethnic groups. The changes were both arising from the local contexts and being impacted from outside. Analysing the transition is impossible without taking into account the traditions: Thus, my analysis is located at their intersection.

As this is a social work study, it is crucial to assess the political changes to understand the societal context in which the women of my study lived (e.g. Pohjola 2003, 57). The first time I arrived in Nepal in 2005, there was a civil war between Maoist guerrillas and the King's army; it was a time when torture and the disappearances of people—especially in the countryside—were common. The protests, strikes and curfews limited life in the capital area, and travelling to rural areas was risky and insecure. It was a time when the authorities did not pay attention to a corrupt and violent children's home where I first arrived, as the 12,000 people who were killed elsewhere were a bigger worry. It was a time of fear and grief for many, and people were hoping for peace, stability and security. During my second trip in 2006, after twelve years of conflict, the peace treaty was signed, and reconstruction began. Democracy activists filled the streets and demanded the end of the monarchy. The king eventually left his position in 2008, and activists celebrated the new form of governance. However, the transition towards a functional democracy has been unstable, with numerous conflicts (e.g. Shah 2017).

Within the struggles of democracy on a political level, one of the most apparent ones was the complicated, seven-year process of establishing a constitution⁵.

Diversities and power dynamics were the major complexity in this process as different ethnic groups and castes were trying to fit around the same table. When the constitution was agreed upon finally in autumn 2015 after numerous extended deadlines, it sparked a new political crisis with protests in the Terai⁶ by the ethnic group of *Madhesis*, who claimed that their rights were not fulfilled in the constitution. The Indian government supported their protests⁷, and as Nepal is highly dependent on the import of goods from India, this led to a new humanitarian crisis with violent protests and shortages of food, medicine and cooking gas. Constitution was contradictory also from a feminist perspective. Even though local feminists were active in including women in the constitution process with recommendations for gender equality (Abdela 2010, 6; Pant and Standing 2011, 412), the constitution was criticised as being discriminatory towards women's citizenship rights⁸.

Transition appears to snowball as its different aspects feed off each other and create broader societal change (e.g. Pant 2015, 9). On a general level, transition in Nepal has been an internal struggle for peace, development and justice, and a complex process of democratisation (von Einsiedel, Malone and Pradhan 2012, 2). Besides the political turbulence there also have been improvements, for example, in the circumstances of different marginalised groups. This has been initiated by positive discrimination, which has shifted largely unipolar politics gradually towards diversity (Dahal, Acharya and Dahal 1999, 206). Positive discrimination also has spread to development policies, as women and ethnic groups often were prioritised to get support from governmental and non-governmental development projects. Thus, the changes in the women's social position were boosted by a wider political transition: In post-conflict Nepal, women's issues have increasingly been on the political agenda—for instance, expanding the amount female MPs to 33 percent of the parliament in 2008 (though it had decreased to 28.9 percent in 2014) (e.g. UNDP Nepal 2016; Pant and Standing 2011, 409–411). Also, Maoists announced that they promoted women's empowerment by recruiting them as their guerrillas during the conflict; however, their actual effects on improvements to the women's position have been questioned (Pant and Standing 2011, 411).

One of the glass ceilings for women was broken in 2015, when the first female president of Nepal was elected. However, vast differences and the segregations of different groups led rural women and grassroots activists to criticise the election. (I consider

5 McGray, Rebecca: Does Nepal's New Constitution Miss the Boat on Women's Rights? <http://www.takepart.com/article/2015/09/22/nepal-s-new-constitution-misses-boat-women-s-rights>

6 Ibid.

7 Al Jazeera: Crisis on Nepal-India border as blockade continues <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2015/12/crisis-nepal-india-border-blockade-continues-151223082533785.html>

8 McGray, Rebecca, *ibid*

this more in terms of transgressing spatial borders in Section 6.2.) Thus, different local feminist movements and activists not only supported each other; segregations also developed into competition for the funding resources. This calls for an intersectional analysis in which caste, class, age and other attributes are considered.

This was also seen with the two women's organisations of this study, which were from the same area with similar agendas. They were having spatial clashes in their struggles for justice. Women's inclusion on the political level was mainly Kathmandu-based, and the grassroots movements were located more in the rural areas (e.g. Pokharel and Niroula 2016). Because most Nepalese women still lived in the rural areas (Pant and Standing 2011, 409), it presents the problem of how segregation on the rural-urban scale is going to be reduced if women's political activism continues to be driven by an urban higher class. When Nepalese women become increasingly involved on different levels of society (e.g. *ibid.*, 411), I see it as a sign of progress in the women's position, but my concern also is on the hierarchies and inequalities among the women within the transition process.

Transition—even if it is powerful on the macro-level—is not fulfilled as long as it is not reaching the micro-level: the everyday life contexts where people encounter each other and actualise cultural and social manners (e.g. Assmuth 2009, 177). Even though the political changes were major, the transition did not have the same speed in the daily and communal contexts. In the rural areas, the resources and possibilities for change and improvements in livelihoods were more limited, and therefore migration to urban areas was common, especially among the younger generation. Transition in the countryside was a slower process compared to the urban areas, as the expanse in terms of social and cultural concepts and practises was much greater than the 30 kilometres of geographic distance. The modern impacts (which often were seen as international ones—more in Section 6.2) in the rural areas were observed mostly in technological devices such as mobile phones and computers, as well as multinational brands in clothing and transportation. One sign of the change process also appeared in local and international development programmes that financed livelihood projects. As transition is complex, this raised ethical concerns that I discuss more in Chapters 5–7.

This contextual description of the (mostly political) transition in Nepal grounds the analysis of social change in the women's position, which takes on different forms in everyday practises, conceptions and understandings. I scrutinise the changes in daily contexts and communities by considering how women related to their families and to each other, and how their stories linked with the wider transition. I consider the changes that the women embraced, questioned, created or promoted, and the restraints or the flexibilities of the traditions. However, as I mentioned, I also recognise the traditions that the women viewed positively. Thus, I analyse social change on a practical level—which reaches the core of social work as being located at the juncture of conceptions, structures and practises. Therefore, to consider the questions above, I first describe the

concept of social change through the international (although debated) definition of social work and different feminisms from the global South and North.

2.3 Framework of social work—Social change with a decolonising lens

Because this study locates in the epistemological, disciplinary and methodological borderlands—as controversial as it may sound—it establishes a basis for committing to the social work profession, discipline and research. The knowledge base of social work is a debated matter, and as Malcolm Payne (2001, 134) presented, it is a continuous negotiation process with deviations in different contexts. This negotiation process and the debates within it strengthen the social work basis of this study, because I do not rely on a fixed epistemic base, but rather join the continuous process of constructing and reconstructing professional knowledge (ibid.) drawn from a specific context. I see social work in this research as *transformative negotiation towards social change*. This aligns with social work's commitment to be a practise-oriented discipline, in between the micro and macro levels, located where the structures and practises meet, and guided by the principles of social justice (IFSW 2014). Thus, transformative social work debates and constructions (interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary as such) form a disciplinary foundation of this research.

As this is a social work study, there is a need to take a look at social work in Nepal, too. Even though the communities I studied with were not in contact with professional social work practises and methodologies per se, their collective action aligns with the substance and commitments of the profession. As social work literacy is emerging from attempts to systematise the experiences born out of a proposal to intervene in social problems (Ferguson, Lavalette and Whitmore 2004, 11), the women's communities' actions and aims appeared as those experiences that social work aims to systematise. Therefore, analysing their activities contributes to social work knowledge bases, both locally and internationally.

Because social work as a profession in Nepal is relatively new and under-resourced, the number of social work schools was limited (Nikku 2010; Nikku and Pulla 2014, 376). Professional social work practises were mostly located in the urban centres, particularly in the capital area. However, when seeing social work and its knowledge bases from a wider, multidisciplinary angle (e.g. Payne 2001), it has congruences with the community development projects throughout the country. This aligns with the connection between the social work profession and education in Nepal with community and development work, including Paulo Freire's ideas of people's and communities' participation against oppressive structures (e.g. O'Kane 2002, 700).

According to my observations with two social work schools in the capital, the students were mostly young urban middle class or elite who were associated with activist networks. As the number of social work schools was limited, and the professional practise was based mainly on the third sector, it strengthened the link with activism—as social work educators and practitioners were seeking a ‘legitimate identity for social work as a profession and a societal value for their professional services’ (Nikku and Pulla 2014, 376). Thus, in the Nepalese social work context, teaching is inseparable from activism, including participation in political transition, which create multiple identities and commitments for social work professionals and students as activist-academics (ibid., 379). Even though the social work profession in Nepal is emerging, I do not analyse it as such, as it did not have a straightforward link with the communities that I studied with. Instead, I embrace social work from a wider perspective and approach it as a critical conceptual framework and standpoint of this study. This, however, contributes to the professional debates, both in Nepal and internationally.

Debated definition of social work

The debates and constructions of social work offer a framework for examining and understanding the complex social structures that impact diverse daily contexts. This relates with the essence of the profession: Knowledge is co-created and co-constructed with the communities and people within the practises that are to be transformed (IFSW 2014). When researching transition and social change, it is critical to recognise the link between the institutions and practise (Healy 2014). As social work is a practise-based profession and an academic discipline (IFSW 2014), the analysis of this study is located in the spheres where their intersections are discussed. Thus, the conceptual framework of this study lies within the debates of the current global definition of the social work profession:

Social work is a practise-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being.

Global Definition of the Social Work Profession (IFSW 2014)

The definition is not static, and it has been under debate and transformations (e.g. Dominelli 2000, 25), revealing the contested construction of social work knowledge bases. Hence, using the definition as a disciplinary and conceptual framework joins with the very core of social work, but at the same time, there is a risk that the framework

remains vague and bland. Therefore, I scrutinise this definition—by picking the concepts that are central to this study—in a more detailed way with critical (decolonising and feminist) frameworks. This brings forth the associations of social work knowledge bases within this study.

‘...Promotes social change and development...’

This extract of the social work definition relates to the heart of this study through the concepts of social change and development. Yet there is an elementary dilemma in researching the complex processes of social change. As the change is constant, it is hard to grasp, and it demands continuous reflection and inclusion of different knowledges. The change process includes a complex set of different actors and structures that impact the practises. However, analysing social change also provides crucial information about the social dynamics, and it aligns with the aims of social work (e.g. Parton 1996, 8). During this lengthy ethnographic research, the processes of social change in the communities could not be ignored, as the concerns and questions from certain moments took on different shades at other times. I perceive social change as a process that includes the negotiations of various actors and the transgression of different borders, which expands the concept of transition from the political and structural levels to the communal level.

I perceive the term ‘promote’ as a concept that makes social work distinct in addressing social change and development. It does not settle only for analysing the concepts, but it also includes the question of advocacy (Mertens and Ginsberg 2008). This relates to the social work tenet of promoting social progress, which aims at better, fairer and more just societies and communities (e.g. Parton 1996, 8). I also associate it with social work research either through the practical or conceptual promotion of social change (more in Section 3.4). Social change is a vast term. It is often advocated in global resistance and opposition movements or societal transformations (e.g. *ibid.*). It is linked with activism that reaches for social justice in marginalised communities, which includes for example advocacy for gender equality, equality in economic opportunities, and human rights (O’Kane 2002, 698).

In Nepal, most of the social change activists were from higher castes and classes, as well as urban and educated populations (e.g. Pokharel and Niroula 2016). Thus, there was a contradiction to Marxist and liberation theology in which working people and the poor are the essential protagonists of social change (e.g. Staughton 2012, 4). Critics argue that development discourses often lean on the principles of social change that are colonial and Eurocentric and divide people and societies into ‘developed’ and ‘undeveloped’ (Jönsson 2010, 394). When the promotion of social change is not seen through a critical lens, it tends to align with the neoliberal paradigm, which can be harmful for local communities (e.g. Marirajan 2012). The postcolonial feminist perspective recognises the dangers of the increasing demands for individualism—which is boosted by neoliberalism—within development discourses (e.g. Deepak 2011, 784).

The counter-hegemonic vision emphasises inclusion, communal aspect and contribution to the health and well-being of vulnerable and marginalised populations (ibid.).

Scrutinising the concept of ‘marginalised’ leads me to recognise the power imbalances within the processes of promoting social change not only on international, but also local levels. Communities are dynamic networks with their internal hierarchies, and it is not sufficient to pay attention to the community as one united entity. Their internal tensions develop multiple marginalisations that must be taken to consideration. By following the narratives of the communities of this study, my focus on marginalisation is primarily on intersecting social (gender, ethnic) and economic (class) aspects. However, marginalisations are much more diverse than that: The research on marginalisation emphasises that it does not always mean exclusion or poverty, but it can also mean being different by the person’s own choice (e.g. Granfelt 2004; Hughman et al. 2010). Nonetheless, by leaning on the research encounters and the data, I do not analyse marginalisations that are linked for example to sexual or gender minorities, or that are based on the person’s own choice. Marginalisation gets multiple and diverse forms, in which each individual’s situation is unique. However, it is possible to identify the impacts of societal and communal structures in individual situations (e.g. Granfelt 2004). In promoting social change, individual and structural aspects intersect, which determines the analytical standpoint of social work.

‘...Collective responsibility and respect for diversities...’

Social work debates include a question whether a global knowledge base in social work is possible (e.g. Payne 2001). At the same time, in the professional definition, there is a call for collective responsibility. How is this responsibility carried out with the vague and contested knowledge base of the profession? Because collective responsibility refers to international cooperation, it is worth investigating what international social work offers to address this question. It is argued that there is an escalating need for social work to consider internationalisation and globalisation (for example, transnational flows of people, cultures, resistance, ideologies and information), as they are increasingly impacting its practises and conceptions (e.g. Dominelli 2010b, 601; Brydon 2011, 160; Healy 2014, 370).

However, the difficulty of this consideration arises from the profession’s strong connection with practise that is inevitably context-related. Although social work is recognised as a profession in most societies, how it is understood and viewed in different countries varies (Dominelli 2000, 25). As Kerry Brydon (2011, 157) suggested, the functions of social work are tied to the cultural, social, economic and political realities of the context. This leads to a debate about which dimensions of social work are international and universal, and how much of it is defined by certain contexts, cultures, religions, values, history or strategies of understanding the helping and being helped in different cultures. Due to these contextual links, respecting diversities is inseparable from the collective responsibility.

As Karen Healy (2014, 373) introduced the debate of whether there is an ‘international’ or ‘global’ practise and whether it is a good idea, I approach international social work as an ideology that crosses different borders rather than as a fixed global practise. It ties in with understanding global effects on different local contexts and recognising the impacts of globalisation (Healy 2014, 370). Those impacts include wars, droughts, famine, human trafficking, cheap labour, evictions and other phenomena that affect the realities of different localities due to global politics, economics or environmental issues (e.g. Dominelli 2014). In addition to this, it links with migration in general but also among social workers. I see these global phenomena as allied with the importance of the collective responsibility of social work, which expands also on a practical level to responsible choices (for example, in consuming) or promoting peace and opposing hatred and xenophobia.

Globalisation is a double-edged sword in social work. The need for collective responsibility arises from the negative impacts of globalisation, but the positive sides of it provide spaces for carrying that very responsibility, including the transnational flow of communication, information, technology, culture and a sense of global citizenship, which is related to the promotion of social change (Deepak 2011, 781). Collective responsibility and transnational flow have characterised social work from its professional roots, as social work academics have exchanged ideas, practises and concepts throughout the profession’s history (Midgley 2006, 12). Thus, collective responsibility has its basis in the construction of social work as an international profession and discipline.

In addressing the collective responsibility of social work, it is necessary to consider the diversities and global power structures that also relate to the nuances of social change and development. While being characterised as an international profession and discipline, the word ‘international’ has been perceived narrowly within early professional social work discussions. Its development is grounded in industrialisation and ‘modern’ societies, so it is strongly associated with the societies and social policies of the global North. The problem is that while professional social work has leaned on constructions from the North, it is represented as a collective knowledge system that is universally applicable (Yunong and Xiong 2008). It has ignored diversities, the contexts in the global South and indigenous knowledge production (e.g. Gray et al. 2008, 78).

There is an emergence of critical views claiming international social work to be based on neoliberal and imperialist paradigms and arguing for alternatives therein (e.g. Wehbi, Parada, George and Lessa 2016, 286). For example, Brydon (2011) and Mel Gray, Michael Yellow Bird and Bill Coates (2008)—among many other social work scholars—have deconstructed the Western hegemony in international social work to move for more multifaceted, ethical and diverse constructions. These debates have contributed to the newest global definition, which recognises diversities among collective responsibility.

This has led to an emergence of indigenisation in social work, which promotes constructing professional approaches relevant in the global South (Gray and Hetherington 2013, 25). Indigenisation is a counter-hegemony for the homogenising tendencies of the ‘McDonaldisation’ or ‘Americanisation’ of social work (Dominelli 2010b, 603). The term indigenisation, however, is problematic, as the flow of indigenising the knowledge is directed from the North to the South. Lena Dominelli (2000) argued that the term indigenous includes power hierarchies and maintains the dichotomy of traditional communities (seen as backwards) and the ‘developed’ and advanced academia of the North. Dominelli instead suggested to lean on culturally relevant and context-specific methods that are more appropriate in questioning the power imbalance. The roots of indigenisation are found mostly in colonised contexts, so when searching for effective and culturally appropriate research, education and practises, it can be understood as decolonised social work (Gray and Hetherington 2013, 27).

The complicated question of collective responsibility and diversities leads to a reflection on the methodological and conceptual frameworks of this study. I approach it through critical, decolonising scrutiny and reflection on my positions as a social work researcher. The question also is about how the local communities relate to global impacts and at the same time maintain their own traditions and culture. The main concern in addressing the complexities of the global social work definition is the recognition of social inequalities and injustices, both globally and locally (e.g. Deepak 2011, 780). This stands with one of the core issues of my dissertation: the relationship between the transition and traditions. It relates to the question of how a social worker can stand in solidarity with marginalised communities without ignoring the cultural shades and distinctions and without stepping into an imperialist ‘knowing’ of the ‘other’ (e.g. Spivak 2005).

The question related to the international and global power imbalance within this study is primarily epistemological: Who am I, as a white academic from the global North, to talk ‘on behalf of’ Nepalese women in the rural communities? There is a risk within this research setting of failing to include the communities in the margins, and maintain the ‘otherness’ (e.g. Gray et al. 2008, 78). Despite the decolonising and indigenous lenses, this study joins the majority of international social work literature being written by academics from the global North (Wehbi et al. 2016, 285). This problem is only partially solved by writers of cultural or ethnic minorities who live or are educated in the global North (e.g. *ibid.*). The assumption of ‘Northness’ also expands to the presumed audience (*ibid.*, 289).

These questions are vast and crucial, and I consider them throughout this study. The first step in reflecting on these risks is to refrain from talking on behalf of the ‘other’. It is instead the encounters with the ‘other’ that the research knowledge is based on (e.g. Höckert 2015). Thus, the importance is not in thorough knowledge of the other culture, but rather of one’s own ability to recognise and question power and privileges

(Gray et al. 2008). The knowledge of this research is provided by the epistemological and methodological boundaries, where I have my own position and the women have theirs, and both impact the production of knowledge (this is discussed more in Section 3.4). However, I claim that these encounters in the epistemological borderlands provide knowledge that is necessary in the international debates of social change and development in an increasingly interconnected globe. This justifies studying encounters within the margins when they are accompanied by a critical and ethical view point.

'...Social justice, human rights...'

Since the principles of human rights are part of the global definition of social work (IFSW 2014), it indicates that they have been embraced as an ethical basis of the profession. There are scholars who state that increasing globalisation, the movement for global citizenship and the claims of being an internationally relevant discipline have increased the need for examining the role and utility of human rights in social work (e.g. Dominelli 2000, 25; Harrison and Melville 2010, 139). This includes the idea of maximising people's civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights (Harrison and Melville 2010, 139). Also, the issues that social work practitioners deal with often are associated with human rights, even though they are not always articulated as such (ibid.). Yet when some scholars indicate that international social work is based on understanding the principles of human rights, some other face challenges in adapting those to a society practically and conceptually (e.g. Xu 2006, 682–683). I scrutinised the question of differences before addressing social justice and human rights, even though they are inverted in the global definition of the profession (IFSW 2014). I think that diversity and local contexts need to be the main framework in examining human rights, despite the claimed 'universalism' and 'indivisibility' of the human rights concept (e.g. Mapp 2007). Diversities are crucial in the scrutiny of social work as a profession that is based on human rights, and human rights are to be read through those differences (e.g. Xu 2006).

Globally, the leading determination of human rights is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) launched by the UN in 1948 (Harrison and Melville 2010, 139). This is established as a universal conception of the dignity, respect, rights and freedoms that concern all humans regardless of their nationality, political system, religion or any other grouping, simply by virtue of their humanity (e.g. Mapp 2007, 17). The global human rights indicators are published for international comparisons and to report violations of the rights in different contexts. None of the countries are free from those violations but their extent varies. In spite of the universal principles, the declaration has faced debate among different nation states on major political and ideological differences (e.g. Harrison and Melville 2010, 144). The challenge is in the convention itself as well as its implementation. For example, Susan Mapp (2007, 19) stated that the universality and indivisibility of human rights are called into question

in the processes of different countries ratifying the conventions and covenants formed by the UN.

The idea of equal worth of ‘rich and poor’, ‘rural and urban’ or different genders—which penetrates the convention—is related to the idea of liberty (Nussbaum 1999b, 227). This calls for a consideration of diversities: Liberty is valued to various degrees in different contexts and cultures, and people’s obligations and duties towards their communities and society are wide-ranging. Thus, the universalism of the concept of human rights is challenged in terms of local expertise. The convention offers a starting point for the scrutiny of human rights, but if it is not done with sensitivity to particularity and the contextual differences with which the people around the globe live, the analysis remains partial. The convention and the disputes around it offer a platform to study the distinctive cultural and contextual perceptions of human rights, which provides crucial knowledge in promoting social change processes.

The convention is divided into different ‘generations’, which has led to debates especially on the prioritisation of them (Ife 2008, 30–34). For example Susan Mapp (2007, 17) and Jim Ife (2008, 30–34) pointed out that besides the first (civil and political rights) and second (economic, social and cultural rights) generations, there also is a third generation of the rights that is led by the idea of collectivism. Ife (*ibid.*) stated that these rights can also be called ‘solidarity rights’, which are loosely framed in Article 29 of the UDHR. These collective rights concern, for example, the protection of entire communities, the right to sustainable economic development and the right to a clean environment. The collective rights have a cultural resonance with traditions in Nepal, illustrated in a local saying that one of the contextual translators of this study introduced: ‘When a person straightens their hand, their rights reach till the hand touches the next person.’ The idea of collectivism necessitates thought on the duties and responsibilities of individuals towards the community.

Theoretical and philosophical standpoints offer tools to address the diversities and intricacy of the convention on human rights. For instance, the writers of globalisation, feminism and postcolonialism have added new dimensions to the debate, with the main argument that human rights are not ‘one size fits all’ but vary according to culture (e.g. Harrison and Melville 2010, 139; Deepak 2011, 780). This relates with the power imbalance of the Western cultural influences dominating other cultures within the process of globalisation (Payne and Askeland 2008, 9). Colonial history between many countries in the global North and South led to the criticism of the ‘colonial project of human rights’ (*ibid.*).

The representatives of some Asian countries argue that human rights are a Western concept based on modernist-capitalist ideology, with a greater emphasis on the individual than on society, which does not match with the communal-based cultures in Asia (Mapp 2007, 20; Deepak 2011, 780). This has led to ethical dilemmas, for example, within the rescue projects targeting child labour. Without a deeper understanding of

the context—such as the poverty of the families—this has led to some of the children ending up in even worse conditions like prostitution or trafficking (e.g. Deepak 2011, 780–781). To avoid this kind of ethical ‘trap’ in the promotion of human rights, one needs to examine globalisation, power, resistance and contextual nuances.

Besides being criticised as a colonial project, the universalism of human rights is argued to be flawed on the grounds of sex and gender (e.g. Nussbaum 1999). Feminist critique states that the first generation of human rights is gender blind, and it inadvertently perpetuates the existing inequalities between men and women. Thus, women’s domestic work and private spheres are marginalised in human rights discourses. Additionally, domestic violence against women is seen to fall outside the scope of human rights, yet gendered violence occurs in every country in spite of culture, ethnicity, class or religion. Feminist critics have brought new gendered aspects to the discourse, such as the issue of rape. This has been facilitated by the UN’s adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979 and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, adopted in 1993 (Harrison and Melville 2010, 147). Human rights discourse also has expanded to recognise distinctions on a broader level, including the notions of children’s rights, LGBTQI-rights, indigenous rights, land rights and disability rights (e.g. Hilsdon, Macintyre, Mackie and Stivens 2000, 13).

Yet Asian feminists have brought different viewpoints to the criticism by highlighting the duties and responsibilities of women and the importance of family relations (e.g. Bulbeck 1998, 70). Asian feminists emphasise obligations towards the family, men, state and community (ibid.), and not only because they ‘have to’, but because that reflects their values. Postcolonial feminism includes these aspects, as well as the recognition of women’s agency in the global South, which brings crucial nuances to the human rights discourse (Gray and Boddy 2010; Deepak 2011, 784).

Indigenous methodologies in social work are framed with social justice and human rights dialogue (e.g. Gray et al. 2008, 78–79). This discourse recognises the Indigenous Peoples’ histories and questions the vision of them as static and ‘frozen’ communities that had not developed before the Western academia or development workers found them and documented their lives (ibid.). The indigenous view of human rights recognises the traditional rights and strengths of the communities. This connects with, for example, the strong female goddesses in Hindu mythology (e.g. Ahmad 2009, 9; Channa 2013, 146), which impact the women’s position in Nepalese communities. I address this more in the next section and in Chapters 6–7.

In addition, the capabilities approach takes a contextual stand for the rights discussion in arguing that human rights as such are not sufficient, but there is a need to examine and improve the capabilities of people ‘to convert their rights or recourses into well-being’ (e.g. Sen 1993; Nussbaum 1999b). Because the capabilities approach evaluates the environments and the contexts in which people live, it has parallels to the

indigenous and decolonising approaches (e.g. Gray et al. 2008, 78–79). To convert a right into well-being takes more than just an offer of the rights or resources to marginalised people. This comes together with Monica Mookherjee's (2011, 14) statement on the 'harmful internalisation of social norms' caused by structural constraints: As in the case when a woman in this study introduced herself by saying, 'I'm just a poor, sad, unlucky woman.' This emphasises the need for structural and decolonising scrutiny along with the rights discourse.

The discussion of human rights is a dynamic one and should not consist of top-down imposed legal or abstract principles (Harrison and Melville 2010, 149–150), but instead a dialogue with indigenous, decolonising and feminist views. In so doing, finding a balance between international notions and diverse local contexts becomes more complex. For example, the Asian Human Rights Commission has argued that the 'Asian critique' of human rights is invoked by governments to justify the suppression of political and civil freedoms (e.g. Channa 2013). Among some post-colonialists, the Eurocentrism of human rights also is disputed. In the global South, the domestic human rights workers often are the descendants of the colonial subjects, and therefore they are 'culturally positioned against Eurocentrism' (Spivak 2005, 134). Gayatri Spivak (*ibid.*, 139) continued that there often is a discontinuity between the human rights advocates of the South and the people whom they aim to protect. These aspects relate to power structures and the question: Who has the right to talk on behalf of an entire culture or context?

This leads to the concept of social justice that is not a static virtue or free from cultural interpretations. John Rawls described social justice by saying, 'The fair division of a cake would be one that could be agreed on by people who did not know which piece they were going to get' (O'Kane 2002, 698). This idea of social justice deconstructs the power imbalance between a 'giver' (such as a social worker, development agent or politician) and the 'receiver' in the redistribution process. It also approaches the problem in human rights discourse that Spivak (2005, 188) introduced: the discontinuity between those who right the wrongs and those who are wronged. This aligns with the principles of postcolonial-Marxist feminist notions on rights, which assert that the concern is not only about having or claiming a right or a set of rights; it is also about righting wrongs (*ibid.*, 132). Claire O'Kane (2002, 698) stated that social justice goes beyond redistribution. As poverty and injustice are structural matters, one must identify those structures and promote the transformation of them. This is achieved by respecting cultural diversities and recognising the oppression that lies in complex global and local social structures.

Need for a holistic view in a changing world

I explored the framework of social work in this study through the concepts within the global definition of the profession. As a conclusive aspect to those ideas, I add an element that is emphasised especially in indigenous social work—the need for a holistic

view in a changing world. This corresponds with the vision that the knowledge bases of social work, societies and global phenomena are in a continuous change process. Social work locates at the intersection of theory and practise, which calls for ongoing critical and nuanced reflection on the changes in the practises and, accordingly, development of its conceptualisations. As Malcolm Payne (2001) expressed, the knowledge bases of social work are linked to a nuanced negotiation and re-negotiation process, thus following the changing characteristic of the worlds that social work deals with. Social work is not a ready-made or fixed conception or practise, so its definition is not absolute but open to debates that recognise and respect the diversities among people in changing environments.

One urgent, often heard question in current development discourses is about how to ensure the well-being of all human beings without destroying the environment. This follows the commitment of social work dealing with a holistic view and acknowledging the relationship of social circumstances and environments (e.g. Dominelli 2010a). It also calls for identifying major trends—such as global politics, economies and climate change—and their impacts on local contexts. As the views and practises of social work are linked with multiple lifeworlds in people’s realities, recognising the continuity of change emphasises the need for holistic scrutiny. Thus, there is space and a demand for the knowledge bases of different disciplines within social work. There also is space to learn from indigenous knowledges and the ecospiritual perspective, which emphasise, for example, the meaning of spirituality and environments in human well-being (e.g. Dominelli 2010a, 121; Gray and Coates 2013). This joins with examining human worlds with a multidimensional gaze and searching for unity among and between people and the environments (Dominelli 2010a, 121). Thus, social work knowledge is not a thing or a noun but a process that links spiritual level with material, emotional level with intellectual, and individual level to collective (ibid.).

A holistic view is a key for crossing the borders and social ills that social work practises deal with around the globe. It is crucial, for example, in dealing with global concerns such as the flows of refugees, evictions, poverty or natural catastrophes. It is not sufficient to lean solely on indigenous knowledge. It also includes the need to recognise and reflect on the impacts of wider international politics and economics, including the role of the global North in boosting problems in the South, which, for example, force people to flee from their homes (e.g. Marirajan 2012). A holistic view is actualised in practises, research and knowledge processes that are negotiated and co-created with the people and communities within their unique contexts and environments, but also with the ties to the global networks, connections and ruptures.

On a more specific level, social diversities are linked to gendered, ‘racial,’ ethnic, sexual or bodied aspects that must be addressed with a holistic view (e.g. Dominelli 2002b). For example, feminist social work recognises women’s particular needs through intersectionality in a holistic manner and deals with the complexities of life—address-

ing also the needs of those with whom the women interact: men, children and other women, and also the physical environment (Dominelli 2002a, 7; 126). Dealing with a holistic view is not a simple task in social work practises that are impacted by global financial and political issues. They are intertwined with one another with the complex dynamics of power, the global histories of colonisation and racialisation, and conflicting worldviews in different parts of the world. Thus, the question of universalism in social work knowledge bases stays unanswered, but by respecting the differences with a holistic view, different debates refine the content and commitments of social work toward mutual understanding. This can lead to open and respectful dialogue that reaches more just and fairer gendered, spatial, epistemological and social spheres, both on the global and local levels.

2.4 Feminist debates from the global South and North

The setting of this study where I, as a white academic from the global North, encountered South Asian women included a risk for inadvertently creating ‘otherness’ and establishing the authority and right to speak about what meaningful female life is in that context (e.g. Behar 1993, 270–272; Spivak 1998). This would lead to producing a passive picture of Nepalese women who (Western) feminists need to ‘save’ from patriarchal dominance in the local context (e.g. Deepak 2011; Arora-Jonsson 2008). This contrast includes a view of freedom that lies with Western feminists, while the women in the global South are seen through different cultural restrictions (e.g. Behar 1993, 271).

There also are many local perceptions arguing that Nepalese women are subjected to various restrictions. Tek Nath Dhakal (2002, 60–61) suggested that they are silenced, oppressed, neglected and forced to live insecure lives with illiteracy, health risks, persistent traditions and a discriminative legal system; I do not argue against this. However, there is a need to take a deeper look at the persistent traditions. In Dhakal’s (ibid.) view, they are presented as parallel to health risks or a discriminatory legal system, which are seen as a restriction in the women’s lives. However, this seems oversimplified. Traditions have also had positive impacts in the women’s lives, and they wanted to protect and maintain many aspects of them from change. When leaning on decolonising feminist critiques, this narrow perspective of traditions gets widened.

The first step in broadening this perspective is to recognise the local traditions and communal strengths that maintain and promote the women’s well-being. Also, by recognising the characteristics and capabilities of the women, I lean on the feminist emphasis of deconstructing the picture of them as passive, subservient and lacking creativity (e.g. Behar 1993, 272). By being conscious of these biases and risks, I approach feminism by prioritising the frameworks from the South and joining them with some

ideas from the North. This is not a simple task, as I carry my own initial understanding, which calls for continuous efforts to learn and unlearn. I try to avoid recreating the dichotomy of the feminism(s) from the South and the North, with the sensitivity to recognise the prevalent (global and local) power structures that also impact the feminist discourses of academia.

A passive image of the women in the global South ignores, for example, the female goddesses in Hindu stories and the power laid with the women (Ahmad 2009, 9; Channa 2013, 146). These stories promote the humanity and value of women through wifehood, which is not perceived as liberating in the frameworks that approach individuality as a virtue (Gross 2002, 107). Hindu goddesses do not contribute to the individual values that are seen as important in many forms of Western feminisms, but they provide the psychological well-being that positive female imagery brings to traditional communities. This leads, for example, to the women's central role in the households (Lorber 2010, 7). While this can also be seen as a restriction on women, with their workload and inferior position in the family's economic decision-making, emphasising its restrictive side is questioned with cultural understanding of power: In strongly religious contexts, power may be seen more as spiritual than economic matter (Bulbeck 1998, 34). This shows that feminism is a debatable and complex framework requiring a culturally sensitive approach and the recognition of variable perceptions of power.

When scrutinising feminism(s) around the globe, it does not appear as a united movement but as diverse frameworks with different causes and solutions for women's subordination (Gray and Boddy 2010, 368). In the prevalent academic world, the historical roots of feminism are seen in the first-wave movement for (white) women's civil rights, such as the suffragettes (Lorber 2010, 2–3). This was continued by a more diverse second wave of feminism—from the prompts to increase women's economic independence and bodily freedom, to the views of socially constructed sex and the deconstruction of the 'otherness' of the women (ibid.). The diversity of the second wave of feminism included liberal, radical/socialist, cultural-difference, social welfare, black, lesbian and postcolonial feminisms (Gray and Boddy 2010). This has been followed by a third wave of feminism, which emphasises the pluralism and hybridity of the sexes and genders (e.g. ibid., 382). Third-wave feminism, however, has been criticised for leaning on a neoliberal paradigm due to the emphasis of freedom and choice as consumers (ibid., 383). This shows that feminism in the West is not a united movement, but it includes diverse phases and branches with different emphasis.

When the waves of feminism are dissected, the presentation often starts from the West, yet which is questioned for example with postcolonial feminism. Prioritising feminism(s) from the West subordinates women's movements for instance in South Asia, which have roots in the early 20th century (Bulbeck 1998; Desai 2002; Sharma 2002; Mukhopadhyay 2007; Ahmad 2009). In spite of the diversities within the

feminisms of the North, they have been criticised for their Eurocentricity and Western worldview (e.g. Bulbeck 1998, 9). The paradox in feminism is similar to that in social work, as its concepts have been set in the West, and the 'Rest' is invited to contest those (Sharma 2002). Those contests have included the criticism of Western feminism for focusing too narrowly on the issues of violence against women, while women's experiences of marginalisation and exploitation—especially within globalisation and development processes—have not achieved the same level of recognition as human rights concerns (Reilly 2013, 118). While the concepts of autonomy and self-determination are central to the feminisms in the North (e.g. Desai 2002), in Asian settings and in more communal-based societies, individual autonomy is not seen as a virtue of either gender.

The role of the feminist writers from the global South, often from colonised societies, is significant in bringing forth the women's experiences, creating an awareness of their circumstances and instituting social change (Ahmad 2009, 10). For instance, the leader of the Indian independence movement, Mahatma Gandhi, emphasised the equal intellectual capacities of women and men (Bulbeck 1998, 23). Issues like rape, dowry harassment and deaths, domestic violence, media projections and sex determination tests have consistently been on the agenda of women's movements in South Asia (Mukhopadhyay 2007, 203). The emphasis also has been against the colonial education system and poverty, in the efforts to include women in society and to understand the gendered structures (Desai 2002, 34.)

South Asian feminism(s) have included debates on the ideas of womanhood and female-male relationships, with the division of the obedient wife or the freedom of women. They have argued about the dangers of Westernisation, which is seen as bringing bad habits along, such as the protection of individual rights by violative means (Velayudhan 2002, 90–102). In the communities of this study, individual rights were questioned by a communal appreciation for harmony and peace. The acts to protect individual rights appeared more as resistance to unfairness rather than to support individualism per se. Recognising the questioning of 'liberation' among the South Asian feminists does not mean, however, to dive into the cultural relativism that ignores the oppression of and discrimination against women (Dahlgren 2005, 28). It is instead about the negotiations where the contextual and cultural determinants are set into a dialogue with structural power structures.

In Nepal, feminism does not appear as one united movement either but it is divided into separate activities and priorities, with impacts from South Asian and especially Indian feminisms (Abdela 2010, 6). The roots of Nepalese feminism are seen in the ripples of the 1950s worldwide women's movement. It has been linked strongly with the democratisation movement in the country. The women's struggles, along with the political turbulence, have led to a reservation of spots for women in the local governing bodies, the first female minister being elected to the parliament in 1960 and the first female president's election in 2015. (e.g. Shah 2017.) One pivotal aspect of women's

political rights has been the impact of the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), as both the women of this study and the wider feminist movements in Nepal agree that the conflict pushed many women's issues forward. The women's movements have included campaigns for different ethnic and caste-related rights (like the *Madhesi*, *Dalit* and *Janajati* movements), and women also have visibly campaigned against many discriminatory practises such as dowry, child marriages and witch-hunting. These movements have had a significant impact on improvements in the women's position with regard to political participation, legislation and in gaining citizenship rights. (Pokharel and Niroula 2016; Shah 2017.)

However, women's movements in Nepal have been criticised as being run mostly by educated, urban, middle-class women (Shah 2017). Vina Mazumdar, a 'grandmother' (pioneer) of the women's movement in South Asia, also was an educated, middle-class woman who was nevertheless relentlessly self-critical of her own position. She was active in a collective movement of poor working women in rural and urban India. (Sharma 2002, 16–18.) She described peasant women as her gurus, as they questioned her knowledge of political theories (*ibid.*), which links with the rural feminists' movement. The women of this study were acting on a grassroots level; they were rural feminists who were not leaning on theoretical frameworks, but their views and actions arose from their traditions and practical realities.

I see one of the core questions of feminism as what is common between women around the globe? In culturally sensitive feminist research, the historical, cultural and socio-economic differences among and between the women in different contexts have to be evaluated (Kapoor 2008, 47). As Monica Mookherjee (2011, 21) described, the particulars in the women's lives provide a critical perspective on the universal. In the perspective of gender as seriality, women are located serially in different normative orders (*ibid.*). There are many determinants beyond gender that formulate women's lives varyingly in different contexts and cultures; intersectionality pays attention to ethnicity, sexuality and other diversities. Therefore, the complex interests of women with affiliations to communities that differ from the liberal norms must be explored in researching with Nepalese women (e.g. *ibid.*).

Despite the segregation of different feminisms across cultures, they have shared views, too: They all agree that gender inequality is cloaked in the structures of the societies, and that it is not an individual matter. They agree that unequal gendered structures appear in families, politics, religions, languages, economy, the arts and other cultural productions (Lorber 2010, 7), and those structures are to be questioned. There are a lot of reasons for feminisms to expose the oppression that women face all around the globe. Sexual exploitation and violence take on very brutal forms through genital mutilation, rapes, child marriages, trafficking and so on (*ibid.*, 5). By bringing forth the unifying issues, I aim to question the dichotomy between different contexts like the global North and South.

The conceptual framework of this study is a decolonising feminist critique on social change and transition. This calls for humility, not in the sense that is based on the privileges of ‘being thankful for how well things are for the women back home’, but in the sense of recognising and being open to the vulnerabilities and capabilities that women around the globe carry within their different circumstances. Oppressive structures affect women to varying degrees in different contexts, which calls for critical scrutiny and self-reflection by the feminists who join transnational alliances. At the centre of this process, however, there is not self-reflexivity per se (e.g. Ahmed 2004) but the impacts of diverse social positions (with weaknesses and strengths) that affect the processes of standing in solidarity with marginalised and colonised communities. This does not produce closed ends but rather openings for nuanced discussions and ethically conscious considerations on social change and development processes.



जब म, म को हूँ भन्ने कुरा बिसन्छु, तब मात्र म म बन्न सकछु।

Jaba ma, ma ko hun bhanne kura birsanchhu,

taba matra ma ma banna sakchhu.

When I let go of what I am, I become what I may be.

Chinese philosopher Lao Tsu



3 Eleven return tickets to Nepal—Methodological engagements

I base my methodological choices on my experiences and encounters in the research context. The empirical basis of this study lies in distinct encounters within different life situations and daily contexts. The research choices were drawn from combining those experiences and methodological tools. Developing the experiences within the research context to an academic study was grounded in the combination of ethnography, anthropology and social work research. This requires explicating the differences between the experiences and the research data in order to understand their different but overlapping roles in the production of research knowledge.

I describe the research process based on my experiences as ‘stepping down the stone stairs’—a gradual process of diving deeper into cultural and contextual knowledges. As part of this description, I consider my role in the field as an outsider and insider, and the transfer periods and being in between different worlds on my yearly travels between Finland and Nepal. Ethnographic fieldwork is located in a certain context and time, so I also consider the meaning of the present in doing ethnographic research. I describe the scenes of the fieldwork—the communities and the informants with their diverse positions and with which the primary data was collected and co-created. I perceive the research methods as ‘merging methods’, as the research discussions and participatory observation often were simultaneous episodes.

Because I was living close to the research participants with my distinctly different position and background, it is crucial to scrutinise my relationships within and to the field. I reflect on my connections with the women and the context, and on the women’s and the communities’ internal relations, which affected the research knowledge production. I analyse the women’s views by drawing from my encounters and the shared knowledge production process with them. The encounters were based on our different socio-economic positions. Thus, the analysis is drawn from the spatial and epistemological borders. This raised ethical concerns due to power structures, hierarchies and privileges. It also created a question of ‘producing good’ in the research process. A crucial part of reflexivity is considering how my personal choices and position influence the research process. However, I avoid remaining with a ‘white woman’s self-reflection’ (Ahmed 2004); my main focus is on the research participants’ perspectives.

Reflexivity is based on the encounters and relationships between me and the research participants, which inevitably influenced the knowledge production and the results

of this study. With critical reflection on the limits of my position in embracing a full understanding of the research context, I provide analysis built on ethically sensitive encounters with the local participants. In this process, it is crucial to recognise silent and marginalised knowledge(s). It leads me also to reflect on the 'cracks in the ethnographer's mirror'. They include my failings and limits, which are turned into the strengths of this study as they provide knowledge about marginalisation and differences. The mistakes and failings often are not reported in the research. However, they are a crucial part of the complex and lengthy ethnographic research.

In the last section of this chapter, I describe the analysis and writing processes. The considerations of earlier methodological parts apply here, too, as power structures, hierarchies and privileges shaped the analysis and writing processes. As part of the analysis, I also explain the roles of different data: Research discussions form one part, and participatory observation, spontaneous encounters, emotions and sensory perceptions form another part of the data. Even though those different parts of the data are distinguished, they overlapped within the fieldwork, and thus they complete each other. I do not lean on one particular analysis method, but I combine different elements of theoretical thematisation (e.g. Morse 1994), content analysis (e.g. Neuendorf 2011) and sensory ethnography (e.g. Pink 2009; Valtonen et al. 2010), which are penetrated by critical reflexivity. Combining different methods forms a creative and context-specific ethnographic analysis (e.g. Behar 1993; Coffey 1999).

3.1 Ethnography, anthropology and social work research

The methodology of this study leans primarily on ethnography, which draws from the anthropological paradigm. By going beyond description and searching for deeper understanding, ethnography is a method of researching peoples (ethnos) within their specific cultures and societies (e.g. Ranta-Tyrkkö 2010, 42). I embrace ethnography (the main method of anthropology), particularly through participatory observation and research discussions within the daily lives of the people, but also by reflecting on the research relationships, epistemological hierarchies and ethical issues (e.g. Behar 1993; Alexander 2004). These methods are intertwined in social work research that is open for different methodologies. Being transparently subjective, relative and open method (e.g. Coffey 1999; Ranta-Tyrkkö 2010), ethnography aligns with my research interests in various ways. It offers a base to produce knowledge on social practises and often ignored informal or unofficial information (e.g. Behar 1993; Siikala 1997; Parameswaran 2001; Sherif 2001; Alexander 2004; Enguix 2014; Haight et al. 2014). Thus, it forms a methodological foundation for reflecting on a twelve-year journey within and in between the spaces of my origins and the research context.

Anthropology is a methodological framework that is based on a researcher moving to a different—often geographically distant—context (e.g. Behar 1993). Culturally sensitive anthropology reflects on the researcher's observations of the context with the question of 'what the anthropologist sees with' (Hastrup 1995, xi). Besides being a methodological approach, anthropology also is a theoretical framework that includes reflection on epistemological positions. It steps out of the division of 'us' and 'them', solidifying the morals of ethnography (Hastrup 1995, 5) as well as decolonising and indigenous methodologies (e.g. Gray et al. 2008). In the development of anthropology, the researchers have stepped away from a 'white man's balcony' observing exotic tribes (e.g. Siikala 1997) toward the process of co-creating knowledge with an emphasis on local expertise, the recognition of differences and intersecting social hierarchies, and deconstruction of epistemological power imbalances.

Ethnographic fieldwork and revisits to the research context challenged and reconstructed my initial ways of knowing and not knowing (e.g. Pösö 2010). The research process has been lengthy and eclectic, boosted by multidimensional and compelling experiences with the local communities. The research participants were being and relating in their own fields—for example, as farmers, family members or activists. Since the fieldwork was actualised in the people's lifeworlds, it also included shared pains and joys (e.g. Trudgen 2000, 3). This created a need for recognising and negotiating ethnic, gendered, class-intercepted and cultural borders within the research relations (e.g. Behar 1993, 244).

Ethnography includes parallels to decolonising and feminist social work research in its emphasis on locally relevant, culturally sensitive methods and the questioning of power structures. This also is related to indigenous methodologies that embrace a cross-cultural, anti-oppressive and structural perspective; however, there has been a lack of developing knowledge together with indigenous people (e.g. Gray et al. 2008, 49). Thus, being a cross-cultural analysis of local lifeworlds, this study risks recreating the academic tendency to see indigenous and colonised people as 'others' (e.g. Dominelli 2000). This necessitates reflection on the research relations, roles and power dynamics within the fieldwork and in the analysis process (more in Section 3.4). It also includes a need to recognise the colonial histories of the researched communities and societies (Behar 1993, 270; Gray et al. 2008, 80).

This relies on a strategy that identifies the structural and cultural impacts on personal experiences (Nash, Munford and O'Donoghue 2005, 102). In ethnographic research, personal identities are linked to collective action (Ledwith and Asgill 2007, 108), which is actualised in the research relationships that form the participation, observations and discussions. Personal identities are shaped by power relations that create a circle of overlapping impressions with distinctions and complexities (Behar 1993, 244). In this process, the concern about the risk of effacing the realities when developing them into academic knowledge (Nussbaum 1999 and 2000) is apparent.

To embrace something holistically and avoid ‘effacing the realities’ is difficult due to the differences and distances of the researcher and research participants (Sherif 2001; Haight et al. 2014). However, in its openness, ethnography supports the conceptual and theoretical alignments of this study, such as the feminist and decolonising approaches, which led to the development of the empirical and conceptual aspects ‘hand in hand’.

The ethnographic fieldwork included two main methods: participatory observation and ethnographic discussions (e.g. Hastrup 1995; Ranta-Tyrkkö 2010). Participation was based on living beside the local communities. The first phase of my experiences in Nepal was centred on my volunteer work and partnership in a local children’s home, where I spent seven different periods before I started my actual fieldwork. During those periods, I also completed my master’s thesis on children’s rights (Mikkonen 2010), which established the research choices for this dissertation. However, I do not analyse those experiences in an explicated way. They function as mirrors to the analysis and form background knowledge, which made it easier to start my fieldwork and understand some of the contextual matters within it. To do so was quite complex as there were no formulas or closed frameworks to work with, calling for openness and creativity. It also required critical reflexivity, for example, in not using the people’s views in this research if they did not know about it. I use my diaries from my time before the fieldwork that reflect on the context as background information, but the actual research analysis is based on the primary fieldwork with the women’s communities.

The primary fieldwork was done with two different women’s communities in rural Nepal over a six-month period in 2012–2013, and I completed revisits to the communities in 2014, 2015 and 2016 that totalled approximately one month. The data was collected through research discussions and participatory observation in the women’s meetings, organised activities, daily life and cultural events. Both of these methods included sensory perceptions, such as seeing, hearing, smelling and tasting, which provides crucial research knowledge and thus led me to explore sensory ethnography (e.g. Pink 2009; Valtonen et al. 2010). I saved the research discussions in audio recordings (completed with photos and reflective diaries), whereas the participatory observation was recorded primarily in my research diaries, but also in photos, drawings and video clips. Multiple forms of data required multiple analysis methods, which I unwrap more in Section 3.4.

Each method offers a partially different quality of knowledge, and they complete each other. The research discussions with the participants were based on their subjective and discursive knowledge, whereas the participatory observation provided communal knowledge with its unions and hierarchies. Both of the methods produced reciprocal, experiential and sensory knowledge, and I reflect on that more in the upcoming sections. Those diverse qualities of knowledge embrace the complexity of the research context and the questions. Both methods included the emphasis of context and local circumstances, and required me to reflect on silent messages and social organising.

This calls for specific ethical concerns within the analysis and reflexivity towards my interpretations. The fieldwork was holistic, and it highlighted the importance of contextual knowledge production.

Ethnography focuses on studying with people rather than on people (e.g. Ranta-Tyrkkö 2010). When I was studying with people in their real lifeworlds, it aroused different feelings and experiences related to the research context. I was not only an objective observer, and by critical reflection on openly subjective experiences, I reached deeper knowledge about the lives and perspectives of the research participants (e.g. Coffey 1999; Latvala 2008). ‘Diving’ into the research context does not dictate experiencing what the research participants do but feeling empathy and caring (e.g. Ledwith and Asgill 2007, 113). Without sharing and ‘feeling together’, I might have lost some important ethical aspects, dimensions of the research theme or subtle pieces of knowledge.

Seeing the research partners as the experts of their lives required me to recognise their capabilities, knowledges, resources, coping strategies and potential to analyse and propose solutions to their own problems (e.g. Laird 2003, 262). Thus, I do not consider myself a professional who ‘knows’, but an outsider who relates with the research context and its people from my own position. However, the position of an academic researcher authorises me to edit, organise and choose what I write in this research (e.g. Laird 2003, 262). The power to conduct academic research does not mean ‘possessing’ the information that the research participants provide, but the analysis is my interpretation of their perspectives with my positional lens. This steers one to deconstruct the dominant epistemologies (more in Section 3.4).

Kristen Hastrup (1995, ix) argued that an ethnographer is an explorer of a distinct field rather than a gatekeeper of the information. Even if I was perceiving myself as a gatekeeper, that mantle would have been torn down with the encounters and the bodily experiences of my fieldwork. Although there were expectations of me being an expert (more in Section 3.4), social dynamics and the learning and unlearning processes within the fieldwork challenged that. Being an expert as an ethnographic researcher is paradoxical: Because I was relatively new in the context—whereas the research participants had lived there all their lives—they held the primary contextual knowledge.

This led me to epistemological questions: Which and whose knowledge is valued and recognised in academic research? As the women had the knowledge of their everyday lives, families, lands, festivals, manners, grievances and joys, what is the position of their knowledge in the academic research? How it is analysed in a way that does not efface the reality? This requires investigating the gap between conceptual and practical knowledges in academic research (e.g. Motta 2015). The combination of those create a shared epistemic space where the questions of power, different positions and the hierarchies of knowledge are exposed and considered. Before stepping deeper into that reflection, I describe the scenes of the fieldwork, its encounters and relations.

3.2 Stepping down the stone stairs—From volunteer work to researching

I stepped on wet, slippery stone stairs into the children's home. The calls of 'Miss! Miss!' welcomed me to my new life, along with small hands catching mine. Coldness blew through the holes on the walls, the smell from the toilet filled the corridor, and I got my part from the lice and runny noses of children hungering for hugs and touch. My friend and I, strangers, were treated as guests who they had been awaiting for a long time.

Diary note 22.01.2005

The steps on the stone stairs led me to my volunteer work in a Nepalese children's home, but they also started the journey upon which this research is based. I stepped on those stairs to begin five months of volunteer work and planned to return to my life after it. However, those stairs have taken me further than I expected. They created a change in my life story that has prompted me to get eleven return tickets to Nepal so far, all together forming one journey with travels and transits between Nepal and Finland. Those stairs were a concrete beginning, but they also symbolise the journey as a whole. They led my steps that directed me to question my worldview(s) and lifestyle and took me deeper on this conceptual and contextual journey.

The steps took me into inner parts of the children's home and the context with its own roots and history. This stone symbolises the local context that existed before I entered it. Therefore, I had to lay my feet according to its shape, cracks and bumps, by being sensitive to and open for the specificities of this context. Nevertheless, I left footprints on it in the form of the relationships and shared memories with the local people that I encountered, as well as the insights and actions that have impacted my life and theirs. I must recognise and reflect on these footprints, because my role was a multi-layered combination of friend, 'sister', co-operator and researcher.

The stone stairs, symbolising my journey and different phases during the eleven trips, form the empirical basis of this study. The eleven periods totalling over three years in Nepal have not been a linear progression towards a determined goal. Instead, my steps have been directed by diverse incidents and experiences during the trips. At times, the steps have been confident, and the direction has felt clear, but at other times, they have been slippery, and I have found myself lost and directionless. When looking back at the journey overall, however, it has a logical direction, as each period established the next one, and each trip has its own role and place in the whole story. This journey has been a learning process, heading forward and deeper, both contextually and conceptually. When developing this journey into research, I needed to distance myself from those experiences and scrutinise the process from a reflective angle that built new dimensions to the story.

During my first four trips to Nepal, in the period from 2005 to 2008, I joined local activists in opposing the exploitative practises of the children's home. These trips included moments of deep desperation but also shared joy alongside the activists and children, strengthening my commitment to the context. The main message of the first four trips was in a journey when I witnessed and participated in the rescue of the children from the cruelty they experienced in the children's home where I first volunteered. On trips in 2009 and 2010, when the new home for the rescued children was more settled, I also collected data for my social work master's thesis with the children's rights framework. The trip in 2011 was a transitional period from volunteering in the children's home to researching with the women in rural communities. As I had gradually started to deepen my consideration of the women's position, I travelled to different communities to explore the best ways to settle in for the fieldwork. Within the years 2012–2013, I collected my primary data for six months with two different women's organisations and their daily contexts in rural communities. That was followed by three shorter revisits in 2014, 2015 and 2016. In the following table (Table 1), I illustrate the actions and contexts as well as research knowledge and data within eleven different periods in Nepal.

My first steps were hesitant, careful and unsure about whether they fit the shape of the stone stairs. The colours, smells, crowds of people, traffic, manners and spices—both in the physical and psychical context—were new to me. In addition, the first trip introduced me to the desperate reality of the children's home, where the children did not have enough to eat, where they had red scars on their backs as reminders of a violent manager, and where they became very silent during the manager's meetings. I was an outsider, a foreigner, out of Europe for the first time in my life, shocked by the striking inequality and unfairness the children faced. However, along with this despair there was hope: The efforts of local activist Bikash—the main cultural and contextual translator of this study—to rescue these children encouraged me to take steps forward. This hope and the struggle for justice that he initiated were the main paths that guided me back to Nepal for the second time.

After the first trip's feeling of difference and confusion, the context started to feel more familiar on the second trip; the smells and tastes were not totally new, and unknown faces were now recognisable. The activism initiated by Bikash had effected a change in the lives of the children, and it inspired me to join the cause. The endeavours to get the rest of the children rescued from the oppressive children's home needed to be financed and secured, and that was the basis for the founding of the Finnish-Nepalese organisation Maya Nepal⁹, which has developed into an active network to support the children's home for the rescued children and the families in Nepal. This activism was inspiring, and the second trip was

9 Maya Nepal: www.mayanepalry.com / www.crossingthehills.wordpress.com

Table 1: Eleven visits to Nepal

	2005 5 months Volunteer work	2006 1 month	2007 3 months	2008 2 months	2009 5 months Master's thesis	2010 5 months	2011 3 months Transit period	2012-13 6 months Primary fieldwork	2014 5 months Revisits in the research context	2015 1 month Revisits	2016 1 month Revisits
	Volunteer work and living in a local children's home; Witnessing the local activist's rescue process of the children experiencing oppression and violence	Volunteer work and living in the children's home with the rescued children	Establishing Maya Nepal children's home with the local activists; Participation in the struggles against children's oppression	Activism in Maya Nepal	Activism in Maya Nepal; Social work; Master's thesis on children's rights	Activism in Maya Nepal; Master's thesis	Gradually moving to the rural area where the women's communities located; Maya Nepal was still the primary context	Living beside the women's communities in the countryside; Regular visits to Maya Nepal	Writing; Living in Kathmandu; Revisits to the women's communities approximately twice a month	Writing; Living nearby Maya Nepal community; Revisits to the women's communities once a week	Living in Kathmandu; Revisits to the women's communities for 4 times
<i>Research knowledge and data</i>	Not researching per se, but this trip created a basis for contextual knowledge	Not researching per se; Widening cultural and contextual background knowledge	Not researching per se; Widening cultural and contextual background knowledge	Not researching per se; Widening and deepening cultural and contextual knowledge	Interviews of children; Participation and observation in the children's homes and the streets	Interviews of children; Participation and observation in the children's homes and the streets	Initial discussions with and visits to different rural communities; Forming a basis for the fieldwork	Primary research data: Participation & observation; Research discussions with the participants	Research discussions; Refilling the data	Research discussions; Refilling the data; Evaluating the analysis	Research discussions; Evaluation and reflection of the analysis with the participants

like my honeymoon with the context: Life in Nepal appeared colourful and fascinating, with a welcoming community and meaningful actions to participate in.

This grounded the third and fourth visits, following one another yearly and including a deeper settling into the context. I became more involved with the new children's home by working with local partners for the children's well-being. I felt a strong connection with the community that I worked with, which awakened a desire in me to achieve full membership within it. During those trips, the processing of differences was given less space, and my being was characterised by a desire to be part of the activism for social justice. In addition, I was an outsider, and the context offered a feeling of freedom that was not possible in Finland, such as being able to travel on the roof of a bus on mountainous roads, being free from strict timetables, or admiring the mountain peaks in the sunsets. I enjoyed a slower rhythm of time than back home, and the hospitality of the communities, colourful festivals and magnificent nature, yet I was aware of the concurrent multidimensional realities. The restrictions and hierarchies in the communities, the poverty, the political unrest and the natural disasters challenged the lives of many local people.

My contextual and conceptual knowledge deepened and widened on my fifth and sixth trips, and I gradually attained more knowledge of subtle cultural ingredients. These periods stretched the limits of my adaptation process, as I viewed respecting and being sensitive to the local specificities as the adoption of local habits and avoiding the 'white-skin extras' and special attention that foreigners usually get in Nepal. I aimed to be separated from the basic tourists by speaking Nepali, travelling by local buses and shunning common tourist areas. I ate twice a day—as most of the Nepalese do—a traditional meal of *dal bhat* (rice, lentil soup and variations of spicy vegetables) with my hands, washed my clothes at common taps and shared a room with girls in the children's home. Nevertheless, the calls of *kuire* (white tourist) that were targeted at me on the streets continued, and my response—'I am not a tourist'—sounded rather like a joke to the commentators. I could not cover my foreign look or adapt fully to the local circumstances despite of my efforts to diminish the gap.

This appeared to me in a very concrete way on my fifth trip, when I travelled with my Finnish and Nepalese friends to a remote rural area with few, if any, previous foreign visitors. We travelled a day on a bus and another in a jeep, and spent five days on a footpath to reach our destination. Our aim was to visit an isolated, mountainous place that local politicians rarely visited, after a resident had called Bikash about exploring ways to support its people living in extreme poverty. This trip provided many meaningful encounters and insights, for example on my adaptation process. Our goal of offering support to the people in the village was turned upside down when one of my travel companions became seriously ill, and we had to depend on the hospitality of the villagers. The nearest hospital and phone were a day's walk away. Local herbal medicine did not help with her illness, so the villagers provided a mule for travel to the

hospital. This incident was one that turned the helpers into the receivers of help, and it brought forth the vulnerabilities and limits of my adaptation. This also deconstructed the power structures and positions of ‘white privilege’.

The trips before the actual fieldwork supported my ability to relate and settle in the communities that I studied with. I had learned the basics of the language, and I could recognise many culturally defined, fine-grained conceptions and social norms. It also had given me a strong practical basis for the research theme and reflecting on my positioning in the field. Gaining knowledge on cultural manners, values and essences—and, most importantly, a connection and trust with the translators who did the journey with me—helped in forming a basis for this ethically conscious ethnography.

The cultural and contextual exploration, that built my background knowledge, was strengthened by the seventh and eighth trips. I settled into my primary fieldwork in the eighth trip. I was more ready to accept that I could not and did not need to avoid the differences that appeared between me and the people in the local communities; whatever my role in Nepal might be, I would have to stand the calls of *kuire* on the streets. Respecting local specificities did not mean I fully adopted the same communal lifestyle as the locals. This realisation was one of the factors that led me to move from the children’s home to a separate house with some advantages that seemed luxurious by local standards—with an Internet connection and hot water. The shift also was part of my progress in the contextual exploration, as my work with the children had inspired me to study the women’s position. My viewpoints widened, since I was not located just around the community of the children’s home anymore, and I had more privacy and space for reading and writing in a new locality with the communities with which the primary data was collected. I cover this period and context more in the next section.

The ninth and tenth trips involved a number of shorter revisits to the rural communities where the women of the study lived. I lived urban life in Kathmandu, which introduced me to faces of Nepal with very different realities from the research participants’ communities. The hour-and-a-half scooter ride to the villages took me to markedly different lifeworlds. The distance created space for recognising the differences and for doing analysis and writing parallel with visits to the research context. My last visit to Nepal in 2016 was a return to the field not as a researcher primarily, but to make an ethical foundation for the closure of the research, and to maintain mutual trust with the women. It also included reflective discussions with the women on the research analysis and conclusions that I had made.

Mothers knocking on the children’s home’s door

She was knocking on the children’s home’s door early in the morning. The baby was on her chest, and a small girl was holding her hand. She was not much older than 20.

She told her story: She had fallen in love with a man from a lower caste. Opposing common social rules, they had gotten married. As the tradition goes, they moved to the husband's village in a rural community. They had two children. Not long after the second child's birth, the husband got ill and passed away. She could not stay in the village anymore; her different caste was not accepted in the community after her husband's death. She couldn't go back to her own parents, either, since she had 'dirtied' herself with a man from a lower caste. She had to cope on her own, without education or social security.

Her only option was to move to Kathmandu to find a means for living. After many rejections, she found a job at a construction site. The work kept her busy from sunrise to sunset but provided a poor salary. The children had to come along to the world of cement piles, bricks and unfinished floors, as they did not have any other place to go. Her salary was decreased due to the time she used for nursing her baby during work.

Diary note 13.02.2009

This was one woman's story, but it contained a common thread with the stories of other women who knocked on the doors of children's homes to look for help. This story also reveals the core of what led me to focus on the women's position in this research. On my latest trips, the children's home had been settled, and the lengthy fight against the oppression and violence towards those children was eventually won by the alliance of local activists. The children had grown up to be young students. However, in discussions with the activists, we were bothered by the fact that many children still were taken away from their mothers for reasons that we saw as preventable. The social work principles of structural scrutiny and advocacy for social justice led me to search for the roots of the children's separation from their mothers and families. Therefore, my path led me to cross the hills, both in concrete and symbolic ways, to explore the rural communities where most of the children had their roots, where the opportunities for single mothers and widows were fewer and that people often needed to leave to search for a better life. As the majority of Nepalese people live in the countryside (Pant and Standing 2011, 413), it also was one of the arguments for this move to base the fieldwork in the rural area.

On my eighth trip to Nepal, I moved—with the main translator of this study, Bikash—approximately 30 kilometres away from Kathmandu to rural villages to establish a 'base camp' for the fieldwork focusing on women. Our base camp was located in a village on a hill, surrounded by a Himalayan range. When zooming a lens on the hills and valleys, it revealed a view towards rice fields, mud houses, buffaloes, goats, hay piles and people who did not seem to be in rush. I could see their

backs bent into work on the fields, their heavy loads in their baskets, walking on hilly footpaths, queuing for water at common taps; there were men gathered around a big tree and drinking tea, children in their uniforms on the way to the school and women in their red *sarees*. After settling down and starting to explore the neighbourhood, I heard about the organisations that united women to develop the communities and improve the women's socio-economic position. I had found what I was interested in: women who acted for and believed in their dignity, and who were strengthening and promoting their well-being.

In between different worlds—Travels and translations

Delhi airport. Here, I have time to stop. To be in between these two dear worlds of mine. To think. To breathe. To feel. To recognise. To distance myself from those worlds. To understand and see myself in them.

Research diary 16.12.12

This research process has included a number of departures and arrivals, welcoming smiles and goodbye tears, physical and psychical spaces between Finland and Nepal. The data has been collected in Nepal, but I cannot completely ignore my origins, because they affect my understanding and thus are part of the research knowledge. In my twelve-year relationship with Nepal, these two different contexts are knitted into one epistemological story. Nepal is a contextual ground, but my travels between it and Finland are an epistemological foundation of this study. Anthropologists often avoid writing about themselves, as they are meant to tell the stories of other people (Behar 2013, 5). However, I believe that to do so is not to write about oneself per se but to understand the epistemic spaces of the study and describe the research process in between different contexts. To understand the women's worlds, I have to locate myself in terms of this research.

The mind travels more slowly than the body, which created feelings that I could have been drinking spicy tea in a village tea shop or coffee in the university in Finnish Lapland at the same time. Those realities were parallel, equally as real, both affecting the research journey. My periods in Finland allowed me time to consider, discuss and reflect on the fieldwork from a distance. Thus, they opened up new analytical viewpoints. However, during those periods, Nepal has still been present through my work with the NGO and its strong network of people sharing similar passion. Therefore, these two contexts cannot be completely separated in this research and analysis process. By identifying these two contexts in the knowledge production, with their differences and similarities, I base the epistemological and ontological standpoints of this study on the spaces *in between*.

Ethnographers have struggled with the difficulties of combining their two very different worlds (e.g. Hastrup 1995, 15), in this case the Northern academic world with the realities of rural Nepal. There have been times when I felt that these worlds do not meet, and the people around me cannot really understand how the realities of Nepal feel, smell and affect me. As Hastrup (1995, 19) described, when she gives in to a different reality and receives a new world, she allows herself to change in the process, which might not be easy for others around her to recognise. Hastrup (*ibid.*) continued with ethnographer Margaret Mead's warning about 'drowning' in the local contexts, which would make returning home more difficult. One way to avoid this is to be in contact with one's home and academic circles during the trips. Being in contact with people in different places is easier thanks to the latest technology, so this problem looks different to current ethnographers than to earlier ones.

On my first trip in 2005, I wrote emails to home from local cyber cafes, where sometimes a thoroughly typed message disappeared in a sudden power outage, whereas on the last trips, smart phones and Internet connections were becoming more common in Nepal, and I could type an email to my supervisor sitting beside the paths of the villages and looking out at the blooming mustard fields. This created a sense that the two worlds were not so separated, but they existed to me in parallel. This gap between different worlds also was diminished by attending the international social work conference organised in the area during my fieldwork, where I could present my research plan for the academics and activists from South Asia and the global South, and at the same time be surrounded by the landscapes of my research context.

Yet this conference revealed an ethical paradox in a very concrete way: It was organised in a luxurious resort where Mamina, one of the women of this study, was living on the street just few hundred meters away. Those two different realities were socially and psychically far from each other, despite being in the same area. This social and psychical distance was problematic especially as discussions in the conference dealt with social injustices and promoting change. I examine this gap throughout the study, in both the methodological and empirical parts.

I avoided 'drowning' in the ethnographic fieldwork due to the community of Finnish and Nepalese people with whom I lived. The process of forming this community started on my first trip, when I encountered Nepalese activists whose work inspired an international group of people to act for social justice. Changing combinations of the people from that community were around me when I did my actual fieldwork. The relationships and numerous conversations within this community helped me in formulating an empirical standpoint of this study. The spaces in between were natural in the community that was a culturally diverse combination of actors from different contexts with similar aims and worldviews. During my fieldwork, I shared a house with Nepalese and Finnish friends from that network, so the transfers between different worlds were softened by the familiar group welcoming me in Nepal or travelling with

me. This network assisted me in reflecting on the research questions and choices, ethical considerations and personal feelings during the process. Therefore, even though I was far away from my original home, I felt that I was home.

Despite my homey feeling, I was still perceived as a *kuire* who was there to travel and take photos. I embodied whiteness (e.g. Behar 1993, 249). There were periods when I wanted to hide my appearance, colour my hair and eyes and dress in a *saree* or *kurtha*, to be counted as a part of the communities. Nevertheless, as an outsider, I could identify some taboos and silences around culturally sensitive matters (e.g. Sherif, 2001), which can be fruitful in terms of research knowledge. I will explore this power imbalance more in Section 3.3. The spaces in between the different contexts were in multiple borderlands, and the more time I spent in Nepal, the more I started to feel that did not completely belong anywhere—neither completely in Nepal, where I was noticeably different, nor in Finland, where I looked like the majority but felt a psychological gap, especially straight after the Nepal periods. However, those spaces in between enrich the analysis in spite of their dilemmas.

The social spaces were built by the differences and similarities between me and the women of this study. It included spatial and social distancing and converging. The distance was caused especially by the epistemological challenges of this study, such as language gaps and the differences between practical and conceptual knowledges. However, those gaps were negotiable, and reflecting on and questioning them made the process very productive. I discuss them more in Section 3.4. Travel in between different worlds is related to the chance to be something that one cannot be at home (Behar 2013, 5), and from which the ethnographic knowledge is produced. It includes, for example, unlearning one's initial viewpoints and trust towards strangers. It is like giving up on familiarity to find alternative worlds and selves (*ibid.*). These formed the bridges in between different worlds.

One important aspect when researching in between the social and epistemological spaces is a question of language and translations. I was able to carry on and follow basic conversations in the Nepali language, which helped me gain trust among the women. However, in deeper or more advanced discussions, my limited Nepali was a constraint. Therefore, I needed a translator—for linguistic and conceptual aspects. The translators not only translated the words from Nepali to English, but they also explained the contextual or cultural meanings (e.g. Trudgen 2000, 114). As the language that was used—English—was not the mother tongue of me or the women, it was not without challenges. This, at times, led to misunderstandings and gaps in the communication.

The position of the translator was an important matter in terms of communication. This was seen in the three different translators that I had in the research discussions. The first of them, Bikash, centred his talk on his background as an activist, with a critical view for the society and culture. He was a social advocator, which appeared in the research discussions in his way of offering viewpoints to the women's problems and revealing

new perspectives on complex situations. The second translator, Rewati, a researcher in development studies from Kathmandu, stuck more to translating (both contextually and linguistically) in the research discussions. However, her reflections developed my research methods in a more locally relevant direction. The third translator was from the community that I studied with—the organisation’s leader’s daughter, Chori. I found some constraints in the discussions that she translated due to the limits of her English as well as her position in the community. After the fieldwork, I re-translated the discussions with a fourth person and discovered something: Chori had left out parts of her translation that did not benefit her mother’s organisation. I dissect those issues more in Section 3.4.

A challenge in this cross-cultural study was that I was dependent upon the translators, and the process included multiple misunderstandings. There were many levels that could disguise the true meanings: First, the women were talking from their points of view, positions and realities with which I did not have experience. Second, their talk was translated into English—the second language of both me and the translator. The third phase of the translation process was when I interpreted the message with my own conceptualisations and epistemological position. At this point, the message had gone through three different phases. In every step, the likelihood for misinterpretations grew. It also is important to note that the worldviews of the translators affected in a way how she/he interpreted the message. Gender, caste and ethnic hierarchies influenced the interactions between the translator and the research participants. For instance, I noticed that some of the topics were more openly discussed with the outsiders of the community, Bikash and Rewati. Gender played a role in some cases, as the women seemed to talk more openly about certain things, such as their menstrual periods, in the presence of the female translators—Rewati or Chori.

In reflecting on the misunderstandings and limitations that the language gaps produced, I observed the body language, atmospheres and unspoken messages. Those non-verbal messages were captured in my reflective diaries. However, I had to be careful not to simplify or damage the messages of the women with my interpretations, as they were coloured with contextual and cultural meanings—as were mine. Ethical sensitivity and reflective discussions with the women and the translators offered me a chance to avoid those misinterpretations. Also, the basic knowledge that I had gained on culture and language helped me to overcome and be sensitive towards the misunderstandings. Besides the gaps in communication, there was a lingual connection between me and the women: We were not able to communicate with each other with our mother tongues. English was the tool to overcome our lingual differences and to produce knowledge for an international audience. We used a language that includes the remnants of imperialism and global power structures (e.g. Behar 2013, 7). Thus, in that aspect we were in the same vulnerable and limited position.

As Ruth Behar (*ibid.*) stated, English is a language of power; for example, the women who knew English were in a better position socially and economically. The challenge

was not only about me misinterpreting the women's messages, but also my limits in writing and producing knowledge in English. Tarja Pösö (2014) considered the power issues in the dominance of English in academic literature and pondered if the writing loses some original cultural nuances when the conceptions are translated into correct and polished English. Weaknesses in my English also can be seen as the nuances of my cultural background that affect my positional knowledge. Thus, English bridges some gaps but at the same time wipes out some features of cultural identities and differences.

In reflecting on the difference between me and the women of this study, I stand with Margaret Ledwith and Paula Asgill's (2007) view of a 'need for difference in the research', and 'feeling and experiencing together with difference'. Thus, differences were turned into information that I see as a strength and a possibility for research knowledge production. It was not feasible to escape or deny the differences, and accepting and recognising them created crucial research knowledge. It was like opening oneself towards the communities with respect (Trudgen 2000, 13). This includes reflection on the 'communication mores' (ibid., 77), which refer to the language beyond speaking and are especially important when there is not a common language between the researcher and the research participants. The 'communal mores' include the cultural meanings of eye contact, the balance between speaking and listening, the response times within the conversation, body language or the concerns on silence (ibid). The key in the research process that embraces the spaces in between is in the 'kindness of strangers' (Behar 2013, 5). This refers to the women who welcomed me into their worlds and made this research possible through the shared epistemic spaces.

Time matters in ethnographic research

Ethnographic fieldwork is located in a present that is constantly changing; therefore, I see it crucial to consider the meaning of time in this research. Present is a challenging starting point, because it is built over a constant change that is difficult to capture in the research, and it is affected by histories and visions of the future. In my study with the Nepalese communities, this was especially apparent as the society was under rapid transformation due to political upheaval, newly achieved democracy and major changes in legislation. As an ethnographic researcher, I have to deal with this complexity. After I returned from the field, the present that I was studying had turned into a past. After the fieldwork, some of the realities had changed, and the present in the field looked different. Therefore, time has to be considered, particularly in dealing with sensitive themes by ethnographic means.

I consider the time from two aspects: First, my fieldwork took place in particular period of time, in the environment that modified the information of the research participants. Moreover, my observations, interpretations and recorded discussions were placed in a certain time and context. Second, long-term fieldwork included changes in the context, which creates challenges in the analysis. As the fieldwork lasts for a

limited period, its length matters in knowledge production, and the importance of revisits is emphasised. My revisits in the research context revealed the changes in the context, which highlight the meaning of time. To understand the dimensions of time in the knowledge production of my study, I need to recognise the ingredients of the present during my fieldwork.

To study with people in ‘specific cultures and societies’ (Ranta-Tyrkkö 2010, 42) includes multidimensional aspects, and the dimension of time is one of them. I approached this task through the interpretation of my experiences in settling down in the environment defined by specific contextual factors that determined the lives of the informants. I describe those experiences because they expose the specific nature of the circumstances and time in which the research participants lived. I needed to ponder the different ingredients of the present to understand the refined process of ethnographic knowledge production. Even though ethnographic research emphasises the present, the histories and future(s) of the cultures and societies are part of it, too.

Time in the field—the ethnographic presence—was a complex set of activities and relations. Embracing Hastrup’s (1995, 21) view, it was a sharing of time with the research partners. This shared time refers to the holistic presence in the field. It was more than just action and discussion; it also included feeling and experiencing together with the research participants. During the analysis, the ethnographic present is re-read as an implication of the shared time and the memories. Pösö (2010, 28) underscored that time-aware research—not only in the sense of highlighting the changes, but also the stability—is needed for better understanding of social work in its functioning and contexts. Revisits to the research context were meaningful, both in terms of understanding the change process and in gaining access to knowledge. Many of the epistemological gaps in the research knowledge production were filled and bridged during the revisits. When entering a familiar context, I needed also to consider previous visits, both substantially and methodically (*ibid.*, 27), which increased the reflexivity of the knowledge production process.

Even though the research participants and I carried our own histories and visions of the future, the present determined the ways in which the research knowledge developed. Our different backgrounds met in that particular present and were set into a dialogue where both of them had a crucial function. We created new spaces in that particular present in which the research knowledge was produced. These spaces were not, however, created without effort and negotiation. The spaces that were created during the ethnographic present showed the circumstances in which the women lived. That, in turn, illustrated the time in which the fieldwork was carried out. The ethnographic present is a construction of surrounding time in the shared space(s) of the researcher and the participants.

3.3 Scenes of the field—Researching with the women’s communities

I sit on the balcony of a mud house, drinking morning tea. A spider web covers the orange trees, which creates a magical scene toward the dawning sunlight. A cock in the yard sings the morning song, and people and nature welcome the new day in harmony. The idyll of the village feels unbreakable. The first impressions of this morning are calmness, peacefulness and slowness. The rush and pollution of the capital are left behind the hills and curvy roads.

Research diary 18.10.2011

This description of a morning in a rural village illustrates the beginning of my observation and participation in the communities of this study. I started like an observer from a balcony, seeing mostly the beauty of these green, hilly villages. As ethnography is much more than observing people from the balcony, openness and creativity functioned as tools for me to step into the life of the villages. Grasping the rhythm of the villages and relating with the people was a gradual process that included various phases and episodes. The process had two functions in this study that connected the methodological and content-related journeys: First, the journey framed the methodological discussion, and second, it developed the content and the conceptions of this study. The encounters and episodes with the communities were coloured by, for example, their social structures and characteristics, which affected the path of gaining access to the knowledge on different hierarchic levels.

A year after the morning on the balcony, I returned to Nepal to start my primary fieldwork. I discovered that women’s organisations and community banking were popular in those areas, and they were found in almost every village to varying degrees. I stepped ‘down from the balcony’ in a rural region that—despite its short distance from the capital in kilometres—was a world away culturally and socially. When entering the villages, one had to travel curvy roads sided by downhills and cliffs that made the distance feel even greater and the differences from the urban areas more pronounced.

My living spot was surrounded by different ethnic groups and castes. I contacted the leaders of two women’s organisations from different villages and social positions. One was from an ethnic group that had been discriminated against throughout Nepalese history. Her organisation was established to improve the position of this ethnic group as well as for the community’s general development and to fight against poverty, women’s health problems and exploitation. She also ran a tourism programme in the villages. The other leader was from a community of a higher caste that nonetheless included similar patriarchal hierarchies. Her priorities were similar to the other one’s: Their main

to tell her story in a practised way—a way that shows that she has done this many times before with different visitors.

Research diary 12.10.2012

Ama, the leader and founder of one of the women's organisations, plays a vital part in this research, as she appeared as a key person in terms of entering her village, where the other women's organisation operated. Her house was located at the central point of the village that connected the footpaths crisscrossing and heading downhill towards the mud houses in the lower parts of the village. I learned that the location of a house represented the socio-economic position of that family in the community. The hills were not only breath-taking with their greenery. They played an essential role in the villages' appearance as well as in the communities' lifestyles and social positions. As one of the women described, the hills separated people into different ethnic groups and castes: 'That hill is like a shoemakers' (caste) hill; that is a *Tamang* (ethnic group) hill; this is a *Chhetri* (caste) hill'. Hills and valleys were connected by narrow paths and trails that made moving around tough and time-consuming, which I interpret as one of the reasons the social distances appeared greater than the geographic distances. As people were positioned in different social slots, it inevitably led into both the external and internal hierarchies, and thus considering the essence of the communities is complex.

Communities had predefined relations to each other: External hierarchies divided them into a certain order, mostly due to their geographic location, caste and ethnic background. These complex social orders still affected people's lives, even though there had been multiple political and activist efforts to deconstruct them. Nevertheless, while the communities differed from each other with the feelings of distance, they shared a lot of similarities. For example, the same routines repeated in the villages in a sign of communal harmony, as the sunset brought the sight of smoke from cooking fires from tiny holes in the walls of the smaller houses or from the chimneys of the wealthier homes.

Harmony was one of the first impressions of the villages that I got, but it also included a factual base: Communal coherence was highly protected and valued in the villages. People were expected to accept their social positioning, and communality was valued over individuality. This both helped and hindered the research process. It helped in being welcomed into the communities, and it created a space to observe some common characteristics of the women's position—for example, their social space in private and public spheres appeared similar in spite of the location or position of the village. However, this communal harmony also included hierarchies that defined the research relations. The leaders were the ones controlling my encounters with the women on the lower levels of the hierarchies, and it challenged my connection with them. I consider this and its consequences on knowledge production more in Section 3.4.

Informants from different directions

The empirical foundation of this study is based on a network of different people who each had an important yet different function and place. I, as a researcher, was a part of this network, using ethnographic methods to analyse multidimensional knowledge(s). However, it is necessary to consider the different epistemic spaces and positions of the participants and their impact on the knowledge production. The core questions in creating this network—asking whose knowledge matters and what we can actually know—aligns with feminist research (e.g. Oinas 2004, 209). The primary sources of information are the women in rural areas, who were vulnerable in many ways, but whose strengths, courage and communal bonds were admirable. In aiming for equal and respectful research relations, I perceive the women of this study as research participants: Their role was more than merely answering the questions. They also, for example, asked questions of me, which produced a process of unlearning and reconstructing knowledge. This stands with Ledwith and Asgill's (2007, 111) argument of studying with people rather than on people.

The research participants were the women with whom I had various discussions, experiences and relations. They lived in the communities nearby where I lived, and they were more or less active members in the women's organisations. Some of them belonged to the management committee, whereas some of them were seen more as nominal members and were rather resistant towards the organisation. When leaning on decolonising social work and a holistic vision, I see it as important that the research participants come from different social positions. However, bridging the knowledge gaps and contacting the women on the lowest levels of the hierarchies was not easy, and it demanded time, effort and continuous negotiations. I discuss those hierarchies more in Section 3.4.

As is typical in ethnographic research, I committed to respecting and prioritising the views and perspectives of the research participants (e.g. Behar 1993). Even though I conducted the analysis and writing process (e.g. Ranta-Tyrkkö 2010, 51), the role of the women is crucial, as they welcomed me into their lives and offered their knowledge to this research. I would not have been able to create this knowledge if they had not opened their worlds to me—which I see as a gift that they gave to the research. I recognise my ethical and social responsibility in receiving the gift, which is based on respect, humility, openness and mutuality.

Naming of the research participants

The naming process for the women in this research was based on two ethical considerations: First, to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality, their real names were to be changed. Second, to be contextually faithful, I leaned on local ways of social bonding in naming. I use a practise prevalent in Nepal of identifying people through the idioms of kinship (e.g. Holmberg 2014, 317), such as mother, sister, aunt, daughter and so on. This 'circle of kinship' (ibid.) indicates a system where people are related through

a communal mindset. Calling an unknown person *didi* (big sister) or *bahini* (little sister) connects two people to each other for a moment. Those names, referring to kinship, included the message of the person's positioning in the community through gender, age and marital status. Its beauty also is based on the possibility of cancelling out caste and ethnic differences. Yet the communal relationships, such as sisterhood, were not monolithic matters but a diverse networks with different unions and separations. For example, age and marriage increased a woman's value in the communal network. The most respected and powerful women in the community were the oldest ones, *hajur amas* (grandmothers). I introduce the participants and their pseudonyms in the following table.

Table 2: Naming of the women

Mamina	A woman who lived on the street and died for serious illness during the fieldwork. She was excluded from her original family and the community around which she lived. I use the name that she introduced herself, which respects her memorial and stresses her dignity. According to the available information, she had one daughter who was adopted.
Mahila *woman	I use <i>Mahila</i> for naming the women who were not long-term research participants but who participated either in one discussion or presented something that was important to note.
Mahilaharu *women	<i>Mahilaharu</i> encompasses diverse group discussions with 5–30 women. <i>Mahilaharu</i> was used in the communities mostly when referring to the public sphere, as the women's organisations; to women as activists in different projects.
Hajur Ama *grandmother	The president and founder of the other women's organisation. <i>Hajur Ama</i> refers to her older age. She had two sons, two daughters, and four grandchildren.
Ama *mother	The president and founder of the other women's organisation. Married, four daughters, one grandson. She ran a home-stay programme for tourists and a shop. Ama appeared as a key person and a gatekeeper in her community.
Chori *daughter	Daughter of Ama, married, one son. Chori was a housewife and helped Ama in her businesses. She was a translator from Nepalese to English in few research discussions.
Didi *big sister	Didi had lost her husband in an accident, lived alone with her daughter and son, and sold home-made alcohol for living. Her best friend was Budi.
Budi *wife/old woman	An older woman who presented resistance towards the actions and especially the leaders of the women's organisation. She was married, had two sons and one granddaughter. She was a farmer for living.
Bahini *little sister	A widow and younger than Didi, thus I name her as <i>Bahini</i> – which refers to unmarried women. She lived with her one son and worked in the construction sites. She was originally from a separate community.
Auntie *aunt	Auntie's husband had got married with another woman and had left her alone in the village. She was still socially married, thus the social norms and duties of the wife applied in her position. She had one son and she was a farmer for living.
Thuli Mami *first of two wives	An older woman who was a widow and lived with her son, who was alcoholic and violent towards her. She was a farmer for living.
Buhari *sister-in-law	Buhari was struggling with her extended family. She had a school leaving certification which was rare among the research participants. She had two small daughters and she was dreaming about handicrafts training.

These women's stories included their passions, dreams, relationships, prayers, complaints, illnesses, duties, joys and sorrows, which are interwoven in the analysis of this research. The research knowledge is based on a physical and psychical process with mutual relationships that have left marks on each of the participants. Our shared spaces and knowledges with different women contribute to something greater than what we would have been able to do alone. Next, I introduce the participants in a more detailed way,—showing their positions and the diversity of the research context—and locate them within the epistemological spaces of this study.

Mamina

We saw a woman lying at a crossroads, surrounded by flies, rubbish and stink. She seemed to be in serious condition and could not make her way back to her 'home' under the bus stop. People passed by, looked once, again and continued walking. 'Water, water.' Her lips were dry, feet swollen, body cramping, hands scrabbling in the air. [...] A taxi driver refused to take her into his car. The stink followed her to the ambulance. In the hospital's emergency service, she was washed and got clean clothes. After her rastas were cut, she looked 20 years younger—from a middle-aged woman to a 20-year-old girl. She was diagnosed with serious malnourishment, pneumonia and hepatitis. She could not even raise her hand; her eyes were sometimes asking, sometimes fading somewhere far, unreachable. 'I want to go,' she said, seeming scared inside the walls. Then she fell asleep again.

It took nine hours to get her admitted to the hospital. It was not possible without relatives who would stay with her. The only option we had was to sign the admission for her treatment, which meant that we had to stay beside her and take care of her during the treatment. She whispered her name, 'Mamina,' but in the admission papers it was written as 'Unknown.'

Research diary 22.02.13

Mamina spent ten days in the hospital. She got stronger, and we built a connection and trust. Then, unexpectedly, she passed away. The inequalities in her life emerged at various levels. At the very last phase, they led her into this fatal situation. After being abandoned by her original community and by society, after years of being malnourished, raped and giving birth alone on the street, she exemplified extreme exclusion and silencing. Our relationship lasted for only ten days, and we could not have a proper verbal discussion with her. However, these ten days were more powerful than many other experiences within this research process. I faced the complexity of the inequalities of a society in which social security lies, in the first place, with the community and families.

I have only partial information on Mamina's story, but her position as a woman living on the street—her helplessness when she was seriously ill, the difficulties in getting her admitted to the hospital and the process after her death (a secret burial by the municipality's authorities, because outsiders were not accepted in the community's graveyard)—indicated the hole she fell through without a family's or community's support. Her case was extreme, as she was excluded on every level of social security. Her 1-year-old daughter was with an adoptive family in the neighbourhood, but she was living alone on the street after she had been separated from her initial community elsewhere.

Mamina's position as a research participant had specific characteristics that call for multidimensional ethical considerations (more in Section 3.4). Those characteristics were, for example, the shortness of our relationship, which lasted for only ten days, and her specific vulnerability. Especially due to her passing away, feelings of despair, sadness and fear were connected to the research relationship. Her role in the research is important in showing the meaning of human dignity and connection even without language—in looks, smiles, holding a hand and being still in the shared spaces of humanity.

Hajur Ama

The loud talk and laughter of this woman, who was over 60 years old, filled her living room where we met many times. Her charm was apparent when she sat on the bed, her legs crossed, and she looked me straight in the eyes. They were fearless. They indicated wisdom that one can only acquire through experience. She was not literate, nor had she gone to school. She did not know about international human rights concepts or feminist theories, but she had been working for 25 years to improve the lives of women from different ethnic groups and castes. She had also been a member of a political party, and she had established a microcredit network for women in the area. She gathered the women of the villages regularly to meetings to talk about their life challenges. She was well-known in her locality, and she was called a 'radio' of the communities. She was widely respected and had a voice among the men in the communities.

Ama

Ama was called a 'mother' of the villages. Walking around with her took time; people on the fields stopped their work to chat with her. Women came to talk with her about their difficulties. She spoke to the villagers on their way home or to the field. She would ask, 'How are you, brother?' (or 'uncle' or 'little sister'). When she was younger, she had worked a lot, so she did not attend school even for a day. She said that, as a child, her happiest moments were when she could be faster than her friends in collecting firewood. Her duty had been to carry the wood home, collect corns and join the harvesting. She had gotten married when she was 14. She gave birth to four girls. She told me she was lucky to have a husband who accepted and supported her, even though she did not provide a son to him.

A decade earlier, she had heard about agriculture programmes and cooperatives on television, and she had wanted to know more. She said that she wanted to do something for the suffering that many people were experiencing in the villages. According to her, the main problems in the communities were poverty, poor infrastructure (such as a lack of clean water) and hard physical work that caused health problems, especially among the women. She had gathered the women of the village to talk about establishing a cooperative. They needed a chairperson, and the women had encouraged her to be the one. She said at the beginning she was afraid; she did not trust herself, but she felt that she did not have a choice. Gradually, it started a process that led her into her role as a mother of the villages. At the time of the fieldwork, their organisation was 10 years old, and they ran a women's community bank that had been supported by many governmental and international development programmes. Her next plan was to build a community house for her ethnic group that would include a women's clinic, an elderly home, a museum and a cultural centre.

Chori

Chori was Ama's daughter, and she was a great support to me in the village visits. Her role in the research was multi-layered. Our communication was quite fluent, as she was able to speak the basics of English. She also acted as a translator for some of the research discussions with the other women. She was in an arranged marriage, had one son and a husband who, exceptionally, lived with her and her mother instead of the husband's family. Her main duties were linked to Ama's activities in the organisation, their home-stay programme for the tourists and the family's shop.

Didi

Didi told me that she had once had a family with her husband and two children who had made her happy. Her marriage had been love-based and her choice. Three years earlier, her husband had died in a motorbike accident. Since then, Didi had been alone with her two children. She was producing rice wine for a living. She lived with her children in a small house in the lower parts of the village, and her neighbours were her nearest social support. She said that her only goal and dream was to offer her children a good education.

Budi

Budi was the best friend and a neighbour of Didi, and they usually appeared together during the research discussions. She was an older woman with two sons, a husband and an infant grandson, and she mostly spent her days taking care of the baby. Budi was resistant to the women's organisation and was not afraid of criticising it to me. She was aware of women's legal rights, which she had used in her struggle with a man in her neighbourhood over a conflict about her land. She appeared to be a strong woman who

knew her value and resisted the wrongs that she experienced, yet she was not active in the women's organisation.

Bahini

Bahini had come to the area from the southern parts of Nepal with her infant son after her husband had died. She rented a small room in the village where we lived. She was a *Dalit*—an untouchable caste—and her irregular manners caused confusion among the people in the community. She said that she had lost her other child when she was working at a construction site, and the child had fatally fallen from the third floor. She had not had any choice but to take the child to the construction site, because she did not have a family around who would take care of him. Later on, she found a new husband and moved to Kathmandu. Thus, she was as an outsider in the communal framework, but she had been able to find ways to cope on her own.

Auntie

Auntie was living alone in a mud house in the lower parts of the village. She reared her livestock and worked on the other villagers' fields in the agricultural exchanges (more about them in Section 6.2) to provide her living. She had one adult son from a marriage with a man who had gotten another wife and moved to Kathmandu. However, she was still socially married, even though she was no longer in contact with her husband. She was deeply religious and smiley—and tightly bonded with the women in her neighbourhood. She often invited us to her house for dinner.

Thuli Mami

Her name means 'Big Mother', which refers to her role as the first of two wives she had been for her deceased husband. She was silent in the gatherings with the other women, but when we visited her home, and she was by herself, she was more talkative. She lived with her adult son, who was an alcoholic and violent towards her. She explained that if, for example, she did not have dinner ready for him in time, he hit her. She was very open in telling her story and about the violence and the alcoholism of her son. She was a hard worker who did not stay idle even during our visits.

Buhari

Buhari came to talk to Ama many times to get help with her complex family situation. She had been married for nine years, and she had two daughters. After giving a birth to both of them through caesarean sections, she had been physically and psychologically weak, and she had gotten medication for depression. She had not been able to work in the field for years, which made her a 'bad wife', in her own words. This, coupled with the fact that she had sterilised herself after the second child without negotiating with her husband, had led to discrimination against her by her family. The husband

was working outside of the village and hardly visited them. Her husband’s parents had built a separate room for her and her daughters on a lower part of the hill, whereas the rest of the extended family lived in a bigger house. They hung food outside of the house for Buhari and her daughters. They had also planned a new marriage for the husband, as they were desiring a grandson. There were many striking incidents with Buhari during the fieldwork, which I describe and analyse more in the empirical part. Her main characteristics were the tight bond she had with her daughters and love that she showed them, as well as her strength to oppose the discrimination.

Mahilaharu

I named the women’s groups that I had discussions with, as *mabilaharu* (women). The groups that I met both in Ama’s and Hajur Ama’s communities were important in providing information through their specific dynamics and inner relationships. Women as a community and a group provided partially different information than in individual discussions. Their ways of communicating included important research knowledge, as the content of the discussions was not the only source of data. There was important research information cloaked in the social structures of the group discussions, for instance, in the observations of who was talking over the others, whose opinions were prioritised and who remained silent. The groups embodied the strong connection and communal lifestyle of the women. They showed the importance of peer groups and unity, but at the same time, they exposed internal hierarchies and differences among the women. Therefore, they also displayed the complexity of communality.

Cultural and contextual translators

Cultural and contextual translators were also my guides, cooperative partners and friends, and they had a crucial role in the data collection.

Table 3: Cultural and contextual translators

<i>Bikash</i>	He is a social justice activist and an author on children’s issues—the person who inspired me to travel to Nepal again after my first trip and join the work for children’s and women’s well-being. He established two homes for the children who were rescued from the violent and corrupt children’s home.
<i>Rewati</i>	She is a scholar in development studies and an activist in a feminist network in Kathmandu. She established an NGO promoting children’s education in the areas that were affected by the major earthquakes of 2015.

The activism of Bikash and Rewati—and countless reflective discussions with them—contributed to this research on many levels. Their jobs during the actual fieldwork were mostly interpreting from Nepali to English and acting as the ‘bridges’ between the different cultural backgrounds of me and the women. However, their function was

wider than that: The traditional and religious stories that Bikash told—as well as his in-depth analysis of the culture, society, manners, religions and beliefs—are part of the contextualisation and background knowledge of this study. My discussions with both translators deepened my understanding and perspectives and functioned as a platform for the reflections on the epistemological and methodological questions. They filled the deficiencies of my understanding and strengthened the ethical aspects of this study. As both came from elsewhere but still represented Nepalese culture, they were viewed as outsiders and insiders. Accordingly, their positions offered crucial epistemic space for deeper analysis. I discussed their roles more in Section 3.2 as I considered the issues of language and conceptual translations.

Other informants

The other informants of this study consisted of different people from countless encounters I had during my eleven visits to Nepal. They are too many to be named or separated here; they are bonded together in my ethnographic observation, participation and discussions. One of them was Chora, (Hajur Ama's son), with whom I had two research conversations. Those discussions provided special knowledge from another perspective than that of the women in the villages. Even though my main informants were women, and I prioritise their knowledge, Chora's position in the government of a local municipality was an important addition to the information.

Part of the research knowledge also was gathered with women in separate communities that I spent time with during all of my visits. I participated in numerous festivals and harvesting parties. I visited different homes and saw various daily lives. I lived in communities besides those of the actual fieldwork—in a semi-urban area where the children's home was located and in the capital area with its shopping malls and multinational companies. These distinct locations and the people that I encountered in them provided mirrors to the research relations with the women of this study. Spending time in different contexts has given me crucial background knowledge of multi-level community life and diversities, the complexities of the women's position, and my position and role in a culture that is different from my own. In addition, Nepalese social work academics—the teachers and students with whom I had a few discussions—were crucial in completing the research information. I use my general observations on the context and the communality through these encounters, but I do not interpret the individual perspectives of these people without their consent, as it would not be ethically sensitive.

Because Nepal is strongly hierarchical in social, economic and political aspects (e.g. Pant and Standing 2011), those hierarchies must be considered when analysing social change. Bridging the knowledge of people from various positions provides a multifaceted analysis of the communities. Therefore, I aimed to get research partners from different directions and positions, but this was not an easy task. It took time and countless negotiations, failures and desperate moments to gain access to the knowledge

of many levels of the hierarchies. However, that was to avoid relying solely on knowledge from the local elite, which has been a challenge for ethnographic research (e.g. Ranta-Tyrkkö 2010, 47). Dividing people into ‘elite’ and ‘non-elite’ was not simple either, as the cultural and social differences were intricate and not always easy for an outsider to recognise. Sometimes, even though I thought that I was reaching genuine knowledge outside of the elitist views, it appeared to include hierarchies and biases. Taking into account the diversities calls for recognising many different ‘truths’ on the same issue, as the same situation or incident might seem different to separate people.

Discussions in the tea shops—Merging research methods

During the research process, I was asked numerous times how I spent my days in Nepal. I answered this with the examples of my daily life: I woke up to the sound of *cock-a-doodle-doo*, had morning tea and watched as the village began the day. I participated in housework, such as cleaning rice grains or sorting out corns, had long walks on hilly paths, sat in the tea shops and ate *dal bhat*, washed clothes in shared places and observed them as social events. I sat beside hospital beds, participated in work parties on the fields and the women’s gatherings in the yards, and listened for their stories, joys and grieving. I also travelled on the roofs of the buses or drove a scooter on the curvy roads, sat around bonfires, danced in the festivals, played guitar with the youth, played football on the fields and, most of all, had conversations with different people. These details of my daily life, among countless others, created the basis of my ethnographic participation.

I analysed the details of daily life using ethnographic methods. Participatory observation revealed multidimensional views of the women’s lifeworlds, whereas research discussions opened deeper aspects of the women’s perspectives. Participatory observation and research discussions often were concurrent events: Participation included both observation and discussions, and the discussions were mixed with the observation of silent messages and physical context. Thus, I see the observation and discussions as *merging methods*; rather than being separated from one other, they involve co-creation, negotiation and combining different knowledges. The merging methods included mutual reflection and consideration with the research participants and the contextual and cultural translators. They also involved feeling and experiencing together while recognising and navigating the social and epistemological differences (e.g. Ledwith and Asgill 2007, 111). Even though participatory observation and research discussions were merging in the fieldwork, they comprised different elements that must be distinguished. In the following table, I illustrate them and the different qualities of knowledge that they provided:

Table 4: Ethnographic knowledge production

Data collection methods	Participants	Contexts	Research material	Analysis	Qualities of knowledge
Participatory observation	Women from different social positions Relatives of the women (extended family members, children) Villagers Staff in health services Cultural and contextual translators	Daily routines (common taps, fields, homes, tea shops, roads, temples, vehicles) Festivals Travels Offices Hospital	Reflective diaries Photos Drawings Video clips	Ethnography Sensory ethnography Reflection Self-reflexivity	Communal Reciprocal Experiential Sensory Contextual
Research discussions with the participants	Women from different social positions Male relatives of the women Cultural and contextual translators	Teashops Yards Footpaths Homes Fields Vehicles	Audio recordings Photos Reflective diaries	Content analysis Sensory ethnography Decolonising & feminist thematising Reflection Self-reflexivity	Subjective Discursive Reciprocal Experiential Sensory Contextual

Participation in the children's homes and activism with the local social advocates as contextual background knowledge

The discussions were done with different combinations of the women's groups and with individuals or pairs. They often were spontaneous, sometimes arising along with visits to homes or tea shops. They were also planned, initiated mostly by the leaders of the women's organisations. The group and individual discussions provided knowledge from several perspectives. The group discussions were formed by the women themselves. They functioned both as their organisations' official meetings in which I participated and gatherings that the leaders formulated to discuss the topics related to this research. This follows the participatory approach, as I let the women determine the forms of the discussions (Garcia et al. 2011).

However, I noticed that the group discussions contained social hierarchies, which was seen when the leaders talked on behalf of the other women. Therefore, I found it important also to have individual discussions in the women's homes and the places that they chose—the tea shops, buses, footpaths, fields, temples and common taps. It literally took more time to walk to the houses located in the lower parts of the village, where the poorest people lived. This revealed the hierarchies and distances between the centres and the edges of the communities in a very concrete way. The groups demonstrated local power hierarchies and connectivity, whereas the individual discussions in the women's homes were more intimate, and many women appeared more talkative in them.

Having the discussions within the women's daily environments eliminated formality and built trust between me and the participants. Individual discussions with the women often included many interruptions, such as when their children or a neighbour entered their homes. These discussions illustrated the context: It showed a collective lifestyle in which privacy was not perceived important. The discussions in the homes were almost always done around a cup of tea. It was a cultural manner, and it indicated hospitality. Ethnography emphasises the localisation of research methods (e.g. Behar 1993), so the women determined the place, the form and the time of the discussions. This was necessary to ensure that the research discussions did not disturb their daily routines or that I did not impose the research activities on the communities. The place and forms of the discussions played a crucial role in ethnographic knowledge production—also emphasised in feminist research—by breaking out of the traditional roles of 'interviewer' and 'interviewee' to produce knowledge of social practises in genuine lifeworlds (e.g. Davies 1999, 99; Oinas 2004, 209).

I used three different translators in the discussions, as my Nepali language skills were not sufficient for collecting data. The translators' socio-economic, ethnic and gendered positions affected the discussions from two angles: First, their interpretations were impacted partly by their positional epistemologies. Second, the presence of the translators and their positions affected the women's talk. The women were more open to presenting critical views of the women's organisations to outsiders of the community (Bikash and Rewati), whereas having a community member as a translator (Chori) was somehow more complex, as the women did not talk as freely about issues in the community with her. This became apparent to me when I visited the same women many times with different translators. This creates some limits to the research data, and the women's original messages might have changed along the way. I discussed this more in Section 3.2.

I recorded the discussions on my iPhone with the women's informed consent. The phone as a recorder did not seem to cause confusion among the women, as they had their mobile phones with them, too. Even the poorest women who struggled to provide enough food to their children had mobile phones. They were part of the women's

personal belongings that they carried everywhere with them, and sometimes they answered them during the discussions. After the discussions, I transferred the recordings to my computer and deleted them from the phone to ensure they would not end up to wrong hands if I lost it or if it was stolen. These details ensured one part of the ethical conduction of the study.

Participatory observation was done in the daily activities that I described at the beginning of this section. The villages were full of observable moments, because most of the daily activities were done outdoors. One noticeable detail was the colourfulness of the villages, which was based in the local culture and seen in specific clothing, jewellery, festivals and decorations. The colours and other details produced important information about the local culture, such as manners and social structures. One of the central locations for my participation and research discussions were the family-run tea shops—small stalls that opened toward the roads and were the meeting places of the communities. Sitting in the tea shops was not only about getting involved with the community or enjoying the flavours of *masala* tea: Because they offered views of the sceneries of daily life, they inspired countless conversations about societies, global dynamics and their local impacts, social ‘wrongs’ and change. Those sceneries and slow moments around cups of tea created crucial spaces for inspiration, insights and connectedness with the research participants and the translators.

Ethnographic observation often is linked to hearing and seeing, but it can include other senses, such as tasting, smelling and feeling (e.g. Pink 2009, Valtonen et al. 2010). My observation was expanded to include senses that are not often considered as research knowledge. This led me to explore *sensory ethnography* in knowledge production (e.g. Pink 2009). The research context represented a specific and impressive sensory world in itself (Valtonen et al. 2010, 4) with its distinctive smells, sounds and colours. Through sensory ethnography, I am able to recognise the crucial pieces of knowledge hidden in those dimensions (ibid.). For example, when the coldness blew through the walls of the corrupt children’s home on my first trip, I felt that on my skin. This feeling of coldness symbolised one part of the adverse circumstances the children faced. Or, when the sun started to shine after freezing winter nights, and the patients in a remote hospital were moved outside to warm up, it was a sign of people’s hope and creativity.

However, these experiences were my interpretations. I cannot be sure how the local people experienced the cold. Despite having come from a cold country, I had never felt as cold before, because of the central heating and proper clothing that I was accustomed to. I noticed that many people wore their slippers and took cold showers in the winter months when I was freezing under many blankets. I interpret this as part of their connection to the environment, and how the feeling of coldness was a personal experience. This indicates the subjectivity and limits of sensory observation. Nevertheless, these examples of experiencing coldness illustrated the local living conditions, which indicates that multiple senses and their interpretations are important in providing knowledge on

the ethnographic context. Taking into account the multidimensionality of observation and its cultural contexts fills the deficiencies of subjectivity.

Sensory ethnography offers crucial tools to using multiple senses in ethnographic observation: Epistemic attention is not directed only to the senses as individual experiences but social practises. Attention is given to understanding the ways the senses play a part in the performance and coordination of practises, as well as interactions with the social and material world (Valtonen et al. 2010, 6). This directed me to interpret the senses and their contextual link. In doing so, it helped that I was quite familiar with the Nepalese context when I started my fieldwork. This background knowledge helped me to see the complexity and contextual dimensions of the senses. Seeing them revealed that while intelligence is prioritised in the academic knowledge, it diminishes the other senses that the researcher faces in the research context (Valtonen et al. 2010, 8). This emphasises the role of embodying the fieldwork, which also relates with the feminist and decolonising methods (e.g. Motta 2015).

As I was not only a researcher, but also viewed as a sister, a friend, a possible financial supporter or a professional, the participation embraced elements similar to volunteer work or social work practises— advocacy and support for social justice along with the women’s activism. Research knowledge was developed in the shared moments of real life—with its vulnerabilities and joys—such as when Buhari cried over the neglect and mistreatment by her husband, when I sat next to Mamina’s hospital bed, or was dealing with the municipality officers after she died. Knowledge was developed by witnessing power struggles over land issues or project funding, or in the meetings of the women’s organisations, where they dealt with their social and economic empowerment. Yet it also was expanded in situations such as when I was treated by Budi with herbal medicine after falling ill, when I rang the praying bells in *puja* (praying ritual) or when I danced with the women in festivals.

These examples are only a few out of numerous small but impressive encounters that are part of the empirical knowledge base of this study. As the knowledge is drawn from lived experiences and practises, the meaning of ethical sensitivity is emphasised. The women’s lifeworlds were the priorities, and the research was a secondary matter in those shared moments. I consider these issues in the next chapter in terms of ‘producing good’ in the research relations. Having a holistic approach to the discussions, participation and observation—as merging methods—stressed the significance of the surroundings and silent messages as research information. One key in this process also was a lengthy connection with the participants, as revisits produced continuity in the research relationships that reconstructed the shared spaces towards openness and trustworthiness.

I saved the considerations, observations, inspirations, frustrations and reflections of the fieldwork in the pages of my research diaries. I used the diaries as ethnographic field notes when examining the research process and its epistemological and methodological ingredients. Furthermore, they have content-related value, since the notes of the

daily details include considerations about the essence of the communities. However, the diaries are based on my personal memories, experiences and interpretations, underlining the importance of being critical and self-reflexive. It includes deliberation on the challenges that I faced in negotiating the research relations, as I also struggled to achieve a genuine and open connection with the women (more in the next chapter). The challenges were located in the power dynamics within the social and epistemological positions. It called for an ethically conscious analysis of the positions from which the research participants and I produced knowledge.

3.4 Relating to and in the field

One of the central parts of the ethnographic research process with merging methods—participation, observation and discussions with the people in diverse contexts—are the research relationships. Social work ethnographic research contributes to the understanding of culturally sensitive interventions, the challenges of interacting with participants and cross-cultural conversations (e.g., Yunong and Xiong 2008; Haight et al. 2014). Yet it is not sufficient only to be culturally sensitive (Brydon 2011, 160). The perception of ‘culture’ and the wider structures that are affecting research relationships need to be scrutinised. This encourages the use of a decolonising lens in terms of understanding the relations in and to the field. This includes specific ethical concerns and grounds important research knowledge from the social margins and centres, and the dynamics of the communities. If social phenomena are explained solely through ‘cultural sensitivity’ without problematising the perception of culture, it creates a setting in which the research participants are seen as ‘others’. Cultural otherisation is something one wishes to avoid in ethical social work research (e.g. Jönsson 2013, 164).

To move beyond cultural sensitivity requires a dialogue and mutual learning in the research process. However, creating an open and equal dialogue between me and the research participants was a complicated process shaped by the power hierarchies, privileges and inequalities between us. It is not enough to understand the ‘other’, but also my own cultural and societal background. The women of this study lived in different contextual and material reality from me, which impacted our ways of seeing the world. They also affected the research relationships and created certain expectations towards me as a researcher (e.g. Henry 2003; Edmonds-Cady 2011; Mikkonen, Laitinen and Hill 2016). Those expectations were affected by unequal global structures that highlight the need to understand the material and social realities of the research participants. In moving to the cultural, material and social views of others, the key question is not about how we position ourselves in relation to each other but rather what we can learn from each other (e.g. Brydon 2011, 163).

Like Johanna Latvala (2005, 253) suggested, ethically strong research needs to be advanced by the people being studied. It calls for crossing the borders that are, according to Latvala (*ibid.*, 254–256), always a part of anthropological research. This corresponds with feminist and ethnographic orientations for breaking the traditional power relations and dichotomous visions in the research relations. However, crossing the epistemological borders in the research relationships was complicated. The women's needs heightened the efforts of 'producing good' in the research process on both the conceptual and practical levels (Mikkonen et al. 2016). Giving a key role to the research participants also stressed the need for me as an ethnographer to look in the mirror: to self-reflect on my own expectations towards the research and the women, my positions and epistemological blind spots.

Ledwith and Asgill (2007, 113) encouraged researchers to embrace the understanding of their own privileges and their impacts to the research. In doing so, I also position this study with feminist research that emphasises that knowledge is provided in social and cultural relations, and it is based on economical and institutional orders (Oinas 2004). In researching with the communities in the global South, I need to acknowledge the risk of recreating colonialist realities or strengthening unequal socio-economic structures (e.g. Siikala 1997, 20–25). Reflecting on my positions in the research context is based on the need to describe the epistemic spaces of the research. It also includes the recognition of my own marginalisations, as I grew up in a religious community and identify myself with a sexual minority. These personal experiences deepen my understanding of being marginalised, which brought me closer to the women's experiences. Even though the marginalisations that the women experienced were different from my own, these considerations helped me to have an open approach and to question the power structures and social borders.

'Flowers on the neck'—Hierarchies of knowledge

When we went to the women's meeting, we found out that it was organised because of us. We were given chairs, while the women were seated on the floor. We were welcomed with flower necklaces and tikas. The positions and talk created a feeling of hierarchy and high expectations. It's like I had a sign on my forehead: I come from the West; I'm privileged. What I want is not equal to their interests at this moment. Finally, we want the same thing—equality and fairness—but we approach it from different positions. I aim at producing knowledge to bring forth their ideas and actions. But for them, my aims are too far in the future. They need those changes now.

Ama wanted to take us (me and Bikash) on a tour in the villages. She did not let us go by ourselves. She also wanted to set up meetings and to use a calendar, which

was not common in the communities. That bothered me: I wasn't a regular tourist; I was an ethnographer who had time. Were my appearance and my position that were similar to the tourists why she wanted to set up meetings and use a calendar with me but not with her community?

Research diary 12.11.2012

My status as a white academic researcher from the global North in Nepalese rural communities created multiple ethical challenges and power structures that must be examined with a decolonising lens. This diary excerpt illustrates the concerns of how the women, especially the leader who was a gatekeeper to the villages, positioned me as a researcher in a predefined way. The first concern of this diary extract is the chair that was offered to me when the women sat on the ground. This was a sign of respect and hospitality but also positioned me higher than the community. The second concern is in Ama's interest in setting up the meetings with a calendar, which was unusual among the villagers and communal setting. These details led me to wonder if that was what Ama thought that I expected—that I came from the world of material well-being (which explains the chair) and timetables (which explains the calendar) and wanted to maintain those during the fieldwork.

Different expectations towards the research and my 'expert' position appeared in the challenges that I had in communicating and relating with the women. Those challenges related to the social work ideal of enabling clients to identify their own solutions to their problems (Brydon 2011, 162). Having both this ideal and ethnographic sensitivity for the local expertise as my principles, I wanted to offer the women a leading position in the research discussions and actions. This led me to aim for unofficial and unstructured research discussions and relationships. However, the women wondered at the beginning of the research process why I was not 'researching' but instead just living everyday life with the communities and discussing with them without a structured formula.

This raised a question: Was I, in expecting them to conduct the research process as the experts of their lives, actually relying on my predefined perception of them instead of a real dialogue in which they positioned me as an expert? This question is very complex, and I discuss it throughout the study in terms of the epistemological questions intertwined with social and economic structures. I could not deny the 'professional' cloak that was set upon my shoulders. Being a professional social worker raised expectations of offering solutions to the social problems (e.g. Brydon 2011, 162). This was seen in a question I often was asked: 'Do you have any ideas?' My expectations to deconstruct the position of a professional actually were imported from my academic background and ethnographic principles.

Yet these concerns have another aspect as well: Where did these expectations come from? As is typical for social work research, this research also deals with the issues that

were affected by economic, social, environmental and epistemological inequalities (e.g. Dominelli 2002b). Within the prevalent, divided global dynamics, Western is often perceived as advanced and modern, whereas the rural communities in the global South are seen as ‘backwards’ (e.g. Motta 2015). In this setting, I, as a white researcher, carried privileges that were a challenging starting point for the study with a decolonising approach. White privilege also appeared as a restriction in the ethical production of research knowledge. For example, I encountered situations where I did not know how to act in a culturally appropriate manner or where I faced the limits of my understanding.

Here, an important aspect was my self-reflexivity and the question of what my knowledge is based on (e.g. Potts and Brown 2005; Mertens and Ginsberg 2008; Mikkonen et al. 2016). To indicate my openness towards these complications, I reflected them with the women (e.g. Ahmed 2004; Seppälä 2016). Sensitivity towards my personal background, life situation and value base deepened the understanding about the limits of knowing. They also revealed some restrictions that I carried in gaining access to the holistic knowledge of the communities. Thus, being sensitive to these boundaries of my knowledge was productive in terms of the research knowledge. Apart from producing limits, the knowledge gaps eventually provided crucial information on differences and identifications, as well as exclusions and inclusions (Enquix 2014).

Various expectations appeared also towards Nepalese people who were outsiders of the communities: For example towards Rewati as an academic woman from Kathmandu. This reveals intersectional differences that impacted on the research encounters. Rewati, as a Nepalese woman, shared the gendered, linguistic and ethnic spaces with the women. However, her educational background and geographic location in the capital created expectations of her as a potential supporter in the rural villages. This indicates how social and economic power imbalances were intertwined with the issues of gender, class and ethnicity (Parameswaran 2001). The differences intersected with complex and overlapping global and local power structures (e.g. Foucault 1980; Sherif 2001; Henry 2003).

Besides the differences and power imbalances between me and the research partners, they appeared also in the communities’ internal relations and among the women of this study. Having a communal approach towards knowledge production in a Nepalese context is well-argued, but it includes challenges because of the internal hierarchies.

They smelled like work: sweat, field, mud. They stopped their work in the field to come meet me when Ama (the leader of the women’s community) asked them to. ‘Now you can ask them questions’, Ama said to me. I had explained beforehand that I just wanted to have a free talk on the topics that the women felt were important. I repeated, ‘I want to be like your friend; let us meet more times and spend time together.’ When the women were shy and silent, the leader asked me again, ‘Do you have some questions to ask?’ ... ‘Ok, you can, for example, tell me your names and

something about your family or yourself—whatever you feel like telling.’ I got the same type of answer from each of them: ‘My name is—— ... I am —— years old ... In my family, there are ...’

Research diary 16.01.2013

This episode illustrates the hierarchies and class-intercepted and spatial power modalities within the research settings. It demonstrates how the local leader of the women’s community conducted the discussions with the women’s group and controlled the women’s participation in the research process. The leader also defined and controlled my role and interaction with the women, as I had kind of stepped on her ‘territory’ (Westwood, 2002). Thus, socio-economic hierarchies among the women affected ethical knowledge production, which was seen in the way that the research relationship with each woman was different. It showed that the women’s social position in their community influenced the ways that we negotiated our relationship. The local power imbalances hindered me in obtaining access to knowledge from different social hierarchies. Overcoming these restrictions called for long-term participation with the research participants and ethically sensitive negotiation of research relations.

The differences among the women also created important research knowledge: They revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the communities in terms of promoting change in the women’s position. As Cynthia Edmonds-Cady (2011) explained, hierarchically ordered categories shape the experiences of the participants and their opportunities to act in the community. Ama was from the same background as the other women, but she had gained the position of the head of the community and had launched projects that provided, for example, loans for women in need. When considering the position of the leader of the projects promoting the economic and social well-being of the villages, it was obvious that the women—and me as a researcher—could not easily question her control. The leader’s role in promoting the women’s position was essential, while most of the other women were obligated to work for their survival. Losing the leader’s support by questioning her power might have led them to lose that opportunity for social and economic contributions. Therefore, the research relations were restricted by this control, and the knowledge gained in the discussions was only partial. However, Ama’s role in the research was not merely restrictive: She made numerous contributions to it by offering her time, effort and knowledge.

Along with the social hierarchies among the women, gender inequality and patriarchal restrictions were some of the strongest determinants of the women’s role, which inevitably affected knowledge production (e.g. Parameswaran 2001; Edmonds-Cady 2011). This includes the analysis of the women’s beliefs and the restrictions on their views that arose from fears of losing the support provided by their husbands.

The question from Hajur Ama's son was reasonable: How could the women tell me their real thoughts when they could not even tell their names straight to me? From his viewpoint, they were afraid. They were afraid of their husbands who dominate them. They are socially bound in many ways; one woman spoke about being happy if her husband comes home sober. It reveals her dependence. She did not talk about being happy if she could be independent or not restricted by social norms or not forced to work so hard, but she wanted to be treated well by her husband.

Research diary 20.02.2013

Patriarchal frames impacted the women's participation in the research (e.g. Parameswaran 2001). It limited their expressions; thus, it occurred on the conceptual level rather than in practise. Men did not openly threaten the meetings, and they welcomed me to the communities. Therefore, I had to understand the causes behind the women's fear in expressing themselves. The diary note above indicated how the women were to be seen through family orientation, which is suggested in indigenous social work, too (Yunong and Xiong 2008). This was important to take into account when committing to social work's aim of promoting social justice and ensuring that the researcher avoids causing harm to the women (Mertens and Ginsberg 2008). Therefore, the research process progressed on the women's own terms within the patriarchal restrictions.

To take into account these social restrictions and hierarchies, I had to learn to read silent messages, gestures and relationships among the women. The hierarchies in the community placed me in a position between the leader and the other women. Spatial power was entangled in the restrictions created by these hierarchies, which needed to be identified and re-negotiated (Westwood 2002). The need to hear and see silence called for developing my persistence and tactful negotiation skills. It raised some specific ethical notions, such as the inner struggles of how to act in the villages, how to negotiate research relations within these boundaries and ensure that harm did not come to the women contributing to the research. It was a lengthy and complex process to have an open connection with the women on the lowest levels of the hierarchies.

One month and twenty days left here, less than two months. I have to look into this truth. I'm not satisfied with where I am with my data collection. It is obscure, and it is not focused. I have information on the women's communities from the leaders, the board—too little from the women from the downhill.

Research diary 05.03.2013

I found a way to overcome these restrictions with the research participants when some of the women from the ‘downhills’ approached me spontaneously without the leader’s presence. Their courage to do so arose from their frustration over unfair and discriminatory actions by the management of the organisation. However, they wanted to keep their independent participation in the research low-profile to prevent conflicts within the community. With their defiance, they brought diversity to the research knowledge and therefore contributed to the feminist debate (Garcia et al. 2011). I could not be the one to challenge the social relations and orders among the women in the communities, where the hierarchies often were related to survival and social security; hence, renegotiation was initiated by the participants by their own terms. This strengthened the ethical stance of the interaction and encounters with the research participants, which developed the research relations. One crucial element in this negotiation and its conclusions was lengthy time and many revisits. When there was space in between the visits, and I returned to the field multiple times, the research relationships got stronger, and we managed to renegotiate the expectations and build trust with each other.

As Ledwith and Asgill (2007,111) have stated, the differences among research participants can be seen as a strength instead of a division. Looking from different directions, but aiming at the same goals—or at least being conscious of the goals of others participating in the study—reveals new dimensions. By viewing the differences as a strength, these considerations can lead to the production of multidimensional knowledge. During the process, I realised I might have to shine a new light on the initial theoretical approaches and questions of this study. I needed to be ready for the new perspectives and changes that the participants of the study could introduce.

Sometimes I feel a strong connection with the people here. It’s like a bus ride, when I sit in a window seat observing things passing by—horns making space for different vehicles, a conductor tapping the side of the bus and shouting the destination, the rhythm of Hindi-pop, college-girls and boys with their uniforms, a meat seller chopping up a goat, a women’s group washing clothes beside the smelly riverbank, burning rubbish, dust and pollution joining into an unhealthy cloud. This jumble turns into stories in my mind, individual lives that meet with mine for a while. I observe this all, and I share this moment of being alive, of being a human being.

Diary note 12.02.2009

Sometimes the feeling of connection with people is universal and requires no words. During the research process, I wondered how should I consider these feelings of connection in terms of knowledge. Even though ethnographic methodology gives space for a researcher’s personality and vulnerability (e.g. Ranta-Tyrkkö 2010, 62), what does

it mean when our roles overlap, when we are just two people sharing the mystery of life—people whose basic feelings and needs are similar, though they are coloured by different surroundings and backgrounds? My role as a researcher disappeared when a woman told her story with tears in her eyes. Our social backgrounds, histories, cultures and personalities separated us, but we had a lot in common through humanity, through womanhood.

I interpreted this recognition of humanity and the connection between me and the women as another part of the knowledge production, referring to Ledwith and Asgill's (2007,111) argument that feeling and experiencing also are sources of knowledge. Feeling empathy and caring can deepen the understanding of the situations that the research partners lived in, without the need to experience it the same. Ledwith and Asgill (ibid., 113) have stated that the starting point for this kind of research process is a personal challenge in relation to oneself and the world. When I try to study with people instead of on people, I have to recognise my feelings and experiences in terms of the research context. I was not only an outsider and an objective observer, and by openly admitting and analysing that, I can reach deeper knowledge about the lives and perspectives of the research partners. Without that kind of sharing and feeling together, I might lose some important understanding of the research theme, or some particular, fine-grained pieces of knowledge. Feelings of connection demand seeing deeper, beyond the social categories.

'Producing good' in the research process

If you go village to village, walking, and many people have a lot of problems, and they have lots of expectations ... We have to discuss that before going to the villages. If we go walking to the village, everybody is looking. That's what is gonna happen. Now what? ... And people start to feel greedy. Everybody wants help.

Hajur Ama

Hajur Ama presented her expectations about the villagers' needs when we were planning to visit her community. Her considerations posed a question: Was it ethically sensitive to 'enter' those villages as a researcher? The research partners and their needs challenged the ideas of equality and rewriting the roles in the research. When I claim to put the women's and children's needs and hopes before my own ideological interests, I have to identify them first. What do the women want and need? This ethical concern was not answered with my initial thought of spending lengthy time in the research context to balance the relationships and enhance the encounters without boundaries. Time alone could not vanquish the economic and social imbalances between us. I was in a position where I could have supported them financially or possibly employed them as housekeepers, for example (e.g. Behar 1993, 241).

This highlighted the ethical question of ‘producing good’ in the research process. This concern is the core of a respectful and socially just research process, both ideologically and practically. This led me to consider Ledwith and Asgill’s (2007) discussion of research committed to social justice and deconstructing the oppression of research participants, and to view it as ‘producing good’ in the research process (Mikkonen et al. 2016). This also emphasises the meaning of context and particularity in ‘doing ethics’ in research relationships (Banks 2004). For example, the women in Nepalese rural villages wanted assurances of food for the next year, stable lives for their children or to eliminate violence or a husband’s alcoholism. The expectations set for the research mirrored the research context. Unbalanced economic and social positions within the uneven power relations between me and the participants led to epistemological inequalities.

The needs and aims of the research participants were concrete, and when they encountered my goal of creating abstract knowledge, it raised an ethical question concerning knowledge production: How could these different objectives be combined? As Aitor Gomez, Lidia Puigvert and Ramon Flecha (2011) stated, the purpose of research knowledge is to move the issues—theories, practises or conceptions—forward, so there are always transformational elements. However, I evaluate ‘producing good’ more practically by mirroring it to the needs of the research participants. As the debate concerning an ethnographic presence includes the issue of the researcher’s intervention in the lives of the participants (Coffey 1999), I emphasise the demonstration of effects on social circumstances by, for example, providing special protection or considerations (Canadian Institute of Health Research [CIHR] et al. 2010; Garcia et al. 2011). Ethical, decolonising research could not withdraw from practical responsibility in situations where there were striking inequalities. These appeared often as particular encounters that were the result of wider structures and power imbalances.

For example, when we found Mamina fatally ill on the street, I could not ignore my ethical and moral responsibility, not only as a researcher but as a human being. I encountered the questions of human dignity, which opened new windows for my concerns about ethically responsible research. I needed to step out of the ‘researcher’s boots’ in front of fundamental questions on humanity. When the research aimed at deconstructing injustices and then clashed with a remarkable one, I had to consider whether the ethical responsibility was to take action for social justice. Thus, moral responsibility drove us to take Mamina to a hospital. This illustrates the ethically important moments and choices in the research (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). It expanded my role as a researcher beyond observation and participation, as the ideological stance on respectful encounters was not sufficient in this case to ‘do ethics’.

This formed an epistemological turning point that highlighted the importance of seeing and hearing the voices in extreme margins and the knowledge that was considered ‘improper’. The turning point mirrored the society’s remarkable hierarchy, which illustrated how excluded voices do not inevitably involve words; there was important

information shrouded in silence, gestures, sights and expressions. This refers to the meaning of visual power in epistemological issues: how the research topic can gain visibility in different daily settings, and how visibility can be a key aspect in understanding (e.g. Westwood 2002).

This morally crucial action could not have been actualised without my local cooperative partner and translator, Bikash, even though my whiteness with its assumed economic privileges lent power to negotiations on Mamina's treatment in the hospital. This comes together with the analysis of global and local power relations that decolonising research embraces. The local person played a crucial part in challenging those power structures, as I did not know all of the local nuances that affected the case. Nonetheless, the point was in the action that we took together.

The ethical consideration around the case was extended to the epistemological level: Could Mamina be perceived as a research participant when she could not have a proper conversation? One reasonable viewpoint to this is Donna Mertens and Pauline Ginsberg's (2008, 490) assertion that 'to omit people in dire straits from participation is also to disempower them further'. Mamina's participation from an ethical point of view could be justified by recognising her non-verbal information, as she indicated trust toward us with smiles, recognition in the eyes, holding a hand and being present with her gestures. Feminist and indigenous methodologies support sight and other contact as research knowledge (Behar 1993), thereby encouraging us to recognise silent messages as essential research information. In terms of the dilemma above, I had to proceed with special attention to ethical considerations within the encounters. I documented Mamina's silent gestures in my field notes. I interpreted the trust that Mamina showed towards us as consent, giving extra attention to confidentiality and safety.

As Etherington (2007) stated, the researcher is expected to consider ethical guidelines (such as confidentiality and informed consent); moreover, in Mamina's case, the ethical concern was expanded to the needs of the research participant. Generally, because many of the women in the researched communities expected a change for a better life, it challenged the academic understanding of 'producing good' in social work research. Apart from the ideological standpoint, it demanded concrete actions from me as researcher and space in the research report (Burke 2007). The inequalities led me to stand by the women in their struggle for justice. This involved, for example, advocacy in difficult family situations, providing support for health care when there were no resources or being a listener in times of grieving. Although the NGO that I was a part of operated elsewhere in Nepal, it functioned as an ethical 'safety net', offering resources and a network for intervention to deal with fundamental ethical dilemmas, like Mamina's case and other situations where women's or children's rights were violated (e.g. extreme poverty, discrimination or abandonment in the community). This action provided important knowledge on relationships and how to encounter women with recognition and respect towards differences.

‘Producing good’ in the research process relates with the crucial task of ethical social work knowledge production: to ensure that inequalities are not repeated in research knowledge that argues for social justice (Mertens and Ginsberg 2008). Yet I find another aspect with the decolonising framework in approaching the question of ‘producing good’: to be listened to and received with love and tenderness, which challenges the separation of the colonised and coloniser (e.g. Motta 2015). This called for recognising the impacts of my epistemological privileges in the research knowledge production. I return to this question in Chapter 7, when I consider the role of an external advocate in promoting change in the Nepalese communities.

Cracks in the ethnographer’s mirror—Accounts of disconnection and failings

Because ethnography is based on respect for the local contexts and knowledge (e.g. Behar 1993; Coffey 1999), I have noticed that there is a tendency to be careful about reporting negative issues in the field, especially in the research relationships (for example, my disconnection with the research participants). However, sometimes I did get annoyed by actions or incidents in the research context—such as the situations of disconnection or disagreement with the research participants. In those feelings, I met my personal limits and realised the shortcomings of the research relationships. Yet I have not come upon many of these types of reflection in ethnographic research. It may be due to this lack of academic mirrors that I have somewhat ignored those feelings in terms of the research and prioritised presenting the research partners in a ‘polished’ light. However, when considering the concept of respect a bit further, I do not see it as parallel with a one-sided (only positive) picture of the people and contexts—which actually appears as ‘othering’, too. The research participants were people just as anybody else in their lifeworlds with their desires and faults, honesty and dishonesty. Thus, real respect is about accepting the participants, as well as myself, as human beings with our imperfections.

My ethnographer’s mirror got a crack when I tried to create a connection and respect between me and the women but instead found us disconnected. They did not manifest as rows or arguments, but rather in my occasional feelings of discomfort; as I was on the way to the villages, I sometimes felt as though I carried a sign of a privilege with my different appearance than that of the communities (see the previous section ‘Flowers on the neck’), which disconnected me from the the research participants. This consideration supported me to see the research in a relative light: It is incomplete, and we—me and the women—were doing our duties as imperfect human beings.

I discovered that those uncomfortable feelings often arose from misunderstandings and different expectations—when, for example, I was expecting to have a discussion on the women’s family relationships, but instead the meeting started with the question of how many children I could support in the villages. I also found out later that one of the women had made up her story in the hopes of getting funding. In moments like those,

I felt like a fool with my ‘ethnographic sensitivity’, aiming to build an open dialogue and deconstruct the power structures. I caught my own ignorance toward our different social and epistemological locations. My interactions with the participants were not separated from the global economic power structures and my privileges. I could not get rid of those structures just by encountering the women with my own perception of an ‘open dialogue’.

I continued to address this issue with critical self-reflection, and I discovered that even with my intention of accepting the uncertainties, I had my own expectations of getting into an open dialogue, and when that was not fulfilled, I felt irritated. Dealing with these feelings and the disconnection required specific ethical considerations. Thus, I found another crack in the good ethnographer’s mirror: I had not fully embraced the impacts of inequality in the research relationships and on the information the women provided. I reflected on this in countless discussions with Bikash, Rewati and other feminist scholars and social activists, and I had to be open to this concern from the ‘producing good’ aspect (see the previous section).

I also got profound insight on this matter in a research workshop by Sara Motta (2016), when she wondered if my disconnection from the women was related with their resistance. This question was eye-opening: Maybe the woman with her ‘made up’ story and the ones with their wishes for financial support resisted my ethnographic endeavours for equal encounters that did not help them in their particular situations. Maybe they grasped the opportunity that they saw in my position as a white academic and activist. The primary ethical consideration in terms of this question was discussed in the previous section of ‘producing good’ in the research process. This insight also revealed new viewpoints and created a more nuanced picture of the research partners. Thus, instead of silencing my feelings of annoyance about the disconnections and failings, recognising them unwraps new ways to respect the women. This highlights the women’s agency and recognises that they chose their ways of being and relating in the research from the point of view of their desires and needs. I had to see beyond my annoyance and discomfort—not for the cause of deeper self-reflection, but to understand the women’s epistemic positions and the power structures within the research relations.

This shows how the ethnographic path within a context that is impacted by the power imbalance between the global South and North is a complicated one, which includes the need for recognising the cracks in the ethnographic mirror. This divulged new epistemological considerations and produced knowledge that probably would not have been exposed had I not investigated these ‘negative’ feelings. However, the women’s made-up stories might not only have been about their resistance. Maybe they were just related to their attempts to navigate the ways of coping. Yet the message of this viewpoint is the same: The women were the agents of their lives and are to be recognised with a holistic view. I also need to mention that the women who ‘resisted’ my ethnographic endeavours for an ‘open dialogue’ were not many, and my encounters

with the rest of the women were more open. That does not, however, mean that the power hierarchies did not affect them. Thus, within complex and widespread power structures, my encounters with the women were like a drop in the ocean, and even though I also had dialogues, affiliation and connections with them, deconstructing those structures was rather unrealistic within those circumstances.

Besides the global power structures and different epistemic locations of me and the women, the differences among the women themselves created challenges to the research process, too. I started my fieldwork with the women's communities by approaching the leaders as a way to legitimise my research in the communities, yet later on, I discovered that this 'top-down' progress was one of the restrictions that I faced during the research process. There are numerous notes in my diaries about failing to get into genuine contact with the women of the lowest social positions. Looking back, the top-down approach that I considered as my failing turned out to be very informative in terms of the hierarchies in the communities and the epistemic questions of the research.

The challenges of the fieldwork also included occasions when meetings were cancelled either by the women or an unexpected incident. There were, for example, general strikes that stopped the traffic and changed the plans, or shortages of water and electricity, which challenged everyday life practises. At the same time, these events offered an opportunity to sit around a bonfire, which inspired discussions, or just to embrace the peacefulness and be present in the moment. Thus, sometimes the occurrences that changed the plans or challenged the research process were rather fortuitous in the end. One of those kinds of incidents occurred on a day that Buhari recalled during my revisits—she described it as a day that made her remember our connection:

We were on the village round with Chori and her husband. Suddenly, the sky was covered with black clouds, and it became dark in the middle of the day. We escaped from the heavy hailstorm into Buhari's nearby house. The steel roof rumbled, and the power of the hail and wind shook the small mud house. A few women from the fields nearby rushed inside to get shelter from the storm. The atmosphere was chaotic, and work and other duties were stopped for a while. With the noise of hail hitting the roof, I sat next to Buhari, and she started to talk about her difficulties. When she cried, we somehow got closer. We shared the spaces of feeling sorrow, in a dark room with the noises of the storm. There was no nervousness or gaps. We were kind of like friends sitting on her bed and talking.

Research diary 02.02.2013

These kinds of occurrences created spaces to reconnect, to stop the routines and to start fresh intercourses. Spontaneous situations and encounters called for creativity and intuition to throw oneself into the moment without expectations. Those moments

were somehow the most insightful in terms of the research knowledge. One of those occurrences happened one morning when we were on our way to Ama's village for a scheduled meeting and saw Mamina on the street, which started my ten-day journey with her. That journey was pivotal and meaningful in many ways, even though the days were few. That morning, I cancelled the meeting with Ama, because I had a strong feeling we had to stay with Mamina, and she needed us more than my research. Intuition was linked with emotions—one of the elements of driving for social change that Ama emphasised (more in Section 6.1). The indigenous and feminist approaches encouraged me to trust my intuition and let go of the urge to stick with the plans or embrace the context perfectly. That leaves space for feeling, smelling, touching and tasting as sources of knowledge (e.g. Pink 2009; Motta 2015).

3.5 Nuances of ethnographic analysis and writing

Ethnographic researchers have been criticised for paying a significant amount of attention to the fieldwork and its social settings at the expense of the analysis and writing processes, even though they include similar questions of power and subjectivity (e.g. Coffey 1999, 136–137). I recognise comparable weaknesses in my study in focusing widely on the fieldwork and its nuances. However, I argue that the considerations of the fieldwork apply in the analysis process as well. The ethnographic analysis process included continuous reflection on the epistemological and methodological questions of the data. It was a parallel process with the fieldwork, and it consisted of my reflective diaries and dialogues during and after the fieldwork and revisits. Continuous reflective discussions with the research partners, cultural and contextual translators and different academic gatherings affected the analysis process. Thus, the analysis is not only an individual process, but it is impacted by a diverse network.

My goal of recognising the power structures and social hierarchies during the research process extended to the analysis. Thus, decolonising and feminist critiques were the frameworks of the analysis and reading of the data (e.g. Spivak 1998; Ahmad 2009; Dominelli 2010a; Motta 2015). The writing and analysis processes were based on my research choices and interpretations, including the power imbalance between me and the participants. The questions of power and subjectivity formed a crucial part of my research diaries, which I mirrored to the theoretical framework. I found my blindness for the power structures and my positional interpretations during the whole analysis process. This was both a weakness and a strength of the study: Recognising my blindneses and limitations revealed the epistemological positions in the research relationships, and reflecting on them strengthened the ethicality of the analysis. The choice for the analysis methods had two dimensions arising from the different qualities of the data—the recorded research discussions and participatory observation.

I started the analysis of the recorded research discussions by transcribing them. For the transcriptions, I used an external translator to evaluate the translations from the field. This revealed some challenges in the use of translators, based on their different socio-economic, ethnic and gendered positions with the research participants. Those challenges produced limits to the research knowledge which I wanted to explore by using the external translator in the transcribing process. Elina Oinas (2004, 217) called for consideration of the verbatim form of the transcription. My research discussions were translated from Nepali to English, thus, the initial language of the research participants was filtered through the translators. Therefore, being verbatim with the transcription was not necessary. I reach the message of the women's perspectives by using multiple analysis methods and considering the context and silent messages.

I lean on for example Amanda Coffey's (1999, 138) arguments of not using one fixed analysis method in ethnographic research. She claimed that it is hard to teach, describe or categorise the ethnographic analysis process, which is based on creativity and reflexivity. This supported me in combining different elements from multiple analysis methods. I started with reading the transcribed discussions by leaning on content analysis and thematisation (e.g. Morse 1994; Neuendorf 2011). Kimberly Neuendorf (2011, 277) maintained that each content analysis should include theoretical and conceptual backing to overcome its technicality. Therefore, I also used theoretical frameworks (decolonising and feminist) (e.g. Spivak 1998; Ahmad 2009; Dominelli 2010a; Motta 2015) in forming the themes of the analysis. This enabled me to be sensitive to the power nuances during the whole analysis process. I used theoretical thematisation in understanding the content of the discussions in a wider context (e.g. Morse 1994, 32). I constructed the ethnographic analysis from the interaction of transcribed discussions, diary notes and theoretical literature, and took into account the contextual and social structures (e.g. Davies 1999, 111). This included recognition of gendered, ethnic, social and cultural factors in the analysis.

I based the thematisation of the research discussions also on the research questions that I had outlined during the fieldwork, which led me to categorise two main frameworks for the analysis: *women's social position* and the *changes* in it. The first analysis framework—women's social position—included the women's narratives about their husbands, children, parents-in-law, other women, their childhoods and their life situations, either as housewives, widows or single mothers. This led me to identify their position from two angles: communal and family relationships and daily routines and responsibilities. The discussions also included the women's wishes, needs, activism and their relationships to the external advocates and development, which I categorised as the driving forces, aims, tools and partners of the change. I recognised that their stories included desire and action for changes that appeared at different speeds and scopes in the communities, which I characterised as the 'rhythms' of the transition.

I used theoretical thematisation in deepening my analysis of the women's aims and tools for the transition and in linking them to the structural level. Decolonising and feminist frameworks helped me in embracing the complexity of the change process and to understand the ethical and contextually relevant relationship between the traditions and the changes. The research discussions included the women's multiple aims for the changes, such as reduction of poverty, improvements in livelihoods, ensuring safe lives for their children, gaining a safe social environment or being seen and heard. I mirrored these and other aims of the women (that I explicate in Section 7.1) to the theoretical framework of this study, which led me to categorise the goals of the transition. As a result of this process, the data based on the research discussions had reached its saturation, and the discussion topics had found their place in the analysis frameworks (e.g. Morse 1994, 37–38). However, this is not sufficient in ethnographic research: emotions, intuition and senses played a fundamental part in the research discussions and participatory observation. This leads into sensory ethnography (e.g. Pink 2009; Valtonen 2010), which recognises the senses and their contextual link as research knowledge.

Emotions, intuition and senses as ethnographic data

I had saved my observations of different senses and emotions within the fieldwork to my reflective research diaries. I did not use any particular analysis method for the diaries, but I chose relevant extracts from them with critical reflexivity, which supported and deepened the analysis. My photos, video clips and drawings were additional means to preserve the observations, and they also functioned as inspiration in recalling the atmospheres, landscapes and spices of the context within the analysis and writing processes. Through my research diaries, I recall various feelings of the Nepal periods. According to Coffey (1999, 139), while analysing the data, the ethnographer often feels the same source of love and hate that she faced during the fieldwork. Thus, the analysis process is a holistic one that involves returning to the feelings of the fieldwork. However, time, distance and reflection have changed them, and they appeared somewhat different after the fieldwork.

The languages of the ethnographic research are multiple, and they include not only words, but also embodied, spiritual, ancestral, cognitive and aesthetic forms of knowledge (e.g. Motta and Seppälä 2016, 20). These multiple languages of the research brought both richness and weakness to the study. First, they embrace a holistic and complex essence of a female life in the research context. Second, they are a challenge in the analysis, as the interpretations are based on my research choices and subjectivity. Besides a thorough analysis of the research relations and epistemological questions, I approached this challenge through sensory ethnography. It enabled me to count the senses as part of the research knowledge, where they do not represent only individual experiences, but they are also culturally defined (Valtonen et al. 2010, 9). Thus, the

excerpts of the research diaries that I use about the senses beyond seeing and hearing include messages of cultural and contextual meanings. Scientific systematisation cannot grasp the senses of smells, feelings on the skin or sounds. However, these dimensions bring forth holistic elements of the research participants' daily lives.

Back to the village, to a house smelling of smoke, to a bamboo mat that has been spread on the floor that is covered with cow dung. Dried cow dung keeps insects away. It is pure. And it does not smell as I thought it did when I read about it as a child.

Research diary 12.11.2012

The observations of smoke and cow dung described some elements of the research participant's home. If I ignore the multiple sensory messages that this moment included, will I do the same for the particularities of her story? Sarah Pink (2009, 3), one of the pioneers of sensory ethnography, claimed that scholarly practise is limited in its capacity to communicate the sensory and affective elements of experience, which stresses the meaning of multiple sensory observations. If I leaned only on spoken information in my analysis, I would lose important parts of the ethnographic knowledge (e.g. Waterston and Vesperi 2009, 7). For example, smoke in the house revealed crucial information by signalling that there was no chimney, and the food was cooked with firewood, which indicates a lower socio-economic position. Wealthier families used gas stoves, which were healthier and more efficient. In describing the smells and other sensory observations, there are messages that contain specific information in terms of my research questions.

Ethnographic analysis is not finished with closed results but rather with a nuanced discussion. I am inspired by alternative ways of knowing, decolonising epistemologies and knowledge as a process, not a 'thing' (e.g. Motta 2015). The multiple ways in which the data were collected—the research discussions, observation and participation in the communities, and reflective dialogues with the cultural and contextual translators—complete each other, which is a basis of a multidimensional analysis.

How to write with human being—Insights and pains of writing

Writing, the main tool of presenting academic knowledge (e.g. Pink 2009, 3), is silent but powerful. My writing process included insights and pains—bodily pain from sitting long hours and the mental pain of being detached from social life. It also incorporates the joy of creativity. It is intense in a different way than the fieldwork; it is as closing towards my inner world. Writing is lonely and social at the same time—I relived my encounters with the women of this study and the people who have impacted the research in multiple ways. Coffey (1999, 154) stated that analysis and writing form the most personal and passionate phase of the ethnographic research process. I see that

my passion was strong in different ways during the fieldwork and the writing process. Analysis and writing processes are essential in revealing the strengths and weaknesses of the data.

When I started writing after distancing myself from the research context, I often orientated by imagining the landscapes or listening to the songs that were played during the fieldwork. Writing was about finding a balance between the distance and closeness to the field: To a certain extent, the distance was necessary in detaching from the bodily experiences of the field. Still, a closeness was needed to avoid losing the intuition and feelings from the fieldwork that include important research knowledge (e.g. Ledwith and Asgill 2007). The challenges of writing related to my bodily and mental restrictions, such as my impatience and limits of understanding. The question is how to account for that imperfection and recognise that the writing is about the researcher's personality, too. The challenges also related with the complexity of researching with human being, the 'other', the women in their lifeworlds:

A moment, a situation, a woman in her village. I'm visiting your home—what do I see, who are you, what is your life like? What do you feel in the moment that I share with you? What kind of atmosphere is in our shared space? This moment includes so much more than words can express. There is a wordless presence of energy; there is stirring oil in the pan, the dimness of the smoky air, the glow of the oil lamp. There are smells of turmeric and sweat and goats in the corner. There is a smile and a curious gaze, hospitable expressions. There is your crouched position that I wobble in trying, and am worried about hurting my back. There are red clothes covering your hardworking body, tinkling bracelets on your wrists. Your story is whole, unique, important. 'Researching' this moment is not a simple task. How do I avoid removing this holistic moment in my interpretations? It must seem so different for me as a researcher, an outsider, and for you, whose kitchen we are sitting in, whose firewood you are blowing, and whose delicious food we will eat soon.

Research diary 12.11.2012

The question related to this diary note is: How do I write with human being? This question has two aspects, and the first one links with the consideration of 'otherness'. I need a continuous ethical consciousness in researching people in their homes and environments. I need to reflect on the ways to avoid doing harm to their views and worlds by writing an academic piece on their lives. Writing is situational and contextual, linked to social structures and individuals' and communities' locations within them. Particularly when I write about women living in multiple margins, in a gendered and racialised world, there is a specific need for ethical sensitivity (e.g. Behar 1993).

One task of the ethnographer is to create written or visual field notes with multiple sensory observations (Valtonen et al. 2010, 9). The moments of writing the diaries were critical. They preserved the sensory observations for later analysis. I do not recall all the details of the research discussions and participatory observation. Therefore, I use my diary notes to reach the nuances of knowledge. This is based on my choices and personal feelings about what I have considered to be important enough to write down in that particular moment. This emphasises the significance of reflecting on the epistemic location that directed my observations. The words came through filters that are linked to my personality and my experiences, my social and cultural background, and to my research relationships and the discussions I have had with my supervisors, academic peers and activist friends.

In addition, the different locations where I wrote my diary notes and this research affected the words that I chose—or that often ‘chose’ me. My multiple journeys between different places were not only geographical, but also spiritual and psychological, within and beyond myself and the women of this study. The environments influenced the writing process as well. When I was writing in Nepal, I felt that my text became more colourful, and I was more sensitive to the subtleties of the context. But at the same time, I merged with the social phenomena and contextual realities, which made it hard for me to distance myself for the analysis. I was tempted to spend more time in the field than with my laptop, and this restricted the writing process. Still, writing within the research context was relevant at some points of the process. When I found myself pondering or not knowing something, I could visit the villages and reflect on the questions with the participants and the translators of this study. It also was essential to distance myself from the field during the writing process. The distance was important from spatial and social standpoints: When I was physically removed from the field, I had more space for writing and processing the periods therein, as they were not so much ‘under my skin’. I also needed social distancing from the research relationships to weigh their dynamics and effects on the knowledge production process.

One central ethical dilemma of this research is the women’s inability to comment on my theoretical analysis, which is written in a scholarly form in English. Therefore, I consider using alternative methods later on that could be based on the arts (e.g. Pink 2009, 3) and local culture, such as dance or storytelling, to share the research conclusions with the women. This would be, however, a matter of another research. I attempt to embrace this dilemma with the metaphors of land and hills as part of my writing, through the photos in between the chapters illustrating the women’s life worlds, and with quotes or proverbs symbolic of the ideologies that represent the research context. By using these multiple expressions, I reach the multidimensionality of the women’s unique stories that are the core of the research. This study links them to a bigger story that is intended to contribute to ethical and socially just research processes.

भोको पेट ले सोचन सकदैन
Bhoko pet le sochana sakdai na.
Hungry people can't write philosophy.
Nepalese proverb



4 Roles and positions of the women in the communal and daily contexts

The women of this study had diverse roles and positions in their communities and daily contexts. I base this scrutiny on the spheres in which their social positions were actualised—on the women’s nearest community, their extended families and their mutual bonds. Those spheres also were the places where the women appeared in their daily routines or activism for social change. This led me to analyse the women’s roles and positions in their communities from two angles: relationships and daily routines. The data indicates that the women’s roles were actualised in relationships (as wives, daughters-in-law, mothers, sisters [peers], activists and leaders), which supports Anthea Darychuk and Suzanne Jackson’s (2015, 450) notion of women being socialised into a ‘relational’ state in traditional communities. Besides that, the women’s roles were actualised in their daily routines (housekeepers, workers and cultural agents). These are intertwined into the duties that the women were expected to fulfil in their communities, including a risk where they were divided into the categories of either ‘good’ or ‘failed’ women within the communal framework.

I start my analysis with women’s roles and positions in their relationships, as the women determined themselves often through relating to their families and being part of their communities rather than as independent individuals. They talked mostly as ‘we’ rather than ‘I’. This is linked to communities’ social orders and the women’s roles in nurturing and caring. First, I bring forth the role of the women as wives, as it was one of the roles that they reflected on the most. I continue with the role of daughter-in-law, which was a crucial determinant of married life, as the women mostly moved to their husband’s homes. Next, I scrutinise their roles as mothers, because the women emphasised motherhood as a duty and also the greatest strength and gift in their lives. I continue my reflection with the women’s role as ‘sisters’—in a wider meaning than as a sibling. I use the local concept of sister referring to blood sisters but also to other women like neighbours, friends, shopkeepers, co-workers and so on to elucidate the mutual connection and peer support that the women got from one another in the community and the communal mindset.

In scrutinising the women’s roles as a researcher from the global North, I need to note that I view the ‘traditional’ and ‘communal’ from my epistemic position, which stresses the importance of continuous self-reflexivity and critical reflection. The traditions that I perceived initially as restrictive, often maintained the women’s well-being. The

analysis of women's views opened windows to see the traditions as a multidimensional and fine-grained communal framework, both with their restrictions and benefits. The framework in scrutinising the traditions and relationships is wider than the one where the women are presented mainly as mothers, daughters and wives (Motta 2013, 41). Even though the women emphasised the meaning of those roles in their lives, some of them also identified as activists or leaders, such as through counselling each other or being experts of the communal life. The women also were dreamers, strugglers, creators, singers, dancers and more. Those roles are intertwined into the analysis of the categories that they brought forth as the most crucial in their lives.

The women were, for most of the day, fulfilling their tasks dealing with agriculture, housework and nurturing. Their role in those tasks was distinct compared to the men. The women's daily routines also represented their position in the family and wider community. The routines framed most of the scenes of the research discussions, such as cooking, rearing children or livestock, washing clothes, working in the field or carrying out religious rituals. In addition, the women's talk and expressions about their daily routines included descriptions of their lives in other aspects, too. Thus, they act as mirrors for wider structural and cultural reflection. I divided the daily routines into three different categories: maintaining households (housekeepers), ensuring survival (workers) and carrying out culture and religion (cultural agents). These roles and positions as relationships and daily routines determined the duties of women. Duties must be taken into account when analysing the communities in Nepal, as they were the core of communal functionality. In a strongly communal setting, each member had their own role, which included different duties. Fulfilling those duties was perceived as serving the well-being of the entire community, which guaranteed the acceptance and belonging in the community.

Yet if a woman failed in her duties, it increased the risk of her being excluded, marginalised or discriminated against in the community. In extreme cases, it led to a loss of community support, which left her 'without a social status' (Mahat 2003, 69), as Mamina's circumstances illustrate. However, most of the women belonged somewhere in between the categories of 'good' or 'failed'. In between the division, there were the women with their personal desires and strengths, within the complex social (global and local) dynamics. Duties also maintained the women's social relations, belonging, identities and cultural traditions. Daily routines typically were done in places in which the women socialised, shared their experiences and bonded with each other.

Even though the women's days were filled with work, the daily rhythm was peaceful, and the tasks were completed without tight timetables. They frequently sat in a field, yard or tea shop to chat, laugh or sing songs. Duties were strongly communal, and they also included exchange: The women took turns working in each other's fields. Thus, the workloads were shared. The communities and their traditions were complicated,

and the traditions and duties also were the women's strengths and the basis for their well-being. The women's social position in their communities was penetrated with both restrictions and benefits.

4.1 Communal and family relationships

Wives—Marriage as an unquestionable form of life

At a wedding. The day before, the couple's families have celebrated in the bride's home. Today, the bus is reserved to take the guests to the groom's village. The bride looks young. She sits in a car decorated with flowers. Her face is covered by a red veil. Wedding guests are in a happy and noisy mood, and the aisle of the bus is filled with singing and dancing people.

We arrive at the village. As guests, we get to follow different rituals led by priests and families. The groom and bride met a couple of weeks before. Their families have seen it as their time to come, to get settled, to secure their future. We are invited to dance. Dancing men form a circle, and the women stay behind clapping their hands. With persistent calls, they join the circle for a while. At the end of the day, the girl cannot hold back her tears. When the guests start to leave, the time has come for her to say goodbye to her childhood family. It is her time to become a woman, to stay in a new community. Unknown people are going to be her nearest family. From now on, she is going to see her original family only occasionally.

Diary note 12.03.2009

This diary extract described my observations in a traditional Hindu wedding in a rural community. It is a typical story where a woman—or rather a girl—got married to a man chosen by her parents and then settled in the home of a husband. However, the changes had reached the marriage institution; I also attended the wedding of college friends who had fallen in love and moved on their own. The changes in the marriage institution—such as freedom to choose whether and whom to marry—are generally viewed as improvements to the women's position, which supports, for example, girls' higher education. The minimum legal age for marriage in Nepal is 20, or 18 with parental consent (ibid.). The number of child marriages is decreasing: In 2006, 59 percent of Nepali women were married before the age of 18, and almost one-third of them were married by the age of 15 (Pandey 2014, 11). By 2014, the numbers had decreased to 37 percent by the age of 18 and 10 percent by the age of 15 (Unicef 2015). The average age for getting married among women has increased from 17 to

20 within the last thirty years (UNDP Nepal 2016). There were similar changes in the communities of this study. The oldest women (approximately 40–60 years) had gotten married at the age of 12–17, whereas the younger ones (approximately 19–40) had married at 16–23 years old.

Marriage was mostly perceived as an inevitability for the women. Despite the slight changes in the attitudes towards marriage as the only choice, in practise it was desired and not questioned among the women. It was written in their life stories by the community's norms and family framework. Even though it was becoming more common to ask for the consent of a couple, and they were allowed to meet each other before they made a decision, marriage was still strongly a treaty of parents:

I witnessed a discussion in a restaurant, where two wealthy-looking men talked about their son and daughter. The one advertised his son's health—how he did not smoke, how hard-working and good he was. The other man showed a picture of his daughter, and the conversation continued. I could not understand all of it, but the handshake at the end of the conversation confirmed the agreement.

Research diary 22.10.2012

Marriage as a contract was traditionally agreed to by a handshake of the fathers, which signifies the patriarchal structure of the institution. It also often included a dowry from the bride's family—to transfer the responsibility of her social security and cultural continuity to the family of the husband-to-be. It was a treaty in which the social class and caste system still had a decisive part: Inter-caste marriages were not favoured, but they were increasing among the younger generations. After the marriage agreement, its parties had their own roles and duties that they were expected to follow. The women's role in this agreement was to become a modest wife who respects the community's rules and fulfils a wife's duties (e.g. Huang 2001, 365). When a father showed a picture of his daughter during the marriage negotiations, it indicated that the appearance of a woman was an important factor in choosing the partner—at the same time her purity, health and ability to work supported the agreement.

It was a step toward a change in the women's position that the practise of a couple meeting first and giving their consent was becoming more common. This change was perceived as a positive one among many, yet many of the women also preferred an arranged marriage as their protection and a source of their well-being. Thus, the women's views of arranged marriage were diverse: They supported some aspects of it but wanted to challenge its patriarchal structure. In addition, the younger women were more often willing to choose their partners, while the older women supported arranged marriages.

The issue of choice in whom to marry was complicated. A woman's choice opposing a family's approval threatened communal coherence, which put a girl into a vulner-

able position in a context where communal bonds were the basis of security on a very fundamental level. Thus, the consent was seen as a nominal practise rather than a real choice. Marriage was a wider matter than an agreement of two people, and in this context, it had three basic elements: social and economic security, moral control and communal benefit. These three aspects show that marriage was strongly a communal institution in which the women's space was mostly predefined.

Marriage as social and economic security

One fundamental task of marriage was to provide social and economic security for the women. In a society with a narrow public sector and scarce women's education and employment options, marriage functioned as a safety net to fill those deficiencies. This shows the protective side of marriage in the women's lives. Moving into a husband's home secured a woman's living and housing as she became a member of an extended family supposedly for the rest of her life. Marriage also was a social upgrade from being a girl to womanhood. On the wedding day, a bride—regardless of her age—stepped into adulthood and started assimilating to the roles of a wife. These roles ensured protection and security beside the duties and responsibilities. In spite of its patriarchal base, marriage in its protective role made the women feel free when they were treated fairly and when they were willing and able to fulfil the wife's roles and responsibilities.

The concept of freedom in terms of the marriage institution was multidimensional. Although the women usually did not get to choose their husbands, they described that they felt free when they did not have to make a decision. They communicated that individual responsibility over one's life was a restriction. Thus, the 'freedom' to choose whom to marry also created confusion and insecure feelings among the women. Freedom was perceived through communal coherence: When their bonds to the community were secured, the women expressed that they felt free. This is related to the question of moral control, which I describe in the next section. At the same time, when a marriage ensured protection and security for the women, its limits put some of them into a vulnerable position. The women who faced difficulties in fulfilling the duties of a wife—such as giving birth, preferably to a son, working in the field or keeping a husband and his parents happy—met the edges of the protective role of marriage. In extreme cases, this led to discrimination and marginalisation and the threat of losing the family's security. The security provided in the marriage maintained the women's dependency on the patriarchal community and family.

This produced situations in which the legal reformations did not apply in practise. Even though polygamy was illegal (e.g. Maharjan et al. 2012), communal practises did not always follow the law. After Buhari's husband took a second wife, and Buhari was isolated from her family in a separate building, she said that she did not want to charge him because of the risk that he would get a divorce—which would free him from supporting her and their daughters.

Enni: ...and what the community is thinking about this situation?

Buhari: Nothing... They think that if he has money it's ok... to take care of all of us. So they don't care.

The 'community' in this conversation referred to the other women and their gatherings, where Buhari had presented her situation and asked for advice. Because her husband still upheld his responsibilities of feeding and housing her, his polygamy was communally accepted. Since Buhari was not able to work on the field due to her illness, the other women saw the polygamy as reasonable. Thus, women's specific duties (along with other family members' duties) were part of a functional communal entity and coherence. In Buhari's case, the community saw that the husband had fulfilled his duties, whereas Buhari had not. Even though she opposed the second marriage of her husband, she could not stop the practise due to the communal functionality. In spite of social discrimination and isolation, her marriage still brought her crucial economic security, which she did not want to lose as she did not have a job or other ways to make a living. Thus, economic power ensured social power for the husband and his parents, which justified polygamy. Economic and social security within the marriage institution were intertwined, creating a complex set of practises, with communal coherence as a primary determinant.

Marriage as moral control

Besides providing social and economic security, one task of marriage was to ensure the women's 'purity' and modesty—their faithfulness to their husbands and humility towards the practises in the home. This view of Chori, the 25-year-old daughter of Ama, revealed a moral aspect of marriage:

I think sometimes arranged marriage is good, sometimes bad. It all depends on husband. If he's good, then it's good. Sometimes the girls use the freedom the wrong way. They might get pregnant when they are teenagers and after giving a birth they throw the baby away.

Chori

Chori's view relates to the concepts of freedom and morality. She viewed arranged marriage as a positive opposite to freedom, which could lead to irresponsible behaviour and harmful consequences in a girl's life, such as an early pregnancy. This presented the moral control's protective side. Her view of the 'wrong use of freedom' leading to pregnancy refers to sexual freedom. In a communal context, a woman's sexual self-determination in particular was regarded as impure, and marriage was a protection from that. This was governed by patriarchy, which controlled the woman-man relationship

in intimate interactions (e.g. Dominelli 2002a, 108). This also was seen in communal judgements of girls or women hanging out with and dating boys/men. As Ruth Behar (1993, 281) posited, a woman on the streets (apart from her duties and daily routines) in a male-dominated community was out of patriarchal control, which was perceived as disrespectful behaviour. Yet patriarchal control reached the streets as well: Individuals' moves were known to the whole community, which was controlled by social norms that both the men and women supported. Thus, patriarchy was written deeply in the communal organising and coherence.

Even though Chori's view exposed the problematic side of the concept of 'freedom' and arranged marriage as a solution to that, there was a growing trend of romantic love among the younger generation. It was represented in Nepalese and Indian movies and TV series that were common entertainment among the villagers, from grandmothers to small children. It created social clashes when the youth went out for dates; the girls especially were judged and counselled back to modesty and morally acceptable behaviour. Also Budi's comment of 'feeling shy' when she saw boys and girls dating or talking freely to each other indicates confusion in confronting the changes in culturally accepted practises of women's and men's intimate relationships. In spite of the changes in the attitudes, intimate love was partly a taboo, and dating was restricted by moral control.

The priority in terms of marriage was not based on emotions but practicalities. It was rare for the women to talk about love within their marriages, and they appeared shy but also amused when doing so. However, love between a husband and wife, in an arranged marriage or not, was a growing concern among the younger generation. Love was associated with affection between a wife and husband, especially in arranged marriages among the older generation. Affection was seen as congruent to familiarity with a husband, and the older women who had been married for longer talked more about respect and affection, whereas the younger ones prioritised love as a crucial emotion in a marriage. When Chori asked me, 'Do you like arranged or love marriage?', it implied that there was a possibility for love marriage (marriage of choice), and it was communally accepted. This question was common, but I was never asked, 'Do you want to get married?' Not getting married was not perceived as a practical option in the communities, with few exceptions.

In terms of the question of a love marriage versus an arranged marriage, there were various answers among the women. Hajur Ama asked me a question back: 'Oh, what love-marriage? What to do. I had no choices. I got married when I was 12'. Buhari did not know her husband well when her marriage was arranged, but she said that in the beginning, she liked her husband. Love and affection were seen as respect that grew over time. For example, when Budi was asked if she loves her husband (their marriage was arranged when they were about 17 years old), she answered: 'Now I can talk freely with my husband, and I don't feel shy in front of him'. When talking about love, she

turned the discussion into freedom. She said that she ‘felt free’ and ‘did not feel shy’ in front of her husband, which indicated respect towards him.

There was a hotel where I used to work as a housekeeper, and my husband used to work on the construction of another hotel. So, we met there, and we fell in love, and we got married. And we went back to our families, and there were some relatives who got really angry. It was because my husband looked Newari [ethnic group]. But he was Tamang, and when I assured them that he was, everybody accepted him. And he was a very nice man.

Didi

Moral control also was linked to the partners’ social backgrounds, such as ethnicity, class and caste. Inter-caste marriages were still rare, and as Didi’s example shows, love marriages could be problematic from the community’s point of view if a partner was from an ‘inappropriate’ social background. It still was common to hear stories of couples who ran off for their love. Even when a woman from a lower caste had been accepted by the husband’s family, problems arose if the husband died, as she and her children were not considered part of the family anymore because of her lower social position and loss of the husband’s support. Marriage as moral control was seen as both protection against women’s ‘harmful’ behaviour towards themselves and the community, but it also was a continuation of the patriarchy that kept the women home-bound and within their traditional duties and relations.

Marriage also supported communal coherence, which was a basis of the women’s well-being. Thus, there is a need to scrutinise the women’s well-being and concepts of freedom from a wider—communal and practical—perspective than from an individual ‘freedom’ of choice. Contextual nuances indicate the complexity of the concepts and practises of morality and freedom, and these need to be recognised in feminist discourses and in promoting change in the women’s position.

Marriage as communal benefit

Marriage provided security to women, but it also was a basis of communal functionality, and the gendered roles of the marriage institution were maintained and justified by their benefits to the community. According to the women, their husbands followed their parents’ wishes in marriage arrangements and family life, and parents maintained traditional family structures. Subhara Channa (2013, 168) stated that the requirements of a ‘good wife’ are mainly linked to the relational sphere, where the community is more important than the individual. Therefore, instructing a woman to be a ‘good wife’ in a communal setting equates to supporting a family and eventually a whole society

(Huang 2001, 365). The relational sphere of the women's role also was seen in the ways that the women talked about their feelings:

Bikash: When do you feel sad?

Mahila: Abh ... when my husband comes home drunk, and fighting happens, and when the children suffer from that, and when the children fight with each other.

B: In that case, what do you wish?

M: The only wish is that I can give my kids a good education.

Mahila's explanation about the causes of her sadness show how she related her feelings primarily with her husband's and children's behaviour. Thus, they were strongly linked to the family institution and the relations within it. Family relations and the well-being of the women were coupled with duties and responsibilities. Nevertheless, Budi, for example, introduced a view that her life would have been easier if she had not gotten married. She referred to the heavy responsibilities and physical loads of women in the family context:

If you are not married, you have only one worry to think about: yourself. It's your problems, your needs. But now I have a husband; I have children and grandchildren, and I had to arrange a marriage for my children. I have so many responsibilities and so many things to worry about. ... And I have to work all day in the field, and my body feels ill, but I cannot rest.

Budi

Budi experienced the communal aspect of marriage as a burden and individual freedom as a relief. She saw the marriage institution as problematic with its limited spaces for individuals—especially women—to negotiate their position or wishes. Budi mentioned that if she had been able to work herself and make a living, she could have chosen differently, but in actuality, she did not have social networks outside of her community or education or employment possibilities that would have allowed her to do so. This alludes to the lack of power and a means for sustainability as what prevented her from following her preference.

Women's responsibilities within the marriage institution were related to the communal benefits. For example, arranging marriages for their children was intended to get their children's—and, consequently, their own—future settled. The mother's role in it was mainly to plan a wedding and counsel a groom or bride-to-be. Meanwhile, the father's responsibility was to make an agreement and negotiate about the marriage with the partner's family. The women's hard work in terms of festivals and other family

events came across in the women's views: The women's role as organisers was crucial and time-consuming, with gatherings that often included hundreds of people.

Another example of marriage as a communal benefit was the acceptance of polygamy on a communal level, in spite of its illegality. In the cases where it benefitted the family's economic or social security, polygamy was a relatively common solution. Yet polygamy was one-sided, as men could have many wives but not vice versa. When a communal agreement about polygamy was made, it did not require an official document to be recognised in the family context. Many women supported this as a relevant practise; for example, Thuli Mami had adapted to her position as the first of two wives. She did not question polygamy, and she introduced herself as 'Thuli Mami' ('Big Mother' refers to two mothers in the family), even though she was widowed and lived alone with her son. However, the communal agreement about polygamy did not require a woman's acceptance. When Buhari was opposing polygamy, her family and the other women in the community ignored that for the sake of the family's functionality, as the new wife was to be taken to fulfil the duties that Buhari was not able to do.

The acceptance towards polygamy leaned on communal traditions and patriarchy but also on practicalities. Buhari's husband referred to his responsibility in supporting her when he argued to justify his polygamy: 'I'm doing a favour for you, because you are not well, so I am bringing someone to work here for you'. Thus, in a communal setting, the women were seen to benefit from polygamy, as their duties got shared. Buhari saw it another way: 'He is just looking for another servant for him'. Hence, in her resistance, she stood for individual will, which was not respected in the community, and that created problems between her and her extended family. It turned out that the husband was following his parents' wish for a grandson, which Buhari had not provided them. The argument for his second marriage also was about Buhari's inability to contribute sustainably to the family's livelihood, which was viewed as detaching from the community's social networking. This indicates that the belief systems around marriage were about promoting the community's good rather than individuals', and that communal benefits included discriminative and patriarchal power structures.

However, communal benefit is not an absolute opposite of individual benefit. When marriage was seen to benefit the community, and the community was functioning well, it favoured its individuals, too. As a community is formed by a group of individuals with their needs, an ideal community functions for the good of all its members. In that kind of situation, the 'good' of a husband equals with the 'good' of a wife and so on—and benefiting one member of the family was not taking away from the good of another one. The idea of the communal benefit behind marriage was based on this principle. Thus, the problems that occurred in terms of the women's position were not with the communal view per se, but in the patriarchy and discriminative structures within it.

Thus, the women's position in a communal setting was contradictory. In terms of who was heard in the decisions on family issues (including pregnancies), they were

secondary members, but at the same time, their role was also central. For example, when Didi's bad karma was blamed for causing her husband's death, it indicates that the belief system emphasised her role and centrality in 'keeping her husband alive'. Hence, her karma was powerful enough to cause her husband's death. This shows that a woman's role was vital in their extended families.

This, when viewed from a different angle, could be turned into women's positive power—to indicate that women's karma is also powerful enough to cause positive issues in the family. This would bring forth the positive effects of the women's relational position in the families and communities. The community's benefit also may turn into the women's benefit in cases where they gain freedom to do something that benefits the family. This reinforces Huang's (2001, 366) notion of patriarchal communities where men gave more freedom to women when they were to be trained to use skills that benefitted the whole community. Even though this view remains on a level where a woman is seen through family relations, in my research context, it offered the women a chance to attend skills training or to participate women's organisational meetings, because these had the potential to provide economic contributions to their families. Marriage as a communal benefit had a supportive and encouraging role in the women's lives, too. According to Chori, 'It all depends on the husband'. It fostered the women's well-being when it was based on fair relations and practises, and when the oppressive and dominant structures within it were communally challenged and deconstructed.

Daughters-in-law—The meaning of extended family

I named one of the women of this study Buhari—daughter-in-law—because of her complex family situation in which her parents-in-law played a crucial role. Her story revealed the complexities of communal practises, as her husband took another wife to fulfil the duties that Buhari could not. Her husband's parents conducted the arrangements and pressured him into polygamy, showing the centrality that the parents-in-law had in Buhari's life. When marriage was a communal agreement, and a woman usually moved in with the husband's family, her relationship with her parents-in-law became critical (e.g. Gudbrandsen 2013, 160). Their role in the women's lives was even more important than the birth families', because after the marriage they lived in the same households, with the same relationships and routines.

The power that Buhari's parents-in-law had over the arrangements of a poly-marriage was based on traditional family structures and an unwritten treaty between generations that ensured the oldest people were the most respected ones and were taken care of by the younger ones. From that point of view, Buhari did not contribute to the family's well-being sufficiently—neither had she provided security for their future, as she had not given a birth to a son. They blamed Buhari for not serving the family's good. From their perspective, she was too individualistic in not wanting more children after her two daughters and in denying work in the field. Thus, she became viewed as lazy

and incapable. Buhari's actions threatened the generational treaty of taking care of the older ones in the family, and the communal responsibilities in contributing to their living. In the communal setting where a traditional family order was appreciated, these deficiencies justified their actions for isolating and discriminating against Buhari, and for supporting the illegal polygamy in their family.

Buhari's example shows the rigidity of the power of her parents-in-law, which followed communal traditions. This was a very crucial element of the women's lives in communal settings, yet it has often been underestimated or ignored in professional practises and analysis. This comes together with the views of black feminists, who argue that the meaning of extended family has not been recognised enough in family social work (e.g. Dominelli 2002a, 208). As Subhara Channa (2013, 168) contended, the husband-wife relationship is not the core relationship for a woman in traditional South Asian communities—it is actually the relationship with her affinal family.

We all have the same problem: the mother-in-law and father-in-law. ... Eh, for me they also made problems—not giving me enough to eat and always needing me to work, work, work, and they are not satisfied with our work. ... When I was 15 and got married, my mother-in-law used to pull my hair.

Ama

In terms of the women's position in the traditional communities, one measurement is the mother-in-law–daughter-in-law relationship (Pandey et al. 2011, 570; Channa 2013, 169). My data supports this view, as the women spoke more about their parents-in-law than their husbands, and the talk about their husbands was mostly associated with the parents-in-law. One of the spaces where the women spent most of their time was the kitchen, and they shared it with their mothers-in-law. In many cases, the relationship was problematic, especially at the beginning of the marriage, when they were trying to adapt to each other's presence and habits. This was affected by spatial power structures (e.g. Westwood 2002). A daughter-in-law, being a younger woman, was less powerful in the generational order and often got dominated by her mother-in-law in the shared space in the household, making their relationship unbalanced. In the worst cases, this unbalance had turned into violence and discrimination, as Buhari's and Ama's examples show.

Yet the role of a mother-in-law in the women's lives also provided very crucial supportive elements. Women often felt more connected to their mothers-in-law than to their husbands. Womanhood and the roles in it connected them, as they had taken a similar path into marriage within these patriarchal family structures. For instance, Mahila, who had gotten married at the age of 14, said that the first night after her wedding, she had shared a bed with her mother-in-law. She was looking for safety

with an older woman, the age of her own mother, in a new and confusing situation. Generally, the central role of extended family and parents-in-law in the women's lives, both as restrictive and supportive, was related to the marriage as a communal issue. A woman's future was strongly influenced by the relationship between her and the parents-in-law.

Mothers—Women determined through their children

According to Mary John (2003, 75), gender issues are linked with the analysis of the children's situation. Similarly, the women's position in my research context often was determined through their relationships with their children. The women's value as mothers was prioritised—in different projects and development cooperation agendas in the communities—which argued for improvements in the women's position as a means to ensure the children's well-being. They contributed to and supported the view that women are to be empowered and protected because of their children, rather than because of their value as individuals. Additionally, the women themselves emphasised their role as mothers: When Mahila, for example, described what makes her happy, she mentioned her husband and children as the only causes of happiness (or sorrow) in her life. It showed that, besides the marriage, a woman's relationship with her children was a fundamental part of her social place. Therefore, recognising motherhood is essential in researching the women's position.

In 2001, the mean age of Nepalese women beginning motherhood was 19, and 59 percent of the first-birth givers were younger than 20 years old (Pandey et al. 2011, 569). In 2011, the mean age of the women having their first child was 20.1 (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] 2016). This shows that the average age did not increase a lot within a decade. The youngest women of my study (about 19–30 years old) aligned with the country's average, as they had birthed their first children around 18–21 years old, whereas the older ones (30–60 years old) had first given birth around the age of 15–17. The women still had become mothers relatively young, even though child marriages have decreased in Nepal (ibid.). The number of children per woman in my study was from one to seven. The difference between the generations was notable: The younger women had one to two children, whereas the older ones had from four to seven. This supports statistics that indicate that the fertility rate in Nepal has decreased during the last couple of decades (e.g. Gudbrandsen 2013, 158).

In bigger families, there had been more losses of children. Many of the women who had more than five children had experienced the death of a child. Despite the improvements, infant and maternal mortality are still somewhat high in Nepal (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] 2015). Birth control was accepted in most of the castes and social classes (CIA 2016), but it was usually overseen by men and the older members of the families. This led to discrimination, especially in cases where a woman had made the decision herself. One example of this is Buhari, who decided to sterilise herself after

having her two daughters, in spite of the fact that her parents-in-law wanted to have a grandson. Her decision to be autonomous in terms of her body and birth control was used against her, and it became a reason to isolate her.

When a woman's value was in many ways measured through her children, it could be interpreted in a way that a woman who did not have children was not as valued. All the women involved in the research discussions had children, so I cannot analyse the childless women's position explicitly. However, I did get to know one childless and unmarried woman, who lived with her brother and his family. The woman served tea in their family-based tea shop, which was located in a central part of the village. The tea shop was a main communal gathering place. It was also the place where the village's news was shared. Therefore, this woman was—in some respects—at the centre of the village, and her position was secure and appreciated. Her role as an aunt to her nephews appeared important, too. Shared parenting was common, as children were taken care of by the whole extended family, including the aunts and uncles. This woman's position indicates that women without children were important in their roles as aunts in bringing up their nephews and nieces. However, the meaning of having children—preferably a son—was central in heightening the women's value, evidenced by the respect given to motherhood and its centrality in the women's lives.

Myths and expectations of motherhood

Motherhood was a common goal of the women's lives in the communities. It was a set of daily routines, but at the same time, it included a mystical side that was seen in traditional myths, spirituality and stories. Those mystical elements—such as the 'magical power that the women have', or 'mothers as goddesses'—gave special reverence to women, especially to the older ones. Mothers who had just given a birth were viewed as pure and holy for a certain period. This 'holiness' also turned into the expectations and myths of a 'good mother'.

Motherhood is universal but at the same time contextualised. What connects the perceptions of motherhood globally is that it is evaluated through different culturally defined indicators. It is a public issue in most cultures (Huang 2001, 355). In many contexts, womanhood is seen to reach its peak in mothering, and bad mothering is viewed as a failure as a woman (e.g. John 2003). The perceptions of 'good' or 'bad' mothering vary across the cultures and societies, which shows the contextual side of motherhood. In a communal South Asian setting, for example, motherhood is gauged through the following expectations: to be able supervise and discipline children; to be virtuous and responsible; and to have knowledge about the child's development (Huang 2001, 366–367). Besides that, an ideal mother in the communities was not only knowledgeable and capable, but also giving and self-sacrificing, contributing her free time to family and community rather than to herself (ibid.; Motta 2013, 44). The 'normativity' of motherhood has different variations in different cultures, which chal-

lenges the professional social work practises that have been affected mostly by ‘white, middle-class values’ (Dominelli 2002a, 114).

The normativity of motherhood is questioned by cultural differences. In my research context, the women were strongly evaluated and perceived as mothers, which links with the universal perception of motherhood as a public issue. Children’s behaviour and success were a matter of honour or shame for the whole family, yet the women played a central role in it. However, even though a mother’s role was primary in the children’s lives, the children were raised up communally: Grandparents, especially grandmothers, had a critical part in taking care of small children while the mothers did their other duties. The view that emphasises women’s responsibility in caring for children has underestimated the meaning of communities in it (Dominelli 2002a, 115). This was particularly apparent in my study. Extended family lived in the same house, and they shared the worries and joys related to children. This comes together with the communal benefit to raise children to be part of the community and to learn communal habits and values, which helps maintain traditions and cultural heritage.

Motherhood as a duty and ‘livelihood’

Women’s role as mothers is universally seen crucial as women can provide new members for the communities and societies, and this was especially apparent in Nepal, where the care system was strongly based on generations’ treaty. The women were responsible for the outcome of their mothering, and mothers often were blamed for their children’s bad behaviour (e.g. Huang 2001, 365). As mothers are seen as giving and self-sacrificing in traditional communities, this is questioned by many feminist critiques, which call for the needs of the women as valuable individuals (e.g. Dominelli 2002a, 113).

The duties and responsibilities of motherhood are context-related and they also mirror the political and economic systems. In the communities of this study, it was generally accepted to send a child to an institution—a children’s home or hostel (boarding school)—which was perceived as way of securing the child’s future. It was seen as an opportunity and a path to success, especially if the institution had foreign contacts. This resonates with the ‘encouragement’ that the children heard from their parents: ‘Be big’, or ‘keep the foreign contacts so one day you might get to live abroad’. The acceptance of sending one’s children away from home was based on the idea that it would provide a good education and future for their children. This concept was affected by poverty and a global economic imbalance. Single mothers especially struggled to take care of their children without the community’s support, and Western contacts were seen as a way out of the economic challenges. As there was not a public day care system, a woman who worked, for example, at a construction site and did not have a family around had to take her infant along to the hazardous environment. In this context, single mothers were struggling to fulfil the ‘duties’ of motherhood—to ensure safe and healthy environment to their children. The act of

giving one's child away to better socio-economic conditions was seen as carrying mother's responsibility for protection.

I consider motherhood as a contextual issue also through the concept of freedom. When the women's paid labour is prioritised over motherhood, it joins with the market-based paradigm in which work is seen to contribute to the society's economy and therefore all its members are encouraged to work (Gilbert 2008, 4). Hence, in this type of setting, neoliberal endeavours frequently are encompassed in women's 'freedom of choice'. In the communities of this study, motherhood was not seen primarily as a choice: Having children was women's duty, and they had to serve the community rather than the market system.

The question of the choice of motherhood is associated with livelihood. Raising children was the women's major contribution to communal resilience in the research communities (e.g. Darychuk and Jackson 2015, 453). This was seen in, for example, Didi's and Buhari's main objectives of ensuring good lives for their children. When the 'pension' system was relied upon by the community and family, the children were supposed to secure the parents' life in the future. Therefore, having a child became a means of livelihood. This led to differences in the value of having a daughter versus son: Sons were still a common preference in the communities (Gudbrandsen 2013, 157; 166). For example, Buhari did not fulfil her duty as a 'good mother' because she had not provided a son. Her relationship with her two daughters obviously was a loving one, but in her family, it was not considered as valuable as if she had gotten a son. This comes together with patriarchy in family structures: A girl was expected to move to her husband's house in the future, whereas a son was the one who stayed with his parents and provided security for them. There was a change, however, in terms of viewing and valuing the daughters. Women gradually allowed their daughters more freedom than compared to themselves, which shifted the generations' treaty and targeted to expand women's livelihood means in the future.

Motherhood as a strength

Women being seen primarily as mothers and carers has been censured by feminist social work discourses (Dominelli 2002a, 111). However, in the communities of this study, it was deemed odd and unfeminine not to want children. The women viewed motherhood as a crucial part of their lives and as an asset. They expressed the joy of motherhood as being an important factor in their identities and their positions as members of a community. It also bolstered their role toward the men. They held the key to communal continuity, which was highly valued. This establishes views that are oppositional to feminist social work. The role of the women as mothers and carers was not viewed as a shackle but as a privilege for the women. Channa (2013, 177) stated that children are extensions of their parents in the communal setting. The women supported this view, as their dreams mostly involved ensuring a good life for their children: 'When I see my

children happy, that makes me happy'. They described their goal as being able to offer their children the lives that they could not have. They also emphasised the meaning of education in the well-being of their children, regardless of the child's gender.

Motherhood appeared as a strength for the women, especially in difficult social situations. For example, Buhari's connection with her two daughters was her 'reason to live' when she was facing unfair treatment from her husband and his family. Motherhood was her greatest strength in hard times. This could be expanded to wider communal and contextual ways of viewing the women's position: linking motherhood to spirituality, as the feminine goddesses were perceived as the providers of the continuity of life through the land, fertility or peace building (e.g. Gross 2002). Motherhood also connected women to each other and they shared its responsibilities mutually, which promoted their well-being (e.g. Motta and Seppälä 2016). Shared responsibilities and parenting as a communal issue strengthened communal bonds. The communal links of motherhood that functioned as strengths for individual women are important to recognise in promoting change and development with a decolonising lens.

'Sisters'—Communal interconnections

When I walked along the village's paths with the women, I constantly heard the questions: *sanchai chha, didi* (Are you ok, Big Sister?) or *kata ho, bahini* (Where are you going, Little Sister?). When greeting each other in a tea shop, for example, the women called one another as sisters. This naming custom through a communal lens crossed the caste and ethnic boundaries: I, as an outsider, also was called *didi* or *bahini* as a sign of accepting me as a member of the neighborhood or a welcomed guest. The naming through kinship connected the women in the community and at a wider level. Within this 'circle of kin' (Holmberg 2014, 317), there were, however, certain hierarchies that were related to a woman's age and marital status.

The connection among the women in the communities was also spatial. Most of the discussions I had with them were organised in groups. It was natural for them to have conversations in the shared, open areas—together as 'we'. We-talk refers to the communal identity, which appeared in the use of space: Rooms were shared, and privacy was not admired. The infrastructure of the villages was built to support communality. Houses were close to each other, and most of the activities and daily routines were done outdoors. There was communal coherence also in the practises that were done in public spaces, where exceptional action was easily recognised.

The spatial connection of the women also touched their routines, which were practised in common areas like water taps or fields. Those were places for them to socialise and connect with each other as well as to exchange information. This connection was seen in the research discussions when the women supported each other by completing each other's sentences and sharing eye contact. I link this with communal coherence and support, but also with control, where the individuals had limited space to dissent

or oppose commonly accepted views. Control extended to cultural manners and relating to the other people in the community. The term 'sister' indicated belonging but also carried expectations to act in a culturally appropriate way. Thus, the concept of 'sisterhood' did not recognise sexual diversities or gendered variations.

The connection among the women denoted communal resilience, which increased their capacity to cope with difficulties. Especially adverse and hard times reinforced the community networks and social ties (e.g. Darychuk and Jackson 2015, 448). The informal support that the women signalled to each other was mostly actualised in sharing sorrows and joys while doing daily tasks together. For example, Didi and Budi lived in neighbouring houses, and when I had a discussion with Didi, Budi came along and vice versa. They appeared to be stronger together, and said that they shared their experiences and feelings with each other. Yet there were discussions, too, when they were alone, which shows that their relationship was based on support, not control. Thus, the bonds through sisterhood were built on trust and mutual sharing. Sisterhood and communal bonds were also central attributes in the women's activism promoting gender equality in their communities.

However, Budi also brought forward an interesting aspect of sisterhood that challenged the communal coherence: She said that they shared their concerns, but only to a certain point, and they did not want to share the most negative things with each other, because 'everyone has their own problems.' This illustrates an ideal of individuals carrying their own sorrows, which is inconsistent with a view where 'everyone knows the problems of the others.' The idea of keeping their problems to themselves was also beneficial to the communal coherence, as it speaks of a sense of not wanting to burden others with their individual problems. Communalities, on a wider level than through naming or sisterhood, was still intertwined with class, caste and age orders that created ruptures and hierarchies among the women. Therefore, sisterhood should be acknowledged as a shared experience of womanhood and resilience while recognising the ruptures and gaps within their bonds.

Activists and leaders—'Mothers' of the communities

Outside of the women's traditionally perceived positions through their communal relationships, they also took on the roles of activists, mainly through their registered organisations. They promoted changes in their position and communal development through, for example, community banking and microloan practises. This expanded the women's spaces from the private to public sphere and from domestic to economic practises. This was not a straightforward development, however, which I consider more in Chapters 5–7. In this measure, the women related to the men not solely through their family relationships or in maintaining traditions, but as contributors to the wider communal welfare. This had increased recognition of the women outside of the family sphere, as their organisations often were approached in terms of challenges with poverty

or family relations, such as violence or alcoholism. The men did not participate in those meetings, but they supported them by indicating appreciation and giving space for the women's activism. This support also relied on the fact that the activism was more about promotion than resistance, which did not harm the communal coherence.

The women's activism in their organisations was communally bonded. It was linked to the idea and practises of sisterhood and motherhood: They perceived women as one group whose position was to be promoted communally. Motherhood was one of the leading issues within their activism, as in promoting maternal health issues or supporting the children of the families who were struggling with poverty. Thus, activism was tied to the traditional communal orders and respect for each other, and it also was drawn from spirituality and religious values (more in Section 6.1). Within the women's activism, the key roles were with the organisations' leaders. It was personalised to them and their nearest companions. Thus, the leaders' families, their husbands and children, also played a vital role by creating space for their activism.

The organisational leaders were originally from the same circumstances and backgrounds as the other women. They did not come from outside of the communities, nor were they more educated or socially or economically advantaged. The women leaders in two different communities, Ama and Hajur Ama, had climbed up the social ladders by different means and had gained central social positions within their communities. They both had charming personalities, and their older age also supported their climb since older women's views were more respected. They were social leaders, and all the projects and decisions that related to the women's organisations were filtered through them. Their houses were the biggest in their communities, with a central location nearby the road, which meant a lot in hilly areas where the road was one sign of 'progress'. Most of the other women seemed to accept the leaders' higher positioning, because they generated new projects and gained financial benefits for the communal activism.

Actually, this was not my aim. I don't know how I ended up here. I think I was more like a frog in a well. I didn't know anything. I still don't know how to read and write. ... I was kind of not educated and went to see how the other people are doing, and slowly I got the knowledge from out of that well.

Ama

Ama's community consisted of an ethnic group that had traditionally been considered as inferior. She had created ways to obtain benefits by leaning on the political reforms aimed at deconstructing the caste system and ethnic discrimination. She had gotten governmental and international financial support for a project that provided goats to poor families, and for her family's 'home-stay' program based on the ideals of participatory tourism (e.g. Höckert 2015). She had parlayed her 'inferior' background

into a source for benefits, gaining recognition for the ethnic minority as well as material resources. Her activism was supposed to benefit the whole village; she indicated a group mentality in her talks and as arguments for the programs.

Hajur Ama had started by 'going out to public spaces and talking with men' in the outer community. She described how she went to different official meetings where she initially felt like a 'forest woman' who did not know how to sit on a chair. It took time and many unsuccessful attempts before she really felt she was accepted as an activist among men. Both of the women leaders expressed that the first step for becoming activists was to expand their social space and communicate with men in another community and on a societal level. This was related to complex social dynamics with intersecting gendered, ethnic, caste and class structures, which I consider more when analysing the complexities of the transition in Chapter 5.

Ama's and Hajur Ama's positions had gained visibility among the communities. Their locations by the main road indicated power, as they were the sole highways to get to the villages, which led to the setting where the leaders were able to control the research practises and relationships with the women living in lower parts of the villages. This also symbolised their power in promoting the changes, even though they also supported the traditional family and community values.

You are more than our own mother.

Mahila

My mother is a hero.

Chori

The position of the women leaders had garnered respect and admiration among the other community members, as they were like celebrities when they walked in the villages: People came to talk to them, to tell their miseries and get support. A valued position of a woman beyond the relational and domestic sphere is perceived as one of the feminist achievements. Still, the complexity of the celebrations around them was intersectional (e.g. Drolet 2010). The women's leadership and activism remained mostly with the women in the highest positions and their favoured peers. They failed in expanding to the women of the lowest social positions, who were struggling with fundamental issues such as absolute poverty, caste discrimination, stigmatisation and a lack of capabilities. The gender aspect was not the only aspect in the leadership, but it was intertwined with economic, class and racialised power relations. Despite the communal ideology behind their talk, the leaders had partially adapted the top-down and centralised paradigm of the change, which has been typical for development pro-

grammes (Huang 2001, 363). I discuss this more in terms of the complexities of the changes, as this kind of leadership—outside of their contributions— also created new kinds of hierarchies on top of the traditional ones.

4.2 Daily routines and responsibilities

She wakes up before sunrise to fetch water from a common tap. Queuing may take an hour, but at the same time, she can have a chat with the other women of the village. She lights the firewood in the corner of the kitchen and starts cooking tea for the family, then continues with preparing lunch. After lunch, she goes to work in the field—owned either by her family or others—to dig, cut and cultivate. While her back is bent for work, she chats with the villagers, sings harvesting songs and laughs at the village's funny incidents. The oldest woman of the family brings afternoon tea to the field. Before the sunset, she collects firewood into a basket carried with a headband and walks curvy paths uphill to the home. Just before the darkness falls, she rounds the house and yard with praying rituals to protect the family, its animals and property from the devils. She rings the bell and burns incense in front of the god's statue before entering to prepare dinner. After everybody has eaten, she has time to sit with her family and watch TV before tiredness wins.

Research diary 21.10.2012

Housekeepers—Maintaining the household

The women's function in the domestic sphere was principal, as they did most of the housework in the families (e.g. Joshi 2000, 265). In a traditional Nepalese family system, the women's main tasks were cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, fetching water and wood, and rearing children and livestock (e.g. Maharjan, Bauer and Knerr 2012, 114). As the diary note expresses, the women's days were filled with physical work, and those routines repeated mostly from day to day. Duties framed their social life, communal bonds and identities. Despite being physically hard, the women represented their duties also through their connectivity to the land and community, which were crucial elements in their well-being.

The rhythm of the routines was set by the sunrise and sunset, as well as the different seasons. They varied according to geographic location and the women's social positioning, and exceptions in them occurred mostly due to religious festivals or different family and community events. Routines specified social structures and the connection or disconnection of the people; they offered a mirror to scrutinise both the appreciation of or discrimination against women in their families and the nearest communities. The routines contained a strong gender division. They were one of the crucial issues

that separated the women from the men of the family. This division and the routines were mostly taken for granted in the communities, which also united the women of the villages who mainly acted out similar routines in their daily lives.

Maintaining a household was one of the main responsibilities of the women in their daily contexts. It contained routines that kept up the practical functioning of households. The women of this study were aligning with a traditional housework division: They did the biggest amount of housework in their families. For example, washing clothes was one of the routines that made the women visible, as one common sight in the villages was women in crouched positions rubbing, rinsing and drying clothes. Common taps, where this mostly happened, were fruitful places to observe and participate in the women's daily lives, as their actions and relating there offered a place to analyse the women's social position.

The village tap is crowded. Women carry buckets filled with laundry; men's clothes, sarees, kids' clothes, shoes and bottles to be filled. Few men come to fetch water, but they don't touch the soap. After queueing for quite a while, it is my turn to enter the tap with my laundry. I think that I know what I need to do: Fill the bucket with water, add the powder, rub the clothes with the piece of soap on the stone. But I get into trouble. The other women come to fill their buckets even when I think it's my turn. They notify me that I am using too much water, and I get confused when a woman takes my clothes and puts them in her bowl. I do not know what should I do. The attention that I'm getting and the talk about me feel uncomfortable.

I need to give up. I do not know the rules of the tap.

Next time, I go with Bahini and observe the tap with new eyes. I should have gone with more confidence, to put my bucket on the line and not to be confused when others overtake me, because there are certain rules on the tap. Small bottles or buckets get to be filled first. There are two taps. One is for households and the other for washing clothes. There is mutual respect and connection with the women; a woman washes another one's back. They share the hottest news about whose husband is sick, whose daughter's wedding is coming soon, what vegetables they ate today, when the last bathing day was, how this year's harvest is.

Research diary 09.12.12

Common taps in the villages appeared to be mostly the women's area and they formed a public space where the women were able to have conversations in a shared female sphere. Since the washing was done by hand, it took a lot of the women's time and effort, and it formed a big part of their daily lives. A social network and set of

cultural habits had developed around the taps, as they were the places to maintain social relationships with the other women. It was an important routine to connect the women to each other, whereas it also was a tool for social control.

Daily routines functioned as the indicators that showed either respect or discrimination towards the women in their families. When Buhari, for example, got her bad reputation because of her mental imbalance and inability to work in the field, her husband showed his power and dissatisfaction by not allowing her to wash his clothes. Even though this could be perceived as liberating, as it set Buhari free from one of her responsibilities, she was not happy with this 'liberation': It diminished her value in the family. One indicator of the women's value was 'letting them do the housework'. After taking a second wife, Buhari's husband let her wash his clothes again, which brought back Buhari her honour. This shows how patriarchal control and dominance was ensconced in indicating appreciation and value for the women's work. What was remarkable in this setting was that Buhari could not negotiate her role in terms of her responsibilities. This indicated an unbalanced gendered power relation in which the women's self-determination was limited by patriarchal control, even in the field, where they were the most appreciated and valued.

As with washing clothes, the structures around eating similarly indicated cultural values and social status as well as power relations. One general way of greeting and opening a conversation with other community members was the question: *khana hana bhayo* (Have you eaten?). It was a way to express how people were getting on; if they had eaten, it indicated that everything was fine. This illustrated the attitude towards food and eating, as its meaning went beyond nourishment. Meals followed a certain rhythm on most of the days. This unspoken but common rhythm made the women be home at a certain time of the day, as they were the ones responsible for the family's meals. It restricted their time and social space to the home and therefore functioned as a communal and patriarchal control.

The women's talk of their eating manners, company and place offered windows to analyse their social position. This aligns with Antti Karisto's (2004, 18) analysis of people representing their identities, separating or connecting, and communicating with each other while they eat. Different eating manners and ways of viewing food represented culture and social relationships. Individual stories, as well as societal changes and structural features, were represented around the meals (e.g. *ibid.*). Women often used eating as an expression to describe their social position. For example, Hajur Ama, the leader of a women's organisation, described her path to leadership and social promotion as going 'outside and eating together with the men of the outer community'. She explained how this step encouraged her to start talking with people more openly and how it broke social barriers, as she got a chance to share her opinions with the men outside of her family. Eating represented social space with gendered and spatial power structures that Hajur Ama's actions challenged.

Eating manners and socialising around them included divisions between people and groups. Those who still believed in the caste system did not eat with people from a lower caste or a different ethnic group that they considered to be impure. This indicates class-intercepted and racialised power hierarchies (e.g. Westwood 2002) that set the poorest people in a vulnerable position, making them dependent on the solidarity of the people in higher positions. Also, gender-based discrimination was actualised in the eating culture, for example, when a woman ate her dinner in the corner of the room, separated from the other family, and was not allowed to touch the food of the others. This was based on the traditional notion that a menstruating woman was impure and therefore had to be isolated from the common space where the rest of the family ate. I discuss this issue more in terms of promoting the transition in Chapter 7.

Eating as a platform for social structures and power hierarchies indicates the communal and relational nature of it. Most of the Nepalese people eat variations of the same meal, *dal bhat*, twice a day. This was one sign of social connectedness across the country, in spite of cultural and ethnic differences. Women used the illustrations linked to eating and food production (such as cooking, dining, harvesting) also as a mirror to their freedom and connectedness with the community. Besides power relations, eating was surrounded by solidarity among the people:

I have 400 other people [women in the community], and I have never separated any people. We are all the same family. ... If we eat, everybody will eat. If one doesn't eat, nobody eats.

Ama

Martha Nussbaum's (1999b, 235) 'list of capabilities' in terms of development discourses offers a relevant framework for investigating the meaning of eating in the women's social position. Primarily, it relates with two of the first capabilities on the list: life and bodily health. In the context where some people struggled with absolute poverty, this aspect appeared particularly important. When there was communality but parallel hierarchies and poverty, eating turned into the ideal of solidarity, as Ama's view illustrates. Yet reality did not completely follow her ideal. Nussbaum (ibid.) continued that what makes life humane are the goals of dignity and choice along with the basic capabilities that maintain survival. The women aimed to increase dignity by relating it to surviving. Thus, they prioritised the basic capabilities rather than the choice.

The routines related to washing clothes and eating were the main tasks of the women in maintaining the households. I used them as examples, because they were the most visible roles of the women in this category, and the women used them to illustrate their social position. At first glance, these routines appeared restrictive, but they also indicated the women's value and importance in their communities. Women used remarkably more

hours for household work compared to men, which defined their central position but prevented them from reaching for other the capabilities that Nussbaum (1999b, 235) outlined. However, there were other capabilities cloaked in these routines: Women used their imagination and thought, affiliation and emotions (ibid., 235) within the routines, especially in communicating and supporting each other. This showed how they had developed strengths, such as communality, within the habits that filled their days from sunrise to sunset.

Workers—Ensuring survival

The routines that the women carried out besides housework were mostly located in the fields. Those fields structured the daily lives of the women, who did most of the agricultural work in the communities (e.g. Joshi 2000, 255; Maharjan et al. 2012, 108). The women's work—in addition to housework—was related to ensuring survival and was separated into two categories: farming and labour. The agricultural communities were mainly self-sufficient, and external incomes were partial. Most of the families produced their own food by livestock and farming. This, along with maintaining the households, was related to the basic capabilities of life and bodily health (Nussbaum 1999b, 235). This shows that the women's daily routines were part of the very foundation of livelihood and survival. What made the work of the women in the communities of my study special was their central role in promoting the living of the whole extended family. The women's responsibility in ensuring survival extended to their relations. Women who did not fulfil that task properly faced the threat of discrimination or isolation from the community, which in its extreme form had devastating consequences on an individual level.

There were various cultural attributes hidden in the agricultural work, such as harvesting songs on cutting grass or planting rice, laughter and chats along with the work. Afternoon tea on the fields was a space for socialising and relating with the other villagers, which aligns with the capabilities of affiliation and imagination in Nussbaum's (1999b, 235) terms. The importance of agricultural work in the women's lives also was illustrated by their aims and dreams. When a group of women was asked to outline the most important contributions for their well-being, their suggestion was getting a buffalo for every house of the village. The buffalo was a symbol of wealth, and it was seen as strong and longevous. As a representation of a dream of these women, it expressed the circumstances in which daily routines were about ensuring survival but also indicated their social position.

Within their work, the women experienced the practical challenges that were related to poverty and hindered their daily lives. One of the major challenges was a lack of water. It expanded their working hours, as they had to queue for water from a common tap starting in the early mornings. Also, power imbalances reached the taps with the dilemma of who was prioritised when the scarce water was distributed. The poverty

and practical challenges that occurred in the community deepened class-related and ethnic hierarchies and divisions.

Despite the women's primary contributions to agricultural work in the rural communities, their contributions have been argued to be highly underestimated on political levels and development agendas (Joshi 2000, 255; Maharjan et al. 2012, 106; Kasi 2013, 1; Motta 2013, 39). The women's role in terms of work was both visible and invisible. Even a superficial view of the villages gave the impression that women worked all day long, while the men's role was less visible. The women fetched water and processed food, whereas the men mostly did the harvesting, which is counted and recognised as more productive in economic terms (Joshi 2000, 256; Maharjan et al. 2012, 114). Harvesting days occurred a few times a year, but the women's maintenance work was done daily. This also indicates a division between home production and production for sale and exchange (e.g. Joshi 2000, 257–258). In the traditional concept of work, the women produced goods in-home. This led into a situation that the women's work was not recognised in official documents or in terms of economic freedom. Typically, the women also did not have an ownership over the land that they cultivated and spent the most of their days in (e.g. Pant and Standing 2011, 413). This substantiates that the feminised spheres of work were undervalued from the masculine spheres.

The other angle of women's work was their participation in labour, which was one way to break the traditional gender-based divisions. In terms of the women's position, it could be seen as improvement when women were allowed to work outside of their homes and contribute to the income that secured their families' life. This was mostly accomplished by producing alcohol and selling it outside home or being a cleaner in a nearby hotel or school. This indicates, however, that the women's work that contributed to the family's economic situation was still heavily based on a gender division: It was either done at home or consisted of the women's traditional spheres, thus keeping them in their predefined slots.

This value-related issue over the women's work was also linked to wider structures than communal appreciation. The question of 'productivity' is complex when the view is enlarged to global structures and the capitalist ideals within them. Because the women's role was crucial in social reproduction, which was not perceived as economically contributive, arguing for its economic value makes the family and community—and the women's role in it—a capitalist partnership (Motta 2013, 39). In this setting, the issues such as health, education, housing, child care, sexuality, fertility and the family are perceived as the relationships that produce new labourers to support capitalism—thus, the private and domestic become power-ridden and political (ibid.).

Even though it breaks with the traditional view of women's space being restricted mostly to the home, getting women out of the house to work did not completely deconstruct the traditional gender-based division. Black feminists have argued that the problem is not in the women working in the home but in the fact that it is undervalued

(e.g. Dominelli 2002a). Some of the women of my study indicated that they were happy to be able to do the ‘women’s work’ and saw it as a restriction when they had to do labour work after being widowed or divorced. This is tied to the fact that the women still had to—even when working outside of the home—do their traditional work inside the home, which increased their workload. Breaking some of the traditional divisions of work did not, as such, function as ‘liberating’ the women in a context where there was no day care system or where poverty did not give them a chance to rest.

Cultural agents—Representing culture and religion

Culture was one essential—yet complex—determinant of the women’s position in the researched communities. The women had a specific role in actualising culture and religion in their daily contexts. Daily routines were affected by beliefs, attitudes and manners that represented religion and traditions, such as stories, rituals, festivals and clothing. They illustrated the women’s position in relation to men, to each other and to the community on a wider level. However, it is important to recognise that culture is not a static set of activities or conceptions; it is constantly changing, and people and groups are reconstructing it in their daily lives (e.g. Siikala 1997, 20). Many cultural elements were transferred from one generation to the next through different traditional stories—stories from ancient times, that were told by grandparents and their grandparents. The children listened to those stories and learned about the dangers and joys, responsibilities and myths of life. The stories also taught them how to be good people, how to carry out their duties and what a ‘good life’ is. They were told orally, and developed from the cultural and climatic surroundings. Those stories were unique in carrying the cultural heritage within.

According to Bikash, many of the traditional stories include a patriarchal message; for example, a story about a woman who ‘drinks water as a husband’s blood’, or where she greets her husband by drinking water from his feet. Those stories include the patriarchal archetype of a woman who is humble, obedient and serves her husband. They were part of the traditions, and they conveyed the perceptions of common morality and lifestyle. Even though in my research context, these kinds of stories were treated as symbolic, and women usually did not follow them in practise anymore, they still read the stories and heard them in temples, which reinforced the message of a woman’s role as inferior towards men. Yet, there also were stories of strong women—goddesses who won the war and promoted peace—and of women’s magical powers, such as being able to create new people (e.g. Gross 2002). Thus, the traditional stories included both restrictive and supportive sides of the women’s position in the communities.

Besides the stories, rituals were strong determinants of the women’s daily lives. Women started their days with prayer, ringing the bells and blessing a new day. Spirituality was one of the main aspects of their daily lives, whether they were Buddhist or Hindu. These different religions carry many similarities, and there were no apparent

conflicts between people due to the religions. Nepal is known for the harmonious co-existence of different religions (Pant and Standing 2011), which was repeated among the women of my study.

The smell of incense fills the room: ginger, smoke, rose, lavender, cinnamon. A small statue of Buddha shines in the candlelight in the corner. Ama stands in front of the statue with her traditional, colourful dress and flower necklaces. The room is filled with peace and harmony when she repeats the mantras and burns the incense. I can feel the warmth of the candles. She sprinkles water on the statue from a bronze decorated pot. She has left some fruits, rice, bread and money on the plate for the gods. 'Do you want to see a puja?', she had asked me earlier. This was a special puja, a praying ritual, in a special room. When walking around the villages, I also see women and men practicing pujas by the big trees, the stone in the yards and in little caves on the hills.

Research diary 12.01.2013

Praying rituals—*puja*—were one of the most visible cultural practises of the women. Their role in practicing religion was fundamental in everyday life settings, mostly in their homes, whereas in the temples, festivals and special occasions, the leading roles belonged to the men. This indicated a gendered division in the religion, where the women's space was primarily seen in the domestic sphere. However, when women did *puja* in their homes, it gave them the position of a 'protector' of the house. In terms of the women's position, this can be seen in two ways. It illustrates the women's value and crucial position in the family, as they were powerful enough to evict devils and earn the gods' protection. It also could negatively affect the women's position, such as when undesirable circumstances in the family sometimes were blamed on a woman's bad *karma*, as she could not keep the gods happy. This also was seen in a woman being blamed for her husband's death.

Mel Gray, Michael Yellow Bird and John Coates (2008, 55) stated that indigenous people's practises often acknowledge nature and all its connections through prayers, ceremonies and rituals. In my research context, nature and especially the connection to the land were a big part of the culture and spirituality. Religious rituals followed the circulation of nature, which determined the practises of the days and seasons. Women, by doing morning and evening prayers, were important in maintaining traditions and reaching for spiritual goals, which still strongly determined the lives of rural communities. Women's role as agents of spiritual rituals indicated an appreciation that often was invisible in terms of their work.

Aside from the daily rituals, culture and religion were celebrated frequently in festivals. Festivals are a big part of Nepalese culture, and on the communal level, they

were the most common reasons to stop the daily routines related to work and survival. The festivals celebrated different gods—or cows, brothers, women, flowers or dogs, to mention just a few reasons. Festivals, with their colourful clothing, food, music and dance, were strongly ritual-based, and they were carried out in families and communities, in homes and temples, and on the streets and in fields. The women's role in festivals was in their organisation—cooking, serving and decorating the houses—but they also represented the culture in their dancing and in their vibrant outfits, with visually remarkable glitter, makeup and jewellery:

It's Nepalese New Year 2071. The street is filled with colourful lights, music and flowers. I approach a crowd of people on the street gathered around young women dancing. The colours of their traditional dresses are sparkling in the lights. They move in a stable order, with graceful motions and smiles. People clap their hands along to the music.

Research diary 14.04.2014

Dancing was a major part of the festivals in the communities. The women performed outside of their basic duties for survival and housework, visible and entertaining. But behind their moves, there were restrictions—frames into which the women had to fit. Dancing included rules; it indicated freedom but also control, as it was limited to a certain style. It represented the women's sexuality yet was morally controlled. In terms of the women's position, it was important to interpret the norms and the lack of the women's self-determination within the dancing culture.

One example of the festivals being conducted by cultural norms and patriarchy was a yearly festival called *Teej*. This festival is dedicated to women. They were excited to dress up in their *sarees* and gather to the temples to celebrate. They appeared happy and proud about the festival, and they told me that they celebrated womanhood. In *Teej*, the women were visible; they gathered in a public space, out of their traditional space in the homes and fields. They got free time from their other duties. The temples were filled with colourful, dancing and laughing women with strong cultural self-consciousness and a sense of communality. Yet the songs were linked to the women's traditional position through their relationship to men, as unmarried women prayed to get a good husband, while married women sang and danced for their husband's health and long lives. When celebrating *Teej* with the women, I noticed a couple of things in terms of their social position: First, the women were able to expand their social space when it came to their role as cultural or religious agents. The second observation was that despite being a women's festival, it maintained patriarchal structures, as they were dancing and praying for the men's health and lives.

Clothing also was one of the essential cultural determinants that indicated differences between the social classes and ethnic groups as well as the women's position. For

example, one of the signs of widowhood was a white dress worn for a year after the husband's death. Wearing white clothes also restricted women from practicing certain cultural manners, like celebrating at festivals or eating spicy food. When Didi refused to do that for a year, she was judged by the people of the community; they had seen it as a lack of respect to her husband. Nevertheless, Budi expressed that it was also a relief when a woman wore white as a symbol of sorrow, so people knew to face her with respect for her loss. She also saw that the white dress gave a grieving woman the freedom not to attend celebrations. This indicated the tradition was also a symbol of respect for the feelings of loss and sorrow. Thus, this tradition involving clothing had an interesting impact on the women's position, as appreciation was tangled with control. This connects with the complexity of viewing the traditions as both a supportive and restrictive matter in the women's lives. It also indicates the importance of rituals as part of the representation of a culture and emotions as a communal matter.

Representing culture and religion through stories, rituals, festivals and clothing had an important place in the lives and practises of the women. They illustrated the value that the women had in their communities, but they also repeated traditional, patriarchal power structures and gendered discrimination and dominance over the women's life. The women saw those cultural representations basically as their strengths, providing them courage, communality, hope and also free time from their hard work.

4.3 Duties of women in determining their position

Rewati: So, what makes you a good woman here? What do you have to do and be?

Didi: To respect older people and the family, to be obedient with them and the husband, and take care of the children. Be there at the right time, clean your house and, yeah, be disciplined and responsible. And do your duties.

R: What are the duties?

D: To cook and to keep the house clean, to take care of the children and send them to school, to respect the elderly and the husband.

R: And what is a bad woman?

D: Those who just walk in the market and don't come home, and those who don't take care of their children, or who disobeys her father-in-law and mother-in-law and the husband. ... The women who drink are bad women.

...

R: So, for example, a little girl, how does she learn to be such a good girl?

D: So, most of the things we learn by seeing, seeing from others. So, everybody does that; everybody has to follow that. [...] It's from the parents and seeing others. It's also from understanding yourself. Like if your husband goes outside and has to work there, so you have to do inside. If the woman goes outside, she should understand herself.

‘Good women’—Carers and moral role models

I analysed the women’s traditional roles through relationships and daily routines, which are intertwined with their duties. The duties show the communal basis of my research context. The individuals’ duties were linked to the community’s functionality. This also was seen in the tendency for most of the gender-sensitive projects and development approaches in Nepal to be community-based (Nikku 2012; O’Kane 2002). Duties guaranteed the community’s functionality as each member had a specific role in maintaining it. My data contains many stories about the women who had a strong position in their community and family. These women, who were categorised as ‘good women’ in their communities, had fulfilled their list of responsibilities. The gendered division of the duties in the communities was not equal: The women’s list appeared to be longer than men’s.

Budi: I dig the field, plants, vegetables. I clean the cow’s shed, collect grass and firewood. ...

Rewati: And what kind of work does your husband do?

*B: He’s the owner of the house, so he doesn’t have to work. He’s just roaming around.
[laughs]*

Budi’s statement illustrates the unequal share of household duties. Wider rights for men regarding properties and ownership created a situation in which a woman had to carry out more duties to deserve her place and to be a ‘good’ member of the community. Women had mainly internalised this division as their protection and freedom. Budi said she was happy with the roles because she did not have to make tough decisions or take care of the money issues. Duties were vital in communal life. Budi, who was about 52 years old, said that since she had fulfilled her duties—gotten her sons married and had a grandson—in her words, it was her ‘time to die’. This shows the totality of the duties in the lives of the women. Caring formed a cornerstone of the women’s duties within their relationships—as wives, daughters-in-law and mothers—as well as in their routines—housekeepers, workers and cultural agents.

Globally, caring and nurturing have been the leading factors of womanhood, yet this is questioned by different feminists (e.g. Dominelli 2002a). The women’s duties as carers were mostly linked to children, but they also were expanded to wider communal and societal levels. In a communal setting, the women’s role in taking care of the entire family—as well as elderly and sick people—was crucial (e.g. Joshi 2000, 265). Besides taking care of the entire family and the household, as Didi put it, the women’s duties also were to respect elders and the husband. Mirroring the social structures in Nepalese communities (according to age, gender, class, caste and ethnicity), respecting women’s duty meant to be obedient and modest and not to behave or think exceptionally in the community’s terms.

The duty of caring is linked—in Nussbaum’s (1999b, 235) terms—to the basic capabilities of life and the health of the family. These duties were to be fulfilled also in situations where the family or a woman was struggling with poverty, illness or other difficulties, or where she was mistreated, discriminated against or violated. So did for example Thuli Mami in living with her only son, who was violent and oppressive towards her:

My son is like that, he wakes up, and larrrrra [demonstrating the scuff on the floor] ... and he gets alcohol when he gets outside. If he is not drinking, he eats and sleeps. He does nothing. He used to drive [for a living], and I asked why are you not driving, and he said, 'I won't drive another's vehicles now'. And ok, if you want to have your own, then you should have your own money, and then he started to argue with me, and I don't like that, and then I don't feel like talking. What do I talk about with this kind of alcoholic man? You can't have a conversation with that kind of person. They will say bad words and bad things. [...] All my life, I was thinking I have one son, and shit. ... Now what happened. I don't like him. Whatever he does, I don't care about him. But what do I do—when he comes home, I feed him; I take care of him [...]

Thuli Mami

Thuli Mami said that her son had broken her rib as he had got angry when the food was not ready in time. In spite of living in a violent and dominative relationship with him, she was cooking and taking care of him when he was drunk or ill. She was fulfilling her duties as a carer and a mother, even though she experienced violence. She was the only person who had not left him: His two wives had left him because of the violence. Thuli Mami explained that a mother’s responsibility as a carer was stronger than that of a wife’s.

Another research participant, Didi, specified that the duties of a ‘good woman’ were to respect older people and a husband, take care of the children, do housework and be disciplined and responsible. This highlighted the traditional position of the women, which was formed and maintained by communal control. She expressed that the girls learned to be good women by observing others. They were unwritten rules that a girl had ‘to understand herself’. These norms were part of the communal contract in which the older members were expected to represent the models of ‘good women’ for the younger ones. Thus, besides caring, there was a duty of being a moral role model—to transfer the traditional duties of a ‘good woman’ to the next generations. This view also was represented when Buhari was complaining about her husband’s polygamy to the other women, and they supported her husband instead of her, thus acted as moral role models.

According to Didi, a good woman had to ‘be there at the right time’. The women’s space was controlled by their duties, as appearing in the public places was mainly related to their roles of maintaining the households, ensuring survival or representing culture. Public spaces were the arenas to behave and represent oneself as a good woman. This comes together with social coherence. Their behaviour was expected not to contravene the norms by, for instance, dressing up, talking or acting distinctively. The norms relate with the idea of honour, whereby a woman represented her family, and exceptional behaviour was perceived as dishonouring the whole family and disgracing the entire community (e.g. Channa 2013, 168–169). This also is linked to the social practises, relations and social order in the communities, which ensured and maintained the women’s holistic well-being—if the women fit into the position of ‘good women’.

‘Failed women’—On the streets and in lonely rooms

The expectations of a ‘good woman’ led to situations where some of the women were driven to the edges and out of that category. For instance, Buhari communicated that she could not fulfil a good woman’s duties because of sickness and physical weakness. Her inability was perceived as laziness in the family, and that led to silencing and discrimination. When she stood up for her individual desires against the community’s good, she was labelled as a mad or unbalanced woman. The so-called failure that led a woman to the edges of the community was either due to ‘inappropriate’ behaviour or circumstances that restricted the woman’s ability to fulfil her duties. This created a circle that led to exploitation and ostracising. In its extreme form, as in Mamina’s case, it had fatal consequences. This was linked to communal functionality and its treaty for shared responsibilities, yet it was also connected to morality, normativity and ethnic, gendered and sexual exploitation.

Scrutinising the communal edges advances the analysis of the individual-communal relationship: a woman—with her unique personality, abilities, circumstances, wishes, desires or miseries—tangled with ruptures in the communal bonds. When there was a ‘hole’ in the community’s security net, and when a woman fell through it, it became an individual problem. As individuality is outside the traditional view of the communities, it leads to women being excluded and ostracised by their community or women resisting and opposing the communal rules themselves. These women, with their actions or fate, expand the scrutiny beyond the traditional spheres of seeing women as mainly carers or moral role models (e.g. Dominelli 2002a).

Viewing women as individuals includes an ethical paradox: When a woman was scrutinised beyond her communal roles, she risked losing communal support (e.g. Motta 2013, 44). Losing communal support created a threat to survival, as Mamina’s fate indicated. There were, however, also women who were outside of the ‘traditional slot’ (e.g. unmarried) but who were not discriminated against or ostracised. The women

at the extreme edges of the community or beyond it, were both coping and not coping. However, mostly they had not chosen their situations themselves.

Widows and migrated husbands—Women out of the marriage

There are no unmarried women as mothers here. But there are older women who are widows. But they have children who take care of them properly. So, they are not younger like me. There is me and one other woman whose husband took her and her children to India, and when they reached there, he vanished. He just left. So, they came back, and she doesn't know if her husband died or ... So, it's only the two of us single women here. [...]

Didi

There were not many single mothers in the communities of this study, as Didi described. A woman outside of a marriage was an exception. There was one example of an unmarried older woman, a *didi* running a tea shop and living with her brother and his family. There were rumours among the villagers about her parents 'forgetting to arrange a marriage to her'. However, she had gained a central and respected position with her stable and calm appearance in the centre of the community—the tea shop. Her location was a melting pot of the community, and she was usually among the first to hear the village's news. Therefore, while it was rare for women to live outside a marriage, there were exceptions to this, and the communal edges were flexible. Those edges included multiple overlapping power and moral conditions that composed an individual woman's story. According to Sona Joshi (2000, 257), in Nepalese rural communities, single mothers are mostly widows, or their husbands have migrated for labour. Didi talked about her neighbourhood, which contained approximately 30 houses, and a bit further away there were more women whose husbands had migrated, as that was a very common way in Nepal to improve family incomes (Maharjan et al. 2012, 96).

The protection of a woman was fixed as long as relations within the family were stable and followed the traditional order—whether in a marriage or not. A woman who lost her husband had a higher risk of losing her social and economic security. As Didi, a widowed woman, said: 'My main support was gone when my husband died'. Didi's vulnerability grew not only because of losing her husband's support, but she also lost the whole family's support, because her in-laws believed her *karma* had caused the loss. Since she had moved from her birth village, she remained without a community's support. She said that she had been happy and free to carry on a wife's duties as part of the 'communal deal', but after being widowed, she was forced to take on a husband's role as well and carry the responsibility of her two children by herself. This made her

feel burdened. Her views included an interesting take on freedom: Instead of seeing decision-making and the freedom of mobility as privileges, she considered them unsafe and restrictive.

Female-headed households often remained poorer because of their limited access to land and other resources (e.g. Joshi 2000, 256). Women who were the heads of the household also were looked at as having more struggles and were considered the 'poorest of the poor' (Motta 2013, 41; Kabeer 2015, 193). Poverty was intertwined with social dimensions. It led to exclusion, which narrowed the women's chances, and it formed a circle of misfortune. Ishara Mahat (2003, 69) stated that women who got divorced to escape oppressive marriages or who were abandoned or widowed have no social status in Nepalese communities. In a community where social position was the women's insurance for survival, it prevented or hindered them from resisting oppression. Thus, the 'failed' women fell into the very furthest margins of the society.

There was a difference between the social status of a widow and a woman whose husband had migrated. One of the widowed women used to tell people that her husband had migrated, which kept her social status higher than if she had been open about her widowhood. Widowhood was a sign of failure and misfortune: It showed that the woman could not fulfil her duty of keeping her husband alive. In widowhood, there also was sorrow, grief and loss, and in traditional beliefs, it had been a woman's honour to die at the same time as her husband. While this belief had changed in the most traditional communities, it had its effects on the belief that it would have been a wife's duty to protect the husband from dying before her. A woman whose husband migrated was viewed as the opposite of a widow—appreciated and lucky, as she was expected to get remittances from abroad when the migration was labour-based. If the money that the husband sent back home was sufficient, a woman's socio-economic position improved, and her workload decreased. Meanwhile, if the payments were insufficient, a woman's duties for living increased as she had to do the husband's duties as well (Maharhjan, Bauer and Knerr 2012).

The furthest edge of the community was a space of compounded marginalisation. After losing all her communal bonds, those edges befell Mamina. When she was literally dying, no one was willing or able to stop and help her. Our encounter with her was pivotal in that she was able to get humane treatment and get to a hospital. It also helped me to identify crucial elements of the women's position and complex marginalisation. In a very striking way, her story showed the limits of the community and family-based care system. Nine hours' struggle to get her admitted in the hospital and the name 'Unknown' on her admission paperwork revealed just how vulnerable she had become after losing her primary social security of communal support.

Understanding the marginalisation that had led to Mamina's death is a complex process. Information on her background was scant, and Mamina was too weak to speak proper sentences. People in the area seemed to be wary of talking about her. We

had passed by her at the bus stop many times before, and when we asked about her then, the people around had answered that 'she is just a mad woman'. We discovered that Mamina had gotten off the bus in that spot about a year before for an unknown reason. She had been pregnant. A woman in the neighbourhood said that one morning she had found Mamina at the bus stop right after giving birth to the child. When the woman had told to Mamina the child was a girl, she had said, 'If it was a boy, I could have gone home'. The woman adopted the child, and Mamina stayed on the street. Her condition had gradually gotten worse after the birth and the child being taken away from her. Local people had occasionally fed her, and street dogs had been keeping her warm during cold winter nights.

In the hospital, she got a bit stronger. She indicated what she wanted with her gestures; she smiled, held a hand, cried, mourned and, most of all, she followed what was happening around her. Her gestures and eye contact showed that her stigma of being a 'mad' woman was because of her circumstances of being alienated, oppressed and ostracised. Mamina's story had a tragic ending. We spent ten days beside her in the hospital before she passed away. Her exclusion continued even after her death: The municipality's officers buried her body secretly in the forest nearby, because outsiders were not allowed to be buried in the graveyard, and traditional cremation would have been too costly.

The inequality that Mamina faced emerged on various levels and led to this tragic situation. She exemplified extreme segregation and silencing on both communal and societal levels. Mamina's story was linked with the women's traditional role in relationships and in routines that binds them to duties that are key to the community's security. Yet the scrutiny also led to wider social and structural levels and power imbalances: to ethnic (as she was from a different ethnic group and geographic area and spoke a different language), gendered (as she was sexualised and raped on the streets) and spatial (living in a public and open place, she was vulnerable to exploitation and insecurity). These social hierarchies had intersected in her life in a devastating way, and had narrowed her agency to between the bus stop and begging.

There was a struggle between caring and ignorance when facing this woman outside of her original community. The people of the area thanked us for taking care of her. This indicated that they cared, but they did not have the means or resources to trump those consequences of ethnic, social and spatial hierarchies that Mamina faced. Communal coherence led them follow the majority's acts (of not acting), and ethnic boundaries were difficult for individuals to transgress. The silence around her situation and the circumstances that had led her into this disastrous condition on the street were a structural matter. The questions of human dignity were especially stressed when she was literally dying in front of the community's eyes. It appeared as a matter of not belonging and having equal worth as a human being.

The multiple marginalisations that could lead to harsh situations were diverse: Mamina's case was very extreme, but there were other women who were in danger of

ending up in similar situations. Bahini was another woman who was shunned to the very edges of the community. She was a *Dalit*, from an untouchable caste, and her habits led people to discriminate against her, as she did not fulfil the expectations of the community with her appearance or behaviour. She had travelled to a new location to look for better opportunities but found herself an outcast, on the edges of the community and without social security. The marginalisations of Bahini and Mamina had arisen from ethnic boundaries, which alienated them for their appearance and language.

Buhari's story also reveals the diversity within the edges of the communities. She was surrounded by the community to which she had originally belonged, but due to her 'failing' as a woman, she had been marginalised. She did not fulfil the social and gendered expectations, which deepened her marginalisation. She had attempted suicide after her husband took another wife, reinforcing her 'mad woman' label. The other women interpreted her action as instability. Her despair was interwoven with the complexity of communal orders, responsibilities, poverty and the expectations towards the women.

That time, my mum and all the relatives told me that now I was dead to them. They asked me why I did this crazy thing. ... 'You are just a mad woman!'

Buhari

According to Buhari, the women's community suspected her of not being honest about her hard situation in the home. The polygamy was arranged by her parents-in-law, which was as legitimate in the community as official documents. This shows the power of communal relations that leaned on patriarchy: An individual dissenting woman's voice was not heard over the dominant ones, such as the husband and his parents.

At the police station, after my husband said that they had gotten married ... the police said that we have to be together. ... 'Let's not be violent. Go home and be happy, the three of you.'

Buhari

Buhari met the communal fringes due to her resistance and opposition of the communal frameworks that also were supported by official agencies, such as the police. Her resistance did not have any positive response in the community—not among the other women or the men. Her acts were based on her personal view of the 'wrongs' in her life, but this was not agreed to on a communal level. She knew that she would have been able to go to court but that would put her in danger of losing her husband's

support. Thus, she needed to decide between accepting the situation or continuing her resistance at the risk of losing her social safety net.

Communal alienation and abandonment, either within or beyond the communal framework, connected Mamina's, Buhari's and Bahini's stories. They were discriminated against for many reasons that linked with the question of human dignity and diversities: Who is seen, heard and recognised within the multiple margins? Their stories revealed wider societal structures with intersecting hierarchies (e.g. Pant and Standing 2011, 415). They indicated that social issues are penetrated by other aspects—such as economic and epistemological—and the power imbalances within them. Traditional and cultural frameworks and their social orders and practises were supportive for the women as long as they followed the rules, but they also put them in vulnerable positions if they were not able to fit within the norms. Even though each of their stories is unique, their struggle against injustices is wider in a context where imbalanced power structures and ethnic and patriarchal restrictions determine the social orders, duties and practises.

Conclusion

The roles and positions of the women in the daily and communal contexts were actualised in their relationships and routines as wives, daughters-in-law, mothers, 'sisters', activists and leaders, as well as in maintaining the households, ensuring survival and representing culture and religion. In this social setting, the women's role was dichotomous: It was restricted and predefined with patriarchal structures and wider social power imbalances, yet there also were appreciation, respect, hope and strengths shrouded in these structures, exemplifying the multidimensionality of the women's social position. The roles of the women were intertwined with their duties, which determined if they were 'good' or 'failed' women. This was a very crucial matter in the women's lives, because this assessment put them at risk of losing the community's security and support—which had, in very extreme cases, devastating consequences.

In this context, the issues around women's duties were related to the absolute questions of humanity. When I proceed to analyse the changes and the transition, the women's multiple roles and duties in their daily and communal contexts—in its margins, centres and beyond—are in the background of the analysis. They lead to a discussion of what was changing and how, and what the traditional elements were that supported the women's well-being and needed to be preserved. This creates a balance between the traditions and transition, yet avoids a dualistic scrutiny of them, as they both had supportive and restrictive elements that must be analysed with sensitivity to recognise the differences and wider power structures.

समय भनेको खोला जस्तै हो।
दुईपटक त्यही पानीलाई छुन
मिल्दैन किनभने एकचोटी बगेको
खोला फेरी फेरी फर्केर आउदैन।

*Samaya bhaneko khola jastai ho.
Dui patak tyahi panilai chhuna mildaina
kinabhane ekchoti bageko khola
feri ferifarkera aaudaina.*

*Time is like a river.
You cannot touch the same water twice,
because the flow that has passed
will never pass again.*

Buddha



5 Houses on the hills—Rhythms of the transition in the women’s position

Analysing the positions and roles of the women in their families and communities showed that they played a central part in community life (e.g. Darychuk and Jackson 2015, 448), which was expanded to making transformations in it. In this chapter, I analyse the complex network of promoting the changes and the rhythms of the transition in the women’s social position. The transition did not appear as a linear progression towards a stable goal with clear-cut developments; it included different actors and processes that produced multiple dimensions of change with various rhythms. When analysing the transition, it is important to acknowledge its complexity. The analysis of the different dimensions of it is based, in part, on indigenous social work perspectives, which include the recognition of complexity and uncertainty (e.g. Gray and Hetherington 2013, 25).

Transition was shaping the structures of Nepalese society, its economy and politics at a fast-paced rhythm (Section 2.2), but it had limited and slower effects on the daily life and at the communal level. It took time for political changes to reach the communal level, as with polygamy, for which communal ‘law’ trumped legislation in the daily contexts. In this chapter, I focus on the transition at a communal level and the women’s daily life, mirroring it to structural elements when it is relevant. This chapter remains on a concrete level of the transition, asking by whom and how the transition was produced and advanced and what the different rhythms were within it. This concretisation of the complexity of the transition establishes the next analysis level in Chapter 6, which focuses in a more explicated way on the driving forces behind the transition.

According to Beverley Skeggs (2004, 54), using metaphor as part of the analysis is a way to solidify the abstractions of social relations and their constructs. I apply this to the analysis of the complexities of the transition, which was grounded in different meanings and social relations. During the research process—as I tried to make sense of, explicate and analyse the different aspects and dimensions of the transition along with being context-relevant—I ended up using metaphors from the geographic landscapes of my research context. Nepal is known for its geographic diversity: Two-thirds of the landscape is drawn by hills, valleys and mountains on the horizon. Life in the communities was strongly shaped by geographic positions. Hills divided people into different social categories. This division can be seen as a physical and social factor, but also as a symbolic category. Besides providing social slots, hills determined the dimen-

sions and speed of the transition. Central geographic positions faced changes faster, whereas the changes reached remote locations often with a slower rhythm and from different aspects. Therefore, I expose the complexity of the transition by defining it as the rhythms of the transition, with the metaphor of the hilly landscape in which the communities were located.

Seeing downhill from the village's central point: The houses uphill, near the road, are bigger and more colourful than the others. The farther down the hills we get, the smaller the houses get. The location of the house reveals the position of the family. The community's hierarchies can be recognised by viewing the hills. When entering the village, the biggest house greets visitors first. That house belongs to the leader of the women's community.

Research diary 13.12.2012

The hills separated people, but there also were unitive paths and roads. Similarly, there were streams of changes on different levels with various rhythms, where individuals, communities and concepts were under continuous transformation. I categorise four different rhythms of the transition in the communities: *main road* (widespread, mainstream and adapted changes), *footpaths* (slower changes, negotiated with traditions), *uphills* (obstacles that hindered the changes and resistance) and *earthquakes* (sudden, abrupt changes, often a step 'backwards' from the reached changes). The main road of the transition, referring to the mainstream and widespread changes, has two main aspects in my analysis: the women's activism in promoting the transition, as well as the transformation of social and gender relations. Even though I prioritise the active role of the women, I am aware of the risk of the dichotomy that feminist development projects have tended to include in seeing the women in the global South as either marginalised victims or change agents (e.g. Motta 2013). Instead, I lean on a multidimensional view of women as a diverse group with multiple needs and positions. Because the women were seen as members of their community rather than as individuals, the internal social hierarchies of the communities—intersecting ethnic, caste, class and gender hierarchies—affected the transition process.

The footpaths were slower, harder-reached changes that met barriers, but were to happen as echoes of the 'mainstream' changes. They developed through the conflicts of values and conceptions, in terms of the women's role and space in the traditional gender order. There also were different obstacles and resistance that hindered the transition, which I call uphill in geographic terms. The main uphill of the transition were communal hierarchies, the silence of the 'middle sort' of the community, as well as patriarchal family structures. The fourth aspect of the transition is the threat and fact of an earthquake. I scrutinise it in two ways—as destructive realities that made

major changes in the women's lives in an instant, but also as a symbolic framework for investigating the attitudes and ideas that affected the transition.

Transition was affected by different power modalities: social, gendered, ethnic, spatial, visual, sexual, economic and global power structures (e.g. Foucault 1980; Westwood 2002; Skeggs 2004). These power modalities function as a lens through which I examine the transition. They are not presented as a systematic analysis, but are recognised alongside the analysis of the relationship and actions that promoted the transition. Power structures were intertwined with the change process, affecting the rhythm of the changes in, for instance, who was capable of driving for the change and who had the power, time, chance, knowledge or resources to determine what would change and what would be maintained. It also was a question of whose voice was heard. The women with spatial and ethnic power got the most opportunities to promote the transition both in their family lives and wider in the community. Thus, the 'mainstream' changes were to be advocated by the higher positions' activism, and they were to be adapted by the majority in the communities.

The complexity of the transition also refers to the viewpoint that it was not inevitably heading towards social justice in every manner, and there also were traditions that the women saw as protective and worth maintaining. Focusing on the transition does not mean to dismiss or undervalue the traditions. I try to recognise the traditions that indicate the cultural distinctiveness and important identity and heritage the women deemed worth saving. Like the landscape, where green hills turned into blue near the horizon and eventually joined with the white peaks of the Himalayas, the change process was complicated with its curves and bumps. The complex range of changes in the women's social position leads towards a transition, to new communal ways of positioning and being a woman. Only after a longer period of time will it be seen where those different changes have taken the women's position. Yet understanding its dynamics can lead to fairer and more just practises for balancing between promoting changes and preserving the traditional and cultural contexts.

5.1 'Main road'—Widespread and adopted changes

Budi: In my childhood, my parents didn't even allow me to stay in my neighbours' house overnight. But now, there's so much change; there's no such discrimination. Women even can migrate to a foreign country. So, there is so much change, and there is not so much discrimination in mobility and even in education.

Enni: ... And can you say in what time this kind of change has happened? In how many years?

Budi: [counting] ... fifteen to sixteen years ... and a radical change within six to seven years.

There were roads that connected the people of different hills, like the changes that were common in different social slots and hierarchic levels were actualised through connectivity. They formed a zigzag of channels, where changing ideas, concepts, goods, habits and people got mixed and interacted with each other. There were visible and widely spread changes in the gendered social order and women's position that could be recognised in the communities. Although the word 'main road' sounds straightforward, even a wide-scale transition was not a smooth way forward or a development without bumps. It was a curvy road, with cliffs on one side and hills on the other—which hindered, resisted and reformulated the changes. This symbolises the fact that the widespread changes had developed with complications. However, these 'mainstream' changes—such as family planning, girls' schooling, widened public space for women, migration or banking—were accepted and internalised within a short time. These changes increased the women's independence, social space and knowledge (e.g. Dhungel and Ojha 2012). In that respect, the women gained more liberty in decision-making and freedom in their life choices. However, freedom and choice were convoluted concepts in the communities, which I consider more in Chapter 7.

These changes were communally accepted, and therefore traditional communal coherence was maintained within them. These goals towards women's autonomy did not threaten the traditions that the women were willing to maintain. These changes leaned on the ideals of freedom and individualism at first glance. From this angle, it would seem that the transition moves towards the liberation of women. However, its directions were more byzantine, and 'liberation' was not valued outright among the women. The main road of the transition often was linked to wider structures, such as political changes. For example, the women expressed that the Maoist insurgency and its aftermath on a wider societal level had effects on the women's overall position in Nepal.

So, the radical change seems to be after the Maoist conflict. ... Like, if you look at 1996, when the Maoist insurgency started, then after that there have been so many changes happening in the women's position.

Rewati

Because the armed conflict needed more fighters, the armies started to recruit women to their political interests. This expanded women's social space outside of the traditional, and it became generally acceptable for the women to join the army or police. This was problematic, as it increased violence and caused more orphans, torture and rapes. The army was a place for women to act in a masculine sphere, yet after the conflict, they had to return to their communal slots, which included problems in re-adaptation to their original communities due to their armed background (Pokharel and Niroula 2016). However, many women perceived the time of conflict

as a turning point for the women's position. It started many reformations in legislation that had discriminated against women (Shah 2017). The women's organisations of this research were established during the same period—after the conflict—which was linked to the changes in general attitudes about women being able to represent themselves in public spaces.

Women's activism that promotes change

This morning I found myself wondering why women from all over the village were heading in the same direction, wearing pink shawls on their shoulders. The day was young; mist was still covering the landscape. I got curious and wanted to figure out what was going on. They gathered around the biggest tree in the village. This tree has seen several generations as a common meeting place for the men as the representatives of the village. This time, they were women. There were dozens. One woman started talking, and they all laughed. Then they started singing.

After wondering for a while, I learned that the women gather once a month to talk about communal banking, and the songs that they sing are traditional ones about women's duties, such as housework, harvesting and so on. I got curious. These women—silenced in so many ways—seemed to be very empowered this morning, united in a way that gives the feeling of power and strength that nobody can restrict or oppress.

Diary note 29.10.2011

The scent of power floating in the air that morning was distinct, and it awakened my interest to know more about the rural women's activism. The questions started to flow in my mind: Was it the affiliation of the women that made this feeling of power possible? What can this kind of interconnection gain in terms of gender justice and the women's position? This gathering expanded the women's social space from their usual slots. They showed up in a public place beyond the categories of ensuring survival, maintaining households, representing culture or nurturing. They had gathered for making change. In scrutinising the main road of the transition, the women's active role is at the core. Without their contributions, interpretations, creativity and willingness (e.g. Drolet 2010, 220), making sustainable and fair change is not possible. If the women's agency is ignored, change turns into an imperialist and imposing set of practises and strategies (e.g. Arora-Jonsson 2008). Therefore, I focus on the forms of activism in the women's communities and the changes that the women were driving for.

Ama and Hajur Ama, the leaders of the women's organisations, often used the term 'women's rights' in the research discussions. I analyse the complexities of the women's

rights concept in Chapter 6. Here, I stay on its practical analysis and explicate its forms that the women promoted. The women's activism that had a specific gender aspect was, for example, linked to their health issues, such as launching a project for a women's clinic, a preventive and taboo-breaking institution.

Every month, they gather all the women to the meeting. Mostly, they talk about the money and the goat project (where the organisation donated a goat to the poorest families) as something that has upgraded their living standards and made their lives easier. They would like to have some kind of training, to learn new skills, but they don't have time for that.

Research diary 12.03.2013

One of the biggest aims of the women's organisations was to contribute to improvements to their livelihood. The women presented their dreams through this angle: One of their wishes was to get more buffaloes to the villages—a sign of wealth. They also talked a lot about the land issues that were linked to their sorrows and joys. This follows the rural feminists' contribution to the respect for their 'kitchens' (Lorber 2010)—as they called for the value and recognition of their traditional position and duties. The women loved their land, and it was linked to their identity, pride and cultural background. Without their land, they would have lost part of their identity, which is a crucial aspect in promoting the transition.

The women also gathered together for economic reasons—to increase their participation in the family economics and property, and to be active members in developing the infrastructure and livelihood means of the villages. Beyond the economic and livelihood content, the meetings increased social empowerment and a connection through which the gendered spaces were renegotiated. Women's organisations were highly recognised in the villages. They were asked to consult on social and economic difficulties, and they were recognised as representatives of the community—for example, Ama won a social advocacy award from an NGO in Kathmandu and gained visibility in national and foreign newspapers.

There was a psycho-social aspect of gender equality in the women's gatherings. The women encouraged each other to talk about their family problems, and there were some cases of domestic violence that the women's community had been making an intervention for. When an individual woman was powerless to fight the violence, the community had a stronger voice in opposing it. The union of women could resist violence whereas an individual without a place to go or power in her words was at risk of further silencing. Women's communal tools in dealing with those issues were, for example, telling encouraging stories based on religion and traditions, and mutual sharing of the experiences. The key was in believing in and supporting each other, which

increased the women's internal capabilities and targeted general transformations in their position.

The communal mindset appeared in the forms of group activism. For example, when the women went to Kathmandu to protest the cuts in the pension of retired soldiers' families and the widows of soldiers, Auntie said she did not really know what it was about, but because there was a bus reserved for them, and all the other women went, she went along. Joining the protest was rather a social event for her than driven by transformative motivation. Connectivity was a natural way of being for the women: This comes together with activism being a strong part of communality. One important aspect of group activism was presented by Anthea Darychuk and Suzanne Jackson (2015, 456), who argued that when there is a pressing need or a threat from outside, it strengthens the feeling of communality. Shared suffering can increase the community identity and the connection among women.

The threat in the women's groups was not as striking as an armed conflict (yet it was still in memories from recent history). Their need for change lied in poverty and the fragility of life. The commonly experienced need for change united the women for action. There was an idea of 'we as women' in the meetings and the concept of the change—the women identified themselves as a group that struggled with poverty and was experiencing social marginalisation. This union relied on traditional and informal uniting—typical in Nepal—more than on 'suffering'. The communal mindset led to objectives that were focused on the group's well-being rather than individuals' (e.g. Purkayastha and Subramaniam 2004, 127).

Besides talking as 'we', the women often narrated their lives via their meaningful relationships. This formed a complex social network—that appeared basically through their mutual relationships—that affected the changes. When the women were supporting and driving for the changes as a group, they had more widespread impact and the most long-term effects in the women's position. This includes, as following feminist theories (Drolet 2010, 217), taking into account the meaning of the structures that supported the women's creativity or willingness to reach for further changes. Group activism appeared as affiliation that had potential to renegotiate power relationships between the genders, classes and ethnicities.

The women's unification appeared important, especially in considering the agricultural and livelihood contributions for the village. The shared goal strengthened their communal identities and the connection among them (e.g. Ledwith and Asgill 2007). This affiliation of women could be turned into a strength that respects the local ways of living. The women leaned on each other, for example, when it came to attending events that had traditionally been in the men's arena. Their arguments often were: 'We want to go together, not alone'. Yet there are dissenting arguments in the development field that criticise this group mentality arguing that women's capability to act individually and make decisions themselves needs to be increased through empowerment (Arora-

Jonsson 2008, 137). The question of balancing between communality and individuality, however, is intertwined with global and imperialist paradigms. This leads to the arguments that the women's position in the global South should not only focus on empowerment, without questioning the global structures and addressing their impacts on the communities' lives (e.g. Jönsson 2010).

After feminist contributions, women's roles in development cooperation have become more recognised globally (Drolet 2010, 216). The critics contend, however, that besides feminist arguments, these contributions to focus on women through their group mentality, are also capitalist (ibid.). They are based on a perception of women as being more willing to act as a group than men—which is seen as a cost-efficient way of contributing to development—but actually this mostly benefits the most powerful actors on local and international levels (ibid.). It is important to consider this when scrutinising the complexity of the development field, but when mirroring to the grassroots level, the group identity of the women is an essential point of view (e.g. Darychuk and Jackson 2015, 452), as it is based on the traditional communal bonds. Group activism has its problematic side when it prioritises cost-efficiency over gender, class or ethnic equality (Drolet 2010, 216). Many of the women in my study had faced discrimination not only in their families, but also in the women's group, which cannot be ignored in promoting social justice. I discuss this further in the section about the uphill (obstacles) of the changes.

Transformation of social and gender relations

And now I want to talk about our organisation. Lots of organisations are helping Nepalese organisations. But who they are helping is those who are educated, wise. Those kinds of people have organisations. And when they are helping, they are first thinking about their family and relatives. ... First, they think about that.

Ama

Ama criticised the development projects as benefiting mostly the 'educated and wise' people. She did not count herself as such, which I link with the change in social relations and development towards equality in social structures: An uneducated woman from an inferior ethnic group was a leader of an organisation, had gained respect on communal and societal levels, and promoted the recognition and well-being of her community. Yet by being from the same background as the other women of the communities, her leadership had increased the social distance between her and the other women, especially the ones who lived in the lower parts of the villages. As Beverley Skeggs (2004, 92) stated, social change can be analysed through the constructions of class. In my research context, the transition was linked strongly to a family's position,

determined by class, ethnicity and caste. This aspect also leans on feminist theories that focus on the processes of racialisation, class, colonialism and sexuality (Drolet 2010, 215), affecting how the changes are related to intersecting oppression and privileges in the communities.

For example, Nussbaum's views on human development have been criticised for not sufficiently recognising the meaning of families (e.g. Bergman 2012, 210). This is a particularly important aspect in Ama's and Hajur Ama's positions as the leaders of the women's organisations and their abilities to re-negotiate the traditional gendered and spatial power imbalances in relation to their parents-in-law and husbands. Both of them emphasised their husbands' roles in encouraging them in their work and activism. This meant, for example, that the husbands had active roles in the domestic sphere—in housework and other duties—which allowed time and space for their wives' activism. Aside from the women's personal skills, supportive family and the questioning of patriarchy within their family relations appeared to be crucial elements in their capability to act as leaders and advance the women's position on a wider level.

Ama's family had a unique structure. Her extended family consisted of her husband, her own mother, and her daughter, Chori, with her husband and son. This was rare in the communal setting, as most of the married women lived with their husband's families. This caused me to wonder how the exceptional family structure was linked to Ama's position as a community leader. Was it her position as a 'head' of her own family that enabled her to gain a leadership position in the women's organisation? Or was it vice versa: Was she 'well enough' to break the family norms because her leadership and activism allowed her to gain material well-being for the family? Ama's family structure was not questioned in the community even though it was an exception within socially controlled norms. I see this through an association to livelihood. Economic progress could change the traditional structures, but not on its own. Also, social and cultural circumstances had to be recognised: In Ama's case, her husband's acceptance and support were crucial in creating the space and freedom for her to work beyond a traditional slot. Thus, the economic situation intertwined with the supportive social structures in her family and her own courage were the bases for the activism. The men's support was one decisive element in enabling the women's activism.

As feminist development discourse argues, focusing solely on women in the transition is not fruitful (e.g. Drolet 2010, 216). Recognising the gender relations as a key determinant of the women's position is a step in the direction the women leaders supported in promoting the transition—to unite with men instead of increasing gender segregation. The gendered gap between men and women in the communities was visually apparent:

Where are the men of the villages? ... They are sitting in the tea shop, gambling, drinking. I also saw a few fights that rest of the village tried to calm down. At the

same time, there are women's cooperatives and women's microloan systems—feels like they are in every community. Has it become kind of a trend to empower women? Women's empowerment has been researched to be one tool in the development of whole societies. But what is there outside of the organisation that has 'saved' their life? If they are empowered, are society and the communities outside of the organisation ready to face them? How can they break these traditional boundaries? It's not enough if they are empowered themselves if the circumstances do not support that.

Research diary 12.01.2013

This view of men drinking and fighting was narrow and simplified, but nevertheless, it was supported by the women's blame-talk towards many of the men's 'bad behaviour'. Even though a minority of men were involved in it, it increased the feeling of insecurity among the women, which was evidenced particularly by their internal restrictions of mobility. For instance, Didi said she did not dare establish a shop as a single woman, because she was afraid of what 'bad men' could do when she was alone in the shop. This, on one hand, resonates with Bijan Pant and Kay Standing's (2011, 415) research indicating that the women saw the males of the community as a major reason for their discrimination and their 'second-class citizens' status. This, however, was affected by the society and structural discriminatory practises (ibid.), widening the blame from the men's behaviour to structural, patriarchal and gendered power divisions that were taken for granted in most of the communities' practises and concepts. As Seema Arora-Jonsson (2008, 152) suggested, men also were related to the unequal global structures, and therefore blaming them is not reaching the structural levels, which is necessary in analysing the complexity of the transition.

Gendered relations were under transition on a communal level. For example, Hajur Ama described her social upgrade as 'walking out' and starting to 'eat together with' the men of the outer community (she referred to men as a community). Before she had communicated mostly with the women of the outer community, but by 'eating with men', she achieved a social promotion that opened her path to leadership of the women's organisation. Thus, men have a crucial role in challenging patriarchal structures in strongly communal contexts (Huang 2001, 377). I see that this argument, however, includes a patriarchal structure as well, if it is interpreted to mean there has to be a man to represent women to gain change. But, seen from a different aspect, this supports the question that I was asking in my research diary above about the society and the wider community being ready to support the transition in the women's position.

Ama has big plans, long-term plans. When we talked about supporting women, she said that the men have to be involved. Now they work separately. There is a

women's organisation, but if only women are supported, it makes this division between genders even greater.

Research diary 12.01.2013

I had research discussions with two men of the communities: Hajur Ama's son (Chora)—and Auntie's big brother (Dai). Men also had their own organisations, and they invested larger amounts of money in it, which tells about the patriarchal economy in the communities. It is important to see also the differences among the men. Their position was related to their caste and age, where the younger generation had different relationships to the women than the older one (Arora-Jonsson 2008, 148). It was possible to recognise a generational shift among the gendered relations. Chora, as a representative of the younger, educated generation with a university degree, was more connected to the women's organisations and their activities, whereas the older Dai followed the gender segregation. However, both of them supported the women's communities. Dai, even though he saw women as a group separate from the men, seemed to respect and value the women's efforts to improve their position.

In scrutinising the complexity of the transition, it becomes crucial to note that the power relationships were not only somewhere 'out there' in local patriarchal communities (Motta 2015, 90). The transition included unlearning wider social (global) relationships, subjectivities and ways of life (ibid.). This emphasises the need for embracing a decolonising framework and questioning the view of men in the global South as being 'evils' that feminisms from the North need to deconstruct. (e.g. Pant and Standing 2011, 415). This highlights the importance of seeing the feminisms within the local communities, the strengths of the women and their unions, their power within the traditions, and deconstructing the global monolithic hegemonies with the recognition of diversities.

As the women talked a lot about reducing poverty and improving their economic situations, it must be examined with a critical lens towards the global market economy and the neoliberal ideals that get often intertwined in the development discourses and practises (e.g. Motta 2015). The neoliberal tendency of development is criticised by the post-colonialist discourses (e.g. Bulbeck 1998; Deutsch 2004; Ahmad 2009; Channa 2013; Kabeer 2015). The international donors and organisations that launched different projects in the villages often emphasised women's empowerment, freedom and economic independence, and dismissed the traditional communal care among women and families, the meaning of religion or the cultural traditions that were sources of joy and strengths to them. The 'communal approach' was common in those projects, which appeared unable to question the communal and international hierarchies between different actors.

An important aspect in the main roads of the transition was that they were accepted widely at the communal level. Thus, they did not break the traditions that supported

harmony and coherence, such as through religion, festivals or communal sisterhood (e.g. Motta 2015). The changes were based on the mixture of traditions. They did not include adopting the values of independence and freedom per se, but strengthening communal affiliation by renewing the gendered and global power divisions. The women leaders also were active in maintaining cultural traditions, but it appeared also like a ‘brand’ for them when they advertised their culture to get more tourists to their villages. This indicates the complex relationship of traditions and transition in the communities. Traditional aspects were written deeply in the women’s bodily and spiritual acts and concepts, which formed the basis for promoting the transition (more in Section 6.1).

5.2 ‘Footpaths’—Slow undercurrents of the changes

The villages were crisscrossed by narrow footpaths, leading to the houses and fields on the lower parts of the hills, away from the main road. The paths were tough to walk in the hot sun or in the muddy monsoon season, but they were the only way to reach the homes of the women in lower social positions. Didi—a woman living in those lower parts—mentioned: ‘They do not come here’, referring to the politicians, officials providing an award to the women’s community, tourists and the women’s community’s board. According to her, they mostly stayed on the upper parts of the village, near the main road. This description functions as an introduction to the next analysis level of the transition: to the slower, harder-reached changes that were hindered on the way, but were to occur as echoes from the mainstream changes. Footpaths took the wanderer to the downhill, where everything felt more peaceful and slow, like the changes that were smouldering somewhere invisible. These changes had clashed with the traditional determinants of the women’s position and were impacting the communities with a slower rhythm.

The women’s views showed that many changes had, at first, faced communal resistance. Those clashes often created competing perspectives and led to a complex transition process, much like climbing up the rough footpaths. These footpaths of the changes included contradictions with the structural (e.g., political) transition on the practical level. Nonetheless, the contradictions were heading toward gradual changes, which was seen, for example, in the gradual impact of the formal laws on the customary laws, beliefs and practises.

Yeah, the policeman told me if both of us are doing nicely together, then it’s fine, but if I complain about her [the new wife], they both will go to jail straightaway.

Buhari, about the police’s view of polygamy

The changes in legislation reaching the communal level was a lengthy process. In spite of the law that had criminalised polygamy, men often still had many wives when their families had seen that the first one carried some inadequacies. Polygamy was maintained with the acceptance of the communities, as well as the official agencies, such as police. Even though the changes in the legislation had not reached the communal level completely, they had a drizzling impact. Many women personally judged polygamy or women's discrimination in land issues, despite the fact that general communal 'law' and beliefs still accepted them. The question was whether these women's views were individual exceptions or the first signs of a wider change in the communal mindset. A relevant mirror here are more modern communities in the capital and bigger cities, where those concepts had broken through to the mainstream and had become part of the communal life. This example shows that changes in legislation created change on communal level over a lengthy period of time.

Another example of the competing perspectives within the transition was gender segregation, which was still taken for granted among the women and men in the villages (e.g. Arora-Jonsson 2008, 145). This dualist segregation could be recognised in the efforts for development as well. When women were encouraged toward entrepreneurship, they were mostly expected to follow the traditional female spheres, such as tailoring and agricultural contributions. Meanwhile, men were urged toward construction and other masculine-related fields. This segregation was also supported by donors from the local, governmental and international development cooperation. The differences between the genders were social and corporal (*ibid.*), and they were maintained in the transition.

Ama made an exception in terms of gendered segregation: She was planning to start a driving course for the women, which was beyond the traditional women's slot. She conveyed that this also would be an encouraging example for the younger generation to expand the women's traditional spheres. Later on, however, I learned that Ama also had her own benefits to motivate her in this case: She wanted the project to finance her relative's driving course, which would have benefited only her family. The structures behind this incident were complex, and they related to economic and social hierarchies. However, it reveals the 'undercurrents' of the upcoming changes for women to step beyond the domestic sphere into new social areas.

The 'footpaths' of the changes also were linked to the individual level, as there were individuals who 'swam towards the mainstream'. These individual actions occurred through opposing the community's norms or restrictive traditions. These footpaths were walked by individual women taking small steps, and they did not resonate in the communities. After a lengthy and multidimensional process, these footpaths have a potential to join with the main roads if the smouldering changes attain communal acceptance. An important notion here is, however, to question the changes that are harmful to cultural and local ingredients that support women's well-being.

5.3 ‘Uphills’—Obstacles and resistance to the changes

Uphills symbolise the obstacles that hindered the changes due to both the power structures and social segregations and to the protection of cultural and contextual traditions. They were seen mostly in the communal hierarchies and patriarchal family structures. This led me to wonder how the diverse social positioning and discrimination of the women prevented the changes, and what kind of new hierarchies the changes may have brought to the communities. There also was an interesting note of the ‘middle sort’ of the people—the silent mass who admired the economic upgrades and targeted them for their own family’s well-being at the expense of the wider community. This was in part an effect of the global capitalist paradigm that had impacted the communities to a certain degree.

Communal hierarchies

Even though the women’s organisations—their activities and unions—had increased the power of the women as a group, the transition also had produced new kinds of hierarchies, and even deepened them among the women, appearing as ‘steps backward’ in the women’s position. Those hierarchies were not totally separated, however, from the traditional hierarchies based on class, caste, ethnicity, gender or geographic location followed by feminist intersectional ideas (e.g. Drolet 2010). Rather, they were accumulated on top of the traditional ones and created new hierarchies beside them. As the unions and hierarchies (including discrimination and silencing) intersected in the women’s groups and communities, I analyse them as parallel.

In some cases, traditional unity hindered individual resistance to discrimination. This was seen in Buhari’s story, when she was seeking support from the women’s community after her family had stigmatised and abandoned her because of her opposition towards polygamy. However, the women leaders, who had registered the organisation for ‘helping women’, leaned on unity and communal coherence in their views:

She [Ama] said to me: ‘We have always done this way, so go back to your home and be happy.’

Buhari, about Ama’s comment on polygamy

Buhari’s resistance and bids for changes in the discriminative and illegal action of her family had backfired. Her resistance was seen as a threat to the harmony that was highly valued in the communities. She was stigmatised as a ‘mad’ woman, which worsened her situation. This was discussed more in terms of ‘failed women’ (Section 4.3), and here I expand the scrutiny to the most powerful women’s control in promoting the transition, which illustrates the hierarchies between the women. The

women's organisations and activism appeared hierarchic, which opened to me after a period of observation and my countless failings to overcome those hierarchies within the research activities (Section 3.4). Many women reported that the well-being of the group was promoted as the well-being of the strongest women—the leader and her committee and family. This was seen in the dominating role of the leaders and the board members of the organisations.

The argument that the development projects tended to improve the situations (especially economically) of the elite groups (Gibbon and Gazottes 2001, 730; Huang 2001, 362) did not apply in the sense that the women leaders were not originally from 'elite groups' but were from the same position as the rest of the community. However, this critique applies from the standpoint that the economic changes (such as market orientation and entrepreneurship) and the endeavours toward economic well-being had brought about new kinds of hierarchies among the villagers, and the women leaders had become a sort of elite in their communities. They had gained access to new social spaces, had gotten respect and recognition, both in their communities and on the societal level, but it also had created hierarchies with some of the women.

Social hierarchies—both traditional and new—were the main barriers to changes in the most marginalised women's position. Thus, the hierarchies appeared to be a vicious cycle: Some of the changes the women leaders and their organisations promoted did not reach the most marginalised women, which actually deepened the hierarchies and their silencing.

Enni: And how about the community around here? Did you get help from them?

Buhari: I don't think they are...

Ama: [interrupting Buhari] I think in your family no ... but don't you think that you get help from us, from up?

There were examples of how the leaders and the most powerful women were controlling the research conversations and directing the answers towards their own benefits. The hierarchies were revealed during the research process, when Ama tried to prevent us from meeting with Buhari. She warned us about the danger of going to her home—for example, the fights around her neighbourhood. However, because Buhari had called for us to visit her, we obliged. Buhari said that Ama was worried that she would speak in disfavour of her. This indicated the internal tensions of the women's community that were increased by the competition for scarce resources in promoting economic changes. The leaders advocated to expand the women's traditional social spaces, however, this did not reach all the levels of the class, caste and ethnic hierarchies. Those hierarchies impacted the women's different spaces in the community, which affected their participation in the groups promoting the change.

Didi: Women who are already well, like with family, rich or educated, for them it's always good, like going up and up.

Enni: ... the changes happening for them?

D: Yeah. But poor people like me, who have to work for a living all the time, they don't get any opportunity. Because they have to work. ... Even if they called me, I would not like to participate in the organisation, because if I'm a board member, they have meetings, and they call, and I have to go. It's compulsory. But to go there, I have to have time. But I don't have time, because if I'm not working, I cannot feed my children, so I have to run. So, I don't like to do that. They just talk there, and I want to work. So, for me it's just time-consuming.

Didi was one of the women who presented that she did not benefit from the women's organisations. Buhari, who had asked for support in her difficult family situation, also said that the women's group had withdrawn from supporting her. Both of them professed that they were not interested in participating in the organisations' activities. This was partially for practical reasons, as they said that they did not have time to go to the meetings or training. Also, the objectives of the organisations did not always make sense for them. For example, in terms of education, learning to write their names was enough to them—to sign the land-papers—but they stated that they did not need to be literate beyond that in their actual lifeworlds. It was not practical to them, because they were too busy ensuring their daily survival (e.g. Gibbons and Gazottes 2001, 735). I scrutinise this more in the next chapter in terms of the driving forces of the changes.

The problem of the poorer women in terms of promoting the transition was that they had to work constantly. This is an interesting contrast to Paula Banerjee's (2006) view of women's activism and resistance in India being organised and run by the poorest women. This difference can be explained by the fact that those Indian women were fighting for their land rights (ibid.). They had lost their land, so they had nothing else left other than protesting. Most of the women of this study had land to cultivate—either their family's or someone else's—which was their means of survival and a lot more. It also was a field of pride, identity, continuity and stability. The land kept them busy, and it was their daily space for carrying out their mutual social networks. Thus, they resisted the women's organisations by criticising their impracticality. They participated in the meetings when they gained concrete, material benefits, like scarves or seeds. Thus, their participation in the organisations was mainly nominal. Didi expressed that they were just 'names and numbers on the papers to look better for the organisation'.

My role is to go once a month to the meeting and save 200 rupees—nothing besides that. [...] Nothing happens in the meetings. It is just to collect money and talk about who is taking a loan and how much and so on.

Didi

Didi showed frustration toward the organisation, and she felt that there was not much for her and women like her to gain from it. She stated that it was dominated by the leaders. There were differences among the poorer women, however. Some of them were resistant and critical of the leaders' power and the hierarchies, whereas some of them were more accepting of their lower position and happy with the 'morsels' of change that the organisation provided to them. The women were positioned in diverse ways in terms of the organisations.

Social and ethnic hierarchies were intermingled, in a complex way, with international power structures in the change process. Reflecting on the impacts of my whiteness in the research process and the complexity of the development projects in the area revealed the intricacy of the power structures in the transnational and local relationships. Rewati—a contextual translator—offered an example of this through a remote, traditional community without a link to NGOs and development projects. She said that the village appeared more united and coherent than the ones that had external impacts on them. She interpreted that the organisations and different development projects often increased people's competition and greed. This comes together with scarce economic resources and capitalist individualism, which had created new kinds of hierarchies and threatened traditional communal coherence.

Silence of the 'middle sort'

The upper level—they don't care, and the lower level does not care, but the middle level is the greediest.

Hajur Ama

When Hajur Ama talked about promoting social and economic change in her community, she described three distinct categories of people: 'the top, the middle and the lowest'. She did not describe, in a more detailed way, who she was actually referring to with those categorisations or where she categorised herself. However, it included an interesting observation about the transition. She mentioned a category of the 'middle sort'—people who were not participating in promoting changes on a communal level and instead closed inwards to carry on with their own lives. Hajur Ama explained that those people had material well-being, but they craved for more. She presented that they

were educated to 'know about the world', but they also were aware of what they were lacking and what they were not able to gain. This had led them to reach for individual (family-related) benefits instead of promoting the wider interests of the people in the furthest socio-economic margins.

One facet of the complexities of the communal change process was in material redistribution. Hajur Ama suggested that because the most marginalised and poorest people did not have options, they supported the change processes and resisted the absolute poverty and silencing that they faced in their daily realities. The organisations had a potential to provide financial benefits, therefore the poorest women could not resist them loudly. The people in the upper positions, in turn, had sufficient resources and superiority within the communal hierarchies, and as long as their higher position was not questioned, they promoted changes in the well-being of the marginalised communities.

The 'middle sort'—a majority of the people in the communities—remained silent about the marginalisations of the poorest and focused on their own families' well-being. At the same time, their silence was linked to communalism, as they followed the mass in their ignorance. A similar concept was presented in the women's talk about 'the fights behind the neighbours' walls': They saw that it was not a communal issue when the fights were located in private spheres. They leaned on the belief that 'we all have our own sorrows, so don't make other's loads bigger by sharing yours'. Yet, instead of blaming the silent 'middle sort', there is a need to look deeper at the structural levels. The 'silent mass' referred to people who were 'busy in their own lives' and did not have time to be active in making changes on a wider scale.

Hajur Ama's perception that 'the middle level is the most greedy' also can be associated with the ideals of capitalist lifestyles and the motives for seeking economic improvements. This had caused deepened hierarchies that did not follow the traditional caste system, ethnic roots or geographic differences. A family's economic improvements could overcome those traditional hierarchies, but they also created new ones and increased the economic gap between the people. This was seen in the case of the positive discrimination that the political and societal changes had promoted. Positive discrimination meant that ethnic groups that had been discriminated against were given support to improve their socio-economic positions. The other women's organisation was based on one of those ethnic groups, and it had received significant financial support from governmental and non-governmental donors. The financial support had produced jealousy among the other people who formed the mainstream ethnicity in the area, and who were not entitled to the same level of benefits. Thus, the improvements in the position of one ethnic group had increased the gap to the other groups in new ways.

The 'silence of the middle sort' was one factor that prevented progress towards equality on a communal level. This was associated with the imbalance in redistribution and the oppression, marginalisation and silencing. The middle sort appeared as

a 'moderate mass'. This relates to the complex communal dynamics intertwined with traditional hierarchies and the capitalist ideals of economic improvements—as well as the international and local development paradigms that distributed the benefits to the communal projects. The silence can be interpreted as apathy, which is both individual and communal. On the one hand, it turned people inwards to their own families, but it was also communal, as it followed a majority of the people. This is linked with the wider discussions on resisting the injustices: The silence of the mass is destructive in allowing the oppression to happen.

Patriarchal family structures

When researching the transition in the women's position, the women's relationships to the men in the family context must be explored (e.g. Banerjee 2006, 97). One major aspect of the transition was to challenge the patriarchal family system, which was not, however, questioned by all the women and from all the angles. The women often supported the prevalent family structures as a basis for their security and well-being. Didi, Budi and Bahini, for example, said they were happy in the 'women's role' in their family, and they did not wish to step beyond that or to increase their responsibility in decision-making or economic participation.

As a result of the women's position in both the family and the wider community in Nepal, the loss of a husband could have catastrophic consequences (Maharjan et al. 2012). A fear of those consequences, such as losing social and economic security, often prevented women from fighting injustices within the family. The loss of a husband and his support was one major social determinant of the women of my study, whether it was due to death or social reasons. In spite of their central role in the families, the women were mostly dependent on their husbands economically, which extended to the social level. However, the women did not communicate that their dependency was a problem for them when they did not face difficulties in their family relationships. Dependency appeared problematic in the cases in which the woman lost the husband's support.

One of those women was Didi, a widow who was responsible for her two children and the household. She was longing for her traditional role as a housewife. This raises a question leading back to Nussbaum's capabilities approach (1999; 2000): Was it a lack of internal and external capabilities that made her feel this way? When looking at the specific circumstances that affected Didi's views, one can see different burdens widowhood has placed on her. First, she had lost her beloved husband, and she lived in sorrow. Thus, she carried a major emotional load. Second, her workload had increased in areas that were not familiar to her and about which she did not have sufficient knowledge, such as tasks in the public space like property management and decision-making.

Third, she struggled to survive without a proper income or a paid job, as she could not subsist only by traditional livelihoods means such as agriculture. Thus, she was lacking the resources to maintain her children's material well-being, which made her

feel restricted. The fourth aspect in her particular situation was related to her communal relations. She had fallen into the slot of a widow at a relatively young age, and she did not have family nearby, as her husband's family was living in another village. Therefore, her status had lowered in a family-centred social order, which made her long for her position as a wife. Thus, the loss of her husband had multiple impacts on her life. The social security system was developed around patriarchal family structures, and it affected many aspects of the women's lives. However, family relations, even though they were patriarchal, supported the women's well-being more than living without those relations. Patriarchal family relations were complicated, however, in the cases of particular discrimination or if a woman resisted the practises within them.

The other example of the obstacles that hindered the changes in women's position in terms of family relations was seen in Buhari's case, as she had decided to be sterilised without her family's permission. Her individual decision prompted discrimination towards her by her family. This shows that family planning was accepted up to a certain degree within the community's customs, but if a woman acted as an individual without negotiating with the family, it was seen as a problem and as a reason to discriminate against her. The convention requiring the family's acceptance was problematic in terms of the fact that it was based on an unbalanced gendered power division, where a husband and particularly the parents-in-law had the strongest voice.

Within patriarchal family structures, there is a heightened risk for domestic violence (Pandey 2014). The women of this study did not talk about the issue, even though statistics indicate that approximately 28 percent of married women in Nepal have experienced physical or sexual violence from their husbands (ibid., 11). Although the women did not speak about violence, patriarchy included social structures that increased the probability for gendered violence. There were also other signs of the issue. Chora, a son of Hajur Ama, suggested that the women were afraid of their husbands and that restricted them from talking openly about their lives. I see there is a hidden restriction in terms of the transition. As violence was highly taboo (ibid.), its victims were prevented from talking about it, deepening their silence. This restricted the change process, as those issues could not be changed without an open dialogue.

In the past, it used to happen—like in their grandfather's time—it used to happen that men were beating their women, but nowadays, most of the men have a love marriage; they have a wife of their choice, so they don't beat their wives. So, there is no wife-beating nowadays—only the conflicts in the house but not wife-beating.

Didi

Didi refers to 'conflicts' in the families and says that 'wife-beating' does not happen anymore. This perspective relates to Budi's view, when she said that what happens inside

the walls is a private matter. Thus, the taboos around domestic violence appeared as research on the issue has argued (e.g. Pandey 2014). First, the women had internalised their inferior position to men, which led to their willingness to be obedient wives. Second, they believed that their *karma* was based on their previous lives, which led them to accept their situations and prevented them from questioning injustices. Third, the silence comes together with the women's dependency on the family and consequently their willingness to save communal coherence. These aspects show that the women's views on domestic violence were related to patriarchal silencing, religious beliefs and socio-economic security. Thus, their views were linked to their overall situation on bodily and spiritual levels. However, there were women who appeared more open about the issue and had left their husbands because of violence. Thus, the attitudes towards domestic violence were tabooed but also growingly open among some of the women, which shows the diversities among them. The patriarchal family structures were mostly internalised, preventing the women from promoting change in it or opposing violence. This was also related to the issues of social and economic security, which had to be stable before the women could fight the injustices.

5.4 'Earthquakes'—Abrupt changes

I've been trying to understand. I've been awake countless nights, feeling my heartbeat getting faster, feeling the ground shaking—which has actually been me shaking, not the ground. In those moments of fear, I swear the shaking ground. I swear that this power of nature has entered into my life. I'm trying to understand why these people start laughing when I say I'm afraid of the earthquake. All that Mahila said to the kids was: 'I guarantee it's not coming.' And to me: 'One day we need to die anyway, so why be scared?'

Sometimes, this fear turns into frustration, and I feel it's simply stupid not to be prepared. I just cannot understand the ignorance about the fact that one day the 'big one' is going to happen. But, then again, I try to look deeper and understand why these people, knowing that a black day will come, seem not to care, aren't prepared.

Diary note 19.11.2011

The white peaks of Himalayas provide breath-taking views that were created by numerous major and minor earthquakes over the millennia. Being located in a seismologically active area cast a shadow on my personal experiences in Nepal, but more than that, it was a threat for the people who lived there permanently. Nevertheless, even though the experts were predicting a major earthquake at any time, the local

people did not seem to worry about it. The women's view towards it was mostly that they could not do anything about it. Thus, why worry? Their strategy of living with this life-threatening fact was to laugh and pray, to live in the moment. The implications of the earthquakes and the threat of them cannot be ignored in my analysis. In addition, they function as a metaphoric element in analysing the complexity of the transition. I explore earthquakes as a destructive fact that brought major changes to the women's lives in an instant. I also use them as a symbolic framework for analysing 'individual earthquakes' and as a window to the people's attitudes affecting the transition.

...As a destructive fact

Earthquakes caused abrupt changes that the women did not expect and were not prepared for—changes that were caused by external power with a distinctive strength. A major (magnitude 7.8) earthquake shook Nepal in the spring of 2015 after my actual fieldwork. The pictures of devastation were spread across the global media: streets split into pieces; buildings falling down like houses of cards; people in rubble; grieving faces. The distress of the people was shared worldwide. The despair I felt about the fate of the people I knew subsided once the phone lines were working again, and they were able to update social media. The other women's organisation's Facebook page announced that they had lost six people in the area, and many houses were destroyed. The earthquake changed the lives of the women especially in regards to the security, infrastructure, livelihood and the social relations of those who lost their family members.

Despite the devastating images that had been circulated globally, the discussions I had with local people on social media after the earthquake indicated that the catastrophic depictions did not paint a complete picture. Even though many lost their lives, the majority continued with normal life. Still, the aftershocks lasted more than a year, which kept the threat of the earthquake ever-present. Many of the people told funny stories out of the moments when they had escaped a shaking building. However, those people telling funny stories were not the ones who suffered losses during or after the quake. Ama said on my last revisit that after the earthquakes, the women's position in their village had been moved 'fifteen years backwards.' She said that they had stopped many of the activities in their organisation, as most of the women needed to focus on rebuilding their houses and livelihoods.

The most marginalised people were the most vulnerable ones after the earthquake (e.g. Dhungel and Ojha 2012, 310). This is seen generally in mortality rates that are higher among women than men during disasters, and the disasters also tend to have more social and economic impacts on women than men (ibid.). When a woman who was already in a marginalised position lost her home, her possibilities to act for wider social change got diminished. The fewer resources a person has—such as community support, income or education—the harder it is for them to get back on their feet. Gendered, sexual, socio-economic and ethnic inequality affected the rebuilding pro-

cesses. Women also became more susceptible to violence after the earthquake. There were reported rape cases in the rescue camps. In spite of this, there was no particular gender aspect in the relief work of the major organisations or in the government's aid¹⁰. These two factors—women being more vulnerable in the disasters and the lack of gender sensitivity in the relief work—were a big setback in the women's position.

However, as the earthquake was a nationwide ordeal for the Nepalese people, it had encouraged some unity directly after the tremors. For example, the women's movements that had been divided became more cohesive on a national level after the earthquake¹¹. Also, many of the traditional norms and hierarchies were transgressed straight after the earthquake, when people started to help each other. The slogan 'We will rebuild' was spread on social media, but it also was seen in numerous local initiatives for aiding 'brothers' and 'sisters'. People used their energy and frustration for action, and the way in which solidarity crossed the social borders, especially on a communal level, was distinctive.

Ama said that after the initial 'shock' period that the earthquake had created—when the imminent danger was over (even though the aftershocks continued)—people were unhappy with the government's inability or unwillingness to provide the help, and there also were signs of growing divisions and competition for the resources. When people were hungry and lost their sense of security, they started to battle for the scarce resources, and when the organising of relief was somewhat ineffective, people pointed at the government. Thus, the earthquake also increased the hierarchies, deepened the existing social gaps and created new ones. At the same time, the lives of the poorest of the poor, who did not have a home to lose, changed maybe the least: They were already living with their own 'earthquake' in their daily struggles for survival.

Besides the actual major earthquake, there were also earthquakes on the family and individual levels—a safety network that broke or an unpredictable crisis that changed the life of a woman or family. There were difficulties created by nature, like the exceptional weather conditions that affected livelihoods and threatened survival, which in turn affected the women's agency and possibilities. There were political crises that had effects on their daily lives, or a personal life incident, such as an accident, the loss of a husband or a child, illness and so on. I refer to these abrupt, often destructive changes in the women's lives as 'individual earthquakes', even though there were also positive events like the birth of a child or other kinds of joys that changed the women's lives in an instant. They appeared as strengths that maintained hope. The destructive incidents were steps backwards in terms of the transition in the women's position, as they had to concentrate on coping with the losses or other difficulties in their lives.

10 UN Women: UN Women to address gender-based violence in the aftermath of the earthquake in Nepal <http://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/un-women-address-gender-based-violence-aftermath-earthquake-nepal>

11 Ibid.

...As conceptions of change

The other aspect of the earthquakes in my analysis comes back to the diary note at the beginning of this chapter, where I describe my fear and frustration before the major earthquake had shaken the ground. My considerations and discussions with people bring forth the question of worldview and the attitudes towards life, which also affected the outlook of the transition. The fact that I came from a context with strict regulations like seat belts, helmets and other safety plans also had affected my views on the risks around me. However, even though I was struggling with my fear, there was something attractive about the attitudes of the people who realised that we cannot fight against the power of nature. Their attitudes were affected by the material fact that they did not have the resources to rebuild houses with earthquake-proof engineering or prepare emergency essentials. Therefore, the only possible approach in those circumstances was to laugh, pray and live.

Nevertheless, I did not interpret a lack of choice in the matter as the main reason for their different attitude towards the threat. I also relate it to the conceptual level, especially to the conception of time: 'Living in the moment' was based on wider Hindu and Buddhist notions, viewing time not as a linear but as a circular matter (Becker 1981) that reproduces itself. Time was not consumed—according to the local beliefs—it was reproduced in every moment. Every new moment was a gift of time, as time was coming, not going. When I experienced a relatively big earthquake in 2011 (magnitude 6.9), I saw people running to safe places, but in particular I noticed them praying. The air was filled with the smoke of incense; praying bells rang to calm down the gods. Praying was a coping strategy, and religion appeared as hope in a time of tragedy. The attitudes about the understanding of life and death also were mirrored by religion and spirituality. The people believed in reincarnation and that life was transient and yet never gone forever (e.g. Channa 2013, 31). In terms of the fact that the societies, communities and cultures are not stable but constructed and changing, these views affected the transition. Because the women often were adapting to life circumstances, they accepted the injustices that prevented some of the changes from occurring.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I brought forth the complexity of the transition in the women's social position through its various rhythms in the communities. I analysed it by using a geographic metaphor, illustrating how it happened with different speeds in separate locations and to varying degrees. The main road of the transition, referring to the mainstream and widespread changes that the majority had adapted, had two main aspects in my analysis: the women's active role in promoting the transition, as well as the transformation of social and gender relations. The footpaths were slower, hard-won changes that had obstacles on the way, but were to happen as echoes from the mainstream changes. There were also different obstacles that hindered the transition,

such as communal hierarchies, the silence of the ‘middle sort’ of the community and patriarchal family structures. The fourth aspect of the transition was the threat of an earthquake. I scrutinised it from two angles: as a destructive fact that made major changes in the women’s lives in an instant moment, but also as a symbolic framework to analyse the people’s attitudes and conceptions that affected the transition. These four rhythms of the transition were mainly linked to the communal level and daily context.

However, there were women in my research context who were left out of the communities, silenced and ostracised into the furthest margins. Therefore, I add a fifth dimension to the analysis framework: the dark places where the changes did not reach. In geographic terms, I present them as the ‘caves’, where the daylight did not reach—things everyone saw but did not look into. It refers to the exclusion and social isolation, to the women who lacked the internal and external capabilities to promote change in their lives (e.g. Nussbaum 2000). This raises a question: If the transition was mostly related to the communities, what happens in their caves? The people in socio-economically powerful positions could allow the changes to happen in a faster rhythm as the restrictions did not concern them with the same extend. Thus, they could more easily embrace the development projects and adopt new concepts and practices. This prompted another question: Is making a change a privilege?

Transition shakes the women’s traditional social position, and there were also supportive traditional elements that the women wanted to maintain. It was important to recognise those traditional elements to avoid colonialist or imperialist views of the traditions as ‘backwards’ and ‘modern’ as something unquestionably good. Instead of recreating the dichotomy between traditions and transition, I stand for a multidimensional analysis that identifies the complexities in reaching for more just communities and societies. The explication of traditions and the dimensions of the transition on a communal level is the basis of the deconstruction of this dichotomy.

This somewhat descriptive look at the intricacies of the transition was necessary before entering a deeper analysis of it. Its task was to clarify and solidify the rhythms of the transition, to gain a general understanding of this complex and continuously occurring flow of changes. Balancing between the hierarchies and unions within the communities is crucial in understanding the inner workings of the transition. When structures and society are changing, the communities are not simply adopting the changes. They make their own interpretations of them. However, that is when one needs to ask: Who is the most powerful and capable of making those interpretations? This is the core issue of this study in leaning on the ideas of gender justice and the decolonial questioning of the global hierarchies.



माया भनेको सबै भन्दा ठुलो धन हो, यो एउटा गहना जस्तै हो।

Maya bhaneko sabai bhanda thulo dhaan ho, yo euta gahana jastai ho.

The biggest wealth in life is love, it's like an ornament.

Ama, Nepalese grassroots activist

6 Beyond the hills—Driving forces of the transition

Fog on the horizon. Awakening smells. A chilly morning covers most of the colours with hazy mist. Yellow mustard flowers start glowing against the green fields when the sun peeks from behind the hills and begins warming them up. It creates space for a new day to come; this light from somewhere beyond the hills has the power to wake the colours up. The sunlight is ruling daily rhythms. It creates atmospheres, shadows, warmth and life—as the powers that create the transition and get the seeds of the changes to grow.

Research diary 29.01.2014

To understand the transition process, the driving forces behind it must be considered—continuing with geographic terms—to see ‘beyond the hills’. Thus, by analysing those forces, this chapter deepens the analysis of the transition. The driving forces are like ‘powers beyond the hills’ that shape the women’s social position in certain directions with a specific rhythm. Like the sunlight that conducted changes in the temperature, colours, people’s activities and so on, there were forces that developed changes in the women’s position in their daily and communal contexts. Analysing them creates a basis for understanding the transition as a holistic but complex process. I investigate the internal (communal and individual) and external (structural and transnational) driving forces, their differences and meanings, and how they intersect in advocating for, resisting or adapting to the changes. Throughout the analysis, I reflect on the moral and power aspects that preconditioned the transition process.

I start by addressing the internal driving forces, which are negotiated with the external driving forces. The internal and external driving forces were not separated but they were affected by one another, and by recognising their intersections, I deepen my analysis of the complexity of the transition. I categorise two different aspects—*spirituality* and *emotions*—behind the women’s activism that promoted social change. These internal driving forces were both personal and communal. They were linked with individual beliefs, emotions and courage, but were, at the same time, affected by the communal values and mindset. An important consideration in analysing the internal driving forces is to recognise that they occurred in a specific context with local terms, which were, however, affected by wider structures. I analyse the external driving forces—*economic*

transformations, political changes, internationalisation and globalisation, women's rights and education projects—through negotiation with local conceptions and practises—as the communities were not only adapting the changes from outside but they intersected in practise level.

I perceive the intersections of the internal and external driving forces as a transgression of different borders—meaning as a negotiation of international, local, conceptual and practical realities. This appeared in the *socio-economic, spatial and epistemological* dimensions. When different borders were transgressed in those aspects, it led to the changes in the women's social position. This formed a process that included controversies and ruptures, as well as flexibilities and progressions. The changes were not affecting all the women in the community equally. I see intersectionality as a key element in this process. Intersecting social categories in the women's lives—such as class, ethnicity and caste—caused ruptures and differences in the change process. However, navigating in the spheres of those controversies led gradually to the transgression of gendered and social borders on wider level. Thus, the transition in the women's social position is conducted by disputes and the remaking of different borders.

6.1 Internal driving forces

I also started in a different way. In the beginning ... I'm also just a housewife who thinks about raising the children, how to do housework. And then I realised that like the animals are living their lives, we were just thinking about feeding the children. ... And I started to think that we have to do something for society. The same as Buddha told, and after 2,000 years, we still remember him because of his work. ... The cattle are happy when they have grass for living. ... But we people need more. We have feelings, too. We have to get a little further than the cattle, because we are more emotional. [...] And people come to me in the middle of the night; they have to go to the hospital, and I help them. And in the middle of the day, they come to ask me for help, and I feel good. When somebody comes to ask for help from me, I don't think she forgets the help she gets from me.

Ama

This piece of Ama's story illustrates the central driving forces behind her activism: *spirituality* and *emotions*. It also shows that those two aspects of internal driving forces were intertwined together in the communal and traditional context. Ama described how she got inspiration for her work from Buddhist stories, which created a need for her to be remembered and recognised. She asserted that people are more emotional than the animals and, thus, highlighted emotions as one reason for the activism for

social change. Ama's and the other women activists' visions and activities were key factors in promoting the transition.

When Ama talked about the need for change in the women's position, she was pondering the meaning of her and the other women's lives. She compared their lives to cattle's, in being focused only on survival. However, she had a need to step beyond that and promote a wider change. She linked the need for the changes with the experiential aspects of humanity. Thus, her internal driving forces were based on experiencing and feeling the 'wrongs'. This comes together with the very ideas of human dignity. People in different societies are striving for meaningful human life rather than, for example, economic growth alone (Nussbaum 2009, 211). The perceptions of a 'meaningful life' are in the background of these internal driving forces and motivations for the change among the women activists.

Spirituality—Complex role of faith and beliefs

The changes in the women's position were negotiated in terms of spirituality and religion in the daily contexts. As strongly Buddhist and Hindu women lived beside each other, these different religions determined rituals and festivals, as well as the social orders, beliefs and moral views of the communities. Due to their centrality in the women's position, they also functioned as driving forces for the changes. Religion and spirituality appeared as both strengths and restrictions in the women's lives. For example, it both hindered and expanded their mobility. Their duties—often justified by religious terms—bound them to the home, but at the same time, they were allowed to expand their mobility by joining the pilgrimages and visiting temples. Spirituality functioned as a strength through prayers and faith, which brought hope and courage to the women. Conversely, religion was a basis for the arguments for patriarchy and the women's inferiority. Thus, the complex role of religion and the religious argumentation that was highly valued in the communal setting, have to be considered in promoting the transition process.

For instance, religion created resilience in difficult situations (e.g. Darychuk and Jackson 2015, 453; Korang-Okrah and Haight 2015, 238) through courage, hope and communal affiliation. It strengthened the 'we' thinking among the women and grounded their communal mindset. Thus, it functioned as a resource for the changes through the connectedness. Darychuk and Jackson (2015, 452) contended that organising traditional feasts and community events gives people a sense of meaning and social support. The villages' everyday life was coloured by a number of festivals throughout the year, which increased the sense of communality. Religious beliefs appeared as inspiration for the women activists. Many of their activities that promoted change in the women's position were defended with religious arguments.

The women had a strong faith in gods that connected them to each other. Recognising this aligns with indigenous social work discourses that emphasise the meaning

of spirituality as part of people's well-being (e.g. Dominelli 2010a; Gray et al. 2008). In the context where the communal and religious values determined the women's positioning, prevalent academic and professional social work tools in promoting social justice were not sufficient. Validating the changes based solely on the concept of 'rights' did not have a relevance in this context. Faith represented the truth, so secular ideas often were not appropriate. Scientific systematising did not, as such, make sense. The discussions on superstitious issues, gods and faith was more applicable. This is covered more in Section 7.

While the religions connected the women, they also favoured the 'community's good' in the cases of individual women's discrimination. In terms of gender justice, religions appeared to cut both ways: They directed the people to take care of each other in the communities, but they also justified gendered power imbalances based on religious interpretations. South Asian feminists assert that religious 'laws' are discriminatory against women (e.g. Hasan 2010, 949). Religious concepts affected the social order, where men had a superior position over the women in terms of economic participation and decision-making. One example of this was in a Hindu book, *Shree Swasthani Brata Katha*¹², which taught for example that the ritual of drinking water from a husband's feet was an act of respect towards him (see more in Section 4.2). This practise was not followed literally anymore, but it was still symbolically impacting on the women's self-conception and positioning. This was seen, for example, in the setting where the women prioritised their husbands' decision-making and mobility over their own. Most of the women did not question this order, and they supported it with the arguments of safety and freedom from certain responsibilities. Thus, religion increased the connection among the women but also created a gap towards men.

There also were symbols of female power in the religious teachings. Hindu and Buddhist goddesses provided liberating, compelling, provocative and inspiring examples that supported the images of strong-willed, creative and powerful women (Gross 2002, 105–108). These images were respected among the men, too. Hindu goddesses supplied the psychological well-being that the positive female imagery created among the women, as religious symbols and social behaviour influenced each other (e.g. Pintchman 2002, 188). As the passage from Ama's talk at the beginning of this chapter shows, Buddha's example and teachings functioned as her reasons to act for social change. Thus, religions and spirituality in some respects do promote women's power, contrary to common perceptions of religions in South Asian contexts (cf. Hasan 2010, 949).

Religion functioned as fuel for the changes. There are examples in South Asia of religious women's movements that have led to public debate on women's rights and started social reform in terms of gender justice (e.g. *ibid.*, 951). Religion and faith also can be joined to resistance among the women struggling with poverty and marginali-

12 <http://www.weallnepali.com/nepali-festivals/swasthani-brata-katha>

sation (Motta 2013, 43). Among the women who promoted the changes, faith and spirituality functioned as a tool of fearlessness and hope in raising up new initiatives, such as contributions that expanded their social space or fought against discrimination. Also in a Buddhist writer Chögryam Thungba's words, there is a 'tradition of fearlessness' in Buddhist myths. This encourages one to gain self-understanding and 'not to be afraid of what one is', which leads to love and connection to the universe and all living things (Doetsch-Kidder 2012, 54). This fearlessness and connection to the universe functioned as an ideological driving force for the activism, as Ama's religious quote implies:

In the rainy time, there is grass growing. It's just grass. But some of the grass is healing grass. And some trees as well—like Buddha was sitting under that kind of special tree and got those fearless thoughts. ... And why? Why are there that kind of people like that grass or that kind of tree? As Buddha said, this kind of thing makes you remembered after you are gone. You need to be not afraid. And that's where I found the inspiration for my work.

Ama

In Buddhist philosophy, one of the core ideas of life is a continuous change (Becker 1981). As many of the women activists were Buddhists, this philosophical baseline functions as a tool to understand the change process in the women's position. It perceives that social phenomena change continuously, sometimes invisibly and inconspicuously—at times regressing, circulating or progressing—with different rhythms and moments following one another. According to Buddhist ideology, the impermanence of life is the biggest existential issue that people struggle with (Becker 1981). In this mirror, the change is viewed as a flowing river—and this affected how the women viewed and accepted the change as part of life. In Ama's religious argumentation, there was an idea of 'going forward'. Yet how going forward was understood and perceived is a complex issue, and it is discussed more in the next chapter.

The existence of change, as such, was agreed upon in the communities of this research, and it often was argued in terms of faith, spirituality and *karma* (fate). However, there were various aspects to how the women viewed the roots of the changes: They agreed that the change can be actively driven, and they also saw that some parts of the change are based on karma (e.g. Raju 2010). On one hand, as they believed in karma, they trusted that everything was happening according to their doings in their previous lives, determining their fate in their current lives. This was seen in terms of class and ethnicity, as it was challenging to step beyond the caste restrictions in practise, in spite of changes in the legislation. On the other hand, both religions—Buddhism and Hinduism—emphasised the role of the moral choices of people, which would have

effects on their next lives. This is related to the concept of *dharma*—the duty that each individual has towards the community. (Dahal, Acharya and Dahal 1999, 160; Raju 2010, 138.)

Dharma is practise-oriented—for example, the duty of giving alms to poor people (Raju 2010, 138). This is linked to the ideal of ‘dissolving the personal ego and selfishness for enlightenment’ (Dahal et al. 1999, 160). This explains why there often were beggars gathered in the temple areas: People donated money to the poor to please the gods before entering the temples for their rituals. The ideas and practises of dharma functioned also as an justification for the women’s activism to promote social change. Dharma led to solidarity, but at the same time, it maintained social hierarchies and did not contribute to sustainable, long-term change. The power division between the poor and wealthy people was not challenged by the practises of dharma. The other problem with dharma was that the generosity was mainly restricted to certain social groups close to one’s own (ibid., 163). The implementations of dharma did not question ethnic, caste or class hierarchies, and they existed, for example, in the practises in which some people did not eat with others from lower castes.

The stories of powerful female goddesses in Hindu tradition (e.g. Gross 2002) could play a fundamental part in driving for change with spiritual terms. Female goddesses functioned as inspiration for promoting women’s well-being and struggling against oppressive structures. In developing culturally sensitive and contextually relevant practises and conceptions with deeply religious communities, recognising the power, creativity and inspiration of female goddesses—coupled with a decolonised lens—is a relevant starting point. However, this does not mean to ignore the religious practises and conceptions that strengthened unequal social hierarchies and gender inequalities. When promoting the change towards social justice, the role of religion and spirituality appears in a negotiation between those two different sides—positive and negative—and the women’s relationship with them. This was seen in the women’s activism, as they had turned the religious teachings into motivation and tools to challenge the restrictive and harmful side of the religion. Thus, making changes on religious terms is finding balance between those two aspects: religion as a source of well-being and strength as well as restriction and discrimination.

In the domain of international social work, religion and spirituality play a controversial role. As the profession’s origins are in philanthropic and charity practises (e.g. Dominelli 2014, 342), it has similar roots to religious reasoning in making transformations. However, social work is identified as a secular profession. In spite of this, there is a need for social work practises to embrace spiritual and religious meaning systems in the contexts where they have more power to make changes than secular arguments. It is contextually relevant and ethical to recognise the religious concepts that argue for social justice and question gender inequality. It has a major impact on the change process, and it functions as an example of local knowledge as a driving force of the transition.

Emotions—Positional love and anger

When Ama talked about her community and activism, she often emphasised the meaning of love. She compared love to an ornament—a symbol of faith, beliefs and cultural identities. In her expressions and talk, Ama revealed a variety of her other emotions, too. She showed her tears, worries, joys and care through her eyes and gestures. Despite the complexities of communal activism and the hierarchies among the women and their different roles, they shared a common motivation for their actions: the emotions that drove them to promote the changes. Ama talked about love as ‘wealth’ of life. I see it as an internal driving force that was a crucial element in the activism for social change. By talking about love in terms of her actions, unknowingly, Ama joined with anti-racist feminist writers who see love as having ‘revolutionary potential’, a source of activism that promotes social justice and peace (e.g. Doetsch-Kidder 2012, 52).

The meaning of emotions as driving force of social change has been studied particularly in sociology (e.g. hooks 2003; Doetsch-Kidder 2012). The studies recognise a variety of emotions behind activism, such as anger and dissatisfaction, but also compassion, care and connection to the other people who are mistreated or oppressed (ibid., 50). Studies on social movements argue that emotions create a need for change, especially the feeling of being mistreated in some way (e.g. ibid.; Hall 2005). According to Claire O’Kane (2002, 700), the role of the social/development worker is to help people and communities express their feelings about the issues they feel important and to ‘cut the apathy’ and sense of powerlessness that the unjust structures have created. To act according to those feelings is like finding an emotional driving force for the change, which can create passion and commitment.

Sharon Doetsch-Kidder (2012, 50) divides the love behind activism into self-respect (self-love), connecting with others, compassion and care, the desire to make a meaningful contribution to the world and openness to heartbreak. I recognise these dimensions especially in the work of the women leaders and their committees. The forms of love were intertwined and intersected with each other, and mixed with other emotions such as frustration and anger. For example, Ama’s ‘act of self-love’ (e.g. ibid., 54) was rooted in a day from her childhood when she had experienced desperate hunger after not having food all day but still being obligated to work in the field. She had decided that she wanted to fight against that kind of poverty and starvation. The act of self-love led her to commit to this promise and to the struggle to overcome social and economic restrictions, which eventually led her to establish a women’s organisation in her community. Her experiences of suffering, hunger and despair functioned as one aspect in the driving forces for her activism in the women’s community.

This self-respect drove Ama to activism, but to succeed, she needed the community around her. It was impossible to be ‘self-respectful’ without being ‘connected with others’ (Doetsch-Kidder 2012, 50)—which she had turned into group activism. The importance of connectedness to the other people in promoting social change was

essential besides the self-love. Doetsch-Kidder (ibid.) determined group affiliation as one form of love behind the activism. Thus, one of the core factors of sustainable social change in these communities was connectedness, which relates to the values of communal coherence and belonging. On the other hand, the act of self-love without the community's support, in extreme cases, led to discrimination in the community.

This was seen with Buhari, when she resisted the actions that ostracised her in the family (through polygamy and isolation). Her resistance could be viewed as an act of self-love, but it was not perceived as such in the community around her. It actually turned against her. Her personal moral view of the situation was different from the community's, which was based on communal good intertwined with patriarchal traditions and the strongest members' dominance. Her ways of acting for self-love were not perceived as communally reasonable, which led her to a breakdown and suicide attempt. Her acts were eventually silenced by her family and the women's community. Buhari expressed her anger and frustration in her talk, which was not appreciated by a community that preferred harmony and calmness. Doetsch-Kidder (2012, 50) related anger to trauma that is linked to invisibility and discrimination, which also explains Buhari's emotions and actions.

Anger and frustration often have been perceived as 'negative' emotions, for example, when linked to feminist activism (Doetsch-Kidder 2012, 51). In my research context, anger as a driving force for change was an exception, and it related to loneliness and isolation. In the other cases—mostly organised activism—the emotions that the women expressed were related to harmony, such as peace, love and connectedness to each other and the community. Organised activism was mostly aimed at issues that connected the women, like recognition or improving livelihood means; thus, the 'enemy' was abstract, not able to be recognised concretely or pointed out (e.g. Mookherjee 2011, 9). Buhari, conversely, struggled against isolation and silencing in her family structures. Therefore, she could identify the 'evil' in her practical reality. In the case of organised activism, the connectedness was transformed into love. In Buhari's case, where the complex social networks and power issues in the daily context were to be changed and challenged, the emotional driving forces appeared more complex and were mixed with the 'negative' ones.

The anger and love behind activism are not separate emotions. Often anger, caused by unfairness, is turned into love and connectedness towards the other activists for the same cause (Doetsch-Kidder 2012, 51). When a woman like Buhari lost her connection with the other women, it led her deeper into despair. Ama and her committee recommended she accept her situation. The leaders had the most powerful voice in the women's organisation, so even if there were dissenting opinions that supported Buhari, they were not presented. Thus, in some cases, the communal mores were discriminatory towards individuals. Even though Buhari had an official law behind her arguments, communal morality had power over the legal statements (e.g. Pandey 2014, 12). This

relates to the very basic questions of feminist research (e.g. Motta 2015): Who had the power and voice to make moral judgements, and what was perceived as oppression and inequality in the communities?

The third element of love in activism that Doetsch-Kidder (2012, 50) determined is compassion and care. Nussbaum (2009) stated that compassion is a 'painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved misfortune'. In Buddhist ideology, compassion is a central issue of humane life (Becker 1981). I link compassion with the action of solidarity, which is strongly represented within South Asian women's movements and feminism. One of their main agendas is to support poor, illiterate and marginalised women, which is related to a rising consciousness of gender inequities (Hasan 2010, 951).

The women's activism and organising for social change was strongly based on a solidarity that they defended with compassion and care. The women also indicated a moral responsibility towards each other in their efforts for improving their position as 'second-class' members of the community. This was seen through their shared identifications as 'we poor women' or 'women who have always been oppressed'. Shared identification created connections through the emotions (love and compassion) (Nussbaum 2009; Doetsch-Kidder 2012, 52). However, communal solidarity met its limits when it came to women who had lost their family's support and who had fallen beyond the communal value base into isolated spheres. There was controversy in the acts of compassion and care, as they were ruptured by caste and ethnic differences, as well as communal obedience.

The extreme example of meeting these limits was illustrated in Mamina's situation, which opens up new viewpoints in terms of the solidarity behind the activism. Mamina was completely ostracised from her original community (from a region that was geographically, culturally and ethnically far away), and she was living on the street. She had gotten seriously ill and faced discrimination during the process of receiving treatment in the hospital (see more in Section 4.3). In Mamina's case, finding justice was about the very basic matter of humanity—her right to live.

The next morning was desperate. The girl was transferred to the corridor; other patients and staff could not stand her smell and crying. They seemed to blame us for bringing her, and they didn't know what to do with her. Nurses said that their duty is to give medicine, treat wounds and so on. People responsible for hygiene said their duty is to be cleaning. But who is washing a malnourished girl whose stomach is keeping nothing inside? Who's asking her how is she doing? Who's next to her when she's crying for mum and praying for death?

All of a sudden, a woman approached us. She had tears in her eyes as she came to hug us. She lives nearby, and she had been passing by the girl at the bus stop. She had

been giving her food and clothes. Today, she saw Mamina's 'home' empty, and she got worried. People told her that the girl was taken into the hospital, and she came. Slowly people—mainly the relatives of other patients—started to gather around. It was mostly out of curiosity, but some seemed to be genuinely worried, too. Finally, we found a man who was ready to stay with the girl when we could not come. [...] Finally, humanity is rising. People start daring to care.

Research diary 22.02.2013

When Mamina was lying in the hospital bed and faced the system that had failed to protect her in her vulnerable situation, it brought up questions about the meaning of care and support that was not connected either to societal, non-profit or kin-based care. I see it as a 'fifth sector' for providing social support, which was linked to this context and situation when the public and private, and the third sector (that is particularly central in Nepal), as well as the 'fourth sector' (voluntary and peer support) (e.g. Hokkanen 2014), were failing to help her. She had gotten occasional meals from a nearby restaurant, she had been warmed up by street dogs, and passers-by had given her money at times. While she did not get any formal or informal care that would have saved her from the street, she was getting occasional help from random people. Those people did not act through an organisation, nor did they have a familial or peer bond with her. I link these occasional acts of passers-by, shopkeepers and the people of the neighbourhood to humanity and universal compassion—as the woman who came to visit Mamina in the hospital said she felt it was her duty to help her. She expressed compassion that she had turned into the acts of care. These acts of compassion and care had kept Mamina alive on the street before she became critically ill.

The emotions behind activism are closely connected to passion, which I see as a vital issue in commitments to promote social change. Passion was seen especially in the leaders' activities and motivations. Cheryl Hall (2005) viewed passion as a 'key force for improving life' that connects people to shared activism. The chance for ethically responsible social work is in what O'Kane (2002) called 'turning the apathy into action'. It is to engage people to the processes that change 'oppression into freedom, despair into hope, hatred into love, and doubt into trust' (Gomez et al. 2011, 236). This way of seeing passion leads to commitment, yet I argue that there also was love with compassion involved in the 'fifth sector'—in the random alms given to Mamina by passers-by. Love and compassion as a driving force for making change in one particular moment (such as giving food to a hungry person) does not include a commitment for making long-term changes or changing oppressive and hierarchical structures, but it includes compassion in that particular passing moment. Those occasional acts of humanity were the choices that the people made in an instant—the choice not to ignore the hunger and despair of another human being.

Emotions as driving forces for activism are linked to morality (Doetsch-Kidder 2012, 50). Besides the lack of resources, time, capabilities or other reasons, the abandonment of a dying woman also is a moral choice. *Moral distancing* functions as a reason for ignorance, whereas *moral affiliation*—linked with humanity and compassion—leads to the acts of help. Thus, emotions turn into moral action, which approaches the very core of social work. Emotions are often behind the moral judgements that outweigh legislation, such as the cases where the community accepted polygamy in spite of the criminalisation of it. Holistic scrutiny of the driving forces considers this controversy and negotiates between different moral judgements.

Emotions as internal driving forces were both personal and communal. They drove individual women to act towards their goals, but they also were linked to communality, as it was necessary to have the community's support to make activism acceptable and, thus, to actualise the changes in practise. Love functioned as a driving force among the women who were powerful in their communities, whereas the women who were left alone with the stigma of being 'mad and difficult' were fuelled by anger. Therefore, the emotions behind the activism appeared positional—they were connected not only to a woman's personal character and temperament, but also to her position in the community.

When activism was actualised as resistance instead of promotion, 'negative' emotions outweighed the 'positive' ones. Emotions were impacted by the form of the 'enemy' the person was struggling against. The 'enemy' that was identified as a person, as in Buhari's case, aroused anger, whereas abstract enemies were fought with connectivity and love. Thus, the women's position in their community and family impacted their emotions; they varied (among other factors) according to whether the woman was accepted or rejected in terms of her 'sisters'. Therefore, promoting the change in the women's position was strongly a question of personal desire and need but also connectedness with the other women.

A wider problem related to emotions as driving forces is how to engender love and connectedness in the activism that was not supported by the community. Another question is how to include all the voices in the change process—also the ones fuelled by anger—in a community that appreciates harmony and peacefulness. One solution is to comprehend that anger is not the opposite of love, but apathy is. Apathy appears as silence in the face of injustice, and in the ethical responsibility that social work carries, the core is to 'turn apathy into action' (O'Kane 2002). The anger and love that drove the women to act were the opposites of apathy. The point is in recognising the similarities in those different emotions—the need for change. In dealing with anger, seeing its root causes is crucial, which is a way to start engendering love and connectedness. This calls for sensitivity and nuanced analysis of the emotions and the causes behind them. The key is to recognise the social positions, ruptures and connections that affect the emotions, which reaches the fundamental point of promoting social change: to negotiate the controversies and include multiple voices in the change process.

6.2 Intersecting driving forces

In this section, I analyse the external driving forces of the transition. However, I do not scrutinise them separately from the internal ones due to my commitment to being contextually relevant and locally sensitive. This is based on the stance that the cultures and local contexts are not just passive recipients of the external transformation processes (e.g. Gray and Hetherington 2013, 34). The communities had their own local responses to the external driving forces. Therefore, my approach is located at the intersections of the internal and external driving forces. These intersections included crossing different borders on international, local, contextual and practical levels. This was seen in the transgression of *socio-economic, spatial and epistemological borders*. Transgressing those borders was a prerequisite of the transition in the women's social position. The internal driving forces were the primary stimulus in crossing the borders on symbolic and concrete levels, and the external (international and structural) driving forces were continually measured and mirrored through the internal ones.

I identified the external driving forces in the communities as the processes of *internationalisation and globalisation; economic transformations* (such as capitalism and neoliberalism); *political changes* (new laws assuring wider women's rights and political participation); and projects on *women's rights and education*. The external driving forces had multiple and complex impacts on the local communities. They sometimes aligned and sometimes conflicted with the local views. However, the communities mostly formed their own responses to them, and those responses were diverse according to internal social hierarchies and identities. Those diverse local responses for the external driving forces triggered the transgression of various borders.

Analysing the transgression of different borders aligns with multidisciplinary studies that address borders and intersections on various aspects (e.g. Motta 2013; Nissilä 2016). The crux of my analysis is in the recognition of marginalisations and centres, conceptual and practical aspects of the transition and their intersections. I prioritise the epistemologies of the women whose perspectives have been disregarded and marginalised in both local and global contexts. I ponder the ruptures and gaps—as well as the flexibilities of the socio-economic, spatial and epistemological borders—which lead to the transgression of social and gendered borders. This includes addressing the borders on a practical level, and exploring how they relate with the complex transition process. Many of the borders included oppressive and unjust elements. Even if they were symbolic, they appeared on a very practical level and were linked to the concerns of dignity and equality.

I begin my analysis on the socio-economic borders, which were the most apparent aspect in the research discussions. The dreams of economic transformations and the reduction of poverty were particularly present in the women's talk. Those borders were strongly linked with the intersecting social categories of class, caste and ethnicity.

Next, I examine the renegotiation of spatial borders in terms of the women's position, which relates with the processes of internationalisation and globalisation, as well as political changes and transforming gendered relations. Scrutinising socio-economic and spatial borders leads me to address the epistemological borderlands—to recognise the hierarchies of knowledge and knowing. I study those borders through the concrete examples of the projects on women's rights and gender justice, as well as education and training. However, those concepts and projects were complex. On one hand, they diminished social and gendered hierarchies, but on the other, they strengthened them. The transgression of socio-economic, spatial and epistemological borders was the prerequisite of the transformation of social and gendered boundaries. They were interlinked to one another in a dynamic process of the transition in the women's position on practical and communal levels. This complex process does not lead towards a predefined end; it changes the social phenomena continuously.

Transgressing socio-economic borders—Indigenous, organisational and market-oriented ways to transition

Poverty was one of the major struggles the women brought up, and it was present in their lives on multiple levels. They described poverty through, for example, the lack of household water due to the deficiencies in infrastructure, or health problems caused by hard physical work. Those struggles were common in the women's everyday life. But for Mamina—without the community's safety net—poverty was absolute and fatal. Thus, poverty had many faces in the communities and so did the means to fight it. The women conveyed that by increasing their economic independence, they would reach equality and social independence. Economic practises, policies and ideologies expand to the social level; they relate to the matters of dependency and independence, disadvantages and well-being, and exclusion and inclusion. Economic changes lead to social changes, yet the process is not straightforward but multidimensional. However, crossing socio-economic borders is a requirement in transforming the women's position.

When the women highlighted the reduction of poverty as the primary driving force for the social change, it aligned with international development goals (UNDP 2016) and most development policies and practises in Nepal. Thus, this could be seen as a shared goal in local and global contexts and a basis to negotiate the development strategies and cooperation for social change. However, the difficulty lies in their power dynamics and the means for reaching those goals. Some of those means did not include women of different social positions equally but instead strengthened the hierarchies. To a certain extent, transgressing socio-economic borders decreases inequality, but it can also increase the gap between the rich and poor and be harmful for local traditions and the environment. Women are particularly exposed in this aspect, as intersecting social hierarchies together with poverty can lead to powerlessness, isolation and humiliation

(Narasaiah 2005, 5). In this context, poverty is feminised. The feminisation of poverty is a complicated, diverse and dynamic condition that also leads to the deprivation of prospects and opportunities (ibid).

The international policies and ideologies of development and the communities' practical realities were somewhat conflicting. This correlates with a risk that the methods and ideologies of development aim to support the capitalist global order and neoliberalism rather than social justice and equality (e.g. Motta 2013, 36; Reilly 2013; Wehbi et al. 2016, 286). The dynamics of development are complex, in that they often include the idea of economic growth as a requirement for social change. This necessitates taking into account the criticism on capitalism, which claims that it fosters inequalities across countries and regions, including gendered inequalities (Reilly 2013). Utilising critical and decolonising lenses in development practises and discourses provides tools to deconstruct the uneven global power dynamics that are interwoven with economic changes.

I address socio-economic borders in practise by considering the women's means and ideas for reducing poverty. This relates with the problems of livelihood in the women's lives: What were the women's means to make changes in their livelihoods? How have they transgressed the economic borders in their lives, and how has it transformed their social position? The women presented diverse views and practises in terms of these questions, which differed according to their social positions in the community. Socio-economic borders intersected with the issues of belonging and isolation, as well as with social identifications and categorisations such as ethnicity, class and caste. By considering the diversity among the women, I identify three separate ways for reducing poverty: the *indigenous way*, the *organisational way* and the *market-oriented way*. All were targeted at diminishing the social impacts of poverty, including despair, isolation, exclusion and dependency. These ways were present as parallel in the women's perspectives and practises, and they were the means to transgress the socio-economic borders.

Indigenous way

The indigenous way of reducing poverty and transgressing socio-economic borders links with the practical and local realities of the communities. I picture it in the afternoons when the group of women stopped their work in the field to attend a meeting with me and the organisation's leader. I associate it with the smell of sweat and soil, to muddy feet and curious faces—to the land that the women were part of, that they presented as their identity, pride, worry and joy. Their primary ambitions were related to land and agriculture. Most of them said their dream was to get a buffalo—a symbol of wealth, sustainability and security—to each house in the village. This dream was linked to a communal mindset, as it would have benefitted all the houses in the village. The women also related a hope for getting training on new agricultural methods.

As one of the main duties of the women was to work in the field, their dreams related logically with survival and the traditional livelihood provided by the land. I see these goals as indigenous (local and contextual) ways to fight poverty. They rely on sustainable economic alternatives with a holistic approach for taking into account the impacts on the environment and the whole community (e.g. Dominelli 2010a). These dreams include the way to transgress socio-economic borders and improve the women's economic participation with a communal lens. This is crucial to consider when promoting change with a decolonising approach.

I also relate the indigenous way of transgressing the socio-economic borders with the local practise of exchange, which I identify as *gift economy*. The exchange mentality within the communities was a widespread and deep-rooted way to organise the socio-economic practises and spaces. For example, feminist literature (e.g. Vaughan 1997; Motta 2015) has criticised market-based discourses for not appreciating this as part of the economy. Acknowledging the gift economy is a radical alternative to patriarchal capitalism (Vaughan 1997). Even though, for example, Genevieve Vaughan (ibid.) described the gift economy as a 'new perspective, a change in paradigm, which brings with it a radically different vision of the nature of the problems, and of the alternatives', it is not a new perspective. It has been practised among peoples throughout the history, but its value has gotten buried under the global economic hegemonies.

In the communal practises, gift-giving was based on sharing and exchange, both on material and immaterial levels. Mutual sharing among the community members ensured the functionality of the communities, and the gift-giving practises included different duties—such as mothering, care, household work—as well as women's mutual bonding and activism towards gender equality. The main speciality of the gift economy is that it is need-oriented rather than profit-oriented (e.g. Vaughan 1997, 30). The gift economy is formed by unorganised, unofficial practises that were recognised in the communal habits of the daily context: Money was not the only tool of the exchange, but for instance working hours in other families' fields were payed back with food and crops.

Beside the social aspect and mutual sharing among the community members, the gift economy also can be seen as a land-related matter. The women respected the land through a reciprocal relationship: The land provided the necessities of their lives (water, food or medical plants) in return for their work. Thus, it was deeply connected with the women's identities and culture, which often is not recognised as a progressive means to reduce poverty. However, when the practises of the gift economy are acknowledged and strengthened, they have the power to transgress socio-economic borders in the communities and, thus, improve the women's position.

The indigenous and traditional practises often were tied to communal mores. Ergo, the indigenous way of transgressing economic borders is linked to morality. I analyse this through a local practise—*communal court*. It was an informal village committee and a traditional platform of control and communal justice. The committee gathered

to address the ‘wrongs’ or the conflicts that the community members brought to them. The judgements were based on communal morals and assessments, whereas the official law was used only in the extreme or insolvable cases (e.g. Pandey 2014, 12). Communal court had more power in their daily lives than the official law. This functioned as moral restriction for some of the changes in the women’s position, as the committees were penetrated by patriarchy and included only men.

However, the traditional communal courts also appeared as a possibility for gaining economic rights for women—as in Budi’s case, when the community court ruled on her behalf in a fight over her land. The tools and power of the communal court were based on moral judgements that brought justice to Budi. The committee set restrictions in agricultural exchanges as punishment for the man who threatened Budi’s rights to her own land. This shows that a traditional practise—communal court—functioned as a platform for transgressing economic borders in some cases, in spite of its patriarchal structure.

The gift economy and community court were related to the means of reducing poverty through mutual sharing and the traditional, communal livelihoods that had developed throughout centuries and decades. They appeared as indigenous ways to reduce poverty and promote transformations in the women’s position. By recognising and strengthening the communal bonds, as well as traditional knowledge and expertise, socio-economic borders are transgressed in a locally relevant and contextually sensitive way (e.g. Dominelli 2010a). This is a basis of indigenous and decolonising social work, which prioritises local know-how in developing professional expertise. This creates ethical ways to drive the transition in the women’s position.

Organisational way

The transgression of socio-economic borders was most obviously located in the women’s organisations’ actions and plans. Generally, the organisations and their formality were perceived in the communities as something progressive, which also gained them external funding and recognition on a societal level. Thus, organising around different themes had become very popular, and numerous organisations in the area contributed to infrastructure, livelihoods or health issues. They were mostly segregated units for men and women. The organisations that promoted the women’s position were targeted at mothers, widows, women’s agricultural training and women’s health. They provided goods—like seeds or other agricultural sources—to the women and their families, and the majority of the women’s memberships in the organisations were tied to material contributions. The instruments for the socio-economic transformations in the organisations were based on traditional and communal bonds, which also included hierarchic and unjust structures and relations that impeded social transformations and made them unequal.

The organisational way to socio-economic transformations was based mostly on a mixture of indigenous and market-oriented ideologies. On one hand, the women’s

organisations emphasised agricultural contributions and training that were based on the local circumstances. Thus, it was indigenous to a degree. On the other hand, the changes were seen in new methods and structures for agriculture, for example, orange tree planting or a compost project for communal business and environmental sustainability. This was to replace some of the traditional, family-based farming, which meant family land was used for making profit on a communal level instead of supporting solely themselves. So, these changes had the objectives of profit and efficiency, which was a move towards market orientation. However, the move towards it was located on a shared, communal level, appearing more context-specific than the market paradigm with a wider gap between a profit-maker and producers.

These projects, which were perceived as progressive by the women's organisations, had multiple impacts on a social level. While they could increase families' economic well-being and transgress social barriers, they also included risks that decolonising views for development have emphasised (e.g. Marirajan 2012; Ranta 2012; Höckert 2015). For instance, the orange tree planting took land from some of the families. It is too early to tell how this eventually impacted them, but there are some troubling examples elsewhere of the further implications of this kind of agricultural development (e.g. Marirajan 2012). The critiques of development have rested in the practises that cause harm to certain (often the poorest and the most disadvantaged) people, such as through displacement and evictions (e.g. Marirajan 2012; Rao 2013, 47; Seppälä 2016). Thus, it is ethically imperative to ask if this was a first step towards a more unequal economy and maybe even evictions, or does it make the families' lives more sustainable and transgress socio-economic borders when they are able to raise their economic status and thus get appreciation in the community?

The organisational way of reducing poverty is intertwined with complex global-local dynamics and hierarchies. It includes a risk of slipping into more unequal socio-economic structures, because the organisations were initiated and planned by the leaders and their committee, and the women on the lower levels of the hierarchies did not participate in them for various reasons (as discussed in Section 5.3). Would the changes with an organisational view follow the traditional hierarchies or transgress them? Do they create new hierarchies? In viewing local and global hierarchies critically, I do not stand either for or against an organisational way as such, but I aim at bringing forth the different and complex impacts that it may raise.

As the organisation got funding for its different projects, it sparked jealousy among the women. Particularly problematic were the cases in which the leaders appeared to use the organisation and its aims for personal gain. For example, Ama's idea to start a driving course for the women was seen as progressive, as it stepped beyond the women's traditional space. However, the idea was to get funding for the driving course from a foreign donor, and the training would have been provided by the leader's relative at a price ten times higher than the course would have cost in Kathmandu. The leader

argued for the women's safety and a guarantee of passing in favour of the course provided by her relative in the village. However, the price difference for the courses was major, revealing signs of corruption and exposing the complexity of the relationship with external donors. The hierarchies—as they are partly hidden—may not show for an outsider during a short visit. They could be identified during a lengthy process with efforts and tools to listen to multiple voices with ethical sensitivity.

The complexity of the organisational way of transgressing socio-economic borders is in balancing between the improvements of the livelihoods and reduction of poverty but at the same time trying to avoid slipping into more unequal and destructive economic development. The aims of development in the organisations were seen as the development on the traditional livelihoods, as progressive and 'modern' strategies. However, the profit-maker was the local community and not, for example, a multinational company, which makes this case different from the cases that have produced resistive movements against development (e.g. Banerjee 2006; Marirajan 2012; Seppälä 2016). A critical question that is to be asked in promoting transition with contextually relevant tools is if the organisational way is a gateway towards a more market-oriented transition, and to what extent the women could impact this process.

Market-oriented way

The market-oriented way was like a double-edged sword in terms of transgressing socio-economic borders: While economic empowerment could overcome ethnic and caste hierarchies, on the other hand, it created communal ruptures, corruption and competition among the community members. The women's meetings were organised primarily around economic participation and relied on the most popular development strategy in the global South—microfinance programs (providing a right to savings, credit, pension and insurance) (Drolet 2010, 216; Hietalahti 2011). They are generally encouraged with women's economic rights, arising from international agreements for human rights and gender equality (Drolet 2010). The projects provided loans for agricultural investments, such as livestock or seeds, or for practising another occupation such as sewing. Microcredit was aimed at increasing the women's entrepreneurship and income-generating activities, which could increase their economic independence and therefore their social position, too.

This leans on the development discourse with economic arguments (Drolet 2010, 214). In this discourse, economic development seeks to emancipate women by giving them access to money to become 'bankable' (Hietalahti 2011, 13). This was seen as a base for the women's empowerment, increasing self-determination and, thus, improving their position in the communities—which would eventually lead to further development of the communities and the society. However, feminist critiques argue that this aspect has dismissed the social and gender hierarchies that are intertwined in the capitalist paradigm (Drolet 2010, 214; Khan and Khan 2016, 66). In addition,

being 'bankable' has been argued to favour global markets (and the richest parts of the world) especially, and there is a threat that this kind of paradigm destroys local traditional livelihoods, such as communality and some cultural heritages.

Microfinance programs partially strengthened the hierarchies within the community, based on ethnicity and class, even though the programs were community-based (e.g. Hietalahti 2011). The projects lacked a critical view towards inequalities and power struggles in driving for economic improvements. Economic contributions targeted the poorest families through, for example, a goat project, where the municipality donated a goat for the poorest houses of the community. Yet it turned out that the women's committee had advised some of the better-off families to hide their property to get a donated goat, too. Competition over the benefits was apparent both within the communities as well as between different organisations. One of the women presented that 'money has spoiled people'. Even though with the goat project it was not about money per se, it indicates how donations can cause more fractions than unity in the communities.

The leaders of the organisations played a crucial role in bringing financial benefits to the villages. It had a puzzling impact on the communities. First, the organisations needed leadership, and financial support could remarkably improve some of the families' lives. On the other hand, it deepened the fragmentations in the community. Economic projects appeared to be mostly the leaders' projects. Spivak (2005, 188) said, 'When I see rousing examples of "people's movements", I ask myself, "how long would the people continue without the presence of the activist leaders?"'. This question is related to the intersectional and feminised internalisation of a lower self-sense, 'othering' and power, which is intertwined with hierarchies, as it concerned the poorest women especially. 'Othering' appeared, for example, in the leaders' talk on behalf of the poorest women, which the external development advocates and donors did not seem to question. In turn, the leaders had adopted the concepts that satisfied the requirements of the donors. They told the stories in relation to dominant narratives (Motta and Seppälä 2016, 8), which were intertwined with colonialist and capitalist ideologies. Thus, the organisations represented a move towards the market-oriented way of making transformations.

Another practise in the communities favouring the market-oriented view was *tourism*, which was practised in the other one of the studied communities. It was a visible part of the community, starting from the board that welcomed the tourists to the area. Tourism was, however, not directly market-oriented, as it was based on a home-stay programme. According to their advertisements, tourists could see 'genuine' and original culture beyond the central tourist areas and hotels. Community-based tourism was one of the main fields that Ama and her committee members were pursuing and promoting—aiming at economic improvements for the village.

Our basic idea is to bring tourists here as much as possible and develop this area. They [the women] would work in the hotels, in hotel cars. ... [...] If the tourists

come, we have a bed to sleep in. If the tourists come, we have a place to eat also. So, if the tourists come, we want to offer our own vehicle to them also. That's the way we want it to be.

Ama

Community and participatory tourism is an alternative to the major tourism business—the second-biggest industry in Nepal—and its destructive impacts on local communities (e.g. Höckert 2015). Ama's endeavours represented a local micro-level practise as an alternative to the bigger tourism companies. However, there are also critical views towards participatory tourism in the global South (e.g. *ibid.*). The problems occurred also in the researched communities. Community tourism mainly benefitted the wealthiest families in the villages. There were certain necessities that only they could afford, such as the facilities for tourists who were sleeping in more comfortable beds than the families in a newer part of the house, and bigger houses located in the central parts of the village. Those conditions were provided by taking out loans, which only the wealthiest families could do. Thus, community tourism tended to incline toward the market-based view in some respects.

It also appeared that in this setting, the poorer families represented the sceneries of a 'genuine', rural village. As a part of the tourism programme, there were village walks, and the tourists got to observe the daily routines and settings of the people. This could initiate dialogues among people from various positions, but it also included the risk that the people working in their fields were seen as a tourist attraction—through exoticism. In developing community-based tourism to improve the villages' economic situation—in spite of its 'alternativity' and local emphasis—there was a possibility of deepening the hierarchies and inequalities.

This shows that the prevalent hierarchies in the communities penetrated the development processes. The market-based way of transgressing socio-economic borders requires critical examination, with ethical sensitivity towards the global and local power hierarchies and those within the local relationships and structures. This includes the recognition of internationalisation and transnationalism within this process, as markets are not bound to national borders, but the flow of money is regulated by international policies and ideologies. When the women were driving for economic improvements favouring a market-oriented approach, they were stepping towards internationalisation and became a part of the global network where banks and other economic institutions play a dominant role.

Promoting economic growth does not automatically improve people's health, education, opportunities for political participation, or the opportunities for women to protect their bodily integrity from rape and domestic violence (e.g. Nussbaum 2009, 3). This is evidenced by the fact that in spite of many achievements towards economic

growth, global inequalities have increased during last few decades (Okin 2003, 281; UNDP 2016). There is an ethical dilemma in the market-oriented way of promoting change. Sara Motta (2013, 50) saw capitalism as part of a colonialist scheme that divides people into the ‘colonisers’ and the ‘colonised’. However, many development projects lean—in spite of the improvements towards local-based practises—on economic arguments (cf. Helin 2016). This includes the idea of increasing material wealth at the expense of the environment and local traditions. When the driving forces of the transition include money, it is penetrated by power issues that require critical investigation. Corruption and competition over economic benefits had increased conflicts among the community members. Thus, in making ethically sustainable transformations, it is important to avoid slipping solely into a market-oriented approach at the expense of local and environmental aspects.

Balancing between dependency and independence

Transgressing socio-economic borders with indigenous, organisational or market-oriented ways drove the transformation in the women’s social position. This included the concern about balancing between the women’s dependency and independence, which was strongly linked to the economic position of the women. However, ‘economic independence’ is complex in terms of women’s well-being: The women did not criticise their dependency on their families—dependency was internalised self-determination, part of their identities and communal lifestyle. However, dependency appeared problematic when a woman was isolated or discriminated against in her family. Those women presented economic independence as their liberation.

The economic transition had brought about some changes in caste and social hierarchies, as material wealth elevated a family’s position within the traditional social order. Thus, the women’s social position could improve when economic borders were transgressed. Economic improvements on an individual level, however, also caused communal fragmentation. Independence could lead a woman to isolation and loneliness. This had harmful consequences in a context in which communal bonds in the families were highly valued. Thus, an ethical step for transgressing socio-economic borders is not to support women’s independence directly, but to support interdependency among the community and family members in a more equitable way to avoid breaking communal bonds and instead strengthen the women’s position in an interdependent network.

Socio-economic borders were communally guarded and flexible, and they defined practises and constructed the women’s identities. Ethically sustainable change in the socio-economic aspect calls for balancing between the indigenous, organisational and market-oriented ways of fighting poverty. It requires the sensitivity to recognise communal traditions that promote the women’s well-being, by including all voices and considering different social positions and their intersections. Professional social work

practises with communities in the global and local margins need to acknowledge the links between the communal bonds and the environmental aspect in improving the communities' social and economic well-being.

Transgressing spatial borders—Internationalisation, political changes and transforming gendered relationships

Spatial changes appeared as a crucial part of the transition in the women's position—for example, when the women's space expanded from private to public and communal spheres. Spatial borders were transgressed on many levels, both concretely and symbolically. They were accomplished, for instance, in internationalisation, political participation and changing relations to men. Spatial borders refer to *class-* and *caste-intercepted*, *gendered*, *cultural* and *ethnic*, as well as *national borders*. Transgressing spatial borders increased the women's agency, decision-making and self-esteem—which drives the transition in their social position. This complex process was affected by external driving forces intertwined with the internal ones.

Some of the strongest external driving forces for the transition were internationalisation and globalisation. They had impacts on the local traditions and social and economic systems. They were actualised mostly through tourism, international development cooperation and migration, and concretised in increasing capitalism and secularisation. Internationalisation widened the women's social space by changing values and beliefs and, for example, by increasing the labour-based migration of women to foreign countries. There was a widespread trend of getting 'internationalised' that appeared as a desire to interact with foreigners, mainly people and organisations from the global North. White people, *kuires*, were associated mostly with America (meaning North America) and wealth, without seeing the nuances and differences among foreigners. Internationalisation was often seen as Westernisation and modernisation, such as speaking English and wearing Western clothes (e.g. Channa 2013, 142). Beyond this generalised perception, the processes of Western and non-Western relations that modified the local structures and practises were complex.

In spite of the strong impacts of internationalisation, it was in a continuous negotiation with the local traditions and conceptions. The daily reality was at a crossroads of local and global effects, where different values intersected and sometimes conflicted. Due to these processes, the dichotomy of local and international did not apply as such anymore; the border was vague, as the values, concepts and ideologies merged. Modernisation and Westernisation were not appreciated on every scale, and some of their influences were deemed inappropriate. The rejections towards changes such as stopping corporal punishments, accepting homosexuality or Western impacts on women's clothing were often voiced as, 'You can do that in Europe, but here it does not work'. Thus, communal values and coherence were prioritised over the foreign impacts on moral issues. However, some women told that they accepted homosexuality, though on

a communal level they could not admit that. The change was brewing on an individual level, but reaching communal acceptance was a slower process.

The impacts of internationalisation were appreciated to a certain extent but also were seen as a threat to traditions and communal harmony. Internationalisation is a fairly new process in Nepal, whereas local traditions are centuries old (Ghimire, Axinn, Yabiku and Thornton 2006, 1184). Rapid changes through foreign impacts can be rather harmful for those traditions—such as breaking communal harmony. Thus, questioning the dichotomy of ‘harmful traditions and advanced modernisation’ (e.g. Channa 2013, 141) is imperative. This is associated with the postcolonial critiques that perceive modernisation as a form of colonialism in indigenous communities (e.g. Arora-Jonsson 2008, 153). Therefore, a decolonising critique is crucial in scrutinising the internationalisation process in Nepal.

The internationalisation process was entangled with regional differences in Nepal. Diverse geographic conditions had separated people to specific areas that aligned with ethnic and caste borders. However, those borders were transgressed as part of the transition, and the castes and ethnicities were increasingly mixed. As the process was slow, and those borders still determined people’s lives to some extent, they also affected internationalisation. Some of the communities and women were more influenced by internationalisation than others, which was related to the women’s socio-economic position: The women from higher classes and castes were able to speak English and communicate with foreigners, which increased their association with internationalisation. Also, the location, education and livelihood means either connected or disconnected the women from international effects. Thus, on this aspect, internationalisation seemed to follow and strengthen social hierarchies.

Spatial borders also were transgressed on societal and political levels, which shaped the communal and daily contexts. The election of a female president in 2015 shattered one of the women’s ‘glass ceilings’. Rewati, a local feminist and contextual translator of this study, reflected on the issue:

Just being a woman, I didn’t consider her a women’s rights activist. She has played a major role in oppressing the voice of women [...] Enni, you know the game of power. She was not a threat but rather a tool to shut up other uprising women’s voices—the older generation’s feminism maybe. But here it’s a positive development. When she was really elected as president, my thoughts changed. It’s a great achievement. To make a female president is not only about her; rather it’s an acceptance and acknowledgement of women’s role in society and the system. It’s a symbolic message to young women like us.

Rewati

The election of a female president was a symbolic message both on the local and global levels in representing the change in the women's position. Nevertheless, it was not only a gendered, but also an intersectional concern. The president was from a higher caste and was criticised by the local feminists for not being sensitive to gender equalities on a wider scale¹³. Thus, there was a gap with grassroots' feminism, and class and caste hierarchies were not questioned by the election of a female president.

Even though there were an increasing number of women in the parliament (Pant and Standing 2011, 411), local feminists criticised that women's positions in politics often are only nominal, and rural women's views are excluded among the political elite although most of the Nepalese people live in the countryside (Shah 2017). Borders between the rural and urban, educated and uneducated—beside castes, ethnicities and class—appeared in political and structural changes and affected practical realities. The grassroots activists of the women's communities said that they were not interested in participating in politics, as they saw it as separated from their everyday life. The women were disappointed with politicians and the corruption of the government. Their views aligned with the Marxist feminists: The women in the parliaments of patriarchal societies often have second-class positions and are marginalised in decision-making (e.g. Motta 2013).

However, the women also presented views that peace-building and democracy projects in Nepal had remarkably improved the women's position on a societal level, with the political parties competing to be 'more advanced than the others' in this sphere. They had established new laws reaching for gender equality and had increased women's participation in the parliament, which transgressed spatial borders (e.g. Shah 2017). Civil war, resulting from a rural insurgency, touched the women on multiple levels. First, they suffered from losses, torture and increased gendered violence. However, it also expanded their social space, because the Maoists needed women to join them, and they could leave their traditional duties. Armed women were seen as empowered, which appears contradictory. In one aspect, this transgressed gendered spatial borders. On the other hand, the women joined (both voluntarily and forced) a violent movement that caused suffering to many. Thus, transgressing spatial borders towards traditionally masculine spheres was not always a change towards well-being, either for the individuals or the community.

Spatial borders appeared strongly gendered. The women brought forth their relationship to men with gendered divisions, including separate duties and places in the community. The women spent most of their time with the other women through family connections (mothers- and sisters-in-law) and activities (daily routines and organisations). However, the men's role and changing gendered relationships as a driving force

13 The Nepali Times: The First Woman President. <http://www.nepalitimes.com/blogs/thebrief/2015/10/28/the-first-woman-president/>

for the transition were clear, as their support of the women's endeavours pushed the transition further. In practise, the men stayed mostly separated from the women's activism: They accepted and appreciated it, but did not join in. On the individual level, women needed allowance for the activism from their husbands. The women leaders said that their husbands enabled their activism by contributing to the household duties and, thus, allowing them some extra time that they needed for the organisation's activities. So, in this case, they increased women's spatial agency. Expanding the women's social space calls for the negotiation between men and women. Unity with men and the renegotiation of gendered spaces with a critical view of patriarchy transgresses the spatial borders.

Transgressing spatial borders appeared through internationalisation, political changes and changing gendered relationships. Internationalisation was about balancing between the foreign and local impacts. The process followed caste, ethnic, gendered and regional differences. Political changes included women's involvement in political decision-making, yet intersecting social categories influenced them, and the changes did not impact the realities of all the women. This shows the complexity of the transition process. Political decisions could increase the women's space, but transformative commitments were conditions for those political decisions. Thus, political decision-making needed the will to transgress intersecting social hierarchies in improving the women's position. Changing gendered relationships redistributed the space between men and women, which deconstructed the patriarchal spatial division. Transgressing spatial borders through those different processes reached gendered spatial justice.

On the epistemological borderlands—Negotiations on women's rights and education

The transition in the women's position would not be complete without the transgression of epistemological borders. Women who are marginalised in both local and global contexts often are the targets of the changes, not the agents (e.g. Dominelli 2010a). Crossing epistemological borders and bridging different knowledges, with the sensitivity to recognise the hierarchies, is a requirement for an ethical transition process. I analyse those borders through the *women's rights* and *education* projects that were launched in the communities by foreign and local actors. Epistemological borders appeared on global power hierarchies and their imperial and colonial tendencies, as well as local caste, ethnic and class hierarchies. The concerns of transgressing epistemological borders align with the methodological concerns of this study—of including all voices and bridging different knowledges from the margins and the centres with an understanding of their nuances.

Women's rights

First, I scrutinise the epistemological borders by addressing the concept of women's rights in the researched communities. Gender inequality is one of the major topics in development policies and practises, and it is seen as a barrier to development (e.g. Nussbaum 2000). Gender equality is mostly advocated with projects on women's rights. However, women's rights is a contested concept, and it includes epistemological borders and power structures. This appeared to me in a concrete way when I found out that many of the women understood 'women's rights' as something that is related to international organisations such as the UN (e.g. Menon 2007, 112). Women's rights were seen as an international project, concept and source of money, which did not have a practical link to their daily context or their own knowledge. Only highly educated representatives of international or national organisations were perceived as women's rights experts. It seemed completely alien to many of the women that they could be the experts of their own rights, or that they would be the ones to determine the prerequisites of the change instead of these external agencies.

This coincides with Motta's (2013) view about 'development' often being imperial projects. Imperialism appeared subtly and often was cloaked in 'locally sensitive' practises. It was symbolised in the concepts that the women had accepted from the outside without completely understanding what they meant. The tense relationship between the external donors, the leaders of the women's communities and the women on the lowest levels of the hierarchies appeared very complex. The leaders had embraced the concepts that the donors wanted to promote, such as women's rights, without critical scrutiny of the hierarchies in their own communities. They had taken a strong stand to advocate for those goals—yet, the women who were struggling with poverty thought that those goals were something that did not concern them. Thus, in promoting 'women's rights', there is a need to understand those tensions, see the complexity of the concept and prioritise the most vulnerable women's views. This is a way of transgressing epistemological borders—challenging the imperialistic nature of development cooperation.

To dissect those tensions, there is a need to understand the realities behind the women's perspectives on the women's rights concept. The women's views differed—from 'I do not know what they mean' to explicit use of different angles of the concept—according to their social position in the community. An extract of the conversation among me, Rewati (the cultural and contextual translator), Didi and Budi (the women who criticised the women's organisation) shows their views on women's rights:

Rewati: Have you heard the term 'women's rights'?

Didi: Yeah, I heard it ... but I don't know what it means.

R: ... And who's talking about women's rights?

D: I've heard it on the TV. And sometimes the women's group, they talk about that.

R: What does it mean in your own understanding?

D: [laughing] ...

When Didi reacted to the question with laughter, did she find the question funny, or was she nervous? Or was it linked to a concept that did not make sense to her? Did she think this question was weird because Rewati, an academic woman from Kathmandu, had asked it of her, a single mother from a poor household? I did not get answers to these questions. Nevertheless, the beginning of this conversation revealed internalised epistemological hierarchies—when Didi did not know the meaning of a concept that was a key issue in the projects targeting her. As these questions were floating around in my mind, Budi, an older woman from Didi's neighbourhood, began to talk with more confidence:

Budi: What rights men have—the women should have the same rights. ...

Rewati: What's a right that men get that women don't?

B: For parents, both children are the children, the same. But the girl never gets the inheritance from the parents; she doesn't have the rights to the parents' property. So, it's only the son. So, it's discriminative. So, girls should have equal rights to the boys in the property of parents. And only boys are getting education, but girls should get the same education. In the past, like when a man goes anywhere, nobody talks about it, so they have mobility. But if a woman goes out and stays overnight, they get criticised by people, which is very discriminative, and it should be not like that.

Enni: Mmm. And who's scolding them if a woman goes? Who's making these rules?

Didi: Paila paila ... [past, past—in the old times]

R: But who are those people looking after the rules?

B: Everybody in the villages—but in the past, not these days. In my childhood, my parents didn't even allow me to stay in my neighbour's house overnight. But now, there's so much change, there's no such discrimination. Women can even migrate to a foreign country. So, there is so much change, and there is not so much discrimination in mobility and even in education.

Budi linked women's rights with property rights, education and mobility. These attributes line up with the rights talk in most of the academic feminist discourses, too (e.g. Abdela 2010). However, at the end of this conversation, we clashed with the prejudices and the positional conceptualisations. After having a discussion on women's rights, Budi asked if I had brought an educational programme to the village. This was an eyes-opening question to me, as we had explained that I was a researcher and what it meant. First, it revealed the difficulty of communicating with the research participants, and second, it mirrored the complexity of the concept of women's rights and the epistemological borders within it. Rewati interpreted Budi's question as the following:

Budi associated women's rights with the organisations, and as I was interested in her views on them, she saw me as a representative of an organisation. Thus, epistemological power hierarchies influenced our conversation. At the same time, Budi's views were closely related to the daily contexts and practises of the communities. They also followed the dialogue of Nepalese feminists, who have advanced citizenship rights (Pant and Standing 2011, 410).

The organisational view on women's rights also was common among the women leaders, whose social position was high in the communities and who used the 'rights talk' more determinately:

Women's rights, children's rights and health projects are gonna work. [...] As fast as that money comes [for the organisation], and that money should go for women's rights and children's rights and economic statement, rights and health and education—with those three, the situation will be better. We need to get a good benefit from that—we need to develop fast. You can't give money to everybody—you have to come to the organisation, through it, not individually. From the old times, we were backwards. Now we want to go forward. With less money, how can we do more products?

Ama

Ama related women's rights to children's rights, women's health, economic contributions and education. Her understanding of women's rights was strongly linked to the organisation and financial contributions, which she perceived as development of the villages. When listening to Ama, I found myself considering the link between poverty and the strong role of the organisational and financial aspects on the rights talk. When the daily realities were filled with struggles for basic needs, it seemed obvious that the economic aspect would be prevalent in making transformations in the women's position. However, different nuances were left out of this view, which appears problematic in terms of the hierarchies among the women and the epistemological borders in the transition process.

Some of the women opposed the hierarchies that appeared in the women's rights projects, by, for example, withdrawing from the organisations' activities. Without recognising the complexity and the communal hierarchies, these kind of actions are often perceived as ignorance, laziness, passivity and a lack of entrepreneurial vision (Höckert 2015, 239). In fact, the poorest women seemed quite sceptical (e.g. *ibid.*) about the impacts of the projects. Thus, their ignorance was not passive but instead was based on an epistemological gap: They did not see that the concepts had resonance in their daily contexts. Withdrawal was a resistance of power, which is emphasised in the decolonising discourses (Deepak 2011, 784). In transgressing epistemological borders,

this resistance and withdrawal from the projects requires attention. That includes hearing multiple voices—also of the women who seem passive—yet leaving space for those to be genuinely passive, too, if that was their wish.

The participants' views show that the 'universal' concept of women's rights is contradictory. In some respects, the concept appeared as rhetoric and as a tool for obtaining financial benefits for the organisations. On the other hand, the women understood their rights through their daily realities such as increasing mobility or education. The complexity in crossing epistemological borders lies in balancing between hearing multiple voices, and leaving space for silence without perceiving it as passivity. Recognising this complexity crosses the epistemological borders.

Education and training

Everybody was telling like, 'Who's going to send a girl to school who is going to another house anyway?' So, that was affecting my father as well, so that's why he was not sending me to the school. So, I had to work so much, like collecting grass, like making fire. ... There was no rice mill, so we made it ourselves by hand. Yes, there was so much work to do, so I couldn't go to school.

Budi

Budi's experience from her childhood was common during past decades. However, the situation was different at the time of the fieldwork and the importance of girls' education was prevalent in the communities. The situations where a girl was sent to work rather than to school were becoming rarer. The women represented their goals of providing education for their children, regardless of gender. However, many of the women had not finished school, because they had had to go to work and participate in making the family's living or get married and start a family. Thus, the family and community's norms were still dominant in relation to girls' education. Adult education was one of the targets of the women's organisations, and this was penetrated by contradictions, too. The epistemological borders were crossed by increasing education among girls and women, but it was not a straightforward process.

This aligned with international development policies and practises in which education is one of the most promoted fields. Generally, education is seen as a tool to advance the women's position in other fields, too—including awareness-raising, capacity building and overcoming unequal relationships—in addition to increasing women's decision-making power on the household, community and national levels (Mahat 2003, 68). Women's education also is viewed as one of the issues that promotes societies' general development (ibid.). Educated women have fewer children than uneducated ones, which is believed to be a sign of women's increasing autonomy

and progress (Gudbrandsen 2013, 168). There are a growing number of women in traditional communities and societies who have stood up to promote women's and girls' education (Dhungel and Ojha 2012). A similar paradigm was recognised in the women activists' ideas:

I realised that how poor my children are, I am uneducated, my daughter is uneducated, all the women are uneducated, and this all made me think that we need education. [...] That school was also built by those people [the foreign donors]. After that, I told him that if you could help me, all my villagers would be educated. He said, 'Okay, I will help you.' Then he gave 360,000 rupees. Then we bought ten buffaloes. Milking buffaloes. Then we gave them to poor families; we made a contract. Those who have it have to send their kids to that school. Their kids can go to private school from milk-selling money. There was no interest on that money, and there was three years' time to pay it back. 'Because let's not be uneducated like me', I told them.

Ama

The importance of education was widely agreed upon in development agendas and among the people whose lives were transformed, but its content and aims are more complex, and they include epistemological hierarchies. Also, its effects on increasing women's autonomy and its impacts on the women's well-being are questioned by a lack of evidence (Gudbrandsen 2013, 168). The question is, when developing educational systems, whose knowledge they are based on? Whose world views are taught and whose theories presented? These questions are necessary in any context, but especially in global margins with vulnerabilities to colonialist and imperialist impacts. Education appears mostly as a static virtue in development discourses, even though the problem of universalism and particularism remains unsolved (Pant and Standing 2011). This is linked with the contextualisation of the education. Educational systems vary according to the culture and the nation, and they cannot be transformed straight from one context to another. The problem is related to the epistemological boundaries on various levels, as there are tensions between the global and local, the universal and particular, and the practical and conceptual levels.

The question of universality and particularity caused friction in the women's communities. While education was one of the key topics in the women's talk, they did not agree with its subjects. The critiques claim that education targeting, for example, women's skills and autonomy risks being a colonial and capitalist project that promotes individualism and threatens cultural and traditional values (e.g. Jönsson 2010). The women of this study emphasised the meaning of education, but not without questions. Getting a chance to participate in education was a class- and caste-related issue, and it varied according to the women's economic and social position. The women from

the higher social positions were prioritising the importance of education, whereas the women from the lower positions questioned the content of the education that the communities had offered to them.

Different views towards education got concretised, for example, in the literacy project that the women's organisation had launched in the villages. Many women participated in the first session, when the participants got a pen and a notebook and learned to write their names. However, only few women appeared in the next sessions. Budi explained that they were busy working in the field and households. She said that it was enough to be able to write their name, because they were able to sign, for example, land and property agreements. To learn to write and read more was not reasonable for them, and they did not want to use their time for something that they did not need in their practical life.

Didi: Yeah, there is training. But I haven't even thought about it. For the training, I should pay, which I don't have money for. And to take training, I should have time. So, I don't have time for that.

Rewati: So, if somebody is ready to pay for the training and pays for your living while you are taking the training, what would you do then?

D: I have never thought about it ... so I cannot say.

Didi's views led me to scrutinise and contextualise the content of education and to analyse the boundaries in the women's access to education. When the women learned to write their names, and they were able to sign important papers, they gained self-determination and agency that they needed in their daily contexts. However, as they were not able to read the papers themselves, they had to rely on other people, which increased their vulnerability. Similar ideas were behind Ama's project, as they provided a buffalo for poor families if they sent their children to school. Thus, they had practical benefits. The value of education increased when it supported their daily struggles.

On the other hand, the leaders of the women's organisations promoted women's emancipation through education. This links with Nussbaum's (2000, 83) ideas of literacy being a valuable cognitive capability. I lean on Nussbaum's (2004, 204) arguments that in spite of the fact that the women did not present a desire for education, it does not lessen the importance of women's education in increasing equality and fairness on a societal level. The idea of contextualisation does not question the meaning of education in the researched communities, but it argues for its practical resonance in the women's lives. As poverty was the biggest struggle in the women's lives, education could be a way to fight it. Thus, contextually relevant educational tools take into account the reduction of poverty and the partnership with the women who know their practical struggles the best.

Transgressing epistemological borders on women's rights' and education projects calls for the recognition of indigenous, practical and multidimensional knowledges. Contextually relevant practise utilises women's traditional knowledge, such as religious and spiritual wisdom, as well as feminine power. For example, oral stories and teachings as part of the communities' cultural heritage and people's identities yield crucial local knowledge. When the indigenous and practical knowledge of the women and the epistemologies of educational or women's rights projects intersected, it transgressed epistemological borders. Yet those intersections of knowledges were complicated. Some of the women had internalised external concepts, whereas some of them remained more sceptical and did not see that they resonated with their practical realities. Those intersections included nuances that followed class, caste and ethnic hierarchies as well as global (imperial) power imbalances. Recognising and deconstructing them leans on decolonising social work practises and transgresses epistemological borders.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analysed the driving forces of the transition in the women's position. The changes were driven by and within the communities and individuals, but also by external forces (societal and transnational). Those driving forces intersected on the communal level, which created a process with multiple conflicts, alignments, ruptures and flexibilities. The process revealed the borders that are to be transgressed as part of the transition. In the following figure, I summarise the driving forces that are intertwined to a complex process leading to social and gendered transformation.

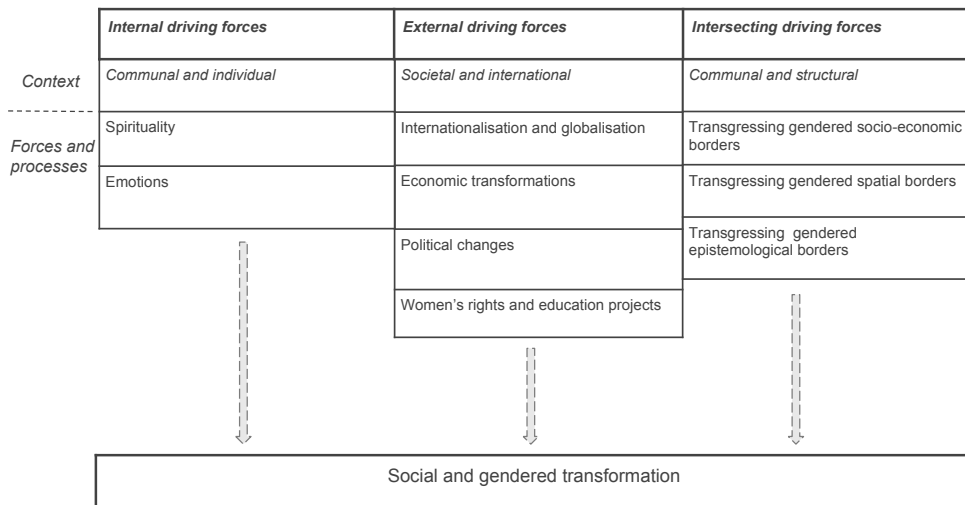


Figure 2. Driving forces of the transition

I categorised two different angles in the internal driving forces: spirituality and emotions. They were both individual and communal matters. They linked with personal beliefs, emotions and courage, which were, however, affected by communal values and norms. The communities were not adopting the changes solely from the outside; the external driving forces—internationalisation and globalisation, economic transformations, political changes and women’s rights and education projects—were negotiated with local conceptions and practises, within the framework of communal morality, as well as local power relations and hierarchies. This negotiation appeared as transgressing different borders both on communal and structural angles. The intersecting driving forces of the changes located in the transgression of the socio-economic, spatial and epistemological borders, which led to the transition in the women’s social position.

Transgressing socio-economic borders shakes spatial borders, where the women step into new spheres and increase their agency and self-determination. This leads to changes in the epistemological borders. This indicates how the transgressions of different borders are combined processes in the transition. The intersections between the internal and external driving forces contains tensions that either hinder or advance the changes. The women are the subjects of the change, who either accommodate, adapt to or resist the external driving forces. Thus, women with their local knowledge are the main driving force of the change. However, ethically sensitive external driving forces are needed to challenge the local hierarchies and vulnerabilities that the communities may be blind on. In a locally relevant transition process, the complexities and nuances—both on local and international levels—are recognised.

एकता नै बल हो
Ekta nai baal ho.
Unity is Strength.
Nepalese proverb



7 White peaks on the horizon—Directions of the transition

Promoting the transition in the women's position is like the exploration of mountaineers. I view the mountain peaks as a metaphor for understanding the intricacy of the tools and aims of the transition. During this ethnographic journey, I travelled through multiple roads, footpaths and fields, earthquakes and hidden caves to different borderlands that shaped the transition. This journey establishes the analysis of the directions of the changes. A mountain range with its changing shape symbolises the diverse directions of the transition. Viewing the horizons of the changes is as following a continuous process: Beyond each mountain there is another one (e.g. Staughton 2012, 2). The goals of the changes are like mountains peaks in that they are often covered by clouds and mist; however, they exist behind the haze, and when the sun shines again, they look even brighter than before.

In this chapter, I first identify the aims of the transition from the women's perspective, and second, I analyse the tools and partners of the transition—to indicate how external advocates can promote changes in a contextually relevant way. The aims, tools and partners of the transition constitute its directions on a wider level. Thus, understanding the local aims with an acknowledgement of the diversities and forming tools and partners to support the local aims are the foundations of ethically sustainable transition.

The women's aims for the transition were diverse, varying according to their socio-economic positions. Some of the individual women's aims were not accepted in the communities—for instance, if they did not have a moral or practical resonance in the community's terms. Similarly, all the community members did not always agree with the changes that were driven by the external actors or structural transformations. These differences sometimes led to opposition and ruptures within the communal relations. Analysing the differences exposes the complexity of the transition process, which is necessary to appreciate in contextually relevant and locally sensitive social work and development practises. Identifying the changes that were communally accepted and aligned with the social order and the local practises leads to forming tools and partners of the transition on the community's terms.

In the first section of this chapter, I identify the local aims of the transition by focusing on the women's views, experiences and environments. Their diverse aims were both concrete—such as fulfilling their basic needs and reducing poverty—and abstract, such as being seen and heard. I mirrored the women's aims to the decolonis-

ing feminist theories (e.g. Agarwal 2001; Mookherjee 2011; Motta 2015), which led me to categorise five wider goals of the transition from the local angle. These goals are the *decolonisation of subjectivities (ontological goal)*; the *deconstruction of social hierarchies (social goal)*; the *feminisation of economy (socio-economic goal)*; the *decolonisation of epistemologies (epistemological goal)*; and the *redistribution of space (spatial goal)*. They comprise the diverse aims of different women, as well as sensitivity to the power hierarchies in both local and international contexts. I analyse them through concrete examples of the women's goals.

In the second section of this chapter, I analyse the tools and partners of the transition from the external advocate's angle. The analysis is drawn from the women's relations to external (foreign and local) actors, as well as the practises that those actors participated in. They included for example development projects, financial contributions and advocacy. The relationship between the women and the external actors was complicated by unbalanced power structures. In developing ethically sustainable tools of transition in the women's social position, those power hierarchies must be considered. My analysis shows that ethical tools of promoting social change with the communities were consolidated in the concept of solidarity and its different forms: *solidarity as dialogue, alliance and exchange*. The relationship between the local and external actors is at the centre of those forms of solidarity, in which the local voices are prioritised. When those different aspects of solidarity are combined, it leads to mutual and contextually sensitive action to improve the women's and their environments' well-being.

7.1 'Five Treasures of the Great Snow'—The women's aims for the transition

Kangchenjunga is the third-highest mountain in the world and the most easterly of the 8,000-metre peaks of the Himalayas. The name means Five Treasures of the Great Snow, a reference to its five summits. [...] The huge massif of Kangchenjunga is buttressed by great ridges running roughly due east to west and north to south, forming a giant 'X'. [...] Kangchenjunga does not have an 'easy' route, as the threat of an avalanche is high.

Summit Post¹⁴

As the mountain of 'Five Treasures of the Great Snow' opens in five different directions, my analysis of the women's goals for the transition includes five different angles. The 'snow' in my interpretation describes the aims of social justice and equality—ideolo-

14 Summit Post: <http://www.summitpost.org/kangchenjunga/150283>

gies that oppose the obstacles of well-being—as something pure and white that covers trash and dirt. The ‘great snow’ illustrates something that is distant, powerful and tough to reach. Despite this, numerous climbers have been and are trying to reach it. It is a plan, a dream, an ambition. The horizons of the changes seemed distant; nevertheless, the women were inspired to reach for them.

The transition in the women’s social position—leaning on Motta’s (2015) ideas of the decolonising epistemologies—is a process of unlearning and (re)learning ways of being, relating, knowing, loving and believing. I see those ways as a crucial part of forming the goals of social change in a contextually relevant and ethically sensitive way. I mirrored them to the women’s perspectives, which showed that they formed a core of the women’s aims for the changes. This led me to identify wider goals that are based on decolonising feminism and include the women’s concrete and abstract aims: the decolonisation of subjectivities, the deconstruction of social hierarchies, the decolonisation of epistemologies, the feminisation of economy and the redistribution of space. Those goals intersect in the transition process and form a basis for understanding complex global and local structures, and deconstructing the silencing, otherisation and oppression of women in multiple margins. I analyse them by recognising the differences between the women but also the unity among them.

We are women, they are women, and the problems of women are the same. If the women are forward, our society is going forward. ...

Ama

The leader of the women’s organisation, Ama, used the expression of ‘going forward’ when she referred to the aims of their activism in the organisation. Her view raises a question about the meaning of ‘forward’. It is a vague term that took different meanings among the women. This diversity causes conflicts in forming the goals of the transition on a wider level, and leads to the dilemma of how to ensure that those different aims are considered fairly. To answer this, it is necessary to understand the factors behind the women’s aims. Those factors arose from the women’s practical realities, which affected them in forming goals for the change. The goals of the transition were ontological, social, epistemological, socio-economic and spatial, yet they included different attributes among the women.

Decolonisation of subjectivities

At the centre of the transition process there was a woman, an individual in her environment, whose life was subjected to changes. Even though the women faced numerous structural obstacles, silencing and otherisation, they aimed at being subjects of the transition. Their subjectivities appeared in both their participation in or withdrawal

from the change process. Their diverse ways of positioning themselves in terms of the changes links with unlearning and (re)learning ways of being (Motta 2015), which forms an ontological goal of the transition. The ‘new ways of being’ that the women were targeting included increasing their self-worth within the social context. Thus, their aims were both individual and based on the communal relations and values. The ontological goals were diverse among the women, intertwined with marginalisation, intersecting social hierarchies and power relations.

Global and local contexts overlapped in the women’s daily lives. They included colonial power structures, which appeared in forms of knowledges and practices of promoting social change and in the relationships with the foreign actors. Thus, in forming an ontological goal of the transition, there is a need for decolonising perspectives. I identify a process of *decolonising subjectivities* (e.g. Motta 2015) as a goal that mirrors the women’s ontological aims for the transition. The decolonisation of subjectivities means recognising the international and local power structures that restricted the women to embrace their subjectivity. I analyse those structures and the women’s subjectivity through the concepts that arose along the way from the women’s actions, perspectives, and social work and development discussions (e.g. Arora-Jonsson 2008; Dominelli 2010a).

The women’s subjectivity relates to their *agency*, which was one of their aims of the transition. Agency took different forms in practise, according to the women’s diverse social positions. These forms of agency were the ways the women embraced their subjectivity—as *accommodation*, *resistance* and *acceptance* of the changes (e.g. Dominelli 2002b, 11). Those forms of agency depended on the women’s socio-economic position and their relation to the organisations, which were the key actors in promoting change. The most dominant women were active in the organisations and had accommodated the structural changes into their work. The women who resisted the changes that the organisations had accommodated were mostly from the lowest levels of the local social hierarchies. The adaptation was linked to changes that were hard or even impossible to impact on or, on the other hand, to changes that the women agreed with.

Accommodating the changes meant that the women supported the international and structural impacts on their communities—by harmonising them with their own terms. Accommodation was achieved, for example, in the economic changes with organisational ways to fight poverty (see Section 6.2). In addition to bringing material well-being to them, those methods increased the women’s *recognition*. The women gained recognition by improving the village’s infrastructure and hosting foreign visitors. Recognition was especially an objective of the women leaders. They did not talk about recognition with that term, but about being ‘respected’, ‘remembered’, ‘proud’, a ‘mother’ of the villages and ‘known in the community’. Official forms of recognition generated pride:

The biggest encouragement for me was that I got a letter from the Agricultural Department. ... Who is sending a letter to this kind of uneducated woman? I was so happy and proud.

Ama

Ama's recognition had increased gradually—from the other women's encouragement to the letter from the Agricultural Department—leading eventually to her winning a societal award as a social advocate. The women aimed to get respect through officially registered organisations and their connection to foreign (Western) advocates. These were considered a sign of development. When they had official meetings, an office, written documents and accounting, it indicated that they were able to handle money, to write their names in the papers, to represent themselves in the meetings and to participate in different training. This gave them an opportunity to be recognised and viewed as active members of the community (e.g. Arora-Jonsson 2008, 144). Thus, recognition in the communities was strongly linked to the organisational aspect as well as international relationships.

The organisational aspect was not supported by all the women. This appeared as resistance towards the women's organisations and their projects. The resisting women were those who felt they were excluded from the organisations and whose agency was not fully recognised by them. As they did not agree with the leaders, they were driven to the margins and seen as nominal members of the organisations. They brought up that they participated in the organisation's meetings and projects only when they received some sort of material benefit from them. They chose to be absent from the organisation's meetings, against the women leaders' wishes, and prioritised the actions that were practical in their daily circumstances. I see this withdrawal as resistance and a form of agency. The women looked for new ways of being by resisting and questioning the communal hierarchies, the dominant positions and power.

The women's resistance as withdrawal was silent. They did not disagree with the women leaders aloud, but they expressed their frustration in our confidential dialogues. Despite being silent, their resistance included a dimension of action. The dimensions of agency leaned on the women's choice to support the traditions or oppose the changes, thus, supporting persistence (e.g. Jäppinen 2015, 53). Their agency was contextual, temporal and situational and was actualised in the relationships (ibid.). Thus, these women, with their silent resistance and the agency within it, were on the 'ontological journey' to becoming subjects of the change process within their own specific social position.

Acceptance of the changes took on different appearances among the women, such as flexibility, believing in *karma* (fate) and powerlessness. The women who struggled to survive or who were in the furthest socio-economic fringes were in a position where they relied on alms and acts of kindness. Due to their adverse situation, they adapted

to the changing environment, even with the ‘harmful internalisation of social norms’ (Mookherjee 2011, 14). This refers to the internalising of a lowly self-conception and to believe in their inferiority, which often relied on their belief in karma. Adaptation of the changes mirrored the hierarchies that affected the transition process. This was seen in the ostracised women’s situations; for example, Mamina’s subjectivity was denied by numerous injustices and violations. Some of the poorest women, such as Thuli Mami, presented such views as ‘I’m a poor, sad, unlucky woman’.

In the cases of Mamina and Thuli Mami, adaptation of the changes was not linked to agency, but rather to powerlessness. Their struggles overlapped through internalised inferiority, which was a result of continuous violence, silencing and otherisation. Those struggles had led Mamina to the street and Thuli Mami to be a victim of domestic violence by her adult son. Thus, the changes that the women’s organisations accommodated—for example, the improvements of the village’s infrastructure or recognition—did not concern them. They did not resist them but adapted to the changing environment. Long-term silencing and violation had buried their agency under oppressive circumstances. The aims of the transition in this case lie in safe social relations, the right to live and in increasing their self-worth. This calls for a process of ‘healing from the epistemological and ontological wounds’ (Motta 2015, 93) of those who have internalised the inferior ways of being in the world.

The ontological goal towards decolonisation of subjectivities was linked to accommodation, resistance and adaptation of the changes. Those different responses to the changes varied according to the women’s position and intersecting class, caste and ethnic hierarchies. In spite of the differences, the women’s experiences indicate that they aimed at increasing their self-worth, which I see as an ontological goal to learn innovative ways of being. It meant, for example, recognition to some or the absence of discrimination and violence to others. To find a balance between the different ways of embracing the women’s subjectivities requires critical scrutiny of the oppression and injustices that were produced both by local and international contexts. This is a process of the decolonisation of subjectivities, which helps the women empower themselves on their contextual terms and to resist unjust structures. Deconstructing those unjust structures is a basis to the process that creates spaces for women to make oneself anew and reach for social justice.

Deconstruction of social hierarchies

Social hierarchies were established by intersecting local and global impacts, and they formed the central determinants of the transition. Community was one of the main aspects of the women’s well-being, so it also determined their aims of the change. The women presented their social relationships through their relationships to men (especially husbands, sons, fathers-in-law and brothers-in-law) and to the other women in their family and wider community. Their perspectives indicated that they wished to

strengthen belonging, social power, communal participation and collectivity. In aiming to strengthen those aspects of their social life, the women need a space to renegotiate patriarchal, ethnic, class and caste relations. I identify this process as the *deconstruction of social hierarchies*.

I scrutinise the women's goal of transforming their relationship to men through two examples that the women brought forth: *arranged marriage* and *male-out migration*. These examples represent traditional (arranged marriage) and modern (migration) social phenomena. The women supported some of the aspects of arranged marriage that increased their well-being (see Chapter 4). They did not wish to stop it but to change some features of it, especially its patriarchal structures. The transformation in terms of arranged marriage was complex and timely. This was illustrated by an incident with an external donor who had 'saved' a girl from getting married by supporting her education. The ethical dilemma in this case was that both the donor and the girl's family disregarded her subjectivity in trying to decide what was best for her.

The girl's family had initially agreed with the external donor, withdrew from their marriage arrangements and sent her to school. However, later on, when she was 18, the family started to arrange a marriage for her again. The donor did not support the idea, which created contradictions between him and the family. The girl was put into a position to choose between 'belonging' and 'liberation'. In the end, her choice was to follow her family. The donor's view was that the arranged marriage violated the girl's rights, but the girl's well-being was strongly based on protecting her family relationships. Separating her from her family by opposing an arranged marriage would have increased her independence but not her well-being. This indicates that the women's aims were not to gain independence but interdependency with better conditions. Belonging and social relations increased their well-being more than emancipation and the ideals of being independent.

One fairly new yet wide-spread phenomenon in the communities was male-out migration, which had transformed the gendered relationships in the communities (e.g. Maharjan et al. 2012, 97). The migration of a husband added to the women's responsibilities at home, for example, handling money and making decisions, which some of the women felt as a burden. However, their socio-economic position was upgraded by the remittances that the husbands sent back home. Male-out migration also had increased the women's social space in their families and thus changed the gendered expectations. It reconstructed social relationships by transforming the traditional family structures where the men were the decision-makers in the households. Thus, male-out migration transgressed spatial borders in the women's position.

Social hierarchies also were reconstructed among the women within their diverse positions. I scrutinise this through one crucial aim of the women: *belonging* in the community. Belonging was both a personal experience and a communal issue. It included multiple aspects, such as belonging to a social order, which included gendered

expectations towards the women. The social order was maintained on the women's part by fulfilling those expectations. Respecting social order led to acceptance in their communities. The women aimed to gain acceptance in difficult situations as well. This came up in Buhari's case as she was searching for acceptance from the women's organisation after being isolated from her family. Her appeals were turned down by the women's community, which advised her to accept her situation at home. Her belonging to both the family and the wider communal level was threatened, which increased her agony. Thus, the individual aims that the women's community did not support threatened the sense of belonging.

Buhari's case indicates that belonging was preconditioned by the absence of discrimination and acceptance. To strengthen the women's belonging requires recognising intersecting social hierarchies between different castes and ethnicities. Buhari was from a higher caste than much of the community, and she assumed that it was one of the reasons why the other women turned their backs to her. Thus, caste and ethnic hierarchies did not appear only as top-down discrimination but also vice versa. Discrimination related with the issue of difference; shared ethnicity increased the women's belonging. This was seen in the activities of the other women's organisation, which was established by the women from a specific ethnic background. Their ethnicity had traditionally been inferior, and the women wanted to change that. Thus, they mainly directed their activities to promoting the position of that ethnic group. This had increased a divide with other ethnicities in the area, as Buhari's case indicates. The women's activism in the organisation had not stopped discrimination, but it had changed its direction. Thus, the deconstruction of ethnic and caste hierarchies—alongside the patriarchal social order—is one of the central aims of transition.

Social hierarchies were deeply rooted in cultural identities and heritage, which makes deconstruction of them complex. Those who participated in the activities of the women's organisation increased their belonging to the other women, whereas the women who resisted them were driven further to the social margins. However, this was not a straightforward process, as belonging took many different forms. The women who resisted the women's organisations belonged to their communities through other aspects, including their families, neighbours, land, traditions, religion and cultural heritage. In deconstructing social hierarchies by strengthening belonging, those different aspects must be considered.

The transformation of social hierarchies also joins with empowerment. It is a common term in development discourses, and it was one aspect of the women's aims in the communities. Empowerment is an intricate process, and I do not address it in a detailed way, but I bring up some aspects of it that arose within the local context. One of those aspects was the women's aim to gain *social power* (e.g Dhungel and Ojha 2012). Women's social power was defined by communal and international relations. The women aimed at increasing their social space and being active in the village's

development process, which I link to the aim of being heard in their social networks. As Lesley Abdela (2010, 11) pointed out, the empowerment processes of the women are not about the exclusion of men but about the *inclusion of women*. The inclusion of women on societal and communal levels was promoted by the women's organisations, yet they also excluded some of the women. Thus, in trying to increase women's social power there is a need to acknowledge intersecting social hierarchies and support the inclusion of the most vulnerable and marginalised women.

Gaining social power also relates to community participation and collectivity (Agarwal 2001, 1623). Community participation in terms of the women's activism appeared through two extremes: as nominal membership in the organisation or collaborative action with the other activists. Participation in the organisations' activities was the most challenging for the women at the edges of the social hierarchies due to exclusion, poverty and a lack of capabilities. The women in the social margins presented their frustrations about their role as nominal members of the organisation. At the same time, they criticised the goals of the organisation and claimed they only benefitted the most dominant women. Thus, besides the intersecting social hierarchies, participation linked with power and communal morality (Agarwal 2001, 1623). This affected the complexity of deconstructing social hierarchies.

The social goal of the women was not to increase their emancipation or independence but belonging, social power, community participation and collectivity. Deconstruction of social hierarchies to reach those goals was done by challenging patriarchal family relationships and intersecting social divisions among the women. Both angles include an aim for finding a balance between individualism and communality. This balance is reached in a contextually sensitive way when the aim of the transition is to increase the flexibility in the women's communal relationships but to avoid breaking them. This searches for new ways of relating (Motta 2015), which calls for mutual respect beyond inherent hierarchies.

Decolonisation of epistemologies

The women's narratives linked often with their struggles to be heard. They used various ways to express their views within the restrictions of the patriarchal, colonial and communal social hierarchies: Budi approached a communal court when her piece of land was threatened by her neighbour, and Buhari broke the family's television to show her resistance towards their discrimination. Ama and her community attempted to gain publicity for their organisation, which appears as an aim to be heard, too. I interpret these aims as an epistemological goal to include the women's multiple voices in the transition. The obstacles that hindered the women's voices to be heard appeared on both local and international contexts with unbalanced power hierarchies, and they are questioned by a decolonising approach. The decolonisation of knowledges respects cultural identities, traditional heritage, communal relationships and the environment

in promoting social change. When mirroring the women's aims to the decolonising framework, it led me to emphasise *feminisation* and the *embodiment of knowledges* as the epistemological goal.

The importance of feminisation and the embodiment of knowledges was concretised to me through an example of menstruation and the different meanings of the practises around this. The women's actions were partially restricted during their periods (by not being allowed to cook, wash dishes or sleep with their husbands), which I interpret as discrimination in terms of emancipation. However, Auntie presented another perspective. She said she was happy to get a rest from housework every month for few days. Even though the practise to restrict the women during their periods was based on a view of periods being 'impure', some of the women had used the insult to their benefit and turned vulnerabilities into strengths.

Another angle of the feminisation and embodiment of knowledge highlights that this practise recognised menstruation as part of female life, whereas in many other social contexts they appear invisible. Periods often are painful, and many women feel that they do not reach their full potential during them—something not acknowledged in the capitalist system. The contexts in which women are expected to act to their fullest ability during periods tend to deny female embodiment (e.g. Agrawal 2010, 49). Decolonising feminism questions the idea of emancipation without the recognition of the embodiment of femininity (ibid.). The decolonisation of knowledges is a process that respects the women's views on the practise that recognises the periods. Listening and taking into account their views leads to include the women's embodied voices in the transition process.

The women's aims for social change were linked to their strengths. This was illustrated in their relationship to motherhood, which they presented as their strength and pride. Motherhood connected the women to each other. I see that turning this strength and connection into an aim of the transition leads to the decolonisation of knowledges. Sara Motta and Tiina Seppälä (2016, 17) stated that motherhood can be turned into a collective action for change, when the women share their duties to create time and space for their activism. Thus, motherhood can engender the actions for the reproduction and nurturing of the communities. Motta's and Seppälä's statement of collective motherhood presents an example of embodied femininity and decolonisation of knowledges. Collective motherhood was part of the women's daily life, yet it had not reached the organisations' activism that was dominated by their leaders. When the leaders were determined to be 'mothers' of the villages, it was based on individualistic perspective that maintained social hierarchies.

The women indicated their connectedness to the land, environment and sustainability of the communal heritage (ethnic and cultural) in their views of the change. These aims were tied to their holistic knowing. Their knowledge was not only a cognitive process, but also included dance, poems, rituals, traditional stories and expressions of

love and tenderness. The decolonisation of knowledges forms a framework to include those alternative ways of knowing in the transition process—by recognising the transformative force that resides in their love towards the community and land. These are the forms of feminised and embodied knowledges that embrace the whispers and silences and the wisdom of female bodies. The epistemological goal of transition includes bridging the gaps of conceptual and bodily knowledges. Decolonising knowledges challenges intersecting power hierarchies, privileges and dominant voices with the goal of love and connectedness. It requires time to stand beside the women and to listen for multiple voices. Listening with a decolonising framework is not a one-way action; it also requires receiving (Motta 2015). Thus, the decolonisation of epistemologies is a mutual process actualised in the communal, societal and international relationships.

Feminisation of economy

The women's primary socio-economic goals were linked to the reduction of poverty. I identified the communities' strategies to reach those goals in Section 6.2 as the indigenous, organisational and market-oriented ways to fight poverty, which the women combined in diverse ways. The women's struggles with poverty were strongly feminised. For example, single mothers struggled to get employed because of their stigma (see Chapter 4). In relation to this, I identify the feminisation of economy as the main socio-economic goal of the women. This is an alternative to patriarchal capitalism (e.g. Vaughan 1997), and it was part of the women's aims for improving their livelihood methods. Traditionally, the men had carried the responsibility of the families' economy, but the women were increasingly taking part in it. The women's role in their families' economy had traditionally involved the practises of gift economy, such as offering their services and goods for communal exchange. However, community banking and participation in labour had increased the women's role in handling money, which upgraded their socio-economic position.

The women's experiences of poverty were embodied. This was indicated in, for example, Ama's narrative of the hunger that she had experienced as a child. The experience of hunger had driven her to establish an organisation to improve the women's socio-economic positions, to avoid experiencing starvation again. Her aim to reduce poverty was communal and land-related. She did not aim to reduce only her poverty, but to improve the whole village's livelihood means. I associate her activism through the organisation with feminisation of the economy, which relies on the women's connection to their bodies, land and community. As the organisation's projects were closely related to the land that the women loved and respected, it leads one to challenge the development projects that occupy community or family lands for accumulating profit (e.g. Marirajan 2012; Seppälä 2016). Those projects disconnect people from their identities, and their environment becomes a capitalist commodity. The women who spent most of their days in the fields with the other community members were not only

relating to each other but to their histories and ancestors through the land that they cultivated. The feminisation of the economy is about respecting those relationships and resisting the projects that exploit the land—and thus the women’s identities—for capitalist purposes.

To take into account the women’s economic participation has become a part of formulating development policies, yet paradoxically, they are mainly based on liberalism (Reilly 2013). This may create blindness to some crucial ‘feminine’ qualities in the communities such as nurturing, cooperation, sharing, giving, concern for the other and nature, whereas the ‘masculine’ qualities such as independence, experimentation, leadership and adventurousness are prioritised (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003, 19). In liberal economies, the women are expected to embrace those ‘masculine’ spheres. Thus, feminisation of the economy becomes as a counter vision for a liberal paradigm and approaches generosity, non-profit businesses, worker collectives and alternative capitalist enterprises impelled by social or environmental ethics (*ibid.*, 2).

Feminisation of the economy emphasises sharing within the community instead of competition, protecting the environment instead of commodifying it, and connecting instead of liberating. It is an ‘economy of difference’ (*ibid.*) that recognises—besides the communal view—the social hierarchies on global and local levels. Some of the women had adapted liberal views, and they aimed at growing their businesses, such as their services for tourists. Those views amplified the divisions among the women. It increased the gap between the wealthier and poorer women and created social ruptures. Thus, feminisation of the economy was not a shared goal of all the women. However, it forms a framework to scrutinise the women’s socio-economic goal towards more just community.

My data shows that economy is a discursive construct (e.g. Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003, 2), as the women’s different views affected how it was viewed and understood in the communities. The women’s subjectivities and knowledge are important preconditions for feminisation of the economy—thus, decolonisation of subjectivities and epistemologies intersect with the women’s socio-economic goal. This develops a process that recognises social reproduction as an economic resource. Recognising these spheres as a socio-economic goal strengthens the women’s ‘capacity of gift’ (Motta 2015, 93). This aims at the transition that leans on contextual knowledge instead of adapting liberal views from the global market economy. The ‘gift’ can be seen as love, care or social support, which leads to the redistribution of resources in a fairer way.

Redistribution of space

Women were a vital part of the village’s scenery in their colourful dresses, daily routines, and singing and dancing at cultural events. Thus, they were visibly represented in the public spaces. However, their presence was strongly gendered, as their social spaces were mainly restricted to their duties and responsibilities and by gendered norms. The

women leaders who had expanded their actions to the public spheres had aims that I tie to a spatial goal of transition. The spatial goal was linked to the expansion of gendered, caste and ethnic spaces. The leaders described how they were encouraged by ‘talking to the people’ outside of their communities.

In the beginning, it was hard to walk in a confident way. People had a confident way of talking, and then I realised I could also talk. I went to different trainings. Then I started to be clever. If I was only sitting at home, this kind of talk would not happen.

Hajur Ama

The first meeting [with the Agricultural Department to apply for funding] I didn't understand anything. And the second time they invited me, I slowly started to understand. And it took three years, and all the people started to support and trust me, [...] and after that, I felt proud of myself.

Ama

Both leaders of the women's organisations described their social elevation through their connections to the public spheres—Hajur Ama to the ‘people of the community’, and Ama to the official meeting with the Agricultural Department. Their stories that led them from the margins to a central position in the communities reveal processes that included confusion and uncertainty, but also the encouragement that they got from the community. Their examples show that they perceived increasing external relationships as a precondition of change. Those external relationships included international and political actors, as well as men out of their families. Thus, the spatial goal was interlinked with the transgression of spatial borders on international, political and gendered levels (see Section 6.2).

Spatial redistribution concerned for example *social rules* and the *gendered division of social spaces* (e.g. Agarwal 2001, 1638). Social rules were tied to the duties and responsibilities of the women, which determined the women as ‘good’ or ‘failed’ (see Chapter 4). The redistribution of space aimed to change some of those social rules. This was seen, for example, in the changing attitudes towards women who didn't have a son. It was no longer considered a woman's ‘failing’ in most cases. However, there were still views that judged women by the gender of their child. For example, one of the reasons Buhari was considered as ‘failed’ in the eyes of her husband and parents-in-law, was because she had produced only two daughters. Her opposition to the family's attitude aimed at changing this gendered social rule. Her case shows that common attitudes towards the expectations of women changed slowly. However, those changes in the

social rules that had determined the women as 'good' or 'failed' led to redistribution of gendered space.

The gendered division of space was apparent in the villages. Spaces were gendered both concretely and conceptually: For example, pubs in the villages were entirely the men's area. If a woman spent time in a local pub, she was assumed to be a sex worker or 'immoral' woman. This applied particularly in the rural areas, whereas in urban centres women's and girls' space in this case was wider. This is an extreme example of gendered space, and most of the divisions were symbolic, relying on the expectations of 'good' women. This was seen for example in the men's gambling circles in front of local shops, where women served them tea. This setting, where men spent their free time and a woman served them shows a gendered division of space. This example took various forms in different practises, where the women were expected to fulfil their duties. Most of the public spaces as, for example, the fields and tea shops, were shared among the women and men, but their roles in those spaces were gendered. However, the division was changing in many respects. The women did not show interest or accept the women's visits to the pubs, but they aimed at increasing their space in terms of organising official performances for the visitors or gathering in public spaces for their economic aims. This redistributed gendered spaces.

One concrete plan to increase the women's space was Ama's and her committee's idea to build a communal house in the name of the organisation. It included ideas to develop gender-specific health care and gain recognition and self-determination as an ethnic group. It also would expand the women's traditional space by creating a safe feminine collective place where they could discuss the topics that they could not in their traditional environments or open public spaces (e.g. Arora-Jonsson 2008, 146; Darychuk and Jackson 2015, 455).

However, the plans for a communal house were viewed differently among the poorest women who were struggling with their survival. Some of them expressed that they did not see the house as reasonable and that it would not benefit them. They criticised that it would be expensive and advance tourism, benefitting only the leaders and the wealthiest people in the villages. Their dissenting views indicate that the communal house appeared as a contradictory plan: It increased the gap between the centre and the margins of the community, as its costs could have covered many of the poorest women's struggles for survival. This illustrates that gendered spaces were overlapping with the other attributes of age, class, caste and ethnicity (e.g. Agarwal 2001, 1642). Thus, the redistribution of space was preconditioned by the women's family background, local histories and social orders.

The redistribution of gendered space is a mutual process that includes negotiation among the women from multiple positions and with the men. The men of the villages accepted the spatial changes where the women, for example, gathered for economic contributions, yet their acceptance included moral control as they did not agree with

women expanding their space for example to the pubs. The first step to increase the women's space was to expand it to the spheres that they felt were safe—by sharing it with other women. This expanded women's space to new spheres, but it did not diminish the gendered segregation in public spaces. This was a process, however, that aimed at increasing women's *mobility* and *freedom*.

The women's views on their mobility and freedom were diverse, which shows the complexity of the aims of the transition. Mobility and freedom often are linked to the ability and chance to move to different places, or to make decisions over one's own life. Yet Didi, for instance, experienced freedom in an unusual way: She saw being free as not having to take on the responsibilities of her deceased husband, even though she was home-bound for her wife and mother duties. For her, freedom meant safety and familiarity. Expanding her social space to decision-making in the home actually made her feel restricted.

Thus, the aim of freedom is complex, and it mirrors the local context with its diversities. In an emancipatory view, freedom is seen as a static virtue and parallel to independence. However, for many women, freedom meant safety rather than independence. If a Nepalese woman from a rural village came to the Northern hemisphere to explore the lives of academic women, would she see the lives of them as free on every level? How would she describe a life that is restricted mainly to indoors while outside temperature is far below zero? Or how would she interpret the lives of nuclear families, where there are no other adults besides the parents to wake up at night when the baby cries? Those realities appear very different from the communal life and the women's daily routines actualised mainly outdoors. I do not have answers for these considerations, but they illustrate the complexity of freedom as a contextual matter.

The redistribution of space also connects with the women's self-confidence in public interactions (Agrawal 2010, 1644). This was one of the women's organisations' aims. Women were able to represent their community in official meetings with the local governments when they stayed as a group. They characterised themselves as 'we', not as individuals. Intersecting social hierarchies had led, however, to the setting in which the leader talked on behalf of the women in the social margins. Thus, the spatial goal needs to recognise the complexities of social hierarchies and ensure that the women at the margins get space to express their views. This could be enabled with the help of the most powerful women and men. Thus, the redistribution of space was a mutual process of the centres and the margins, with the deconstruction of patriarchal, ethnic, caste and class hierarchies.

7.2 Paths to walk beside the women—Tools and partners of the transition

The ‘paths beside’ the women activists consisted of development practises and policies, financial support, philanthropic and volunteer work, and policy-making—including a variety of outsiders who aimed to contribute to the well-being of the communities. Developing contextually relevant tools and partners of the transition includes two phases: first, reflexivity on the nuances of the transition process, and second, action—in both the practical and conceptual contexts. The first phase is a prerequisite for the second one. Acting without critical reflection on, for instance, power imbalances, can have destructive impacts on the local contexts. However, remaining with self-reflexivity and contextual sensitivity may lead to cultural relativism that justifies withdrawal from the social responsibility that social work ethical codes include (e.g. Wehbi et al. 2016, 290). Thus, the ethical tools and partners of the transition are combined with critical reflexivity and action—which led me to perceive them as forms of *solidarity*.

The discussions of international social work emphasises *transnational solidarity* as a counter-hegemonic vision for global injustices and their effects in the local communities (Deepak 2011, 788). I base my analysis on this vision in scrutinising the women’s and foreign advocators’ relationships and co-operation. Solidarity refers to mutual action with a critical and decolonising lens, which leads to an ethical and sustainable change process. It takes different forms in practise, combining social and epistemological aspects in scrutinising and deconstructing inequalities and privileges. The analysis shows that different forms of solidarity create spaces for the women’s mutual and respectful relationships with the external and local actors.

Based on the research material and theoretical analysis, I identified three different forms of solidarity in promoting ethically sustainable social change: solidarity as *dialogue*, *alliance* and *exchange*. Solidarity as dialogue includes epistemological questions and is a condition for ethically sustainable action. It connects different knowledges and recognises epistemological power hierarchies in promoting social change. Solidarity as dialogue is a process where local actors encounter external advocates, and in those encounters, the complexities of the transition and alternative and nuanced knowledges are taken into account. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, there is a need for critical reflection on the inequalities and privileges that affect the promotion of the transition. External advocates are not neutral actors. Their views are based on their social position, history, context, vulnerabilities and limits. Without recognising and ‘unpacking’ their own privileges—based on, for example, whiteness and the socio-economic position of the global North—the ‘paths beside’ may include imperialist elements.

Dialogue leads to action, which consists of alliance and exchange as forms of solidarity. Alliance supports change processes with local terms. In these processes, external

advocates stand in solidarity with the local activists, recognise the traditions, cultural identities and communal relations, and after all, join the communities in their fight against injustices. Alliance is based on action in which the external advocates' views are not mirrored to the local ones but vice versa. The local actors are the ones to define what they expect from the external advocates. This develops negotiation that requires humility from the external advocate to recognise that sometimes the needs of the local communities do not align with their plans.

Solidarity as exchange includes giving and receiving on material and conceptual levels. It does not include charitable giving in its traditional form, but it is mutual action towards transformative goals with listening and receiving. Exchange is the action of solidarity based on dialogue and alliance with the local communities. Thus, these three forms of solidarity lead to development and social change processes to fight dire straits, wrongs and oppressions, but also to respect the cultural heritage and traditions. These forms of solidarity present a way to promote an ethically sustainable transition process.

Solidarity as dialogue

Solidarity as dialogue is a process that emphasises a social advocate's—both local and external—sensitive methods to mutual learning and teaching with the women. This form of solidarity is based on knowledge processes with multiple voices of the women to define the terms of the transition. Dialogue includes listening that requires more than words and, in addition, receiving (Motta 2015, 93). It is actualised in the sensitivity to hear and see the communities in their environments with specific nuances, and to join their endeavours with modesty. It also is a dialogue that questions the division between the helpers and the ones being helped—and sees the encounters of solidarity through a vision that all its parties are part of the same global struggle (Kreitzer and Wilson 2010, 714–715). This requires the advocates to 'unpack' their position as experts (ibid.) and their privileges.

The women described that most of the external advocates in their communities were foreign, and foreigners often were seen as possible donors and cooperative partners. The women's relationships to the foreign advocates were complex, and they included questions similar to those in the research relationships between me and the women (see Chapter 3). The dynamics of transnational dialogue are illustrated in the following discussion with Ama, the leader of the women's community. She reflected on her and her community's relationships to foreign advocates through the metaphor of a pond:

In a pond, there are fish and frogs. If the fish live in the same pond all their lives, they can't see outside, and they can't get fresh thinking, and they get mouldy. That's why there is a need for frogs who can go out of the pond and learn from the other animals, but they also know the pond. [...] If there is a pond with the same fish and frog, they taste only their own water, which does not change, and at the end,

the water gets polluted. It does not circulate, and to make changes, there is a need for the water to be changed, and there they need frogs that see outside of the pond.

Ama

Ama sees the women activists (such as herself) as the ‘frogs’ in the pond who interact with wider contexts and external advocates. She describes change through a metaphor of circulating water. However, without ethically sensitive dialogue, changes that come from outside may spoil ‘the life in the pond.’ External actors often came from distinctively different contexts without the experience of the local circumstances. Thus, there is a need for ‘filters’ that Ama presents as mediators between the local and external actors. The mediators are epistemologically located in between the local and transnational levels. In Ama’s words, they are the frogs that have gained knowledge from outside of the pond. Solidarity as dialogue includes multiple voices—the external and the local advocates and the people who act as cultural translators and lead the negotiations between different actors. The women leaders identified themselves as the mediators, and they said that they had expanded their knowledge by foreign contacts, training (organised for instance by local governments and the UN) and participation in societal activities (for example, campaigning for their organisations).

As external advocates are not neutral actors, there is a need to address their position in the dialogue. Most of the external partners, donors and advocates were *kuives*, white males and females from the global North. In addition, there had been people from Asia, such as Japan, as well as the representatives of the local NGOs. The advocates’ position in the local communities varied according to their ethnic and geographic backgrounds. The relationship to white people was presented as the most desired, yet at the same time, they also represented a context that was distant from the local realities, which restricted them from understanding the local contexts fully.

Thus, the relationship between the external advocators followed ethnic hierarchies and racialisation, where whiteness was seen as a privilege. Asian and especially local advocators were seen as ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’, with whom they had more in common. At the same time, they represented local hierarchies that intersected with gender, ethnicity and castes. Thus, the relationships to the external advocates were diverse, affected by social and gendered hierarchies and the advocates’ geographic distance to the communities. The advocates from the furthest contexts—white people from the global North—were both the most desired but also distanced partners. The relationship also included imperialist and colonialist features (like economic power imbalances), even if they claimed to be ‘locally relevant.’ Power imbalances were hidden and hard to recognise, as they were often cloaked in epistemological blindness. Solidarity as dialogue calls for recognising these closeness and distances, power and the positions of the advocators.

Some of the foreign development workers and donors did not have earlier experience in Nepal, whereas some of them had many years' experience in the context. In addition, they often stayed in their own circles, and the relationships to Nepalese actors appeared rather short-term. Many of them lived in elite locations and made village visits to evaluate the development projects. Short visits, lack of knowing the local language and social dynamics created a gap to the people and the practises that they were 'evaluating'. This strengthens the division of the 'helpers' and 'the ones to be helped' and creates and recreates discourse of othering.

There also were power imbalances between the advocates who lived lengthy periods and in close connection with the local actors and, thus, appeared as 'locally sensitive' at first glance. However, with critical and decolonising scrutiny intertwined with the women's multiple perspectives, it was possible to identify fine-grained power imbalances that those advocates were often blind to. Their cooperation with the women was based on their economic contributions, which set them in a powerful position to determine the action for change. In addition, this fine-grained power imbalance was hard to recognise, both for the local and external actors. It was based on internalised global power hierarchies, where whiteness was seen as a privilege and economic contributions increased the advocates' power. This power imbalance was the most problematic in the cases where the external advocates did not reflect on their own positions with a critical lens. This led to their epistemological blindness, which had subtle yet harmful consequences in the local context. Those consequences were seen, for example, in some of the women's views that indicated that they had internalised an inferior position in their relationships with those external advocates.

Dialogue as solidarity requires that the advocates are aware of their limits in understanding all the local nuances and attempt openly reflect them with the local partners. Those dialogues take time, trust and respect, and they include the perspectives of the most marginalised people. Besides self-reflection, solidarity as dialogue questions the racialised and feminised otherisation that dominant representations often recreate (Motta and Seppälä 2016, 6). Deconstructing the position of an expert means unlearning and learning with local communities, and prioritising the expertise of the women from multiple positions. This raises questions: Why there is a need for external advocates in promoting change, or is there? What can international social work contribute to the local communities? Ama presented her view on this through the metaphor of a pond, where the external advocates can refresh the water. This refreshing could be offered, for example, by international social work frameworks to understand the links between the structures and practise and, thus, the causes for the injustices. Those frameworks present critical views to power imbalances—and negotiating them with the local communities creates a dialogue of solidarity.

Solidarity as dialogue recognises the differences but deconstructs their harmful divisions. Social work methods to deal with cultural, ethnic, class, and caste differences

often lean on ‘culturally sensitive’ practises (Jönsson 2013). However, this approach includes a risk of deepening the divisions between people. The risk relates to emphasising the ‘cultural competency’ of the social or development worker—which comprises sensitivity towards the cultural ingredients of individuals and communities. Cultural sensitivity includes a tendency to explain different social phenomena and people’s behaviour mainly through culture, which increases social categorisations (e.g. *ibid.*). Thus, ‘cultural sensitivity’ may lead to stigmatisation and increase the categorisation of ‘us’ and ‘them’. In addition, if global power structures, privileges and inequalities are not recognised in the development and social change processes, it may recreate fine-grained colonialist discourse and cultural otherisation (*ibid.*). Solidarity as dialogue includes recognising and renegotiating those power structures and categories.

The change process is complicated, hence development and social change agents need to accept the *nuances of knowledges* and the *uncertainties of dialogue*. Recognising nuances and uncertainties in the change process is complex, given that promoting the transition includes the distribution of economic and material resources, which is affected by the different modalities of power. When the advocates accept the complexities of the change, they open themselves up for contextual dialogue. Contextual dialogue is open to contradictions, for example, between the local and external conceptions. Contradictions indicate that there are not ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’, but social phenomena include many aspects and distinctions. Recognising this embraces the ‘messiness’ of daily life as richness and a part of human life. This establishes the recognition of alternative knowledges, which is a precondition for socially just change processes.

A dialogue of solidarity sees that marginalised voices and silences are sometimes more informative than the loudest voices in the communities. However, they often were left out of the development and social change discourses in the communities. Dominant representations were the easiest way to embrace the change process. To reach the knowledge on the margins took more time, effort, negotiation skills and ability to challenge power structures. I recognised the three different ‘traps’ of dialogue that were included in leaning on dominant representations: *infantilisation*, *romanticisation* and *monologicality* of the local communities. The first one leans on the perception that there is a need for an external—often privileged—person to speak on behalf of the women in the margins. The infantilisation of the women victimises them and includes aims to ‘save’ them from local patriarchy, which disregards women’s subjectivity and agency.

The second trap of dialogue was in seeing the women through a romanticised view as exotic ‘others’. The discussions with the women brought forth that the romanticised picture of Nepalese women was based on, for example, admiring their peaceful lifestyle and strengths at the expense of the social ills that the women faced. Romanticised view also included the idea of women as solely pure and innocent, which perceived each of their endeavour and action as well-intentioned, which ignored power struggles between the women and within the communities. Thus, this is an opposite view to the infanti-

lised one, where the women were seen as victims. Both approaches are extremes that dismisses the women's agency. This links with the third trap, monologicality, in which the advocates' relations to the local communities lean on the majorities' or the most dominant people's perspectives. In this view, communities were seen as a homogeneous entity, which included blindness towards social intersections and the diversities within the communities. Monologicality appeared even when different voices were 'heard' in a superficial way, but the external advocates' interpretations repeated the dominant discourses and stereotypes.

Solidarity as dialogue avoids these homogenising traps and recognises the differences and power hierarchies among the women's communities and between the external and local actors. One way to avoid infantilised, romanticised, monological views of local communities is a nuanced dialogue that recognises alternative knowledges. This calls for seeing the women with their strengths and flaws, and reflecting on them openly with the women. Dialogue as solidarity is the process of 'unpacking' the harmful and unjust effects of power, inequalities and hierarchies. To create solidarity through dialogue starts from an 'empty table' that sees differences as a strength of the community. This includes the task of unlearning one's own privileges before entering into the cooperation with local communities. The aim is not only to confess one's privileges but to reflect them with local co-operators; not for 'declaring' privileges (Ahmed 2004), but for a transformative goal (e.g. Seppälä 2016, 20).

Unlearning one's privileges is difficult—first, because they often are deeply internalised by both the privileged and the unprivileged people. Second, the division between 'privileged' and 'unprivileged' is not clear. My view of privileged people in the global North was challenged by the local communities, when I saw the smiling faces, laughter, songs and connection of the people. Most of the street people and beggars lived in their own communities and bonded with others in the same situations. This expanded my views of privilege to the connection with other people, the environment and cultural heritage. Privileges also are personal experiences—which cannot be measured with economic or material resources. Thus, unlearning privilege is complex, and it calls for taking into account its personal and political aspects.

One crucial aspect in unlearning one's privileges is to recognise one's own vulnerabilities. This is accomplished by embracing one's own otherness and accepting discomfort as a possibility (Motta 2015). This links with the vulnerabilities that everybody carries because of humanity. Privileges are not absolute but a result of prevalent global, political and structural settings (e.g. Mookherjee 2011). When the advocates step into an unknown land, they need to meet their limits and vulnerabilities in situations where they do not know culturally appropriate ways of understanding and acting. The vulnerabilities appear also in physical limits, such as in getting ill or lost, when the external advocate needs to rely on the local people and their knowledge. In doing so, they embrace a position of being helped, which deconstructs the division between

the local and external actors and approaches the dialogue as a form of solidarity. Solidarity as dialogue is based on connectivity with multiple vulnerabilities and a shared experience of being human.

Solidarity as alliance

Solidarity action calls for alliances between the local and external actors (e.g. Dominelli 2010a, 172). An alliance is formed by recognising common interests within diverse communities (Mohanty 2003, 7). Common interests define the directions of ethically sustainable change. Thus, the external and local advocates and communities look in the same direction when promoting the transition, yet by being sensitive to the local context. I analyse this through two dimensions that indicate the local ways of living that the women prioritised in their views and action—their relationships to the *environment* and *communal*ity. Those relationships formed a basis of the women's activism. Thus, I perceive solidarity as alliance as leaning on those aspects. They offer crucial viewpoints to the tools of promoting transition in a contextually sensitive way.

The environmental aspect links with ecospiritual social work in recognising that human beings are vulnerable through their environments (Gray and Coates 2013, 359). This returns to a holistic view of social work and takes into account the environmental risks in promoting transition (e.g. Dominelli 2014). Climate change threatens especially the people who depend on their land—rapid changes in weather created unpredictability that was seen, for example, in monsoon rains that were late, hampering rice planting in the villages. Climate research indicates that the environmental risks in people's lives, especially those in the global South, are going to increase (ibid.), giving even greater importance to including the environmental aspect in promoting the transition.

The environmental aspect is important not only because of climate change, but also because it links with contextually relevant ways to promote change. The environment was deeply connected to the communal traditions and their essence. Therefore, a human-centred aspect is not enough in forming an alliance with the communities. As Dominelli (2010a, 115) stated, social workers should become involved at the local level to support poor people to gain control over their environment. Dominelli (ibid.) continued that this could be done by providing them information about climate change in the initiatives and policies.

Environmental aspects were clearly present in the communities' activities to promote change, such as the compost project of the women's organisation. The organisation had arranged training for the local households to learn how to produce soil from bio-waste, which they could then sell in the local markets. This would benefit both the environment and the families' living. Another example of the environmental aspect was the women's weekly gatherings to clean the roads that led to the village. Unfortunately, Ama said that after the major earthquake in 2015, the women stopped the cleaning project because they needed to rebuild their houses and re-establish their living. This

indicates that the environmental aims were relevant to the women when their other basic needs were solid.

The other framework of approaching solidarity as alliance links with communality. This is reached through indigenising an approach to develop locality-specific forms of practise (Dominelli 2010b, 609). This means that the external advocates act as allies with local communities by negotiating changes in relation to local traditions. An indigenised form of promoting social change with the women would be, for example, renewing the village councils. The village councils were gatherings where community members sought solutions for their problems. They were traditional ways for solving communal issues, such as conflicts between the community members. However, an ethical problem from the women's perspective was in their patriarchal structures—and they included mostly men—and their ethnic and caste hierarchies.

The women's organisations—because they were formed by women who sought solutions to their feminised struggles—challenged the village council's patriarchal structures. However, the women's organisations included caste and ethnic hierarchies. Forming an alliance with the local communities does not mean ignoring unjust structures but forming alliances with multiple local positions and acting as a mediator to the contradictions caused by inherited hierarchies in the communities.

Another example of solidarity as alliance would be the extended form of gift economy—where the capitalist and imperialist aims of development are challenged by alternatives of the traditional economy, such as the communal exchange of services and goods. As the traditional gift economy was based on existing communal hierarchies, an 'extended' form of it would be expanded to local ways of transgress the socio-economic, ethnic, gender and caste hierarchies. This could reduce the poverty of the lowest levels of the socio-economic hierarchies instead of increasing the gap between the poorest and the wealthiest people.

Solidarity as alliance is based on supporting the local initiatives for change. However, sometimes an external advocate was needed to challenge the internal hierarchies of the communities and their unjust impacts on the individuals' lives. Recognising those hierarchies takes time, hearing multiple voices and silencing, as well as reflexivity. Those hierarchies are not to be changed with external terms but by sensitive negotiation with local actors and the recognition of intersecting social hierarchies. Solidarity as alliance is shared action based on the mutual and respectful relationship of the external and diverse local actors. This is one ethical tool for promoting the transition.

Solidarity as exchange

The roots of international social work and traditional Nepalese social order both have a philanthropic basis. They convey an idea of charity as the responsibility to take care of the vulnerable ones. However, professional social work has developed from charitable giving to participatory practises, which recognises the agency and subjectivities of

people and challenges unjust structures (e.g. Dominelli 2010a). In Nepalese communities, charitable giving was still a major provider of social security after the familial and communal support. This was seen in Mamina's situation, where she had survived for many years on the streets getting alms from people. However, charitable giving includes a moralising tendency and the expectations of 'goodness' and 'acceptable' behaviour (ibid., 18). This moralising tendency measures the people's value often through moral stereotypes. The stereotype of a Nepalese woman receiving help, however, is expanded by the women's active role in terms of promoting change in their communities. Thus, the external advocates' role in the communities was not only in the acts of giving but in an exchange.

If giving is based on charitable ideology, it does not deconstruct the hierarchies or recognise the root causes of social problems, but the person who receives help remains dependent on the givers. To deconstruct those hierarchies and reach for equality, there is a need for the interaction of *giving* and *receiving*. Giving and receiving forms solidarity as exchange. Receiving is an act of listening with openness to learn and unlearn with the local communities (e.g. Motta 2015), which creates spaces for the fair distribution of goods and donations that intend to promote social change. Exchange is an intercourse of mutual respect that promote the local communities' and their environments' holistic well-being.

One central aspect of international development projects is a flow of money from the international organisations and governments to the local communities and the poorest people. The women contended that money had increased the greediness among people, which created new ruptures and hierarchies in the communities. From this aspect, the ethical way of distributing money would be to expand it more diversely to microlevels. In this way, the local communities would be more able to determine the targets of the donations. The women's diverse views indicate that the decision-making processes are more contextually relevant when they combine multiple perspectives from different social categories. In addition, exchange should be seen beyond the material. If money and materials were the primary tools of exchange, and the outcomes of the changes were measured solely in the numbers of Excel files, it diminishes communal nuances and complexities. The accountings were necessary for controlling the flow of money, but it also strengthened the power of the donor and the most dominant ones in the communities to determine the directions of the change process.

Solidarity as exchange recognises the local and external advocates' relationships as a resource towards change. The ideas, skills and strengths that are shared in the relationships reach for the goals of the transition. The relationships create specific and contextual knowledge that external advocates can use in advocating for the communities' issues on a structural level—through lobbying, boycotts, publishing, activism in global movements or in different international bodies and organisations (Dominelli 2010b, 604; Motta and Seppälä 2016, 25). The ethical exchange of knowledge and resources

aims to diminish the gap between the external and local actors, and among the local actors. One aspect of the exchange is education, which does not mean to educate only the local people but also the external advocates, in order to reach sensitivity towards local contexts via a decolonising framework. Decolonising sensitivity enables them to recognise their privileges and the global hierarchies in the relationships with the local actors.

Solidarity as exchange emphasises local expertise. In the practises in which resources—both material and immaterial—are distributed, there is a need for multiple voices from the local communities. The development and social change projects require leading bodies. The dilemma with the women's organisations, for example, was that the leaders challenged social hierarchies in one way but increased them in others. Thus, the leading bodies should consist of diversities instead of individual leaders. The external advocate's task is to see the power struggles and intersecting social hierarchies in the local communities. This necessitates recognising the complexities and having the skills to question the distinctions among the communities.

Sometimes solidarity as exchange includes opposing the local norms that create extraordinary injustices. This was illustrated in the encounter with Mamina, where she was fatally ill on the street, and people passed her by without stopping. In these kinds of extreme cases, solidarity as exchange is based on recognising the individual's agony and reacting to it in an instant. In front of the remarkable wrongs such as Mamina's illness and exclusion, there is a need for determined action and the courage to stand up. This calls for alliance and an exchange where the external advocates' role is to question customs and injustices. After the immediate action, one should look deeper at the root causes of the injustices and negotiate them by recognising the complexities on communal, societal and global levels. Those levels intersect in individual women's fates, and each of them carry a shared responsibility of the ethical promotion of social change.

Conclusion

The aims, tools and partners of the transition intersect in a complex way. The women's aims of the transition were concrete, such as the reduction of poverty, improving women's health services, or improving their livelihood means and the infrastructure of the villages. They also were abstract, such as being seen and heard and increasing their self-worth. The women's aims were diverse, and they did not share a common goal of transition. However, my theoretical analysis enabled me to identify directions that reflect the local communities' views. In the next figure, I illustrate them by presenting decolonising goals and ethical tools of the transition.

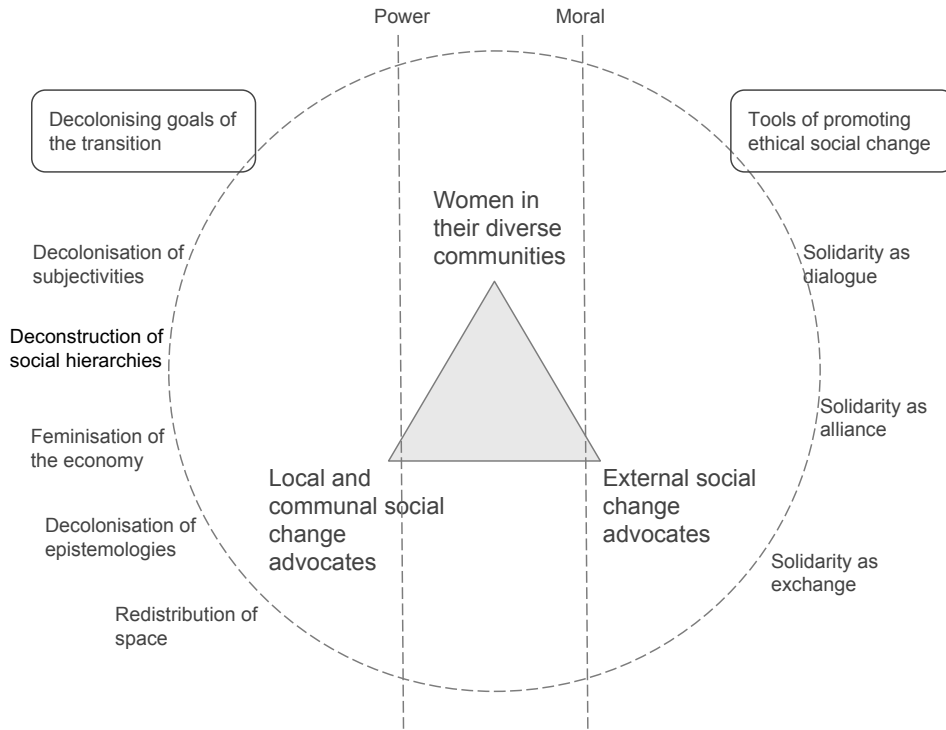


Figure 3. Directions of the transition

At the centre of the process, there are the women and their communities that carry distinct power relations. The women in their diverse environments interact and relate with local and communal as well as external social change advocates in multiple ways. In promoting ethically sensitive social change with locally and globally marginalised communities, the goals need to be determined with a decolonised lens. I analysed the women’s diverse aims via mirroring them to decolonising theory (e.g. Motta 2015), and identified five goals of transition: the decolonisation of subjectivities (ontological goal); the deconstruction of social hierarchies (social goal); feminisation of the economy (socio-economic goal); the decolonisation of epistemologies (epistemological goal); and the redistribution of space (spatial goal). These goals intersect and lead to transformations in gendered and social aspects.

The women’s aims of the transition needed partners and tools, especially for challenging structural problems such as patriarchy, ethnic, caste and class hierarchies and the global effects (such as capitalism) that hindered the women’s endeavours to promote change. The external driving forces and advocates, for example, social or development workers, were the partners of the change. I identified the tools of promoting the transition through the concept of solidarity, to stand up with the marginalised communities by listening and receiving. I analysed solidarity through the angles of dialogue, alliance

and exchange. The main point is to prioritise local knowledges and develop them towards increasing equality that does not homogenise people. This process leads to promote social change with decolonising feminist methods.



ऐउटा मैन्बतीले हजारौ मैन्बती बाल्न सक्छ र
पनि त्यो मैन्बतीको जिवन सकिन्दैन।

*Euta mainbatti le hazaarau mainbatti baalna sakchha
ra pani tyo mainbatti ko jivan sakindaina.*

*Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle,
and the life of the candle will not be shortened.*

Buddha

8 Nuanced process of promoting social change

This ethnography has aimed at making sense of the women's social position in their communities at the intersection of local traditions and multiple changes. The changes were affected by international and local contexts, which were both aligning and contradictory on a communal level. The contradictions were intertwined with global and local power structures and intersecting social hierarchies. Due to these contradictions, social change appeared as a complex process towards transition for multiple goals. The purpose of this study has been to address the complexity and understand ethically sustainable ways to promote the change with the women in their local communities.

The empirical basis of this study was established on my journeys to Nepal for eleven different periods. The first seven trips were based on collaboration with the local social change activists, and they did not include research activities to this dissertation. However, they developed my contextual knowledge and helped me in starting the fieldwork with the communities of this research. The primary fieldwork was based on six months' participatory observation and research discussions with two different women's communities in rural Nepal and revisits that together totalled one month. During the fieldwork, I participated in multiple daily activities, including the women's action to promote social change through their grassroots organisations. The local women had established those organisations in their areas to improve their livelihood methods and address gendered issues, such as struggles of motherhood and women's health problems. Getting to know these organisations and the societal and structural transition—based on democratisation process—that was going on in Nepal encouraged me to research the transition in the women's position. The key role in the fieldwork was with local contextual and cultural translators, who helped me in connecting with the women's communities, and who bridged the different epistemological borders between me and the participants.

I carried out in depth research discussions with different group combinations and ten individual women. The stories of those ten women opened multiple aspects to the communities, as they came from diverse positions. Local and global power relations caused intersecting social hierarchies and marginalisations—based on ethnicity, caste, class and gender. The communities were highly hierarchical, and they were also seen in

the research relations, which was one crucial ethical concern in this study. The women of this study do not only represent themselves; they reveal the differences in Nepalese communities. Their stories open windows to the wider context, as they represented the complex power relations and socio-political structures of their distinct positions (e.g. Seppälä 2016, 20).

One central ethical concern of this study was located in its liminality and subjectivity. Being a cross-cultural research, it was based on my liminal mind and embodiment, which is affected by my social position and background knowledge. In spite of continuous reflection with the local participants and a decolonising approach, I often found myself biased to the local understanding. This stressed the need to learn and relearn with diverse voices from the communities. Recognising my epistemological locations and blind spots also were moments of ethical awakenings. First they revealed the contextual nuances and the complexity of the social change and indicated that producing knowledge on it is a process, not a 'noun' (e.g. Payne 2001; Motta 2015). Second, they kept me ethically conscious throughout the process, which led to the issues of 'unlearning' the privileges and recognising my own vulnerabilities as part of the knowledge production. Those ethical concerns called for creativity and humility, with a prioritisation of the needs and desires of the research participants. Besides creating epistemological limits, they provided important knowledge about marginalisations and shades of the change process.

The encounters and shared knowledge production process with the women led me to form the main research question: *How can one promote ethically sustainable social change processes with the women in globally and locally marginalised communities?* It includes a question of how to recognise structural injustices and their different impacts on the local and practical levels. I approached this with three more explicated questions: *How is the women's social position in Nepalese rural communities shaped at the intersection of traditions and transition? How do the global and local driving forces reshape the women's social position? How are the women's perspectives and environments that promote the transition in their social position related to the international paradigms of development and social change?* The questions embraced the international, local, conceptual and practical dimensions and their intersections.

The ethnographic analysis shows that the women determined their social position mainly through their social relationships and daily routines, which illustrated the communality and gendered frameworks of the research context. The women had strong predefined duties in their daily contexts, which determined them as 'good' or 'failed'. Most of the women were located somewhere in between those determinations, but some of them were socially marginalised and isolated as 'failed' women. Some of the reasons behind the isolation were their struggles in fulfilling their gendered duties, such as satisfying their husband and his parents, being strong enough to work in the field or following communal norms. This led to exclusion, which sometimes had devastating consequences on the individuals' lives. Mamina's story was an extreme that revealed

a gap in the social security system, which led her to the loneliness of the streets. Her story illustrated the extreme patriarchal, ethnic and caste hierarchies that had multiple forms in the communities and affected the women in diverse ways.

Outside the hierarchies, the women showed their appreciation towards the communal connectivity and the traditions. This was linked with their identities, pride, cultural continuity and relationship to land, spirituality and community. The analysis shows that those aspects of the traditions supported the women's well-being. Some of the local traditions that seemed oppressive through an emancipatory lens were not seen as such in the local communities. Those were, for example, the protective side of an arranged marriage or religious traditions as a strength. Besides valuing the traditions, the women also promoted and wished for changes in their daily contexts. The changes that the women had gained within the last decades were multiple: they had, for example, increased their mobility, political and legal rights, education, economic self-determination, and recognition. The changes included, however, complexities that required deeper scrutiny. I conducted the analysis of the complex social change process through the metaphor of local landscapes, which followed the women's perspectives and their close relationship to the environment. As the communities were highly hierarchic, the changes reached the centres and the margins at different speeds. Therefore, I analysed the differences as the rhythms of the change.

The analysis shows that some of the changes in the communities were widespread and appeared as main roads of the transition. Those changes were communally accepted, adopted and promoted, and the majority of the community members agreed with them. The footpaths of the changes were slower undercurrents smouldering within the margins and silent masses; they were gradual steps towards a wider transition. Sometimes the women in the centre and most powerful positions resisted the changes that arose from the margins, and sometimes it was vice versa. I identified the resistance and obstacles of the changes as uphill, located in structural and communal hierarchies, patriarchy and the silence of the middle sort (withdrawal from questioning the injustices or hierarchies).

I presented the metaphor of earthquakes as abrupt changes that the women's stories narrated. They appeared as unpredictable external changes that impacted the women's lives—as a death of a husband, illness or actual earthquakes. Those changes often had devastating consequences, and in dealing with them, the most marginalised women were particularly vulnerable. This expanded the analysis to hidden 'caves'—social locations where the mainstream changes did not reach. The 'caves' were located on intersecting marginalisations, as some of the women were excluded on global, societal and communal levels. The complexity of the transition through its different rhythms showed that communality is both the possibility and restraint of the change process. Desired changes were advanced by leaning on communal bonds, but power hierarchies hindered some of the changes and also deepened the inequalities within the transition.

The analysis indicates that the transition on a communal level was affected by internal and external driving forces. I identified two central aspects as internal driving forces that arose from the communities and the women's activism—spirituality and emotions—that promoted the social change. The transition also was affected by various external—structural and international—driving forces. Those were, for example, the processes of internationalisation and globalisation, economic transformations (such as capitalism and neoliberalism), political changes (new laws assuring wider women's citizenship rights and political participation), and the processes of promoting women's rights (which is a contested concept) and education. Those processes included multiple power imbalances that the women in diverse positions had to deal with.

The communities did not merely adopt the external changes; they negotiated them in terms of their traditions and practical realities. In addition, the communities were diverse, and the women's views towards the changes and the ways to promote them were multiple. Thus, the internal and external driving forces intersected in the communal context in diverse ways. I perceive those intersections as transgression of different borders on socio-economic, spatial and epistemological planes. The transgression of those borders led to transformations in the social and gendered spheres. The key in analysing the driving forces of the transition was in balancing between the local and external impacts on the communities and deconstructing the power imbalances in them. It was also important to recognise the supportive elements of the traditions and local community in the women's well-being. This balance helps avoid promoting changes that cause harm to the local communities and their most marginalised people.

The results indicate that the women's primary goals for the transition were improvements in their socio-economic position by reducing poverty, improving their livelihood means and ensuring safe futures for their children. They also wanted to be heard and seen. The women did not desire to gain for independence, but they wished to create communal interdependence and coherence with fairer circumstances, where their voices would be heard more widely. Their dreams of change were land-related, spiritual and connected to their social relationships and embodiment. Even though the women did not use the terms 'feminism' or 'decolonisation', their grassroots activities for promoting the change included elements that align with these concepts. Therefore, my theoretical analysis was based on the conceptualisations of decolonising feminism (e.g. Agarwal 2001; Mohanty 2003; Spivak 2005; Motta 2015), which helped me make sense of the women's goals for the transition. By using these concepts, I categorised the women's practical and abstract aims into the goals of the decolonisation of subjectivities; the deconstruction of social hierarchies; the feminisation of the economy; the decolonisation of epistemologies; and the redistribution of space. These goals function as an outline for embracing the women's subjectivities in the change process and recognising the contextual nuances, societal and international structures, power imbalances and intersecting social hierarchies.

The last phase of the analysis was to provide knowledge on the ethical tools and partners of the women's transition. There were a number of external advocates who looked to endorse change in the communities through, for example, international and local development projects, financial contributions, philanthropic and volunteer work, and policy-making. The analysis indicates that the ethical promotion of social change is based on various aspects of solidarity with the recognition of intersecting power hierarchies. I identified these aspects of solidarity as dialogue, alliance and exchange. These include sensitivity to cultural and contextual nuances, but do not hold with the cultural relativism and withdraw from the ethical responsibilities for action that international social work carries within its ethical codes (e.g. Wehbi et al. 2016).

The research encounters revealed that the international paradigms of development and social change are constructions that are actualised in different policies and practises in numerous ways. These constructions did not align from every aspect with the aims of the local communities and the voices from multiple marginalisations. The analysis showed that while there had been a lot of improvements in the development practises and policies towards recognising local expertise and including contextually sensitive approaches, conceptual imperialism and power imbalances still existed in them. Because the projects were influenced by intersecting global and local power relations—that the participants often were blind to—they risked deepening the gaps between people in epistemological, gendered, social and economic aspects. To bridge those gaps, there is a need to support the communal change processes by examining the power structures with critical reflection on complexities and diversities.

As those multiple gaps are created with intersecting global and local impacts, there is a need to deconstruct them with transnational alliances. I see international social work as a field to address, understand and diminish those gaps. Yet as international social work is grounded in the very roots of the profession, it is a broad and contested field (e.g. Midgley 2006). At its best, it bridges multiple gaps between people and their knowledges to come together for fighting oppressions, and at its worst, it is based on imperialist and colonialist practises and conceptions that deepen the power hierarchies. The core in developing context-sensitive transnational alliances with the local communities is in critical and deconstructive discussions on intersecting global and local power imbalances. In emphasising this, I join with the scholars who have called for a decolonising approach in international social work education, research and practises (e.g. Dominelli 2010a; Deepak 2011; Ranta-Tyrkkö 2011; Gray and Hetherington 2013; Wehbi et al. 2016).

One crucial concern in promoting an ethically sustainable transition process is in uniting and building the bridges on the social, epistemological and spatial gaps between people. In this process, the key is to strengthen the communal traditions that create coherence, dialogue and respect for diversities. International social work has a lot to learn from the local communities that are the experts of their own environments. The

learning process includes a multidimensional gaze and search for unity among and between people and the environments. Unity is embraced by respecting the diversities and deconstructing the dichotomies of the global South and North, international and local, feminine and masculine, human and environmental, or theoretical and practical, which can lead to open and respectful dialogue between diverse actors. This is increasingly important in our current world, with its alarming polarisations and extremities. In dealing with the vast questions of promoting change with a decolonising lens, there is no one right way. The core of the process—to increase the well-being of the people who are subjected to multiple marginalisations—requires listening and receiving with a sensitivity to nuances. This creates an exchange that promotes peace and equality.

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