A narrative inquiry of women’s lives in Mugu, Nepal: identities, power relations and education

by

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Abstract

This study questions assumptions around universal understandings of gender and education. Using a narrative inquiry approach it focuses on the life-narratives of five women from the remote Himalayan district of Mugu, Nepal. It aims to examine the complexities of lived experience by gaining insight into how understandings of education are embedded in women’s multiple and uniquely intersecting identities, and in doing so, it challenges singular definitions of gender and education. Influenced by postcolonial feminist theory, this inquiry applies an intersectional analysis to consider how identities (including gender, ethnicity, caste, position in the family, role in the household, age and economic status) interlock to create unequal power relations, and how the meanings and values that the women attach to education are embedded in these relations.

As a narrative analysis this study foregrounds the five women’s voices and experiences, challenging assumptions about whose experiences are valued and whose voice can be heard. Other voices have been interwoven with the women’s stories and presented as a multi-layered narrative; these include the local expressive tradition of ‘deuda’ singing, interviews with educational stakeholders, and reflexive journaling. In keeping with narrative inquiry approaches, I use a more personal voice to reflect on concerns about power dynamics and ethical challenges involved in the research process. Issues of representation, as well as struggles relating to voice and positionality, are at the core of the study and reflexively considered throughout. By using a narrative inquiry approach; taking a postcolonial feminist perspective; and applying an intersectional analysis, this study refuses to rely on essentialist and homogenising constructions of women. It attempts to be an example of ethical and respectful research and claims to increase understanding of how identities, power relations and education intersect in women’s lives in Mugu, Nepal.
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A photograph has been included between each chapter break. The intention is that these visual images add to the essence of the thesis; they are not intended as data or considered to be part of the analysis therefore no reference is made to them in the text.
CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

SETTING THE SCENE

*Mugu, northwest Nepal [based on details from personal journal extract, 2007]*

I was tired before I had even reached the first school. It was several hours of uphill from the village where we had stayed the previous night. We arrived late in the morning but the small school perched on the edge of the mountain seemed deserted. Two boys and a little girl who were playing in the yard told us, ‘Sir isn’t here today, he’s busy, and the other master has not returned from visiting his family outside the district’.

We decided to keep going to try to reach the next village by mid day. That meant more climbing. I could feel it in my head; especially as I was hungry. We passed women cutting grass on the steep slopes above the path, while others were bent over double working in the small terraced fields below. Girls carrying firewood in baskets from their heads looked at us as they went by, and we could hear the voices of some young lads keeping an eye on a flock of goats and sheep.

We had sent word that we were coming so we were met on the outskirts of the village by a bunch of young students and soon the school masters welcomed us. The sky had clouded over again by the time we had eaten rice. I observed some lessons and checked the attendance of the scholarship girls from the school register. Classes were outside because the rooms were small and dark, and the stone walls and tin roof were in disrepair. We were above the snow line by this stage. The sweat from walking cooled and I was chilled to the bone as I watched the teacher struggle through a history lesson with half a dozen scantily clad boys perched before him. I looked at the crumbling school building and the shivering children, I thought about the ‘child friendly teaching and learning’ training that I was scheduled to cover with the teachers later and the irony of it all struck me so forcefully that I felt like I was choking. My thoughts drifted. Tonight someone would spend the night sleeping slightly further away from the fire because they had given me their space on the hearth, I would feel guilty about eating the food because I know they can only grow enough for six months of the year and I would gradually become blacker with smoke and grime because it was unthinkable to wash more than my hands with water that someone had spent all day carrying up from the river far below.

When we cancelled the last lesson of the day, the students quickly scampered off to catch up on their day’s tasks. As we climbed with Head Sir up to his house, thoughts swirled in my mind like the snow flurrying around us. Even though I have been in the district for several years I have so many questions. Nothing seems to fit. My qualifications, my experience, my theories all seem irrelevant. My job title is ‘Education Advisor’ but I no
longer know what that means. I came to teach, train and advise without realising that there was so much that I needed to learn, ask and understand. I begin to realise that it is not just impossible to solve the problems I see around me, it is also presumptuous and arrogant to think that I might do so. Yet walking away and pretending that the issues do not exist seems even less ethical...

We had carried some tea leaves and sugar from the market, and I watched as Head Sir’s wife boiled it up for all of us, on the wood fire. I could only think about the cup of hot sweet tea, my mind refused to go beyond this. I sat in the smoke, sipping the hot tea.

INTRODUCING THE PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS INQUIRY

This inquiry aims to examine the complexity of women’s lives in the context of Mugu district in Nepal. Mugu is a much neglected district in the mountainous north-western region of Nepal. It has been identified nationally as the most deprived and least developed district (NPC, 2007), but has remained under-researched and particularly with regard to gender and education. The diversity within Nepal makes it impossible to generalise, yet the perspectives of people in Mugu are rarely heard at national level and the stories of women in Mugu have not been heard outside the district. Therefore a narrative inquiry of women’s lives in Mugu will make a unique contribution to this gap in the literature.

Gender inequality in education is currently considered a priority issue in Nepal (Ministry of Education, 2008) and there is some indication of an increase in literature focusing on girls’ participation in education as well as attempts to mainstream gender issues in education policy (de Groot, 2007). Much of this existing educational literature has predominantly focused on technical school-related factors or has taken a development studies perspective and has tended to single out economic issues (Maslak, 2003). However, the focus of this study is different; it intends to go beyond the existing educational participation literature to gain insight into how education is embedded in power relations and gendered identities as understood and constructed by women in Mugu.

As Okkolin (2006) has pointed out, ‘educational paths are crucially constructed by factors related to socio-cultural background, images of self, personal abilities and educational opportunities’ and therefore it is necessary to examine not only the education system itself, but also the wider non-educational environment outside the education system (p.1). It is important to understand how girls and women value education and how they perceive their own gendered participation in it (or exclusion
from it). Robinson-Pant (2004) points out that all too often education for women has been assumed to be a universally accepted value and that this has prevented us from examining what education or gender really means to communities and what values they see promoted through girls’ schooling or women’s literacy classes. She suggests that we need to start from one step back by exploring meanings of gender and education in the communities involved. This inquiry intends to examine how gender and education are constructed by women in Mugu; what meanings and values they attach to education and how these are unique to their own lived experiences.

The emphasis in this thesis is not on seeking ‘truths’ but on better understanding the meanings and values that the women attach to gender and education. The women’s lived experiences are understood as being personal and unique but also as being constructed within specific social, cultural and historic contexts; their narratives are considered to be simultaneously individual and collective. Identities are recognised as multiple and intersecting, and this inquiry is not aimed at making generalisations or arriving at neat conclusions, rather the intention is to more fully appreciate the complexities and endless possibilities of the reality of lived experiences.

Central to this inquiry is a concern about the colonizing tendencies that have traditionally been associated with research in general (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Mutua & Swadener, 2004) and with international education research and the resulting global gender education agendas in particular (Fennell & Arnot, 2008). A postcolonial feminist approach will be adopted in this study in order to challenge the Eurocentric nature of much ‘western feminist’ research. Postcolonial feminism is an appropriate lens for this study, not from the perspective of a concern about geographical space (Nepal has never been officially colonised) but from a need to be concerned regarding new modes of imperial power; including challenging dominant ways of apprehending North-South relations, problematizing the ways in which the world is known (McEwan, 2001; Tikly, 2004) and disrupting the narrative of the colonisers/colonised and powerful/powerless dichotomies (Fox, 2006).

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3 North-South refers to the global North/South which some authors use as a term preferable to Developed/Developing or First World/Third World as these are often considered outdated and stigmatized. When possible I avoid using the terms ‘Third World’ and ‘Developing’ because of their negative connotations, however the terminology used in the literature review frequently reflects the source from which it is referenced, so these terms do appear at times (especially within the discussion of postcolonial feminism). Terms such as global South or Western are used, not to dichotomise or essentialise but because it is necessary to take into account power relations and to ensure that exploitation and oppression are not ignored or glossed over.
In keeping with a postcolonial feminist lens, it is imperative to bring to the fore concerns about the speaking positions of dominant voices, which so often ‘inferiorize’ others, by depicting them as victims of their culture (Fox, 2008), or re-create colonial scripts by depicting South Asian women as passive victims of oppression who need to be saved by western ideas and feminisms (Sensoy & Marshall, 2010). It is intended that this research will challenge such stereotypes and attempt to break down dichotomies and unhelpful binaries such as oppressor/oppressed.

Recognising that the researcher’s story is intrinsic to narrative inquiry, the process of examining my position and privilege as researcher is considered an important part of this study. As Fox (2008) points out, the right to speak as researcher as well as the attributes of the relationship between narrator and researcher cannot be ignored in postcolonial narrative research. Keeping in mind the dangers inherent in making the researcher’s voice too central and dominant (Etherington, 2004; Trahar, 2011), it is my intention to use reflexivity to problematize the power dynamics inherent in research and to begin the process of unlearning privilege (Spivak, 1990).

Accepting the dangers and risks involved, this study uses a narrative inquiry approach and a postcolonial feminist lens, with the intention of gaining insight into the lived experiences of women in Mugu. This research is characterised by an ethical attitude; it is an inquiry which has grown out of a genuine wrangling with dilemmas during seven years of experience in Nepal, and one that is guided by an ethical conscience as much as it is guided by theoretical frames and academic literature. It is my hope that as I represent my learning as researcher, alongside the women’s experiences, that I do so ‘without betraying their interest as narrators of their own lives’ (Ong, 1995, p.354), and that I do so in a way that connects with the reader or speaks to the reader’s own experience.

**INTRODUCING HOW THE INQUIRY EMERGED**

In the opening narrative I have attempted to convey something of the frustration which I experienced while working as an Education Advisor in Mugu. I had concerns about the way I was working as an educationalist and as an international development worker. The work I was involved in seemed to be focused on peripheral issues, often of a technical nature, while deeper and more fundamental issues remained unquestioned and unaddressed. I came to realise that I could not attempt to encourage improvements in practice at classroom level until I better
understood the wider non-educational environment and its significance. Much of my previous educational training, knowledge and skills seemed irrelevant to this new context leaving me uncertain about how to cope with the new experiences I was facing. I began to question my own assumptions and the expectations of those in the international development scene.

Within government and non-government organisations data from household surveys in Mugu was frequently referred to in order to emphasise the low literacy rate of women in the district and to point out that most women have never had any experience of education. In the professional context within which I was working, women were often viewed as statistical figures; they were discussed as ‘gaps’ in education or ‘problems’ to be addressed with regards to health. The assumption seemed to be that because women had no education they were therefore unable to give any opinion on education. From living amongst women in Mugu I knew that most women had not participated in formal or non-formal education, yet I questioned the assumption that this meant it was irrelevant to them. When asked directly about education women often denied any experience or knowledge of it, yet education often seemed to feature in women’s conversations, when they were discussing other issues. As I reflected on my experiences in Mugu and on relevant literature, I became convinced of the need to hear the voices of the women of Mugu and to better understand their perspectives.

As I flick back through my research journal I can trace how the emphasis in my research has gradually shifted. Initially I was concerned with girls’ exclusion from schooling and considering the barriers to learning they face. But as I continued to read and reflect on Mugu more fundamental questions emerged, such as; what does it mean to be a female in Mugu? How do girls and women make sense of their lives in Mugu and how does education fit in (or not fit in) with these constructions? In the context of Mugu (and more widely in Nepal) these questions seem to be a priority, yet they have been much neglected.

The following three research questions emerged from my study; evolving as I read, reflected and collected data in Mugu:

- How is gender constructed by women in Mugu and how does it intersect with other identities in their life narratives?
- How are understandings of education embedded in gendered power relations in the lives of women in Mugu?
How can reflexivity be used to problematize the power dynamics inherent in research and to contribute to methodological approaches taken to researching across borders?

I am reminded from my research journal how I have worried about the lack of clarity, the shifts and the confusion that have so often coloured my experience of the research process. At times I felt envious of researchers who seemed so sure and clear about the route they were taking, who proposed well defined research questions at the outset of their study and appeared to be guided by them throughout the study, and who safely reached the end point they had been aiming for all along. However, my journaling also reminds me how convinced I have been that the methodological choices I have made and the stance I have taken were the right ones for this study. A narrative inquiry approach has enabled me to examine the way in which women in Mugu interpret their lives and make sense of their experiences through narrative, and it has also allowed me to take a reflexive stance in examining my own involvement in the research process. The centrality of both these dimensions is reflected in the research questions, with the first two questions referring to the focus on deepening understandings of the women of Mugu's perspectives and the third question referring to the methodological stance taken.

It is intended that this thesis does not just refer to narrative inquiry, but that it is a narrative inquiry (as demonstrated in the opening of the introduction and more particularly in the narrative methodology in chapter 3 and the narrative analysis in chapter 4). How narrative research is valued as a methodological stance, as well as how it is fraught with difficulties and dilemmas is reflected throughout the thesis.

CONCLUDING THE INTRODUCTION

The introduction to a study that claims to be a narrative inquiry calls for the telling of a story (Trahar, 2006) and since I opened with a story, I continue in the same vein by concluding with another story. The excerpt below is based on a personal journal entry written in July 2008. It was from near the end of my time working in Mugu, just before I left Nepal to return to Ireland to commence life as a PhD student. As I look at it now I realise that it is as much about beginnings as it is about endings;

Monsoon has come to an uncertain start in Mugu – a grey week with lots of showers. Already everything is muddy and damp and smelly. Yesterday’s heavy rain cleared the air and today dawned dry and bright. As I walked back from Rara with Abhishek I was thinking about the 'end
of term report’ I need to write, as well as the usual donor evaluations that must be completed. I joked with Abhishek about how much detail was always required in the ‘outputs’ column and how there was great demand for ‘success stories’ yet there never seemed to be enough space in the ‘challenges encountered’ boxes.

About half an hour beyond the lake we dropped down into a meadow that was covered with wildflowers. The rains that have brought mud to the villages have also brought flowers out in the meadows. I’ve seen impressive cultivated gardens but they couldn’t compare with this - an incredible display of every colour and size and shape of bloom. I sat down and stared into the minutiae of the growth closest to me.

‘If you were starting all over again as Education Advisor here, what would you do differently?’ Abhishek asks. Obviously he has heard the cynicism in my voice earlier as I joked about reporting my successes. ‘I’m not sure,’ I answer slowly. ‘I often talk about what I am uncomfortable with or frustrated about, but the alternatives...?’ I shrug and then smile, ‘maybe I’d start by just sitting and listening to people – I could drink tea and listen to their side of the story...’ Abhishek laughs, but is serious when he replies, ‘maybe your research plans will be the closest you will get to doing just that.’ I really hope so.

STRUCTURE OF THESIS

The thesis is presented in six chapters, with this introduction as the first chapter. The second chapter deals with the competing conceptualisations which have been significant with regard to the framework for the study, as well as outlining examples of the ways in which gender has been constructed in literature relating to South Asian women, and providing context through a detailed review of gender and education literature relevant to Nepal. This is followed by a methodology chapter, which begins by considering the ontological, epistemological and methodological positioning of the study before continuing with a narrative discussion of the particularity of the methodology of this specific inquiry. The fourth chapter is the ‘narrative analysis’ and forms the core of the thesis. It includes the (translated) stories as told by the five women in Mugu as well as other excerpts of narrative data, incorporated in the form of a narrative presentation. Because chapter three and four are in a narrative style they are presented in a more personal voice than, for example, the preceding and following chapters (two and five) which take on a more formal academic tone. However there are also variations in voice and tone within chapters as well as between sections and this is further discussed throughout the study and within the methodology in particular. Chapter five forms a discussion synthesised from the results of the narrative analysis, dealing first with the question
of how gender and other intersecting identities are constructed by women in Mugu and then moving on to examine how education is understood in relation to these constructions of gender. The final chapter brings the thesis to a conclusion by reflecting back on the process and significance of the study as well as the contribution made and the possibilities for further research.
CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section outlines the theoretical framing of the thesis; the second section reviews examples of the ways in which gender has been constructed in literature focusing on women in South Asia; and the third section provides context to the study through reviewing gender and education literature relevant to Mugu, Nepal.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

This section begins by situating gender and education research in a global context. It expresses concern about the hegemonic nature of global gender scholarship in education, as well as the disjunction that exists between the knowledge generated within the field of gender studies and the emergence of equality agendas in education associated with international development. The commonly used instrumentalist and human rights frameworks are considered, and in keeping with attempts to ‘decentre’ gender and education research, these frames are rejected in favour of a postcolonial feminist approach. Concerns that are central to postcolonial feminist research are discussed and the value of intersectionality theory is outlined.

Researching gender and education in a global context

Concerns about gender and education are currently high on international agendas and have been linked together, particularly in connection with promoting development and reducing poverty at a global level. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) call for gender equality in education by 2015, and not only is there a focus on achieving gender equality within education, there is also an expectation that education will promote gender equality in society (UNESCO, 2003). Gender equality in education has often been considered to be an access problem and statistics regarding the proportion of girls out of school have been mentioned frequently (UNGEI, 2002). The MDGs also recognise the issue of quality of schooling as a significant dimension of gender inequality and attention has been drawn to the differences in achievement and retention amongst girls and boys (UNESCO, 2003).
The MDGs, in conjunction with the Dakar Declaration (2000) which pledged to achieve *Education for All*, have established the legitimacy of talking about gender equality in relation to education, however, there are assumptions connected with such universal gender education targets that need to be considered (Arnot and Fennell, 2007). The call to consider assumptions connected with such global agendas is not an attempt to denigrate international development or deny that gender equality in education is important. Rather, it recognises that such agendas need to be carefully examined; opened up to more inclusive discussion and input; and ‘decentred’, in order that hegemonic tendencies do not continue unchallenged.

**Gender theory and education**

It has been suggested that the majority of the global reform agenda in education appears to have been formulated without much input from feminist theory or gender studies (Connell, 2010). To a large extent development studies and gender studies have remained unaffected by each other and they have pursued their own direction without influencing each other. Stromquist (2000) points out how donor agencies, governments and NGOs have sought to improve the conditions of women, but they have tended to ignore intellectual production of theory and have focused on solving the gender issue by prescribing equality, especially through education. From this perspective, ‘women’ have been considered an unproblematic category and action has been advocated to address inequalities, in particular, the promotion of basic education has been advocated, either for instrumental reasons or using the rhetoric of rights. Feminists concerned with gender and education from an international development perspective and feminist NGOs have often emphasised activism and considered ‘feminism’ to be a movement seeking social justice. In contrast, Stromquist (2000) suggests that the postmodern academy has been concerned with denying the homogeneity of the category of ‘women’ and focusing on the complexities and multiplicities of dimensions of gender and sexualities. Gender studies, particularly in Western academies, have emphasised feminism as a theory of power relations between women and men, often sidelining issues of justice, poverty and oppression. Overall there has been a lack of interaction between feminist gender studies and global social justice initiatives that are concerned with gender and schooling.

It is only in recent years that this dilemma has been recognised, with a small number of authors (including Unterhalter, 2005, 2007; Fennell & Arnot, 2007, 2008; Arnot & Fennell, 2007, 2008) beginning to comment on the gap and arguing for more interaction among actors such as governments, INGOs and schools; more
discussion amongst different disciplines; as well as between academies, practitioners and activists. Arnot and Fennell (2007) recognise the need for meaningful exchange regarding the feasibility and desirability of merging Western based gender studies and non-Western development studies, suggesting that ‘the formation of a global field of gender education research, in effect, implies crossing the bridge from development studies to gender and education studies and vice versa’ (p.2). They point out that for some, this would mean thinking for the first time about the development context while for others it means considering the theoretical and empirical insights of Western gender and educational research.

Attempting to cross this ‘bridge’ has been a struggle for me throughout this research study. In reviewing literature relevant to the study of gender education in Nepal, I have drawn upon a diverse range of gender and education scholarship within sociological, anthropological, and political theory. I have found that reading literature with a focus on the construction of gender in the context of South Asia took me in one direction, while literature dealing with education and girls’ schooling in South Asia took me in a completely different direction. The challenge of integrating these dual dimensions has continued throughout this research.

**Decentring global theory**

All too frequently gender education scholarship has been part of a one-way process that leaves North America and Western Europe failing to recognise contributions from other regions and cultural traditions. In so doing, it systematically denies the creativity and contribution of academic knowledge coming from diverse national academies (Connell, 2007). Across the globe, scholarly and innovative research is being done at a national level, yet this type of localised knowledge about gender and education has less international impact than research funded for an audience of global policy makers. The hegemonic nature of knowledge that is created in global academies, particularly in North America and Western Europe, needs to be challenged by research that focuses on local complexities; especially in the context of regions outside the USA and Western Europe.

Fennell and Arnot (2008) are critical of how much of the research relating to global initiatives such as the MDGs does not tend to challenge the hegemony of Anglo-American gender education theory nor question its assumptions and conceptual suppositions. They suggest that universal targets such as the MDGs carry with them ‘imperial and colonial legacies of international interference in nation building and national educational systems’ (Amot & Fennell, 2007, p.3). Similarly, it has been
pointed out that the concept of *Education for All* (EFA) encourages attempts to uncritically export Anglo-American gender theorising across the world (Mundy & Murphy, 2001).

Therefore, rather than unquestioningly accepting and promoting global agendas for gender education, it is necessary to recognise the hegemonic tendencies of such research traditions. It is vital that uncritical attempts to recreate Western models of education globally are called into question. Research must attempt to engage with diverse scholarship, including from non-Western regions of the world, and include a focus on national contexts and specific localised knowledge. There is a need to move beyond the statistical study of gender gaps in education, which is limited to a focus on access to education or quality of education, and there is a need for studies which focus on understanding constructions of gender inequality and gender dynamics at local levels; ‘knowledge about the specific sets of gender relations found in these local levels generates the intellectual basis for new understandings of gender, education and development’ (Arnot & Fennell, 2007, p.7). Because gender is a complex, dynamic structure rather than a simple, natural dichotomy; because gender patterns are not fixed; and gender relations vary in different class, caste, ethnic and regional contexts; there is a need for gender education research that aims to explore in depth the specific contextual conditions in which these complex dynamics are at work (Connell, 2007, 2010; Stromquist, 2002).

The call for such local, contextualised research is not to deny the importance of a global perspective, but rather to contribute to it. As Arnot and Fennell (2008) suggest, the future direction for gender research is to explore in greater depth the construction of gender cultures within nations, with the desire to break singular concepts of gender down into the complexity of gender identities and gender subcultures within the national context. The opportunities and constraints around people’s gender identifications are precisely the sort of factors that international agendas need to take into account; it is these complex identities that need to be understood since they affect the implementation of education and gender equality strategies. They conclude;

Paradoxically, the more the international community uses gender equality as an indicator of national development, the greater the need for empirical national case studies of gender and for more systematic investigations of the transfer of knowledge across global divides, and the need for strong evidence about the contextual formation of gender identities which sustain poverty and affect strategies for poverty alleviation (Arnot and Fennell, 2008, p.522).
Instrumentalist perspectives

Gender has often been understood in terms of the problems of girls, and gender equality in education has been viewed as being instrumental in achieving valued outcomes worldwide (such as economic growth, population control, political stability, or health improvements). This has resulted in equality being discussed in terms of interventions to ensure that all women and girls receive a minimum level of basic schooling, while wider considerations of gender inequalities, such as in property rights, school curricula, employment, and political and social participation, have been ignored (Gasper, 2004; Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005). Instrumentalism was behind much of the ‘basic needs’ approach to development, popular in the 1970s and also can be seen reflected in Women in Development (WID) approaches that were common in the 1980s (Moser, 1993) and which will be discussed with reference to Nepal, later in this chapter.

Instrumentalist arguments for gender equality in education have been influential in driving policy and in leading to attempts to provide mass schooling across the world. Examples of instrumentalist thinking are evident in the Jomtien Declaration (1990) which clearly links the number of uneducated girls and women with shortfalls in health, economic problems and increases in poverty (Chabbott, 2003). Other examples can be seen in various World Bank documents of the 1990s, including the World Bank Review in 1995, which points out how educated mothers positively influence their children’s physical, social and mental development and therefore ‘education – in particular female education – is key to reducing poverty and must be considered as much part of a country’s health strategy as, for example, programs of immunisation and access to health clinics’ (World Bank, 1995, p.110).

In recent years the limitations of instrumentalist approaches have been recognised and the assumptions upon which instrumentalist arguments have been based have been criticised. Unterhalter (2007) suggests that instrumentalist approaches to gender equality in education as a matter of social justice rest on four mutually reinforcing ideas. Firstly, gender equality in education is economically efficient. Secondly, gender equality in access to schooling attends to a universal need that can be satisfied through basic provision. Thirdly, women’s education provides an avenue for them to step out of constraining forces of ‘tradition’ or domination and enter a more neutral terrain of opportunity marked out by the labour market or political participation. And fourthly, social relations at the local level have a similar form to those at the national and global level. For studies such as this one, that do
not accept these assumptions, instrumentalism is not an appropriate framework for considering gender and education.

Instrumentalist approaches position women’s education as largely for others and do not consider the benefits to women and girls themselves, nor how education might directly contribute to the autonomy and choices available to women or the decisions they make or value. Instrumentalism is open to critique from approaches that view society as comprising complex and interlocking sites, where gender dimensions are recognised as multiple and diffuse and where understandings of equality go beyond a bare minimum of provision (Unterhalter, 2007). The limitations of instrumentalist views of gender equality and education have led to approaches based on human rights becoming more popular.

**Considering human rights approaches**

In recent years, human rights have become universalised, with international declarations being widely accepted, the language of rights commonly employed and rights-based approaches pervading global education initiatives. UNGEI’s gender review of the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011 states that it is based on the simple premise that ‘education is a universal human right, but gender inequality across the globe often prevents women and girls from accessing it’ (UNGEI, 2011, p.4). Another recent study points out that ‘the strongest justification for prioritizing education for girls is that it is a human right, enshrined in international and national law’ (Global Campaign for Education, 2011, p.8). Arguments about rights emphasise the intrinsic value of gender equality in education.

The right to education is outlined in several international and regional human rights treaties, most significantly the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Between them these constitute ‘the most comprehensive set of legally enforceable commitments concerning both rights to education and to gender equality’ (UNESCO 2003, p.25). The majority of countries (including Nepal) have ratified these treaties, and the use of rights to argue for gender equality in education is now very common (Subrahmanian, 2005). There is no doubt that the international human rights movement has done a great deal of good by freeing many individuals from harm, providing a global emancipatory vocabulary and setting standards for governments to judge each other and be judged by their own people as well as the international community (Kennedy, 2004). However, as Kennedy (2002, 2004)
points out, this does not mean that the human rights movement should become an object of devotion or that it is beyond questioning, doubt and criticism. Human rights law is a dynamic and tenacious construct (Chinkin, 1999) and therefore engaging in debate and challenge is vital if it is to be expanded, transformed and advanced.

In the past, a major criticism of international human rights has been that women’s rights have not been fully recognised as human rights (Bunch, 1995; Cook, 1994). In the 90s, Charlesworth suggested that due to the domination of men in the law-making institutions, ‘international human rights law has developed to reflect the experiences of men and largely to exclude those of women, rendering suspect the claim of the objectivity and universality of international human rights law’ (1995, p.103). She suggested that until the gendered nature of the human rights system itself was recognized and transformed, progress for women would not be achieved. Similarly, Stamatopoulou (1995) has pointed out the need to reinterpret human rights law from a women’s perspective and she has highlighted certain issues such as the need to remove the artificial barriers between the ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres as well as the ‘shield of silence’ that protects rather than averts or punishes many violations against women (p.39). Since then effort has been made to ‘transform’ international human rights law to include women’s rights and much has been written about the progress that has been made, particularly following the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 and the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (Coomaraswamy, 1999). However, while progress appears to have been made, some feminist activists such as Charlesworth (2005) continue to have reservations. With regards to gender mainstreaming, Charlesworth discusses how;

The deployment of the language of gender mainstreaming in the area of human rights may appear successful, at least if measured by its omnipresence. The rapid spread of the concept, however, may also suggest its ambiguities, weakness, and lack of bite. Gender mainstreaming in the human rights field has been a mixed success, with institutional inertia and resistance effectively confining its impact to a rhetorical one. It has not led to any investigation of the gendered nature of international institutions themselves or any call for effective organizational change (2005, p.16).

Charlesworth (2005) concludes by pointing out that, women, so often on the margins of the international arena, ‘are more likely to drown in, than wave from, the mainstream, unless they swim with the current’ (p.18).

Human rights approaches appear to have moved from the margins to the centre; Kennedy (2002) describes human rights as a ‘dominant and fashionable vocabulary for thinking about emancipation’ (p.108). However it has been pointed out that this is
not the case everywhere. Charlesworth (2002) declares that while this might be the case in the United States where debates about freedoms are largely conducted in terms of constitutional guarantees of rights, in many other countries, such as Australia, human rights talk is ‘deeply unfashionable and has little impact in legal or political debates about freedoms or social justice’ (p.127). Similarly, Coomaraswamy (1994) suggests that in Asia the rights discourse is weak, in part because it privileges free, independent women rather than women who are attached to communities, castes and ethnic groups as Asian women often tend to be.

Universal human rights have been criticised as Western, mainstream and hegemonic (Muzaffar, 1999; Aziz, 1999). The alleged Western origins of human rights have been much debated, with some denying the charge as an oversimplification (Kymlicka, 2002) and others qualifying that it is not that the concept of human rights is Western, ‘but that dominant forms of perception and the construction of the history of human rights are based on Western and especially Eurocentric predilections’ (Kalny, 2009, p.372). However, there is more general agreement about the need for greater incorporation of views and traditions from the global South in the discourses on human rights (Twining, 2009). Until this takes place there is some justification for the argument that rights are a Western concept and do not take account of different values - particular values located in membership of particular communities – thereby undermining the diversity of local histories and contexts, which are especially salient with regard to education (Unterhalter, 2007).

The universalism of international human rights has frequently been challenged by those who take a cultural relativist stance; human rights violations against women in particular are commonly defended by the use of the ‘culture’ argument. However, as Thomas (1995) points out, ‘rigid concepts of culture, coupled with formulaic notions of universality, have led to a false antagonism between human rights and cultural difference’ (p.357). Rao (1995) is critical of how ‘an overly simple notion of the relationship between culture and human rights in our world of differences has emerged in a dichotomous form, with the universalists falling on one side and the relativists on the other’ (p.168). She argues that culture is not a static, unchanging, identifiable body of information, against which human rights might be measured for compatibility and applicability. The ‘culture versus human rights’ argument makes little sense when culture is better understood as ‘a series of constantly contested and negotiated social practices whose meanings are influenced by the power and status of their interpreters and participants’ (Rao, 1995, p.173).
Feminist scholars have expressed concern that rights talk cannot address the complex settings of power imbalances in which the majority of women’s lives are located (Unterhalter, 2005). International human rights law and scholarship do not appear to have been adequately infused with the reality of lives as lived; for example, with women who do not define themselves as autonomous individuals but describe their lives as enmeshed within complex webs of family, kin and community (Relis, 2011). In these contexts, concepts such as individual rights can be perceived as foreign or problematic. Universalists usually fail to take account of varieties of the ‘patriarchal bargain’ that women strike in order to survive or flourish in some measure (Unterhalter, 2007). This is of particular relevance to the argument that has arisen over whether rights of all children to schooling as per the UN Conventions\(^2\) should take precedence over the values of certain communities who do not believe in educating their daughters, or who have need of their children for subsistence labour in order for families to survive (Kabeer, Nambissan & Subrahmanian, 2003).

Reflecting on human rights in the context of India, Stacy (2009) is concerned about how human rights ideas continue to have difficulty in manifesting their relevance in the daily lives of those who are geographically and culturally distanced from international institutions. She draws attention to the disparities between human rights laws and principles on the one hand and realities on the ground for many of the subjects of human rights on the other. Top-down textual and theoretical analyses relating to human rights practice cannot adequately capture the textured realities and complexity of factors involved and yet there is a lack of scholarship available which grounds the meaning of human rights in local situations at grassroots levels (Relis, 2011).

Of particular relevance to this research study with its focus on women’s lives in the context of Mugu, is the criticism that rights theories neglect the value of caring and attachment that are part of community living. It has been pointed out that the language of rights does not allow for the ethic of care, or concern with vulnerability, that women have so frequently described themselves as being sensitive to (Okin, 1989; Gilligan, 1995; Relis, 2011). Obligations and responsibilities amongst many

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\(^2\) As per the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) and also the International Covenant on Economic, Social And Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966), The Convention on the Elimination Of All Forms Of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) and more recently, The Convention On The Rights of The Child (CRC, 1989)
families and communities towards the ill, the elderly, the young etc operate in ways
that may conflict with the form of human rights. As Unterhalter suggests;

the problem with seeing an intrinsic universal value in gender equality in
education is that this might indeed run against obligations of care within families
where certain members may not have unlimited freedoms to pursue their
entitlements to study without causing harm because they withdrew care from
those who need it (2007, p.58).

Another problem with rights, which is also of relevance to the context of Mugu in
particular and Nepal in general, is that formal acknowledgements of rights, including
the right to education, do not guarantee the state’s implementation of the right nor
the ability of people to claim their right in court (Chinkin, 1999). Despite putting a
signature on paper, Nepal has been unable to keep the commitments made (United
Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal, 2007), and this
is typical of the situation in many states. Relis (2011) reveals that many women who
had suffered rights violations in rural areas of India had never heard of rights, knew
little of their specificities or perceived fundamental human rights principles such as
equality and autonomy as irrelevant to their life situations. For these women,
violations were often considered complex relational issues to be resolved at local
levels, through informal justice systems, and taking into consideration family and
community input. Also in the context of India, Subrahmanian (2002) documents the
legal process which has made the right to education and a life of human dignity part
of the country’s constitution; however, ultimately she is not optimistic about the
effectiveness of legal mechanisms in securing these rights for the poorest and most
vulnerable children of the country. International law makes a state responsible for
the human rights protection of their citizens, yet in many places, the reality is that
very few are able to claim or enforce these rights.

I do not deny the progress and achievement of the international human rights
movement over the last sixty years and I view the heated discussion and increased
awareness of the challenges surrounding human rights and their successful
implementation as a good thing. Nevertheless, despite these positive dimensions, I
do not consider a human rights framework appropriate for this study and its
intention. Romany (1994) describes how rights are defined by who talks about them
a certain way of knowing. As my first two research questions indicate, this inquiry
focuses on how gender is constructed by women in Mugu and how it intersects with
other identities in their life-narratives, as well as how understandings of education
are embedded in gendered power relations in the lives of women in Mugu. This
entails centring the women’s understandings and how they make sense of their
experiences in a particular place and time. The women’s frame of reference is not a
human rights frame and to impose such a frame on their narratives, as the lens
through which they would be viewed, strikes me as inappropriate. Viewing the
women’s narratives through a human rights lens, with its global and legal
associations, would risk the loss of their vocabularies and points of reference (for
example, their discussions around issues of *duty* or *collective commitment* could be
sidelined by considerations of *entitlement*). It would also be my fear that such a
frame would limit this narrative inquiry by forcing the ‘cast’ into narrow roles such as
victim, violator or heroic human rights professional (Kennedy, 2004); it is my belief
that the narratives of this study speak with more creative self-expression than they
would if constrained by the internationally sanctified language of a human rights
approach. This narrative inquiry with its interest in enabling a discussion about what
it means to be a woman in Mugu and how identities, power relations and education
relate, could be crushed ‘under the weight of moral condemnation, legal
adjudication, textual certainty and political power’ brought to bear by a human rights

**Feminisms**

Initially I was hesitant to describe my research as falling within a ‘feminist’
framework. I was concerned that much of the feminist literature seemed more
relevant to white middle-class academics in Europe or America than to the lives of
women in Nepal and was aware that feminism often seemed to be associated with
cultural imperialism. However, while this might apply to some feminist literature (see
Joseph & Lewis, 1981; and Morgan, 1984) it certainly does not apply to all feminist
research. There has been much work since the 70s and 80s, and especially by
black feminists and feminists from non-Western backgrounds, that has dealt
explicitly with feminism’s imperialist origins and its history of ethnocentrism. Critical
works by feminists from diverse backgrounds and experiences (including Anzaldua
& Moraga, 1981; Amos & Parmar, 1984; Lorde, 1984; Mohanty, 1988; Collins, 1991,
2000) have exposed the inadequacies and problematic history of Western feminism
and made huge contributions to what has become known as *postcolonial feminism*.

Mohanty’s (1988) analysis of the insufficiency of western epistemological
frameworks for understanding women’s experiences and structural locations outside
the west has been greatly influential and her criticisms of the invisibility of Third
World women in histories of feminism have inspired many feminists. Since the 80s
black feminist and postcolonial critiques have been concerned with examining the imperialism and ethnocentrism that has been at the core of Euro-American feminism for too long. As McEwan (2001) suggests, ‘the outcome of this feminist and anti-imperialist scholarship has been an attempt to re-orient western feminisms, such that they are no longer perceived as exclusive and dominant but as part of a plurality of feminisms, each with a specific history and set of political objectives, as well as sharing some common ground’ (p.97).

**Decentring Western Feminisms – postcolonial feminism**

Postcolonial feminists, as well as indigenous feminists and black feminists, have criticised the hegemony of white western feminists who have universalised women’s issues and ignored the voices of non-white and non-western women. Black feminist scholars in particular have been concerned about how issues that are central to feminist theory in the west become problematic when applied to black women (hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1988). Postcolonial feminists recognise that assumptions at the heart of western feminism (such as patriarchy being the primary source of oppression for women) do not reflect the experiences of women of colour. Schech and Haggis (2000) point out that for some women, ‘economic exploitation and political oppression, as well as the provision of basic needs such as clean water and children’s education, loom larger on their horizons than the issues of sexual politics and gender oppression which often motivates Northern middle-class women to international activism’ (p.88).

Scholars of postcolonial feminist theory argue that not only have the voices and experiences of non-western women been ignored, they have also been misrepresented. Carby (1982) is critical that ‘feminist theory in Britain is almost wholly Eurocentric and, when it is not ignoring the experience of black women ‘at home’, it is trundling ‘Third World women’ onto the stage only to perform as victims of ‘barbarous’, ‘primitive’ practices in ‘barbarous’, ‘primitive’ societies’ (p.222). When western perspectives and contexts are taken as normative, the category ‘woman’ becomes universalized and non-western women are essentialized as ‘Other’. Many of the most frequently quoted postcolonial feminists (including hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1988, 1991; Trinh, 1989; Spivak, 1990) have been concerned with the issue of how women from the global South have been ‘Othered’ by white feminist scholarship.
Mohanty (1988) has critiqued the western construction of ‘the Third World woman’ as a singular monolithic subject (p.61), denying that such a homogenous entity exists and pointing to the diversity of experiences and oppressions that non-western women face. Along with Radcliffe (1994), Ong (1988) and Trinh (1989), Mohanty has shown how feminist writers have frozen Third World women in a distinct temporal, spatial and historical frame depicting them as people who are assumed to have no agency or differentiation and who are cast as being ‘special’ others. Through her analysis of how Western feminist discourse has produced a reductive and essentialised notion of Third World women, Mohanty (1988) shows that such practices are parallel to colonialism, effectively erasing the complexities that characterise the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races, and castes. Mohanty’s work has remained popular and influential despite suggestions that her own position is not free of binarism (of which she accuses others). Suleri (1992) questions Mohanty’s claim to authenticity, interpreting her work to mean that ‘only a black can speak for a black; only a postcolonial subcontinental feminist can adequately represent the lived experience of that culture’ (Suleri, 1992, p.760). However, Mohanty makes it clear that while she is critical of Eurocentric feminist analysis, she is not suggesting that attempts to conduct cross-cultural analysis are doomed to failure or that it is impossible to achieve solidarity between Western and non-Western scholars, but rather, she is emphasising that feminists must question ahistorical universalist theories and problematize their own positionality in knowledge production (Mohanty, 1988, 2003).

Critics have argued that some contemporary feminist scholarship continues to attempt to ‘identify universal explanations for women’s subordinate position in society’ (Monk, Betteridge & Newhall, 1991, p.239). However there is evidence that over the last few decades feminist scholarship has become more aware of the problems of universalized and essentialized notions of women; ‘western feminism has moved on from notions of universal sisterhood; to an acknowledgement of differences; to a deconstruction of the Othering process; and towards a celebration of diversity and multiplicity and a questioning of universal assumptions’ (Flew et al, 1999, p.394). There are many examples of this type of scholarship amongst black feminist communities and non-western feminists, as already mentioned, but increasingly examples have also been coming from western feminists, such as the work edited by Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1996). Russell’s (1996) chapter is just one out of many in this book that deals with the complexities of the dilemmas involved in
'representing the Other'. In Russell's case it is in the context of being a feminist born into a white, upper-class, Anglican family in South Africa and researching the experiences of black women.

Clearly it has been important for feminists to move away from universalist discourses that essentialize women, and to acknowledge the diversity amongst women’s experiences, agendas and priorities. However, Narayan (1997) cautions that there is the danger of replacing universalism with a focus on ‘difference’, which can also result in essentialism – that of ‘cultural essentialism’. This means that instead of universalising all women, now groups of people such as ‘Indian women’ or ‘Hindu women’ are depicted as homogenous groups. In this way, diverging values, interests, ways of life and commitments continue to be glossed over. Replacing universal sameness with cultural difference does not disrupt power relations; ‘the real challenge lies in finding an alternative to false universalisms that subsume difference under hegemonic western understandings, and to relativism that would abandon any universalist claim in favour of reified and absolute conceptions of difference’ (McEwan, 2001, p.105). For this reason it is vital that stereotypes and generalizations are problematized and that issues of knowledge, power, privilege, identity and positionality are explicitly discussed.

**Voice and authority**

The issues of voice and authority are central to postcolonial feminist theorizing. Collins, Mohanty, Narayan and Spivak are amongst scholars who have been vocal concerning how ‘Third World’ women have been perceived as silent, oppressed victims who can only be heard in discussions about ‘Third World’ difference; ‘subalterns’ who are denied voice and experience. Perhaps the best known work in this area is by Spivak (1988, 1990) who problematizes both the notion of letting subalterns speak for themselves, as well as the strategy of having the radical critic speak for them. Instead, Spivak (1990) advocates for necessary changes to academic knowledge production so that the postcolonial critic becomes involved in unlearning privilege and learning to learn from below.

The notion of unlearning privilege has been taken up by many feminist scholars. Kapoor (2004) explains that in order to ‘unlearn privilege’ it is not enough to try and efface oneself, or to attempt to benevolently step down from one’s position of authority; according to Spivak this gesture is often a reinforcement of privilege, not a disavowal of it. Rather, it involves a process of scrupulously examining our prejudices and learning habits, ceasing to think of ourselves as better or superior
and unlearning dominant systems of knowledge and representation (Kapoor, 2004, p.641). Unlearning is described by Moore-Gilbert (1997) as ‘the imperative to reconsider positions that once seemed self-evident and normal’ (p.98). Spivak describes ‘learning to learn from below’ as being related to ‘a suspension of belief that one is indispensible, better or culturally superior; it is refraining from thinking that the Third World is in trouble and that one has the solutions; it is resisting the temptation of projecting oneself or one’s world onto the Other’ (Spivak, 2002, p.6 cited in Kapoor, 2004, p.642). Spivak theorizes about the potential of border crossings and the possibilities of dialogue that breaks down the academic/non-academic divide; as Kim (2007) suggests, ‘Spivak’s and other postcolonial feminist theorists’ strategies of intervention are enabling, and they advocate for an analytical shift away from the ‘difference’ impasse and a move beyond the binary hierarchy across various borders to forge a dialogue among women (p114).

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, emphasis must be placed on acknowledging the positionality of the researcher; speaking with rather than about or for people; developing a respectful attitude which includes the desire to see from another’s point of view; and accepting that claims to knowledge are always partial and situated. Postcolonial feminist approaches also demand engagement with material issues of power, inequality and poverty rather than focusing on text, imagery and representation alone (McEwan, 2001). Therefore it is vital that analysis is grounded in the particular and local, even though understanding the local in relation to larger (national and global) processes is also important. As Marchand and Parpart (1995) suggest, this requires attending to women’s lived realities and understandings in the specific, historical, spatial and social contexts within which women live and work, and breaking down hierarchies of knowledge and power that privilege the expert-outsider, undermining western universalisms and providing a basis for a new understanding of global diversity. The challenging task for the postcolonial feminist is to keep constant vigilance on power and to develop research and praxis that meaningfully engage with marginalized subjects; all the while examining whether the questions and concepts being applied capture the fluid, situated, and varied contexts, and if the analysis attends to the voices and consciousness of marginalized groups (Kim, 2007).

**Postcolonial feminism and education**

A postcolonial feminist analysis is of particular relevance to research that aims to move beyond the narrow and limited understanding of gender and education which tends to dominate development theories with their emphasis on deficiency and
dependency (McLaughlin & Hickling-Hudson, 2005; Preece, 2008). Such research, along with the resulting global agendas for equality in education, form part of what Tikly (2004) describes as the ‘new imperialism’. Postcolonial feminist concerns about the preponderance of universal and homogenous images of women apply equally to gender education research in the contemporary global context. It could be suggested that much global education discourse relies on homogenised images of illiterate women and uneducated girls as victims whose rights are being denied. The agency of the universal ‘girl child’ in the context of ‘developing countries’ is frequently denied and universal targets such as EFA and other international initiatives essentialize women by not recognising their resistances and negotiations, as well as their complicity, with their circumstances. Such global agendas are based on the ‘one size fits all’ premise and the complexities of gender relations as well as women’s diverse experiences and their unique identities are not recognised.

Also of relevance to feminist researchers in the global education field is the necessity of considering relational frameworks for analysing gender relations in education. There are many examples of feminists who are critical of how Western feminists have ignored the importance of notions of kinship and friendship in understanding African and Asian women’s roles and identities and how these relate to local power relations (Kabeer, 1994; Nnameka, 1997; Bhopal, 1998; Oyewumi, 1997; 2003). Research traditions that fail to attend to women’s relational worlds and their indigenous systems of knowledge construction end up denying women power and turning them into victims. In order to understand how education is defined and valued and the role it plays in women’s lives or the potential it may have, it is important to consider these relational worlds as experienced by women. There is a need for research which moves beyond essentializing references to gender which are related to limited searches for universal education agendas. Alternative research that aims to focus on the processes of the dynamic relational worlds of women and that recognises the importance of women’s indigenous learning, sharing and values is more likely to contribute to de-centring feminism as well as leading to new understandings of gender and education.

**Intersectionality**

Postcolonial feminists have long held that ‘gender identities are embedded within other identities of class, race, ethnicity, age, language, caste and religion and that the experience of gender varies with one’s other social identities’ (Rao & Robinson-Pant, 2006, p.220). Recognition of the importance of attempting to understand these
interconnections has increased in recent years and theorizing about how identities intersect has come to be known as intersectional theory or ‘intersectionality’.

Intersectional approaches to creating knowledge have grown out of the work of feminists of colour who have theorized how aspects of identities and social relations are shaped by the simultaneous operation of multiple systems of power (Dill, McLaughlin & Nieves, 2007, p.629). Intersectional theory has developed to account for the complexities and multidimensionality of social experience. Black feminists such as hooks (1981, 1989) and Collins (1991, 2000) recognise the importance of examining how the interactions of various dimensions of social inequalities (such as gender/race/class) shape people’s experiences. They criticise feminist scholarship which adopts simple unitary or additive approaches relying on single or parallel categories of identity to explain oppression (Hancock, 2007; Simien, 2007). Therefore in intersectional research, emphasis is placed on the mutually constitutive and reinforcing nature of oppression (Shields, 2008), and the focus is on the fluid and changing relationships between identity categories rather than attempting to reduce identities into fixed discrete categories. So, for example, a unitary approach would recognise gender or race, and a multiple approach gender and race, but an intersectional approach would ensure a focus on gender interacting with race (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; McCall, 2005; Shields, 2008).

By the 70s black feminists were already rejecting dichotomous categories such as man vs woman or black vs white and no longer accepting homogenised notions of womanhood as the only point of interest (Ludvig, 2006), but it was Crenshaw (1989, 1991) who first coined the term ‘intersectionality’. Crenshaw (1989) was interested in how the US law responded to issues where both race and gender were involved. She used the concept of intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interacted to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences, illustrating that many of the experiences that Black women were facing were not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as those boundaries were currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factored into Black women’s lives in ways that could not be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately. Because of the specific legal context being considered, Crenshaw (1991) focused on gender and race, but she acknowledges that this analysis only partly accounts for violence against women of colour and that other factors, including class and sexuality, should be included; she highlights the need to account for multiple identities when considering how the social world is constructed.
Intersectionality has become a central tenet of feminist thinking and McCall (2005) suggests that it could even be said that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution of feminist theory to our present understanding of gender (p.1771). Recognition of the importance of intersectionality has impelled new ways of thinking about complexity and multiplicity in power relations and identities, and by disrupting notions of a homogenous category ‘woman’ and challenging gendered assumptions, intersectionality fits with the disruption of modernist thinking produced by postcolonial and poststructuralist theoretical ideas (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Intersectionality foregrounds a richer and more complex ontology than other approaches that attempt to reduce people to a single category at a time, it treats social positions as relational, and allows personal narratives to be connected with socio cultural contexts; in this sense it aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). By situating identities as multiple and layered and existing at once within systems of both oppression and privilege, as Jones (2009) suggests, intersectionality provides a heuristic for exploring the relationships between identity categories and individual differences and larger social systems of inequality and thus illuminates the complexities of the lived experience (p.289). In this way dichotomies, such as oppressed/oppressor, dominant/subordinate and agent/victim, are broken down; it becomes necessary to examine privilege as well as oppression; and issues of complicity, for example women’s involvement in the oppression of other women, can no longer be ignored.

Intersectionality has much to recommend it and is increasingly popular as a theory, but scholars also offer a cautionary note. Intersectionality is not an easy approach to take; one of the most salient challenges for the researcher is how to manage the complexity of an intersectional analysis (McCall, 2005; Knapp, 2005; Ludvig, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Bishwakarma, Hunt & Zajicek, 2007). Some studies, despite claiming to use an intersectional framework, take a disappointingly shallow and superficial approach (Knapp, 2005), while at times intersectionality is merely used as ‘a handy catchall phrase’ (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006, p.187) which is mentioned but not applied to analysis. Other scholars are concerned that because the approach posits that axes of differences cannot be isolated and desegregated, ‘what follows epistemologically, then, is, that the ‘and so on’ becomes the Achilles heel of intersectional approaches, as the list of differences is infinite’ (Ludvig, 2006, p.247).
However, despite these challenges, there are many examples of good quality intersectional research. One example is Ludvig’s (2006) work which analyses categories of differences and identities intersecting in the narrative of Dora, a Bulgarian migrant living in Austria. By showing how class intersects with ethnicity and gender in Dora’s self-narrative, Ludvig demonstrates that global and local relations of power are at the heart of how gender works in relation to other categories of difference. Ludvig suggests that ‘with Dora we get a picture of how, on the one hand, the actions of single actors are determined through their structural conditions’ and ‘on the other hand, through Dora’s case the interpretations and negotiation of these structures by the individual become transparent’ (2006, p.255).

Another robust intersectional study is by Buitelaar (2006) who analyses the identity narratives of women immigrants to the Netherlands. Focusing in particular on the narrative of a well-known female Dutch politician of Moroccan background, Buitelaar uses the concept of the ‘dialogic self’ to examine the politician’s intersectional identifications in the form of dialogues between ‘the multiple voices of the self’ where each of these voices is ‘embedded in repertoires of practices, characters and discourses informed by specific power relationships’ (2006, p.261). Buitelaar examines how the words, images and self-evaluations used in the Dutch politician’s self-narratives demonstrate the ways in which her religious, ethnic and gender identifications are formed and are in dialogue. Bilge (2010) considers Buitelaar’s (2006) study to be a successful empirical demonstration of the ways in which particular identifications are always co-constructed with other categories of identity.

**Intersectionality and education**

Much global research relating to education and gender, and international education initiatives, appear to lack an awareness of intersectionality. There have been calls for development organizations to incorporate an intersectional approach in their research and policies, and an ‘urgent need to integrate an intersectional perspective to the examination and development of policies, strategies and remedies for gender and racial equality’ within the UN has been recognised (Patel, 2001). However, despite ongoing discussion, including for example, at the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism, there is little evidence of an intersectional perspective being systematically adopted in education development policies (Patel, 2001; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Bishwakarma et al, 2007).

Bishwakarma et al (2007) suggest that the ‘continued domination of traditional, one-dimensional policy approaches’ is one of the reasons why global social justice and
gender equality in education are far from being achieved (p.27). Despite growing advocacy, little progress has been made regarding the inclusion of intersectionality in formulating, implementing and evaluating development policies. Not surprisingly, Nepal is no exception. In their intersectional analysis of Nepal’s educational policies, Bishwakarma et al comment on how some attempt has been made to address gender, caste, disability and region specific disadvantages separately, but ‘what we found to be missing in education policy, in particular, is the recognition of intersecting relationship of some or all of these dimensions’ (2007, p.34). One example of the significance of this is in the area of educational scholarships in Nepal. Scholarships are provided for girls, but it tends to be high caste girls who receive them and amongst the scholarships for Dalits it is boys who usually benefit. Because the issue of intersectionality is not recognised, Dalit girls are excluded. Similarly, the legislation for government universities states that there should be a minimum recruitment of women (20%) and of Dalits (10%), yet there is no clarification of a minimum percentage of Dalit women. It is estimated that there are not more than two dozen Dalit women holding Bachelor’s Degrees in Nepal (Sob, 2002).

In relation to education, the intersections of caste, ethnicity and gender in South Asia have also been commented on by Rao and Robinson-Pant (2006). They point out that ‘the intersection between caste and gender inequalities is particularly apparent in the formal sector of education, where it has been noted that special provisions for indigenous people have benefitted boys over girls and where special provisions have been introduced for girls and women, they have rarely benefitted women from indigenous groups’ (p.213). They use examples from Nepal and India to show that although ‘indigenous’ or ‘women/girls’ are marked out in policy as disadvantaged in educational terms, there may be considerable contrasts between groups, concluding that;

Not only is the policy assimilationist – ie., seeking to bring minority groups into mainstream education – but it also assumes ‘indigenous’ and ‘women’ to be homogenous categories, undifferentiated by economic status, gender or age. Targeting indigenous groups as a whole for programmes may disregard the huge economic differences between them. Though many governments are committed to increasing the participation of indigenous groups in adult education and schooling, interventions tend to work in isolation and do not appear to address fundamental issues around participation related to language, curriculum and structure, as well as intersections of inequality (such as gender and caste). (p.213)

Clearly an intersectional approach to education research and policy is important, but in the examples considered, including Nepal, there is little evidence of its existence.
The educational inequality that women experience cannot be explained, never-mind challenged, by gender-only, caste-only or race-only frameworks (Anderson & Collins, 1995), but even though intersectional theory has become well integrated in gender studies and feminist literature, there appears to be a need for it to be centralised in education research and policy.

In conclusion, it is my intention to focus on understanding the lived experiences of a small number of women in this thesis; examining how individuals construct gender and how gender intersects with other identities. I recognise that women’s narratives do not situate them as either privileged or oppressed, but as navigating the tensions of inhabiting both privileged and oppressed identities (Jones, 2009). By considering how understandings of education are embedded in these identities, and how power and privilege operate in the women’s lives, I hope to move beyond narrow definitions of gender equality in education to gain depth of insight into how gender and education are constructed in the context of Mugu, Nepal. Accepting that such research is inevitably risky and that the knowledge produced is always partial and situated, I am cathected by the challenge involved in examining the women’s narratives and attempting to capture some of the complexity of lived experiences when intersecting identities, power relations, and education are considered.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF GENDER IN SOUTH ASIA

When the South Asian\(^3\) sub-continent is referred to in popular discourse, it is often associated with a range of images from the exotic to the war-torn. Scholarship relating to South Asia has frequently essentialized women, stereotyping them as passive victims who suffer under oppressive social structures, who are uneducated, and who are restricted to a life in the domestic sphere as submissive wives and serving mothers. Western feminists have been criticised for claiming to speak for all women and for either pathologizing ‘third world’ women or rendering them invisible (Mirza, 1997). There has also been the tendency amongst western feminist theorists of locating marriage and the family as the major site of oppression for women, of

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\(^3\) The term South Asia is sometimes used in literature to refer only to the three largest countries in the geographical region (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) but at other times it is used to include Afghanistan, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. It is understood in this wider sense, in this thesis, although it is recognised that there is more scholarship relating to some areas within the sub-continent than others.
continuing to apply binary distinctions (such as traditional/modern), as well as supporting stereotypes of South Asian women’s passivity (Majumdar, 2007). There is a need to look beyond the stereotypes to the diversity of experiences of women, and a need for research that listens to women articulate their own realities as subjects and experts rather than objects of research and to appreciate the lived experience of South Asian women through their performances, narratives, writings or other expressive traditions (Mama 1995).

There are an increasing number of studies of South Asian diaspora that aim to challenge misconceptions and stereotypes of Asian women, often with a focus on ‘cultural practices’ such as arranged marriages. Some of these studies consider gender in relation to education and also as it intersects with other social identities (examples include Puwar & Raghuram, 2003; Shain, 2003; Bhopal, 2008, 2009). However, there is a lack of studies that consider gender in relation to education in the context of women’s lives in South Asia.

In recent years there has been an increase in research and literary work relating to the education of Muslim girls in South Asia. In the context of Nepal, Muslim girls’ education has been identified as an area that needs further consideration, particularly in certain regions of the southern plains (de Groot, 2007). However, there is no notable Muslim community in the district of Mugu while Hinduism has had a significant influence on local indigenous religions; therefore I have chosen to focus on literature relating to the latter rather than the former.

What follows is a review of some of the more relevant academic literature that discusses gender in the context of South Asia. Where possible, references to how gender has been linked with education have been included, but it is acknowledged that these are limited.

**Dominant discourses: constructing women as passive victims**

Traditionally much of the literature focusing on women in South Asia has been from a male perspective and tends to be fixed within a single unitary discourse. For example, the Indian woman has too frequently been portrayed as ‘a silent shadow given in marriage by one patrilineal group to another, veiled or mute before affinal kinsmen, and unquestioningly accepting a single discourse that ratifies her own subordination and a negative view of femaleness and sexuality’ (Raheja and Gold, 1994, p.4). This kind of unitary representation of feminine passivity has a long history. Colonial reports stress females’ submissive obedience to religion and depict
women as passive bearers of a fixed and totalising ‘tradition’ (Mani, 1985, 1989). Indeed, Chatterjee (1989) points out that the ‘protection’ of voiceless and oppressed Hindu women became a strategy of colonial domination; ‘by assuming a position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country’ (p. 622) and so gender characterizations were used as basis for moral claims on the part of colonisers.

As well as the colonial records and writing which portray women as passive victims, traditional Brahmanical writings and teachings also depict ‘the ideal Hindu woman’ as submissive and agentless. Skinner and Holland (1998) suggest that until quite recently, most of the anthropological literature on women in Nepal and India emphasized the Brahmanical view of ‘the Hindu woman’ or described women as subjects of patriarchal practices that relegated them to a position of powerlessness vis-à-vis men (for example see Bennett, 1976, 1983; Kondos, 1982; Stone, 1978). While Skinner and Holland recognise that this literature provides a crucial cultural view, they are still critical of how ‘portraits of female lives that are derived from religious texts or other dominant discourses can lead to a conceptual dilemma that traps persons permanently, either in an unchanging ahistorical ‘culture’ or in ‘subject positions’ or some combination thereof’ (p. 90). This dominant model of gender identities, roles and relationships, presumes that the life of a ‘good’ Hindu woman follows a certain path. Initially she is a daughter and sister. She is surrounded by relatives and learns good habits from their example and scoldings. She is hardworking at home and in the fields; respectful; patient and virtuous. Soon after puberty she gets married and begins to work with even more dedication than before. She is obedient and respectful to her in-laws, devoted to her husband and comports herself honourably within the community. If blessed, she has many children, especially sons. When her sons marry she gains status as a mother-in-law and then she has the responsibility for guiding her daughters-in-law and enjoying her grandchildren. Her sons (and husband) are responsible for her well-being in old age and ideally she should be outlived by her husband, thereby avoiding widowhood. This is what Skinner and Holland (1998) refer to as ‘the expected life path’ for Hindu women in Nepal.
In their study of girls from Naudada village in central Nepal, Skinner and Holland claim:

While developing an understanding of the meanings underlying the Brahmanical cultural model of women’s lives, the Naudadan girls were also developing a sense of the hardships (dukha) associated with carrying out the actions required of them in this cultural world. (1998, p.95)

The authors acknowledge the existence and power of the dominant gender ideology but they also recognise that, in narrative and song, the girls lament and at times denounce their unequal positions in society and the treatment they receive as females. They claimed that they were good girls and good daughters and maintained that if they were married they would try to be model daughters-in-law and wives. However, they simultaneously questioned the expected life path, expressed anger about the way they were treated unfairly because they were female and schemed to avoid marriage. This expected life path left no room for girls’ participation in formal education, yet Skinner and Holland (1998) describe how education was frequently mentioned by girls as a means of scheming with regard to marriage. One girl argued with her parents against the idea that boys but not girls should go to school, while many of the girls discussed how they wanted to avoid or postpone marriage by studying and getting work. By looking closely at how the girls reacted to specific contexts and examining their songs and narratives, Skinner and Holland (1998) were better able to understand how the girls both embraced and rejected the expected life path for females, and in doing so, avoided essentialising them as the ideal Hindu girl/woman.

Problematic dichotomies

Much of the anthropological writing related to South Asia as well as Sanskrit texts and vernacular oral traditions have dichotomised women along a pollution / purity split (examples include work by Amore & Shinn, 1981; Bennett, 1983; Dhruvarajan, 1989; Hershman, 1977; Kakar, 1978; O’Flaherty, 1980; Wadley, 1977). This dichotomy is often derived from mythology and models of Hindu goddesses. One such example is Kakar (1978) who describes how the ideal of womanhood incorporated by Sita (who is the virtuous and faithful wife of Rama, in the ‘Ramayana’) is one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and faithfulness, irrespective of whether she is treated well or badly. He depicts women as occupying one of two polar positions; either upholding this normative ‘ideal’ image or deviating from it. In his studies of Hindu goddesses, Kakar highlights a disjuncture between the good mother who is all-nourishing and the bad mother who is threatening and
destructive. Underlying his portrayal of the split female image is an idealized purity and chastity contrasted with a lustful and rampant sexuality. In more recent work of Kakar’s (1990) he continues to use this split-image framework for his analysis and refers to an age-old but persistent ‘cultural splitting of the wife into a mother and a whore’ (p.17).

Bennett (1983) also portrays the cultural image of Hindu women as ambivalent and inherently split, but her argument follows different lines to Kakar’s. In Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters, the author dualises the roles of wife and sister in the context of her study of high caste Nepali women’s lives. Bennett recognises that the woman’s position and relationships are very different in her married home than in her natal home and she locates the explanation for this in the wife’s sexuality. The sexuality of the wife (which is vital for maintaining the patriarchal line but also needs to be controlled as it is a threat to the conjugal solidarity) is contrasted with the asexuality of married women in relation to their natal families. Bennett comes to the conclusion that the problem for women is related to how they ‘must somehow integrate and internalize two different roles and valuations of the self’ (p.316); she observes that the way for women to reconcile the duality of their purity/sexuality split is through motherhood. Bearing in mind that Bennett was writing in the 80s, it is still significant that she only makes passing reference to education in this detailed and lengthy text about high caste Nepali women. She refers to the new trend of considering education as a means of adding to a Nepali bride’s prestige and how this has resulted in more girls being sent to school (p.235). Beyond this, Bennett (1983) does not consider education to have any other link with ‘the social and symbolic roles’ of high caste women in Nepal.

Others have attempted to develop less dualistic representations of South Asian females (see Raheja & Gold, 1994; Robinson, 1985; Sax, 1991). Raheja and Gold (1994) do not deny the strong and pervasive foundations of these contrasting dimensions of female nature, but they seek ‘to contribute an alternative and complementary view’ (p.30). Using data from North Indian women’s life histories and songs, they demonstrate how the women frequently and easily link erotic union with procreation and birth. They propose that ‘although being a daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law and mother certainly demands varying behavior, women playing their multiple parts as they pass through life stages and between natal and marital homes do not necessarily perceive them as ultimately conflicted’ (p.31). These authors claim that while men may perceive there to be a deep disjunction between women’s sexual potency and their procreative/nurturing capacity (which is
respectively dangerous and essential to them), women themselves consciously bridge and undermine such splits.

**Constructing women as agents of resistance**

More recently the tone of writing has changed, with representations of South Asian women as agentless victims of power structures becoming less common. Searle-Chatterjee (2007) is thankful that Western stereotypes of South Asian female passivity are much reduced now in academic writing, but comments that they continue to be found in the media.

As already mentioned, the seminal works of authors such as Mohanty and Said have helped to make more contemporary, western, writers aware of the dangers and difficulties in writing about ‘others’. Mohanty (1984) has written of the tendency within Western feminist writing to create a homogenised ‘third world woman’ who represents all women of the third world. This ‘third world woman’ is a decontextualised victim of male control and ‘tradition’ who personifies the inferiority of the patriarchal third world and by implication suggests the superiority of the West. In *Orientalism*, Said (1978) strongly criticises the totalising and essentialist discourses that assume a mute submission to ‘tradition’ and ignore human agency. Reflecting on such discussions, Raheja and Gold (1994) admit that they are ‘painfully aware of the perils involved in presuming to speak with any authority about women whose lives are so different from our own’ (p.8). Kumar (1994) acknowledges that scholars, who are interested in subordinate groups, including women, now seem to be wiser about the complexities of representation than previously, however, she warns that the effort is indeed riddled with dangers on all sides:

*For studies of South Asian societies, it is Orientalism and Western ethnocentrism that must be recognised. For studies of subaltern groups, it is the colonialist, the nationalist, the Marxist-determinist, and the Western humanist model that must be avoided. For studies of women in South Asia, it is all this that must be recognised and avoided plus the phallocentrism of all dualisms that constitute Western (and Western-derived ‘indigenous’) thought (p.6).*

Being aware of these perils and difficulties has led to a move away from focusing on South Asian women as victims and towards an emphasis on examining ‘agency’ and women’s resistance to power structures. This shift parallels the realisation that ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ are not fixed ahistorical concepts but are fluid and constantly changing, that there is no single ‘third world’ or ‘South Asian’ woman’s voice, and that personhood is not monolithic. In light of this, increasingly, anthropological
literature of the last few decades that deals with gender in the context of South Asia, prefers to listen to the multiple voices of women and their experiences; emphasising their uniqueness as individuals as well as attempting to understand the power of cultures and social structures constraining them (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996; Raheja & Gold, 1994; Skinner, Holland & Pach, 1998).

In an attempt to understand agency and power in women’s lives, the notion of ‘everyday resistance’ has become popular in many fields (for example Enslin, 1998; Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996; Ortner, 1996). These studies tend to show everyday forms of resistance as a set of practices with multiple, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory intentions and consequences; this is the case, for example, in Enslin’s (1998) consideration of the ambiguities in the songs of women from the Chitwan district of Nepal. Rather than reading these songs as ambiguous expressions of resistance, she reads them as ‘expressions of women’s ambiguous positions in middle-class social-reform, in Nepal’ (p. 270). She argues that resistance is not ‘an unmediated activity of oppressed people’, but is ‘tied in complex ways with the construction of individual and collective identities in relation to social inequalities of class, gender, ethnicity, and caste’ (p.270). Earlier work on everyday resistance or ‘weapons of the weak’ (for example by Scott, 1985) brought to attention the many ways that subordinates challenge the structures that oppress them and reject the dominant discourse. These initial studies tended to depict ‘resistance’ as an autonomous practice in opposition to ‘power’. Enslin (1998) points out how more recent work (such as by Haynes & Prakash, 1991; Ortner 1996), has been inspired by Foucault (1978, 1983) and Gramsci (1971), and emphasises the ambiguous and multidimensional intentions and consequences of resistance played out in complex fields of power. She recognises that:

It is becoming increasingly difficult to conceive of an autonomous domain of ‘pure’ Resistance opposed to a monolithic Power. There are many resistances dispersed in intersecting fields of power. These resistances are rarely total escapes from domination; they are themselves shaped in the play of power (p.291).

Jeffery & Jeffery (1996) similarly point out the importance of not ignoring everyday resistances when considering women’s agency. They describe such forms of resistance as typically spontaneous, individual and mundane rather than highly organised rebellions challenging the status quo. These resistances may also appear manipulative and devious as they try to avoid open confrontation. Examples of such resistances proliferate in Raheja & Gold’s (1994) study of North Indian women’s expressive traditions. Through the women’s songs and stories they draw attention to
how the women use irony when referring to their situation, how they renegotiate patrilineal relations to their own advantage, how they coerce the support of their natal family and how they work towards intimacy with their husband; all ways of resisting the structures which oppress them and rejecting the dominant discourses. They show that these women are not merely victims of power structures available to them; rather they are actors who subvert these notions, examining and criticising the social worlds they inhabit and expressing their own views and visions in their own voices.

However while the turn to ‘agency’ and a focus on understanding women’s resistance has been important in correcting the one-sided representation of Asian women, it has been suggested that there is also the danger of falling into the opposite trap (Upadhya, 1996). Women’s resistance must not be overemphasised to the exclusion of acknowledging that oppressive power structures do continue to exist and constrain women’s lives and agency. Both Ortner (1995) and Des Chene (1998) use the term ‘resistance’ with caution. The caveat introduced by Des Chene (1998) is that resistance should not be conflated with heroism or with victorious outcomes. Women’s acts of resistance can be self-destructive, self-defeating and painful, and can also result in negative consequences for others. The two Nepali women, in the example of resistance discussed by Des Chene, make many compromises and the losses appear to be great while there are no clear winners. Referring to an incident of suicide, Enslin (1998) goes on to discuss the cost and pain, as well as the ambiguities of resistance. She admits to having often felt what Abu-Lughod (1990) calls the romance of resistance in celebrating the creative everyday ways in which women in Chitwan, Nepal defy and subvert various cultural norms. To counter-act this problem, Enslin makes suffering the focus of her work. She goes on to examine how high-caste women from Chitwan are motivated by suffering to oppose specific social relations and cultural practices. Yet, as agents of change, in attempting to live up to the ideals of middle-class social reform, they simultaneously distance their politics from their experiences of suffering. In a manner that is similar to Rajan’s (1993) focus on ‘pain’ in the context of examining Sati in India, Enslin avoids both romancing resistance and portraying the women as pure victims by making suffering the basis for the subjectivity of ‘victim’. Kondos (2004) comments that ‘suffering’ has certain advantages over considering ‘victimage’ because it focuses on the pain endured without casting a negative representation of a person’s identity and abilities.
In order to avoid romancing resistance it has to be acknowledged that there are many limitations and risks involved, even in small everyday resistances. Punishment can take many forms for those who step out of line. Fear of shaming, of gossip and ostracism, even of the loss of home and children, can all deter women from defiance, and added to this are the restrictions on women's movement. The normal residential patterns of family life mean that minimal privacy and dense information networks restrict the opportunities women have, even for the more ‘mundane’ and devious forms of everyday resistance (Jeffery & Jeffery, 1994, 1996). While a woman’s natal family are often her main means of support, this source also tends to be limited. Not only can in-laws control and restrict the daughter-in-law's/wife’s interaction with her own family, often the natal family themselves are careful about interference, not taking any action that might dishonour the whole family. These, as well as other risks and limitations involved in ‘resistance’ mean that it is vital not to exaggerate or glorify women’s resistance to the extent that the balance is tipped too far in the opposite direction, implying that women are not victimised or constrained as subordinates at all.

**Gender, class, caste and education**

Much of the scholarship dealing with gender in Nepal has focused on high caste communities and has not attended to how gender intersects with caste. Cameron (1998) is critical that little has been written regarding the gendered identities of so-called low caste women. Her research examines the complexities of the intersections of gender relations and caste hierarchies, and how these connect with other social identities, in a rural area in western Nepal. She shows how so-called low caste groups live in a society that frames them as inferior, but they do not fully agree with it, nor do they apply all its high-caste patriarchal codes to their gender relations.

What interests Cameron, are not merely the rules and norms of caste hierarchy as a kind of practice, but people's agency in creating, re-creating, and resisting the system from their position within it. She examines everyday aspects of work, family and self to reveal that ideas associated with gender are intimately connected to ideas about caste. Her study attempts to show how the experience of gender is altered in the context of caste and vice versa. Her focus is on Nepali women of low caste because they are ‘a little-understood group in South Asian studies’ (p.6). She points out that South Asian scholars tend to portray ‘untouchable’ (Dalit) women as having more freedom and autonomy than women of high caste because they experience fewer social and behavioural restrictions due to their ritual impurity,
however she suggests that this view misleadingly collapses the myriad complex cultural and social values, practices, relationships, and meanings that are part of the narrative of low caste women’s lives. While Cameron deals with many aspects of the ‘myriad of complexities’ of low caste women's lives, unfortunately she does not discuss the relevance or impact of education with regard to gender and caste identities in Nepal. She mentions the training that low caste girls receive in order to learn to be an artisan as per their specific caste group, initially by their parents and then by their husband; but she does not discuss schooling or non-formal education.

Education is briefly considered in connection with gender, class and caste in India, by Liddle and Joshi (1986). They suggest that the emergence of a new middle class has disrupted some aspects of the caste hierarchy, enabling more girls to participate in schooling than was previously possible when high caste males had a monopoly on formal education. However, their work is somewhat dated now and despite their optimistic intent to discuss education as a possible ‘path to emancipation’ (p.117), their discussion is limited to the issues of personal safety, restricted subject choices and marriage expectations with regard to girls’ education. They conclude, ‘women’s subordinate position as sexual object and domestic dependant inhibits women’s education even at the top levels of the class structure, compounded by the effects of cultural and economic imperialism’ (p.123). Clearly there is a need for further research with a focus on how gender identities intersect with caste and class identities and what this means with regard to women’s experiences of education in the context of South Asia.

**Emerging constructions of gender**

Criticism has been levelled against academics who have limited their representations of gender in South Asia to a narrow focus on kinship and the domestic situation. Upadhya (1996) suggests that a weakness common to both Jeffery and Jeffery’s (1996) study and Raheja and Gold's (1994), is that they restrict women’s negotiation for power and subjectivity to the family, kin group and village. She claims that the wider political and historical contexts remain elusive and there is no recognition that women may see themselves as part of ‘wider collectivities’ and as a result ‘a vision of the timeless Indian village, and of the rural woman embedded in her traditional kinship structures and rituals, lingers on in these texts’ (p.1933).

Similarly, Searle-Chatterjee (2007) is critical of how most of the papers in the book edited by Fruzzetti and Tenhunen (2006) limit their discussion to kinship and marriage and do not consider ‘struggles beyond that world’ such as agency within
places of employment or institutions (p.38). In the context of rural areas of Nepal, it would appear that the domestic situation remains a key site of importance to women. Many women may not have any personal experience of employment or an institution and often they choose to focus their own stories and songs on kinship, marriage and local issues specific to the family and community. However, Upadhyay and Searle-Chatterjee’s point is still important when considering such narratives. Even the most remote rural areas are not completely isolated from the ‘outside’ world, and no household or village is a monolithic entity unaffected by wider political processes, social changes at national level, modernization, and even globalization. This is the case, even in the remote mountainous areas of Nepal, although it is, of course, more obvious in the urban areas. Both Liechty (1998) and Levy (1998) comment on the ethnic and social complexity of Nepal, added to which the ‘rapid economic changes, general modernization and urban migration’ of the 1990s mean that many people face an almost ‘overwhelming sociocultural flux’ (Liechty, 1998, p.137). And of course the civil war in Nepal, which peaked in the last decade, needs to be added to this list of major considerations.

Enslin (1998), as well as Liechty (1998), examines the contradictions and emerging divisions in Nepal which are especially evident in current discourses on politics and gender. In *Imagined Sisters*, Enslin (1998) reveals how modern middle-class activist discourses, and also development discourses, imagine a community of united women, but in reality this is often divided by class, caste, ethnicity, and education. The contemporary vision of the ideal Nepali citizen is a modern, urban, literate and high-caste person, and such a citizen is contrasted to the ‘underdeveloped’ villager. In much of this more modern rhetoric, women (especially illiterate, low-caste, rural women) are represented as the most undeveloped of the underdeveloped (Enslin, 1992, 1998).

Both Liechty (1998) and Enslin (1998) discuss how, in contemporary Nepal, the state-promoted ideology of development or ‘progress’ has become an interpretive lens through which change is valued and judged. Education and employment, as well as standards of living and the increasing material culture are some of the most common indicators of social status among a growing middle-class identity in twenty-first century Nepal. Liechty (1998) reveals how more traditional groupings in Kathmandu, such as caste/kin groups, are beginning to show signs of cracking along class lines. He describes the middle class as a kind of discursive space characterized by constant alignment and realignment with class ‘others’. It is a never ending debate; ‘ultimately middle-class membership is not about fixing rank
but about *claiming* and *maintaining* a place in the ongoing debate’ (p.151). While Liechty focuses his discussion on the urban centres, this does not imply that rural areas remain untouched by such changes and influences.

It is also important to recognise that these contemporary issues do not necessarily *replace* a concern about more traditional hierarchies. Liechty (1998) points out that ‘long-standing social identities linked to caste and kin remain highly relevant (to the extent that they can be used to legitimize claims to social superiority) even as these groups increasingly confront the modern pressures of class differentiation’ (p.150). This suggests that it continues to be relevant to focus on women’s domestic situation and their traditional social identities within the family and community, but that it is also necessary to consider these new ‘permeable, and shifting social formations’ that may be emerging even in rural areas (p.150). Attending to the complexities of such intersections in the lives of women will help to dispel the image of the timeless village woman embedded in traditional structures and rituals. As Skinner, Holland and Pach III (1998) point out, it is important to ‘explore how people – positioned by gender, ethnicity, caste, and locale, and constrained by powerfully compelling cultural worlds – nonetheless use cultural resources in creative ways to produce new self-understandings in response to changing material and social circumstances, altered media of identity, and political practices to reposition themselves and their groups’ (p.14). The relevance of formal, non-formal and informal education to the repositioning of selves has not been much explored. How understandings of education are embedded in self-understandings, and how these relate to positionings of gender, ethnicity, caste, and locale, is an area of research needing further attention and to which I hope this thesis will contribute.

**Final comments on constructing gender**

It has become common to acknowledge the place of both social structure and agency in anthropological accounts, yet as Des Chene (1998) comments, usually one or the other remains the subtle hero of the narrative, and she suggests that when women are the subject one can argue plausibly for either.

The structure-as-hero (or villain) account posits that women’s lives are, by and large, more constrained by social structure than are men’s; they are less likely to be able to transform the structures within which they must live. Accounts that privilege agency concur, but argue that precisely because of their structural subordination, women must innovate and improvise; women’s power is informal, operating in the interstices between formal structures. If both arguments have merit, then the study of women’s lives provides a good chance to consider the juxtaposition, the intersection, and sometimes the collision, of structure and circumstance (p.39).
In her writing Des Chene makes it evident that ‘agency’ does not just take place against a backdrop of norms for conduct or sociological attributes such as gender, caste, kin position etc, but rather, that people think through their position and act innovatively from within a host of structured but also contingent circumstances. And in considering the Teej songs and narratives of girls in one village of Nepal, Skinner and Holland (1998) are careful neither to view persons as ‘passive receptors or transmitters of cultural meanings and relationships’ nor to view them as ‘subjects positioned and trapped within webs of discourse’ (p.95). Rather they are viewed instead as ‘partially constrained by, but actively (re)producing cultural meanings and social structures with others in the context of specific activities’ (p.95). Women are constructing their gender, not so much against a backdrop of social structural constraints (for example marriage systems, domestic authority and inheritance laws) and cultural constraints (for example public opinion and family honour), but from within these circumstances, and they negotiate and manipulate these intersecting and changing identities when constructing narrative selves.

Therefore it can be said that women’s selves are viewed as ‘grounded in history, mediated by cultural discourses and social practices’, and yet they are also ‘makers of history, of culture and social structure, of selves’ (Skinner, Holland, and Pach III, 1998, p.6). Women are both constrained by, but also actively constructing, their identities. Jeffery and Jeffery (1996) speak of women who were tied to social structures, yet their lives were not completely determined by them. Women who were affected by global as well as local forces beyond their control, but who also tried to shape their own fate; women whose options were not totally closed, nor were they completely open (p.4).

As recognised by Raheja and Gold (1994), the perils involved in presuming to speak with any authority about women whose lives are so different from our own, are truly daunting. It has only been possible to refer to some of the dangers that riddle the task, but even from this brief review of the literature, the complexity of representing South Asian women is obvious. Keeping in mind the threatening warnings about the dangers of; orientalism, Western ethnocentrism, colonialism, nationalism, Marxist-determinism, Western humanism and any hint of phallocentrism, conceptualising gender across cultural boundaries is fraught with so much difficulty that it appears to be an almost impossible task. The difficulties and complexities of interpreting and representing the Other cannot be underestimated and it is doubtful whether it
is even possible to avoid all these ‘-isms’ that have been mentioned, yet as Spivak (1990) suggests amongst all her criticisms and warnings, ‘as long as one remains aware that it is a very problematic field, there remains some hope’ (p.63).

THE CONTEXT OF NEPAL: POWER DYNAMICS, GENDERED RELATIONS AND EDUCATION

It has already been pointed out in previous sections how diverse and complex the experiences of women’s lives are and that those lives are not a-historical or unchanging, therefore attempts to understand the individual lives of women in Nepal need to take into consideration the context in which their lives are embedded. This section will use a historical perspective to outline how Nepal came to be established as a unified country, how a national ‘Nepali woman’ was created, and how the women’s movement in Nepal emerged. It will then move on to look in more detail at the context of the district of Mugu, focusing on the unusual history of the Karnali region within the nation-state. The chapter will conclude with a review of Nepal’s national education system, examining the main issues and challenges from a gender perspective.

At the outset, it is necessary to acknowledge that the discussion which follows is just one possible construction of the history of a specific area and that it relies on a limited number of key texts and official documentation. It is aimed at providing context and background for readers who are most likely unfamiliar with the area, however it recognises that there can be no claim to ‘factual’ accounts or ‘neutral’ presentations of history and therefore it is hoped that this particular (re)presentation adds another dimension to the literature review.

It may also appear that in some sections of this chapter there is an over reliance on certain sources. While academic literature focusing on Nepal has increased exponentially in the last two decades, there are still certain areas and topics that remain sparsely researched and published. An obvious example of this is Mugu district in the large and isolated region of ‘Karnali’, western Nepal (see map in Appendix C). To date, there has not been any research published specifically about Mugu district; therefore this section shall refer to the wider Karnali region rather than Mugu. However, compared to other parts of the country, even Karnali area has been under researched and I have had to rely on the work of two main academics.
(Bishop, 1990 and Adhikari, 2008) along with unpublished materials, reports and personal correspondence. It is also significant to note that there has been no attempt to consider the Karnali region from a gender perspective and there is no literature claiming to focus on the area's educational situation. Indeed, there have been limited attempts to understand the gendered context of the history of education in Nepal in general, as will be discussed later in this section, never mind in the Karnali region. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to provide context despite these limitations.

Another related issue is regarding the ‘lens’ used by academics. While there has been a recent increase in research relating to Nepal, some of which has included a focus on gender issues, much of this writing is from an international development perspective (for example: Acharya, S., 2008; Gender and Social Exclusion Assessment, 2006; Chitrakar, 2009; Asian Development Bank, 2010) or has been produced by international anthropologists, sociologists and educationalists (for example: Bennett, 1983; Des Chene, 1998; Skinner, Holland & Pach, 1998; Maslak, 2003; Robinson-Pant, 2000, 2001, 2004). This literature is of a high standard and very useful, however it is significant to note that while publications about women in Nepal have increased, there continues to be a limited amount of literature being published by women from Nepal and especially writing which applies a gendered lens. One notable exception to this is Seira Tamang, who not only identifies as a Nepali, a feminist, and being of indigenous ethnicity, but also problematises gendered relations in Nepal, refusing to gloss over or ignore controversial issues related to identities and power relations (Tamang, 2000, 2002, 2009). For these reasons I feel it is justifiable to make more reference to Tamang’s work when discussing the gendered politics of Nepal, and to let her voice be heard strongly from amongst other Nepali male and non-Nepali female academics.

A historical perspective on the establishment of the nation of Nepal

It is almost impossible to begin any discussion about Nepal without initially emphasising the heterogeneity of the country and its people. Anthropologists, tourists and local leaders are all quick to point out Nepal's diversity. Academics frequently begin by describing Nepal as a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and culturally complex nation (Bhattarai & Conway, 2010; Bhattachan, 2008). As Bista, the well-known Nepali anthropologist, has emphasised, ‘because Nepal is such a complex cultural conglomeration seeking perpetually to accommodate, if not synthesize, its diverse discrete parts... and because it is in constant flux... it makes the process of analytic generalization difficult and subject to even more qualification than is
normally the case’ (1991, p.7). In their attempts to generalize, some academics
have naively oversimplified the situation in Nepal or have found that constraints
have forced them to limit their work. An example of this is Rothchild (2006), who
explores how the social construction of gender affects Nepali girls’ participation in
education, but weakens her thesis by disregarding other intersections such as
caste.

As well as naive oversimplifications, there appear to have been deliberate and
political attempts to create a homogenous state of Nepal and in turn construct a
national ‘Nepali mahila’ (woman). These constructions, which will be further
discussed, have their roots in Nepal’s national history as well as the more recent
history of international development in Nepal and therefore an understanding of the
background is necessary in order to appreciate the complexity of understanding
Nepali women’s lives in context.

Nepal’s modern history is usually regarded as commencing in the 18th century with
the Shah dynasty. Prithvi Narayan Shah from Gorkha (central Nepal) conquered
and united the many small, rival hill states into one kingdom. In 1769, after capturing
Kathmandu, Shah formally established Nepal as a unified country, forming an
official kingdom from what had been previously a fragmented feudal situation. Shah
and his heirs continued to seek to expand the kingdom, even challenging the Indian
and Tibetan borders. Shah was considered a true nationalist and in Nepal’s history
books and school curriculums he is remembered as the king who successfully
brought together many diverse religious and ethnic groups under one nation.
However, in recent years, discussion has opened up around the issue of the
sustained lack of national identity in Nepal and the strength of many people’s ethnic
identifications. Clearly the unification of Nepal proved successful in keeping the
country united against external invasions (Nepal is one of the few countries in South
Asia that has never been colonised), yet as Mihaly (1965) has pointed out, it
appears that Nepal never became fully ‘unified in spirit’ (p.14). The conflict of the
last few decades has shown that citizens of Nepal identify strongly with multiple
axes of differences, and as a further examination of the country’s history will reveal,
despite deliberate attempts over the years by country leaders to erase these axes
and enforce a one nation policy, Nepali people are becoming increasingly vocal
about the diversity of their identities.

As the 19th century began, Shah’s heirs began to lose control of the nation and
internal turmoil spread in Nepal. The Rana family (who were descendants of
Rajputs from northern India) reduced the Shah monarch to a mere figurehead and
ruled Nepal from 1846 until 1953. They were a powerful dynasty who ruled autocratically and made all government positions, including prime minister, hereditary. Ganguly and Shoup (2005) emphasise the significance of historic factors in their discussion of Nepal’s recent difficulties with democratization. They refer to how the Ranas ran a deliberately backward feudal system designed to bar mass education, widespread prosperity, or other modernizing influences that might have troubled their rule. The Ranas also kept tight control on the country and were further stabilised by goodwill agreements made with the British Army in India. Some people who had the means to escape the confines of the country went to India to study or to serve as Gurkha soldiers in the British Army, but the general population was kept ignorant and isolated under the Rana dictatorship. Ganguly and Shoup suggest that ‘the Ranas bequeathed Nepal a malign legacy of illiteracy, impoverishment, and authoritarianism that persists to this day’ (2005, p. 130).

Hinduism had long been practiced in Nepal, but until the 19th century it had generally been a liberal type of Hinduism. Other religions, including Buddhism and Bon, Shamanist and Animist traditions had been practised alongside or synthesized with Hinduism. It is important to note that until relatively recently there was no structured hierarchy or caste system established in Nepal. During the Malla dynasty, (which preceded the Shah reign) an orthodox Brahman form of Hinduism had begun to infiltrate the country, brought in to the west of the country by high caste Hindus from India who were fleeing persecution from Muslims. Gradually local chiefs and upper classes began to adopt some of the social forms of this more orthodox Hinduism as it gave them a hierarchical structure which could be used to their benefit in reinforcing their own positions of authority and resulting in caste and class being subtly intertwined in Nepal. However it was not until the Rana period that the Brahmanical stance on Hinduism was adopted at national level. In 1854 the Muluki Ain codified the legal system of the country into a single body of laws and through this the Brahman version of caste hierarchy was officially established as the order of the nation.

In his book Fatalism and Development, published in 1991, Bista wrote in a strongly critical fashion about this form of ‘Brahmanism’ which he perceived as imported and gaining the upper hand in Nepali society. According to Bista, the culture of fatalism, which accompanied Brahmanism, was responsible for devaluing the country’s productivity and preventing development or ‘modernization’. Not surprisingly, Bista’s work met with much opposition from within Nepal and especially from high caste academics. It was the first academic publication of its kind; strong in its criticism of
Brahmanism, written by an ‘insider’ and published just as caste and ethnic issues were becoming highly politicised. In 1995 Bista disappeared and it was rumoured that he was either killed by those who opposed his writing or that he had taken refuge in India to avoid the controversy that continued in Nepal regarding Bista work. Bista’s whereabouts remain unknown, however his writing, and in particular his stance on Brahmanism and caste issues have been very influential.

Eventually Rana rule was overthrown in 1951, but a brief experiment with democracy did not prove successful. In 1960, after almost a decade of wrangling between the king and the political parties, as well as amongst the parties, King Mahendra took absolute control of the country and banned all political parties. Adopting a party-less panchayat (council) system, the king ruled with the help of selected advisers and the support of his army to deter any opposition that might arise from within. Panchayat rule continued for 30 years (1960-1990). Whelpton (2005) describes how King Birendra, who took over from his father in 1972, allowed some democratic reforms but he continued to exercise unlimited power and enjoyed the status of a deity. The Panchayat period is popularly remembered for its emphasis on national development and attempts to ensure that Nepal began to make progress as a modern and enlightened state. However, this ‘progress’ was to take place in a very controlled and specific nationalist style. In the new constitution of 1962, caste-based discrimination was officially banned, yet the ethnic and religious heterogeneity of Nepal was ignored and only one language (Nepali) and one religion (Hindu) were promoted. The Nepali speaking Hindu from the mid hills was considered the ‘real’ citizen of Nepal and anyone or anything else was seen as a threat to the nation and to its development (Whelpton, 2005). The Panchayat years were considered to be a radical move from the dark ages of the Rana era to the enlightenment of Nepali nationalism and development, yet despite the newly drafted country code, the legacy of the Ranas’ 1854 Muluki Ain continued to be used as a means of regimenting social life in the kingdom. Thapa & Sijapati (2003) point out how the caste hierarchy which was used in the country code to rank the entire population (with high caste Bahun and Chhetri at the top, the indigenous Tibeto-Burman groups such as Sherpa, Gurung, and Tamang peoples in the middle and the ‘untouchables’, now known as Dalits, at the bottom) was reinforced and given material as well as social and cultural legitimacy during the Panchayat period.

Following the Panchayat period, in 1990 democracy was ‘restored’ in the Kingdom of Nepal. Towards the end of the Panchayat period ethnic groups had begun to try to organise themselves to preserve their space in what was a culturally
homogenising country. The authoritarian regime led by the king had not allowed them to become overtly political or to make any demands and often they had to operate out of India. Pradhan (2002) suggests that when democracy was established, these diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities, as well as groups perceived as low-caste, began to hope for an egalitarian and pluralistic society in which they would be treated as equals by the dominant high caste Hindus and where their languages and cultures would receive state recognition and support. He recognises that the constitution of 1990 appears to fulfil some of these aspirations in that it declared Nepal to be multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, granted equal rights to all citizens before the law, and prohibited any form of discrimination based on religion, race, caste or ethnicity. The country’s constitution gave official recognition to cultural diversity based, to some degree, on the notion of equality. However, Pradhan argues that despite these changes, Nepal was still defined as a ‘Hindu Kingdom’ and the Nepali language was still declared the official national language. He concludes, ‘thus, behind the official model of cultural pluralism and equality, a hierarchy of cultures or the dominance of one culture over others (through language and religion) can be discerned’ and while the state does claim to make efforts to promote diverse cultures and languages, ‘these tend to be more symbolic than real’ (Pradhan, 2002, p.14). The significance of this dominance of one culture over others will be further examined in the next section, and with a particular focus on its impact on gender.

**Gendered politics and the history of the women’s movement in Nepal**

Amongst the heterogeneous communities of Nepal, men and women have historically structured their relations in varied and diverse ways. Examples of this include Bhotia women who often practice polyandrous marriage, orthodox Hindu communities who emphasise the sexual purity of women and their role in the private sphere, Sherpas who are proud of their women’s business skills and herding abilities and Limbu women who are renowned for their entrepreneurial weaving as well as being free to divorce and remarry as widows. However, the fixing of the caste hierarchy at national level and the effacement of ethnic and religious diversity in Nepal has had definite gender implications (Tamang, 2002, 2009). When the Panchayat regime legitimized the creation of a single national culture based on Hindu norms, the fiction of a traditional Hindu, ‘Nepali mahila’ began to dominate. Alongside this, as part of the Panchayat era’s thrust for modernisation, the country began to welcome foreign aid which then flooded into Nepal. As Pigg (1992) has suggested, Nepal’s link with the west came through international development
rather than imperialism. In other countries, such as India, colonialism influenced the construction of gender and the development of the women’s movement, but in Nepal it is ‘the development project’ which has been of significance.

The goal of national and international development in Nepal became the task of developing ‘the Nepali woman’. Ironically, the category of the patriarchally oppressed and uniformly disadvantaged, Hindu ‘Nepali woman’ in need of empowerment, did not exist prior to Nepal’s development project. As Tamang (2002) suggests, ‘The creation of ‘the Nepali woman’ was as much the work of development agencies in search of ‘the Nepali woman’ to develop as it was the result of the active dissemination of state-sponsored ideology’ (p.163). Stripped of class, caste, ethnic and religious differences, Nepali women were an easy target for development. The Panchayat conception of the modern Nepali woman involved a narrowing of what was deemed necessary or appropriate for the country’s women; emphasising domestic roles within the household rather than any involvement in what came to be considered the masculine realm of the public sphere. In this way a stricter dichotomy of what it meant to be ‘male’ and ‘female’ began to dominate the more flexible gender norms that were prevalent within various ethnic groups.

There has been much political upheaval in Nepal since the Panchayat era; over the last two decades many changes have taken place and after ten years of civil war, the Hindu kingdom is now the ‘Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal’. Yet the legacy of the high caste Hindu hegemony has not disappeared. The image of the homogenous Hindu Nepali citizen continues to be perpetuated, whilst the goal of empowering oppressed and agency-less Hindu Nepali women continues to be the focus of the Nepali state as well as international donors (Chand, 2004). In recent years there has been increasing activism by minority groups and many political movements have emerged and expanded, yet despite some weakening of the construct of the ‘Hindu Nepali’ citizen, Tamang (2002) suggests that to a large extent the ramifications of the construct, in terms of the definition of gender roles, remains unchallenged.

Following 30 years of autocratic rule by the monarchy, uprisings in 1990 eventually led to the establishment of democracy in Nepal. However the 90s were characterised by continued wrangling and conflict amongst the political parties and discontent was spreading in many parts of the country. S. Upadhya (2002) suggests that expectations had been raised but then people began to feel disappointed at the ‘version’ of democracy that they were experiencing; the social exclusion, hegemony and elite power brokering that had dominated for so many years seemed set to
continue. In the last two decades peace and stability have remained elusive in Nepal. In 1996 the Maoists began their movement aimed at overthrowing the constitutional monarchy and establishing a new socio-economic structure and state (B. R. Bhattarai, 2003). This movement escalated into ten years of civil war claiming more than 13,000 lives and internally displacing hundreds of thousands of people. A three-way power struggle developed between the Maoists, the political parties and the king, whilst internal conflict continued amongst the political parties. Eventually in 2006, after seizing control of the country, the king lost power and a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed by the Government of Nepal and the United Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists (UCPN-M). After some delays, Constituent Assembly elections took place in 2008 with the UCPN-M getting a majority of votes and more seats being allocated to women and marginalized ethnic communities than was previously the case. This was soon followed by the abolishment of the monarchy.

As well as the damage done to the infrastructure and social and economic situation of the country, the human cost of the conflict was massive and irreversible, but many Nepali people continued to keep their hopes up for a new and more inclusive Nepal (Krämer, 2010). However, even since 2008 the situation in Nepal has remained tense and the way ahead is not yet clear. The ideological differences between the major parties are many, the demands for inclusion from previously marginalized groups are increasing and becoming more complex, and concerns about security continue. An Interim Constitution came into force in 2007 replacing the 1990 Constitution. However, this Interim Constitution expired in May 2010 and despite two extensions, a new and permanent constitution has not yet been written. Political parties and leaders appear to be experiencing serious difficulties with agreeing on the basic points and mapping out a way forward.

This conflict is the background from which the women’s movement in Nepal has emerged and in which it continues to be embedded. A frequent criticism is that no single feminist movement exists in Nepal and that women of Nepal have failed to unite over their causes. Considering Nepal’s recent history and the country’s heterogeneity, it could be said that this is hardly surprising. Tamang (2009) recognises that women in Nepal are not just divided by petty differences; they are coming to terms with complex and multiple hierarchies that form various axes of oppression and therefore they do not have a single feminist agenda. It is also not surprising that following the advent of democracy in Nepal, the most visible form of any women’s movement to emerge, has been mostly led by well educated, high-
caste city women (who generally have Maoist, NGO or political party experience). So when the plight of economically poor rural women is being raised, or the experiences of marginalised ethnic groups are being discussed, it continues to be done so by elite women ‘gatekeepers’ at central level. As Tamang (2002) points out, a look at the names of conference participants, members of NGO committees and leaders within political parties, reveals that urban, upper-caste Hindu women continue to dominate. Yet this is rarely acknowledged:

Unquestioned in their authority – being Nepali and being female – to produce information about ‘Nepali women’, the speeches, reports and other writings of these elite women reflect little, if any, acknowledgement of the relative positions of power and privilege from which they speak. These elite women’s experiences of being a woman in Nepal is circumscribed by a very specific ethnic, caste and religious milieu... however, in Nepal, these concerns have rarely been voiced and the netris (female leaders) continue to voice the wants and needs of ‘Nepali women’ unproblematically (p.165).

However, despite the challenges, it cannot be denied that from a feminist perspective some positive changes have taken place in Nepal in recent years. Since the advent of democracy, women have become more organised and there has been a growth in the types and number of activities undertaken for the women of Nepal by state and non-state stakeholders as well as more activism amongst various indigenous groups in Nepal. Gradually the voices being heard in Nepal are beginning to diversify, and although it remains limited, demands have begun to be heard from grassroots level (Rajbhandari, 2007). Since 1990 laws and legal decisions have been passed relating to women’s right to property, abortion and their bodies as well as citizenship rights. In 1991 Nepal became a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and later established the Ministry of Women and Social Welfare and then in 2002 the Women’s Commission was established. In 2006 many women were involved in putting pressure on the re-instated parliament and along with declarations of Nepal being made a secular state and free from untouchability, new bills were passed granting equal citizenships rights for mothers as well as fathers; a resolution for 33 per cent reservation for women in all state bodies; and a House bill on gender equality allowing the amendment of the discriminatory provisions in 19 existing laws (Tamang, 2009).

While it is appropriate to highlight these gains which have been made to date, the Forum for Women, Law and Development (2007) point out that there is still much ground left to be covered, many legal provisions continue to be inadequate, and women’s human rights continue to be violated. Unfortunately gains made on paper
do not automatically translate into reality and this is especially the case for those most in need of legal support. Over the last two decades, while there have been victories for women, there have also been losses and set-backs; often the pressure on women to prioritise with the agenda of their political party has meant a compromise in their activism focusing on issues specific to gender, and at times during the last five years national issues of security and the fate of democracy have taken central stage so completely that women and their issues have been sidelined (Tamang, 2009).

As revealed in the writing of Pokharel and Mishra (2001), very often a ‘welfare’ approach continues to prevail in discussions about women in Nepal, with mentions of ‘gender issues’ merely reflecting a shift to more contemporary jargon rather than any conceptual change in thinking. Most government and non-government players in Nepal claim to have moved from *Women in Development* (WID) approaches which were characterised by an exclusive focus on women and their problems, to a more dynamic *Gender and Development* (GAD) approach. Being critical of the narrowness of focusing on women in isolation from the rest of their lives and ignoring the relations through which inequalities are perpetuated, proponents of a GAD approach have proposed that the shift be made from a focus on *women* to a focus on *gender relations*. However, as Maslak (2003) points out, there is little evidence that GOs or NGOs in Nepal have made the shift from analysing ‘women’ as a fixed category, to analysing the dynamic and changing social relations between men and women that generate and perpetuate gender inequalities. ‘Gender’ as predominantly used in Nepal, does not question the origins of the roles of men and women and the power that lies behind the maintenance of those roles, therefore as Tamang (2002) has suggested, dominant social relations are reified and women continue to be essentialised by the implicit acceptance that they have an unchanging feminine essence that transcends the particularity of their lives.

This brief construction of Nepal’s history has provided a glimpse into how the representation of people of Nepal, and women in particular, has been politicised over the years and is an extremely complex and controversial issue. The discussion highlights the dangers of ignoring ethnicity, caste, region, class, religion and other intersecting identities, when discussing the lives of women in Nepal. This does not deny that women in Nepal face oppression and suffer from patriarchy, but rather it recognises that the forms of patriarchy they experience are varied, just as the ways in which they define gender norms are varied, and therefore, the reality of being a woman will vary within as well as between communities. As Tamang has pointed
out, ‘in the face of different forms of oppression, multiple patriarchies and cross-cutting social inequalities, a gendered analysis necessitates a focus on the concrete conditions under which various men and women experience their lives’ (2002, p.171). Such research is vital but still lacking in the context of Nepal.

The Karnali region and power dynamics within Nepal

Mugu district lies in the centre of the Karnali region, in the north west of Nepal. Being far from the capital city, situated in the high Himalaya, sharing the northern border with Tibet, and having a lack of road infrastructure, Karnali is often perceived as being isolated from the rest of the country. Due to its low Per Capita Income, low average life expectancy and extremely high levels of malnutrition and infant mortality, Karnali has come to be known as an underdeveloped and ‘backward’ region which is lagging behind the national average. Recently it has been identified by the state as a target for special development programmes (National Planning Commission, 2007).

The physical constraints of the Karnali area are well known, yet the social, and especially political, challenges that the area has faced are less frequently commented on. Jagannath Adhikari is a Nepali researcher who has much experience in studying rural development and his work has particularly focused on the challenges faced by those living in the west of Nepal. In his book Food Crisis in Karnali (2008) Adhikari suggests that it is vital to take a historical and political-economic perspective in order to better understand the situation of Karnali. His writing emphasises the geographical exclusion of Karnali, discussing how the people of Karnali have been exploited by the powerful elites of Kathmandu. Adhikari describes how the Karnali region has suffered over many years from an exploitative relationship with Kathmandu, which acted as the power centre and treated Karnali like a peripheral colony. Much of what Adhikari describes connects with what I observed or the tales I heard during my years living in Mugu. Local evidence continues to bear testimony of the ‘geographical exclusion’ of Karnali. However, this is not the only issue; there appear to be many intersecting dimensions of oppression and inequality in the Karnali region and using a historical perspective to review the literature on this area will help to aid in understanding the complexities of these relationships and inequalities as processes that have emerged within specific circumstances rather than as fixed categories of difference.

Not much is known about Karnali’s history prior to the 9th century, but Khadka (1999) suggests that in the middle period from the 12th to 18th century, Karnali was
relatively wealthy and civilised, enjoying a better position than most other Himalayan areas at that time. The administrative zone which is now known as Karnali was previously called Khasadesa and took in a much larger area, including parts of what are currently northern India and south western Tibet (S. Adhikari, 1988). The Khas people are considered non-Vedic Aryan people who migrated from central Asia through India and then into western Nepal and up into what is now known as Karnali. These Khasan either displaced or 'absorbed' into their way of life, the indigenous hunters and gatherers known as ban manchhe (forest people). When they intermingled with the Khas and later with the Hindus, most of these ban manchhe quickly lost their identity as discrete groups. S. Adhikari (1988) remarks that documentation from that time suggests that the Karnali area was more influenced by changes or events taking place in northern India than in Kathmandu or the remainder of Nepal.

Gradually during the middle ages the Hindus who were displaced from northern India migrated into western Nepal and Brahmanical ideology began to infiltrate north in to the hills and influence the Khas. But while Brahmanism, with its caste principles and work stratification, was spreading across Nepal, it was also being ‘modified' according to the contours of the local population of the time. Adhikari (2008) points to how the Brahman priests had to accept the authority of the local leaders and the cultural patterns specific to different communities, and he suggests that this meant that ethnic diversity was not lost even though it was overlaid by a blanket of Brahmanism. Prior to the 12th century Khas society was divided into the ‘ruling class’ or aristocracy, the ‘commoners' who were peasants and pastoralists and then some ‘others' who were slaves and labourers. As Hindu influence increased, the Khas priests were replaced by Brahmans and the Khas aristocracy were ‘converted’ to Thakuri and Chettri (within the Hindu caste hierarchy). The common people were then classified as Chettri, but in discrete categories as less ‘pure' Matawali Chettri (alcohol drinkers and not wearing the sacred thread). The social structure of the Karnali region was slowly changing as a result of the continuous immigration from the western and southern regions, but even though Brahmanical ideology gained supremacy among the aristocracy, ‘a large part of Khas society, along with the Bhotia people (of Tibetan origin) on the periphery, continued to retain their Buddhist persuasion and their ancient animistic beliefs and practices’ (Bishop, 1990, p.80). The Khas commoners provided services to the aristocracy, while the ‘inferior’ people of that time who were of unknown origin were called dum which later became classified as ‘untouchable’ or Dalit.
Bishop (1990), who was involved in research in the Karnali region throughout the 70s, 80s and 90s, and has spent considerable time in Nepal despite not being a Nepali citizen, has constructed a comprehensive review of the history of Karnali. Interested in how people interacted with their environment and the ‘precarious ways of life’ in Karnali, Bishop claims to take a ‘multidimensional perspective’ (p.5) and is therefore concerned with historical and temporal components as well as cultural and environmental. His writing is at times technical and some sections could benefit from being up-dated, however his discussion of the history of Karnali region is informative and makes reference to official governmental documentation which he had access to, as well as detailed oral histories from the area.

Bishop (1990) recounts how most of the areas to the west of the Himalayan region were outside the control of the ‘centre’ (Kathmandu) from the 12th century, and as a result the west became strongly established as the Khas Kingdom and was ruled by successive Khasans, mostly by the name of Malla. The Mallas expanded their kingdom and even made several attempts to conquer Kathmandu. Around the beginning of the 15th century the Malla dynasty was at its height and the Karnali area experienced much material prosperity and power. However in the 16th and 17th centuries things began to deteriorate and then the real downfall of Karnali began after the unification of Nepal in the second half of the 18th century. Bishop describes how, even when the other states had been conquered by the Gorkhali army and united to form the official kingdom of Nepal, much of Karnali remained outside their control. In particular the northern districts (Jumla, Mugu and Humla) resisted on several occasions and because they were so spread out, it proved difficult for the Gorkhali army to gain control. Eventually revolts were suppressed and all of Karnali surrendered to the Gorkhali regime.

Adhikari (2008) highlights how the people in Karnali started to suffer under the Gorkhali regime in various ways, mainly because of the system of taxation imposed, as well as being forced to provide free labour services. He suggests that land distribution during the Malla rule was already unequal because of the link between political power and land ownership, but that after unification the inequalities became even more extreme and further entrenched. Adhikari shares examples of how many small landholders had no choice but to give up property because they could not manage simultaneously to pay taxes, provide free labour and cultivate their land. When this happened, large landholders were able to further enlarge their property. Bishop’s (1990) and Adhikari’s (2008) accounts concur in suggesting that because of the initial resistance from the Karnali area, the Gorkhali regime felt obliged to
station a large contingent army in the region. The enormous cost of maintaining an army was a burden that had to be borne by the peasants; they were charged exorbitant rent for the land they cultivated.

Both Adhikari (2008) and Bishop (1999) are of the opinion that the Gorkhali state’s only concern was to have the loyalty of the ‘elites’ of Karnali and they achieved this by granting them both economic and political power. Under this system local chieftains would be given the authority to govern, but they had to ensure that taxes were paid to the central government. For the purpose of collecting the taxes and crushing any revolts, the representative of the government would stay in the Karnali area with a strong army. When the Ranas came to power in the second half of the 19th century, they continued this system of rule but sent their own kinfolks as representatives of the government. They also brought all the revenue collected in Karnali out to Kathmandu, to finance their luxurious lifestyles. Bishop (1990) describes how Karnali was kept secluded from any benefits or mainstream development, while the urban elite prospered. Since the state was concerned with the control of Karnali rather than its development, the area received no support or opportunity for development from the centre, but still had to pay heavy taxes. These taxes were not just on housing and land but on all activities, including dying cloth, falconry, collecting honey etc.

Not surprisingly, such extreme hardship and exploitation resulted in increases of out-migration from the Karnali area. Shrestha (1971) outlines how restrictions were placed on the movement of Karnali people during the Shah and Rana rule, to address the growing problem of labour shortages. Immigration from other areas of Nepal, Tibet or India was actively encouraged. While there is a lack of records of taxes paid or details of what check posts existed, Shrestha (1971) makes reference to records of a ‘passport’ system which was necessary for entry and exit of Karnali, as well as records that are available of restrictions on the time of day that people were allowed to move about within headquarter areas of Karnali. Shrestha (1971) describes how the peasant class in Karnali felt they were in an ‘iron cage’ throughout Rana rule (1846-1953), with no opportunity to escape the heavy burdens and exploitation forced upon them, and he links this with the recorded increase of suicide rates in Karnali.

Slavery was abolished in Nepal in 1925, but continued long after this date in Karnali because the government was content with the taxes and therefore had little interest in putting pressure on the local elites to free slaves. Adhikari (2008) explains how local elites, known as mukhiyas, were responsible for collecting the taxes from their
village, getting a share of the revenue in the process. The *mukhiyas* then had to house and feed the officials, (who continued to be known as *Gorkhalis*) who came to collect the tax. I have heard it joked about in Mugu, and Adhikari (2008) mentions in his account, that villagers have claimed that they took pride in allowing their village to be the dirtiest in the vicinity in order to convince the *Gorkhalis* that they were poor and to dissuade them from staying too long. *Gorkhalis* were known to be fussy about their food and accommodation, demanding rice and other luxuries and disparaging traditional habits and local resources.

Most local decisions and judgements were made by the *mukhiyas* and their village councils, but requests could also be made to Rana officials if they were in the area. Adhikari describes the respect that had to be shown to the chief of the district or any Rana official:

> In the morning he would get a salute from the army, and *Mukhiyas* and others present in the area had to offer the salute. Then he would visit the temples, for which the track had to be cleared of people. People not only had to leave the road but had to follow many rules to show respect to the official. For example, people could not ride horses, use umbrellas, smoke pipes or remain in a sitting position in the presence of the official... En route there would be people who wanted to approach him and tell him about the injustices they had experienced. These people would be treated like animals, tied by their necks to a tree. They would have to stand like animals on all fours and with stones on their backs. They would hold a request paper by their lips. There would be a line of people in this position. The idea was that people should think and behave like animals in the presence of the chief of the district or the Ranas (2008, p.67).

Adhikari concludes that the legacy of this system is still seen in the Karnali region today, with people asking for favours in this way – not as a right but at the mercy of the boss.

By the end of the Rana period, much land was underutilised, food productivity had decreased, and disease and famine had increased. This meant that the population of Karnali was in decline despite high fertility rates. The area had always been vulnerable to natural disasters, such as drought and flooding, and such events exacerbated the problems in the district. Since the time of Rana rule, Karnali became known as a remote and dangerous ‘*kala pani*’ (black water) area, where government officials were sent as a punishment for wrongdoing. Bishop (1990) claims that since the unification of the country of Nepal, Karnali region has been relegated to the role of a peripheral backwater province, and he suggests that from
the perspective of the people of Karnali, the feeling of suspicion has been mutual. Bishop stresses ‘the peasantry’s deep suspicion and resentment of both the “foreigners” from Kathmandu and the policies they perpetuated’ (1990, p.139). It has also been suggested that centuries of exploitation and oppressive historical events have left the people of Karnali with the conviction that they are not their own rulers but a servant class. Shah (2005) comments on the negative ‘structure of feeling’ that persists in Karnali; he refers to Karnali’s historic revolt at the outset of the Shah dynasty but then blames the sustained oppressive rule of the Shah, Rana and Panchayat regimes for the resulting resignation and pessimism of the people of this area. He believes that the majority of Karnali people have accepted the culture of resignation and defeat, as well as their subservient position in the economy and politics of the country.

After the downfall of the Ranas in the 50s there was much political change in Nepal, however Bishop (1990) points out that most of Karnali was unaffected by, and perhaps even unaware of, these changes. The political elites of Karnali continued to practice and benefit from the old feudal system, so values did not radically change and social life continued relatively undisturbed. Local leaders continued to work as subordinates of Kathmandu based political leaders rather than as representatives of the people of Karnali. Gradually the Panchayat political system (1961-1990) brought some changes and Karnali became more ‘open’ to the external world than it had been during the Rana period, but overall the Panchayat period aimed at maintaining the status quo in the social and political structure of the country.

The caste system was abolished in 1963 by the new Muluki Ain, but in Karnali this served to reinforce caste identity as high castes feared it would reduce their political and religious powers (Bishop, 1990). In many cases, inter-caste relations became less flexible and accommodative than before, with higher castes adhering more strictly to ritual purity practices in order to protect their positions and local status. Also at this time, ‘ritual brother’ relationships which had been made several generations previously, for social and economic reasons, began to break down. Bishop points out how many high-caste Khas villages began to threaten the long-standing relationships they had with Bhotia communities, forcing the Bhotia to adhere to Hindu rituals and observances.

During the Panchayat period many of the former mukhiyas, who were mostly high caste, became the new political leaders (Panchas) and were able to continue their exploitation of the common citizens. The Panchas made money and at the same time made life difficult for the ordinary people, torturing them and especially creating
problems for the poor and low caste. The Nepali novel by Bhim Prasad Shrestha (1994) which is set in Jumla, gives insight into how the local *Panchas* of Karnali declared themselves to be the saviours of the caste system and the Hindu religion, and gives a glimpse of the harsh punishments they gave to those who transgressed their rules.

As part of Nepal's drive for development in the 60s and 70s, some primary schools and health care facilities were established in the Karnali region. However Bishop (1990) believes that these rather limited attempts by the Government of Nepal were of less significance to Karnali, and especially to the remote northern areas of Karnali such as Mugu, than the negative impact of the changes taking place in Tibet. After the 1959 abortive revolt of Tibet, the Chinese restricted the trading and herding movements on both sides of the Tibetan border. Flourishing trading routes were stopped and herds from Nepal no longer could be pastured in Tibet. *Bhotia* people in northern Mugu have shared with me how this was especially devastating to them (or their parents) because they depended on herding and trading and had insufficient productive farm land to fall back on. Therefore throughout the 60s and 70s the economy of Karnali, and Mugu in particular, was further weakened, and in relative terms the state’s efforts at developing the region appear to have been negligible.

People from Mugu, Jumla and other parts of Karnali frequently recount how droughts, famines, plagues of locusts and disease epidemics continued to wreak havoc across Karnali during the 60s and 70s. The extreme food shortage that resulted gave rise to the commencement of food-aid to the region. The ongoing issue of food deficits in Karnali as well as the problems caused by dependency on foreign food-aid have frequently been discussed by academics, development workers, state politicians and the media (see Lama, 2001; R. Bhattarai, 2004; Shahi, 2005; Adhikari, 2008). Rice continues to be regularly flown into Karnali at massive expense, yet the levels of acute malnutrition remain very high (Action Contre la Faim, 2006). It has been suggested (including by King Birendra) that the people of Karnali should revert to eating local grains, such as millet and buckwheat, which were traditionally produced in the area and would be more sustainable than rice. However the presence of government officials and army personnel, as well as the ‘status symbol’ of rice has meant that food-aid has continued. To date, the national budget allocated for the development of the Karnali region is spent almost entirely on the transportation of rice and on the salaries of government officials placed in that region (R. Bhattarai, 2004).
Despite democracy being established in Nepal in 1990, political change was slow in coming to Karnali. Adhikari (2008) points out how Karnali remained a neglected region and its participation in national politics was almost non-existent. Plans and decisions were mostly made by ‘outsiders’ who had little knowledge or sympathy for the region, and political leaders were largely occupied with pressing for increased quotas of food-aid, rarely moving beyond this agenda. In recent decades there have been no political restrictions on movement in and out of Karnali, radio has become a vital link between Karnali and the rest of the country and in the last few years some districts have been connected by mobile phone, yet despite these changes, the area has remained isolated from mainstream development. In its report on the governance of the Karnali area, the NGO known as KIRDARC or Karnali Integrated Rural Development and Research Centre (2002) highlights some of the problems involved:

Although elections have sent MPs from Karnali to sit in the national parliament, the area still suffers from a lack of proper representation and access to policy making and central government. The central government is responsible for planning the area’s development, but has failed to properly carry out this task. The people of Karnali have yet to see real democracy. It is money, and the influence of friends and relatives that decides voters’ choices. Anyway, once elected many of the representatives move their homes away from the Karnali either to a town in the Terai or to Kathmandu (p.3).

KIRDARC (2002) is also critical of the lack of transparency of local government and non-government organisations working in Karnali. It comments on the lack of efficiency and accountability and recognises that ‘favouritism, nepotism and corruption unduly influence decision making’ (p.4). In a later report, KIRDARC (2008) summarises the recent history of Karnali as ‘a story of discrimination, neglect, poverty, exploitation and deprivation that together pushed the people of Karnali to frustration and contributed to a situation where tensions were waiting to break out into public violence’.

The decade of civil war (1996-2006) dramatically affected the whole of Nepal, including the Karnali region. Apart from the KIRDARC (2008) report, there is a lack of literature dealing specifically with the conflict in the Karnali area. However it is clear that the impact on the region was significant, with many hundreds of individuals being killed, and thousands more being abducted, tortured or displaced. According to a recent report produced by the World Food Programme in conjunction with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2007), more than two-thirds of Village Development Committees (VDCs) in Karnali suffered high to severe impact of the conflict. KIRDARC (2008) reports how bridges, health posts, school.
buildings and local government offices were destroyed and already poor and starving civilians were forced to serve both the state army and the Maoist army. The armed conflict and national political agendas added to, and became an integral part of the tensions and potential for violence that existed at local levels in Karnali; the situation in the region became even more complex and political tensions became an overt part of everyday life. Out-migration increased dramatically during the period of conflict and has continued even in recent years.

Far removed from (but not unrelated to) national level politics and events, there continue to be ongoing power struggles and outbreaks of violence at local level in Karnali. Allegiances to political parties, identifications with various ethnic communities, as well as axes of class, caste, religion, gender, age and role continue to be a source of tension in Karnali. The people of Karnali are very much Nepali citizens and are quick to point out that the Nepali language originated in their area, however the bitterness that they feel towards the central government and the neglect they have suffered has also fuelled a strong sense of ‘regionalism’ (KIRDARC, 2002). Yet, a brief review of the region’s history has revealed that this regionalism includes an incredibly complex heterogeneity that takes in many intersecting identities and contradictory positionings. Gyawali’s (2002) metaphor of a ‘human mosaic’ is very appropriate for Karnali region and for Nepal in general. Like a mosaic, distinct patterns are visible; yet the patterns are made up of scattered and diverse pieces, with the pieces continually changing place, and the colours within the pieces altering in different lights and from different perspectives. It is impossible to adequately describe the entire mosaic, yet it is necessary to acknowledge that any attempt to describe a small section is limited if it is not understood within the greater context of the expanse of the pattern.

**A historical perspective on education in Nepal and its gender context**

Discussions about gender and educational participation in Nepal often begin optimistically by pointing to the increase in enrolment rates and literacy of women in recent years. By 2006 the national literacy rate for women had increased to 55% (Asian Development Bank, 2010) while the net enrolment rate for girls in primary school increased from 77% in 2003 to 90% in 2008 (Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation & Ministry of Education, 2009). It cannot be denied that the participation of women in education has increased in Nepal; however the significance of such statistics is best understood within the context of Nepal’s recent history.
Throughout the period of Rana rule education was explicitly denied to anyone outside the royal elite. Whelpton (2005) suggests that the Ranas recognised the importance of the ruling class engaging with a ‘Western-style’ education so that they could negotiate effectively with other states, but that education of the masses was considered a threat to the power of the rulers. Similarly, Shakya (1977) describes how there was concern about ‘giving education to the common people, lest they should be awakened and be conscious of their rights’ (p.19), and he claims that there was also suspicion and mistrust of education in general; therefore schooling opportunities for the elite were restricted while popular education was non-existent. This resulted in select groups of young men from Rana upper-class families receiving a limited education, while it was a capital offence for anyone else to receive tuition of any kind (Shields & Rappleye, 2008). Despite some covert teaching, and the establishment of a few educational institutions by Gurkha soldiers returning from overseas or religious establishments, when the Rana regime fell in 1950, Nepal was described by Wood (1965) as being a country with no schools, no education system and no educational traditions. It is estimated that less than 2% of Nepal's total population was literate, all of which would have been elite male citizens.

The main focus of the 30 years of Panchayat rule was on economic progress and strengthening national unity. As Pfaff-Czarnecka (1998) has commented, education was considered key, both to ‘modernisation’ and ‘Nepalisation’, throughout the Panchayat period. Schools were perceived as a symbol of development, modernity and scientific progress. Development support was welcomed from the international community (initially mostly from America) and funding and advice was accepted for the establishment of schools. From the outset, education in Nepal was associated with the ‘outside world’ both as a means of becoming part of the international community and as a focus on learning the ‘non-local’ (L. Caplan, 1970). But at the same time, the national character of education was stressed and ‘one nation with one language’ was enforced through education. Education was seen as an ‘opportunity for the sons of Nepal to come forward and fight against darkness and bring light in the country’ (National Education Planning Commission, 1955, section ii). Schools were recognised as important physical spaces, just as curricula were used, in promoting such nationalism across the country. Added to this, education became a means of legitimising the power of local elites. When caste was no longer recognised as a national system of hierarchy, education became a useful tool for justifying the power of dominant groups through ensuring that some groups were
associated with ‘development’ to a greater extent than other groups (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1999).

So during this period of Panchayat rule, Nepal appeared to make rapid progress with establishing education; the strategies of the Ranas’ were criticised, schools were built all over the country and a single policy approach was used to curb any risk of diversity and make implementation easier (Caddell, 2007). What this meant in practice was that education was inequitable from the outset, it favoured the ‘national citizen’ (who was male, high caste Hindu, Nepali speaking, and usually from the mid hills or central areas of Nepal) and it marginalized women, indigenous ethnic groups, those considered low-caste, and minority religion or language groups.

During the Panchayat period, girls were not explicitly excluded from schools, but education was clearly gendered. A policy level example of this can be seen from the National Education Plan’s suggestion that girls also needed education, as much as boys, in order to fulfil their roles as ‘homemakers and citizens’ (National Education Planning Commission, 1955, section 8/2). To what extent girls were participating in education during the Panchayat rule, has not been much discussed, but it is clear that amongst low caste groups and ethnic minorities in rural areas of Nepal, there is a dearth of examples of females who were students during this period. Literature and documents from the Panchayat and Rana era, as well as research discussing education during these periods of history, are written predominately from male perspectives, and even those written by female academics have not taken a feminist or gender approach to their discussion. From what has been written, as well as by what has not been written, it can be surmised that the gendered aspect of education in Nepal has only been recognised as an issue of significance in the last few decades.

Starting in the 70s, and then picking up pace in the 80s and 90s, there was growing unrest and discontent, particularly among the newly educated in Nepal. Government attempts to improve the education system, including sending student teachers out to unstaffed rural schools and trying to make the system more functional, failed. Those who had invested in their own education became disillusioned when the prospects of employment and improved life circumstances did not materialise. Schools became political recruiting grounds for political parties, Maoists and ethnic groups, and education was at the centre of protests, strikes and riots (Shields & Rappleye, 2008).
The national slogan of the *Panchayat* era, ‘one language, one dress, one nation’ was replaced in the 90s by the slogan, ‘unity in diversity’. Caddell (2007) points out that, despite the new jargon, there was a lack of clarity regarding how to implement ‘diversity’ amidst ‘unity’. More often than not it seemed that the vision did not progress beyond representing diversity as colourful differences amongst ethnic groups, while little attempt was made to ‘tackle the underlying inequalities of access to resources and the differential status of various social groups within the nation’ (p.23) and this was particularly true within the education sector.

Since the 90s the government of Nepal has become more dependent than ever on international development donors, and their influence is clearly visible in Nepal’s National Five-Year Plans and within the educational policies of the country in particular. One of the first international agreements signed by the new government of Nepal was the Declaration of the World Conference on Education for All, in 1990. The Basic and Primary Education Project (BPEP) was launched in Nepal in 1992 and was aimed at achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals, which assumed a global consensus around the commitment to providing universal basic education for everyone. BPEP aimed to provide primary education and non-formal education to as many people as possible and was particularly aimed at marginalised and disadvantaged groups (de Groot, 2007). During this period discussion became focused on how education could be made more inclusive and how women in particular could be enrolled and ‘made literate’. The education of women was high on the agenda of Nepal’s donors for instrumentalist reasons; it was considered a sound development strategy, closely linked with decreased fertility rates, improvements in health, and poverty reduction (Jeffery & Basu, 1996). Alongside this, the state viewed women’s education as an economic investment and something which would benefit the next generation (Agricultural Project Services Centre, 2003). However it was noticeably less common for the education of women to be discussed as a *right* of the individual. This has continued to be the case, with national plans and donor programmes more frequently linking the value of education for women with national progress, poverty reduction, increased efficiency and economic benefit, than considering education for women as a human right and a goal in itself (Robinson-Pant, 2000; Tamang, 2002; Maslak, 2003).

It is clear that Nepal’s education policy has made a complete about-turn in the last 50 years – from banning any girls’ (and most boys’) education during the Rana period, followed by making a nominal provisional of education available to some girls in the *Panchayat* period, to finally declaring an active involvement in pursuing
education for all in the 1990s and 2000s. However, while it cannot be denied that the enrolment rate for girls in primary schools has increased, that more women are literate than ever before, and even that there are some signs of the gender gap narrowing, there is much that remains a cause for concern regarding gender and education in Nepal.

One of the most obvious concerns is that the educational gains which have been made by girls have been very uneven in nature. While there continues to be a lack of reliable disaggregated data, more attempts have been made in recent reports to reflect disparities and examine the extent of the problem. For example, the national literacy rate is estimated at 55% for women and 81% for men, but as the Asian Development Bank (2010) report points out, the gender gap increases amongst some ethnicities, religions and caste groups, as well as across sub-regions and in rural areas. In the western mountains of Nepal only 36% of women are literate (Asian Development Bank, 2010) and if the focus is further reduced to Mugu district, the gap is even more extreme with male literacy at 44% while the female literacy rate is only 9% (District Development Committee of Mugu, 2008). Further disaggregated data, such as the literacy rate of Dalit or Bhotia groups in Mugu, is not available. As mentioned in the previous section, Nepal’s education policy does not show any indication of recognising the importance of intersectionality theory and as Bishwakarma et al (2007) point out, it appears that no attempt has been made in policy design, programme implementation or within teacher training to take an intersectional approach.

Considering the history of education in Nepal, it is not surprising that it continues to be difficult to create a set of educational norms that breaks with the traditions of inequity and exclusion (Shields & Rappleye, 2008). Such systemic change is particularly difficult in the context of Nepal where high level policy and local implementation are known to be far removed from each other (U. Acharya, 2002; Khati, 2003; Khaniya & Williams, 2004) where education is considered integral to national conflict, for example, being both cause and effect of the ‘People’s War’ (Pherali, 2011), where stability of government and consistency of programme implementation continues to be a major challenge, and monitoring and evaluation remain virtually non-existent across much of the country (Dixit, 2002; Singh, 2010).

So while the necessity of gender mainstreaming has begun to be realised, and to some extent reflected in changes in education policy; to date there is little evidence of implementation, neither is there any recognition that gender identities are
embedded within other intersecting identities and that the gendered experience of education varies according to other social identities.

It has been pointed out that educational policy and implementation in Nepal continue to take a top-down approach and tend to include the perspectives of a limited range of stakeholders (Robinson-Pant, 2004; Maslak, 2003; Chitrakar, 2009). Often knowledge from government officials, teachers and heads of households (usually male) is valued, while target groups rarely have any say in policy or implementation issues. Robinson-Pant’s (2004) study shows how there is not always consensus between the reasons that international communities and states give for educating women and women’s own values and viewpoints. Studies of education in Nepal, such as Robinson-Pant’s (2000, 2004), as well as Maslak’s (2003) research amongst the Tharu people, and de Groot’s (2007) research in three geographical locations in Nepal, have attempted to redress this balance by listening to target groups, including pupils in rural areas and women with no education, as well as other individuals or groups who previously have been excluded from research.

A recent report evaluating the nation’s progress towards achieving the EFA goals suggests that there has been ‘considerable progress’ regarding access and equity in education but that progress regarding quality of education has been ‘somewhat disappointing’ (Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation & Ministry of Education, 2009, p.xiv); while enrolment in primary schools and NFE classes has increased so have drop-out rates, repetition rates and irregular attendance. Due to the lack of political consensus on drawing up a new Constitution for Nepal, the 3 years Interim Constitution (2007-2010) is still in place, however the Government has drawn up a new Three Year Plan Approach Paper (National Planning Commission, 2010). The Education section of this approach paper briefly mentions the increase in enrolment figures, the increase in adult literacy figures and the improvement in gender parity, and then presents a huge and overwhelming list of problems and challenges (see Appendix D). Unfortunately, few could deny that the issues listed are very much a problem in the Nepali education system (Singh, 2010) and that many of them affect girls’ education in particular.

While not denying that such problems exist and need to be addressed, Robinson-Pant (2004) is critical of the government’s persistent focus on quantitative gains. She points out that even when discussions revolve around issues of quality as well as access, the emphasis is always on measurable outcomes rather than the process or the needs and values involved in the first place. This approach results in
the government depoliticizing gender and focusing on technical solutions (such as outlined in the new School Sector Reform Plan (Ministry of Education, 2008), that the government are currently struggling to implement). Robinson-Pant suggests that the political agenda of gender is denied when women are presented as a homogenous group, when caste and class bias in the education system is ignored, when it is assumed that schools and literacy classes are neutral, when target groups of girls and women are depicted as passive victims, and when a universal notion of gender is assumed. Both Robinson-Pant (2004) and Maslak (2003) recognise the importance of addressing political and ideological issues rather than just technical aspects of education. In the context of Nepal there is a need for research that examines how gender is constructed in local communities, how other identities intersect with gender, how target groups value education, and how these understandings are embedded in local socio-cultural contexts. As Robinson-Pant (2004) suggests, for too long, the concept of education for women has been assumed as an unproblematic and universally accepted value, by governments, academics and international aid agencies, and now it is time to take a step back to explore meanings of gender and education in the communities involved;

Before working as educators in such contexts, we need to be willing to learn, to explore ways of critiquing our own stereotypes and problematize concepts that are often taken for granted, such as ‘empowerment’ or even ‘education’. We can then move away from the search for a technical fix based on universal values and assumptions about gender relations, and acknowledge the need to increase understanding of the diversity of gender roles and relations outside our own experience (Robinson-Pant, 2004, p.488).
CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

This chapter will begin by considering the narrative paradigm within which I locate my research. A brief outline of the ontological and epistemological positioning of the study will be followed by a lengthier discussion of methodological issues. In keeping with the paradigm within which I am working, the discussion will be in the form of a methodological story and will be narrated in a personal voice. The story will be told within an ethical frame, showing how decisions about method and the necessity for reflexivity are guided by my commitment to an ethical methodology. It aims to bear in mind the complexity of researching across borders as well as the challenge of avoiding imperial agendas and traditional dichotomies. Believing that research is as much a search for form as it is about reporting content, and that methods are constructed for particular purposes rather than merely selected for their general usefulness (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007, p.18), this chapter aims to explain the particularity of the methodology of this study. It is hoped that the chapter will reveal something of the need to ‘discover a methodology for ourselves’ as well as why the choices I made were not just appropriate, but necessary (Clough, 2004). However, the methodology of this research is not covered entirely in this chapter alone but is found throughout the entire thesis; the boundaries between sections are frequently blurred, and content and form are often inseparable.

THE NARRATIVE PARADIGM

My choice to use narrative inquiry is based on my desire to gain insight into how women from Mugu understand gender and education in the context of their lives; the focus being on the meanings they attach to, and the sense they make of, their experiences. Convinced that realist assumptions from natural science methods are too limited for understanding social life (Riessman, 2002) I have turned towards methods which I consider more suited to the complexity and heterogeneity of the social world. Law (2004) points out that the research methods passed down to us from many decades of social science tend to work on ‘the assumption that the world is properly to be understood as a set of fairly specific, determinate, and more or less identifiable processes’ (p.5). He warns us about distorting things into clarity and asks, ‘if much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional,
ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn’t really have much of a pattern at all, then where does this leave social science?’ (p.2).

Along with many others who conceive of reality as constructed, multiple and messy, I have rejected the neat, clean methodology of positivist science research which attempts to know in a definite, coherent and objective way and have turned towards narrative research which ‘eschews certainty’ (Trahar, 2008, p.262) and acknowledges that the social world is multifaceted and interpreted differently by different narrators. Unlike traditional academic research, I do not intend that my research speaks objectively from the neutral position of ‘nowhere’, but believe that, as researcher, I must examine my own positioning and ideology if I am to avoid re-inscribing race, class, and gender biases into my work (Naples, 2003, Shope, 2006).

Over the last three decades narrative research has become popular across many disciplines, as Mishler (2006) notes, ‘With surprising speed, the loosely defined field of narrative studies has moved from its early marginal status in the human sciences to a robust legitimacy’ (p.iv). Along with popularity has come diversity; recently published narrative studies demonstrate great variety as well as frequently speaking of ‘diversity’ as a feature or hallmark of narrative research. In discussing the confusing variety of meanings attached to the term narrative research, Etherington (2004) acknowledges that there is no one ‘right way’, but suggests, ‘what does seem important is that I describe what it means to me (at this point in time) and the assumptions upon which my ideas and practices are based’ (p.71).

Narrative research is commonly described as a method, or a methodology, or a way of analysing, or an approach to inquiry that falls within the qualitative realm of research; but, like Spector-Mersel (2010), I have come to view it as even more than any of these. I find her proposition of a narrative paradigm helpful. She asserts that ‘the core of narrative inquiry combines both a philosophical stance towards the nature of social reality and our relationship with it, and the mode in which it should be studied’ (p.206). So in this sense, narrative research is not just a specific way of carrying out research, it is also a distinct way of viewing the social world and how we experience it.

**Ontology and Epistemology**

The narrative paradigm recognises that reality is constructed, fluid and multifaceted; and more specifically, it maintains that social reality is primarily a narrative reality
Many narrative researchers share the worldview that we live storied lives and that our world is a storied world (Etherington, 2004; Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Sarbin, 1986). It has been noted that story is the ‘portal’ through which individuals enter the world and make it personally meaningful (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Narrative constructs and shapes reality rather than merely reflecting or mirroring it; narrative is reality and not just a representation of it.

In narrative inquiry, research questions are often generated from experience rather than being theoretically informed, and this makes it unique from many other methodological approaches (Trahar, 2011). As has been emphasised by Josselson (2006), the focus of narrative inquiry is on the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences in order to provide insight that befits ‘the complexity of human lives’ (p.4). This means that in a narrative inquiry the ethnographic details that can be seen or observed, for example in Mugu, are not the whole story – what is central to the inquiry is a focus on the ways in which people (in this case the women of Mugu) interpret the world around them and how they understand their place within the social world (Trahar, 2011).

Frank (2002) speaks of his ‘sense of the world as a narratable place; that is, a place that stories can make sense of’ (p.111). It is by telling and retelling our stories that we can create a sense of self and make meaning and continuity of our lives (Frank, 1995; McAdams, 1993). Because of the complex relationship between the world in which individuals live and their understanding of that world, narrative knowing is not just relevant to social reality at the individual level, but also at the collective level. Despite being unique and individual, stories are constructed inter-subjectively and situated within specific social fields and in light of the ‘cultural stock of stories’ available to them (Zilber, Tuval-Mashiach & Lieblich, 2008, p.1048; also see Polkinghorne, 1988; Stalker, 2009).

In a narrative paradigm the borders between ontology and epistemology become blurred. This is because reality is shaped by the way we perceive it, understand it, interpret it and act upon it – and how we shape reality is through stories (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Narrative is an organizing principle which narrators actively use to construct and make meaning in their lives (McCormack, 2004; Sarbin, 1986), as Sparks (2002) points out, ‘I come a lot closer to understanding your life through your interpretation, through how you make sense of your reality’ (p.123). This is complex because, as researcher, I must not only examine my own epistemology, but also take into consideration the epistemology of the participants in the study. As
Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou (2011) point out; narratives are pervasive in the social world, they constitute a core dynamic by which human beings make sense of the world and we as researchers are engaged in matters of narrative whether we know it or not, but at the same time, ‘thinking about and through stories is hard work’ (p.17).

Narrative epistemology is cognisant that narrative is rooted in context. Stories do not fall from the sky, nor do they emerge from an interior self; they are composed and received in context (Riessman, 2008). The concept of working within a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is useful:

Using this set of terms, any particular inquiry is defined by this three-dimensional space: studies have temporal dimensions and address temporal matters; they focus on the personal and the social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry; and they occur in specific places or sequences of places. (p.50)

The significance of narratives being located in the temporal, spatial and relational will be further discussed in the next section through the examination of the example of the narrative of my own research methodology. Before moving into an examination of the particularity of the methodology of this inquiry, which is written in a less conventional style, I offer a brief summary in conclusion.

This research is based on the assumption that there is a characteristically narrative structure to our lives, that we are always making sense of our lives in stories of one type or another and that these stories are our own interpretations and shape our reality. As constructions, they are partial and incomplete, they are from the vantage point of the present, they are created within a relationship with an audience in mind, and they are embedded in specific locations and social fields.

So, as researcher, already I am thinking ahead to the next section and considering ‘what is the story I wish to tell?’ (MacIntyre, 1985; Clough, 2002).

**A NARRATIVE OF THE METHODOLOGY**

**Part One – introduction to the story**

Before beginning my doctorate studies, I lived in Nepal. I worked there for seven years between 1998 and 2008, initially as a primary school teacher and then more latterly as an Education Advisor working in partnership with the government and also non-governmental organisations (NGOs). For the last three years of this time I was based in Mugu district which is considered one of the most ‘difficult’ districts in
Nepal due to its remote location, extreme poverty and challenging social issues. NGO staff working in Mugu receive ‘hardship allowances’ and Mugu is a ‘punishment’ posting for government officials. Friends and colleagues tended to set me up as a hero. Although I would have denied it at the time, in retrospect I can reflect on how some of my motivation was based on an image of journeying to uncharted places and bringing education and enlightenment to native people. Despite my good intentions to work in a sustainable and locally sensitive way, there existed a hint of the coloniser’s agenda in my attitude – I wanted to solve problems, educate people and improve their lives. When I completed my term in 2008 and left Mugu I was frustrated because I had not solved any problems; in fact I realized that I could not even define the problems never-mind offer any solutions. As an educator and developer, I felt I had failed.

I recognise that if this research project is approached as an attempt to define answers and solve problems then it will also fail. This is why the ontology, epistemology and ethical methodology of narrative research is so important to me. Any attempt to clarify and simplify the realities of Mugu (including the women’s lives, the socio-cultural contexts they are embedded in, the institution of education and my relationship with all this) into one single, coherent reality is undesirable as well as impossible. However, by valuing complexity and heterogeneity, and basing this study on relationship and making connections, there is some hope that the research will be worthwhile and may provide an opportunity for growth and learning which will be of benefit to researcher as well as researched and possibly even the wider community (Etherington, 2001, 2004; Rosenthal, 2003). While disagreeing on other issues, Atkinson (1997) and Frank (2000) both agree that stories have a recuperative role. Frank’s research, as well as his own experience, confirms how illness demoralizes and how ‘people use stories as part of their remoralization. Entering the relations of storytelling recuperates persons, relationships, and communities’ (Frank, 2000, P.355). I would broaden this out to suggest that poverty, conflict, oppression and injustice, can all ‘demoralize’ and it is my belief that stories can act as ‘remoralization’ in these contexts also.

Part Two – in the beginning

In 2008 I returned to Northern Ireland and settled into life as a full time PhD student in Queen’s School of Education. I was relieved to be out of Mugu, yet I mourned leaving it. Every night I was in Mugu in my dreams. I shared the stories that people requested (usually related to rats and toilets) and friends commented on how well I had adapted back into home life. There were many stories that I kept to myself, only
sharing them in my journal. It seemed ironic that I should feel more isolated as a PhD student in my home country than I ever had in Mugu. I enjoyed having a bathroom again but felt strangely uncomfortable with the general comfort of my life. I spent time reflecting on how meaningful or otherwise life was as a researcher and what my study was likely to contribute to the world.

At the early stages I spent a lot of time reading in ever widening circles, wondering when I would ever know what I was looking for. Accepting that narrative research is conducted inductively and that understanding is emergent, I knew that studies need to be loosely designed at the outset (Josselson, 2007). I had some experience of narrative research from my master’s thesis and I also had my supervisors’ reassurances as well as the encouragement from other narrative researchers who warn about the necessity of holding on to a ‘not-knowing’ attitude (Freedman & Combs, 2002; Trahar, 2009). I was expecting conceptual confusion and a lack of clarity, yet naively, I only expected this to colour the early days and not to be sustained throughout much of the study. Impatiently, I wanted to rush ahead and ‘get on with it’, not accepting that this was it.

Accepting a world view that is diffuse, slippery and elusive (Law, 2004) conjures up an image of smoke. I was familiar with smoke from neighbours’ fires diffusing up through my floor and in through the cracks in the wall of my room in Mugu. The smoke made beautiful ephemeral patterns that I could follow with my eyes, the scent of it clung persistently to everything in the room, and it even pervaded the taste of the food I cooked on my own fire; smoke is very distinctive yet it cannot be grabbed on to or held tightly. From the outset of the study I have been aware that the world of reality is a smoky world that is constantly shifting and changing shape and that only a narrative approach can do it justice. As the study has continued I have had to learn patience and accept that the smoke is not going to cease swirling or making new shapes. At times it may become less thick but at other times appear even denser when the light catches on it. I have learnt to move slowly, narrow my eyes slightly to peer through the smoke and to breathe lightly through it rather than hold my breath waiting for it to disappear. Law (2004) recommends a method of research that is like blindness in that it slows us up, allows us to take longer to understand and make sense of things; a method which dispels the idea that we can see the whole way to the horizon, that we can get an overview of a single reality at a glance. He concludes by saying that he hopes we can learn ‘to live more in and through slow method, or vulnerable method, or quiet method...’ (p.11).
Part Three - planning

Taking time to read and reflect and contemplate the smoke also had to be balanced with more practical aspects such as preparing for 'the field'. As a doctoral student with limited funding and time, I had to settle for a compromise between what was logistically possible and what I considered ideal, by scaling down my initial proposal. I went ahead with making plans to be in Nepal from September 2009 until February 2010, this would include the time consuming in-country travel to and from Mugu as well as time to work with a Nepali colleague to get everything translated, before leaving the country. For approximately half of these five months I planned to be based in the area surrounding Gamgadhi which is in the centre of Mugu district. This was where I previously lived and had already built up relationships and networks which would be vital to a narrative inquiry.

As well as making bookings and organising the practical arrangements, I spent copious amounts of time making preliminary plans, interview schedules and back-up plans; scribbling in my journal and discussing with my supervisors every likely scenario and dilemma that might arise. But eventually I had to acknowledge that it was just as inappropriate to try to make exact interview schedules or lists of questions in advance as it was impossible to anticipate every ethical issue that might arise (Bond & Mifsud, 2006).

I went through the process of applying for and receiving ethical approval from the School Ethics Committee. I appreciated that the committee was aware that not all of the standardised form would apply to a narrative based study or the context in which I was carrying out the research. I knew that I needed to be aware that ethical issues were likely to arise which would go beyond those listed on regular codes of practice guidelines. In narrative research, because dilemmas arise from contextual ethics, each situation needs to be individually considered and uniquely addressed (Josselson, 2007). Just as it is not possible to lay out a set of guidelines for a relationship, neither is it possible to standardise guidelines for the ethics of research that is relational. Therefore, in narrative research, a reflexive approach to ethics is more appropriate than a procedural approach (McLeod, 1994). I was able to learn from Riessman’s reflections on her concerns about being an ethical narrative researcher in South India:

Abstract rules did not help me when I got into ethical trouble. Interrogating my situated emotions during fieldwork and afterwards did get me through, albeit without a clear map. (2005, p.486)
But despite learning from others, still it has been necessary for me to struggle with various dilemmas which arose throughout the process, including while planning my research, collecting the narratives, exiting the field and writing the thesis.

Some years ago, as part of my master’s course, I enjoyed studying a module on reflexivity and more recently I have spent time reading what others have to say about it – the benefits and risks involved, and how essential it is to cross-cultural research (Etherington, 2007; Shope, 2006; Sparks, 2002; Trahar, 2011; Watson & Scraton, 2001). Clearly it is important that I strive continually to become more fully conscious of my own positioning and use my self-awareness while interacting with participants and at all stages of the research process, especially while writing. I agree that reflexivity is intrinsic to any narrative research (Trahar, 2008), I appreciate the creative, dynamic aspect of being reflexive and how it adds to the quality and trustworthiness of narrative research. Yet the pain that can also be involved in the process took me by surprise. Mistakenly, I had constructed an image of reflexivity as being a peaceful, reflective process akin to staring at one’s reflection in still waters. Or in a more interactive form, I imagined reflexivity to be something like the habit of Nepali women who sit in the sun and examine each other’s hair, picking out any foreign bodies while massaging the scalp. When I examined my own positioning and the research I was proposing, in the light of what I was reading, it felt more like being slapped in the face than massaged.

Writing from the vantage point of the colonized, for Tuhiwai Smith (1999), research is inextricably linked with European imperialism. She claims that ‘research’ is one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. Her criticisms have haunted me:

It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appals us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations (p.1).

And as I have pondered how to collect, analyse and represent the stories of women from Mugu, the harrowing words of hooks (1990) have bitten deep into my soul:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own.
Rewriting you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject and you are now at the heart of my talk (p.343).

I began to doubt the possibility of researching across cultural boundaries in a truly ethical way, and considered whether I was colluding in what was ultimately another colonising research project (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

However, while I believe that it is imperative to examine power issues, I have learnt that it is important to struggle with the issues rather than become paralysed by them. I do not accept that categories such as powerful/powerless; East/West; colonizer/colonised; and insider/outsider, are fixed or unchangeable dichotomies. I know from my experience of living in Nepal that often I have moved between these categories and have many relationships that exist in spaces between these binaries.

I had to take confidence from my experience, and like Trahar (2011), resist critics who have denied the possibility of talking ‘honestly’ across power imbalances, or have suggested that doing research with people from cultures that differed from my own was another form of colonialism, ‘I rejected these notions of immutable boundaries between cultures as they seemed to leave no space for dialogue, no potential to effect deeper learning’ (p.42).

More conscious about who I was and what I was doing, I resolved that I would not become paralysed by self blame, remorse or guilt (Watson & Scraton, 2001) but would use my heightened awareness to continue as a reflexive, ethical researcher. I was encouraged to this end by Trinh (1989), who describes the responsibility of understanding difference as something which requires as a minimum ‘willingness to reach out to the unknown’ (p.85) and by Josselson (1996), who writes:

> I would worry most if I stopped worrying, stopped suffering for the disjunction that occurs when we try to tell the Other’s story. To be uncomfortable with this work, I think, protects us from going too far. It is with anxiety, dread, guilt, and shame that we honour our participants. To do this work we must contain these feelings rather than deny, suppress, or rationalize them. We must at least try to be fully aware of what we are doing. (p.70)

And so, still worrying but also excited about ‘reaching out to the unknown’, I was on my way back to Mugu, ready to listen to stories and ‘effect deeper learning’.

**Part Four – researching in Mugu**

I arrived in Nepal after the monsoon was over, midway through the year 2066, according to the *Bikram Sambat* Nepali calendar. It took a day to travel from Belfast to Kathmandu but more than a week to travel from Kathmandu to Mugu district in the north west of Nepal. Sitting day after day on the edge of a field waiting for a
flight that would take me north, into the mountains and into Mugu district, I had plenty of time to think. While in limbo I was aware of my shifting identities; I was not just a researcher and academic, I was also a member of the human community. I looked forward to seeing the people whose lives I had been part of for three intensive years and then who, for more than a year, I had not even been able to contact. Strangely, despite having lived there for years, I was worried about surviving now for a few months.

Eventually I landed in Mugu and the dry air smelt familiar. I knew that my nose would bleed a little for a few days. The beautifully harsh scenery was familiar yet still shocking; valleys dropping thousands of metres below and mountains rising kilometres above. For once I felt no impatience or urgency; I knew that I needed to sit and talk with old friends, to drink tea, to let my ear adjust to the local dialect and re-establish relationships.

From years spent working in the district I was familiar with the background to the education system, the challenges of establishing formal and non-formal education, and I knew something of the problems and successes that the district had experienced. I knew that female education in Mugu was a particular cause for concern and that girls continued to face more barriers and exclusion from school than boys. I was aware that in recent years concern about the situation of females in Mugu had been recognised nationally and although still limited, discussions about gender and education had begun to take place at a national level as well as at district level. I had heard about the issues from government officials, teachers and NGO workers. But what I knew very little about was what women thought about ‘the issues’ and how they perceived their ‘situation’. I was interested to understand how women constructed their lives; how they positioned themselves in relation to others and created meaningful identities; whether education featured in these constructions, and what role (if any) education played in their lives.

I chose to speak with a limited number of women, requesting them to share their stories individually with me. I did not need a large sample as it was not my intention to make generalisations; rather I wanted to limit the number so that I could focus on the complexity and richness of each of the stories. I purposefully selected five women whose narratives would form the central focus of my study. The women identified as being of varied ethnicity, caste, socio-economic background, geographical location within the district, age, position in the family and role in the household. Realizing that it takes time to build trust, and knowing that it was important that participants felt comfortable with sharing their stories, I selected
women with whom I had built up a relationship previously. Most importantly, I chose people who were garrulous, willing to enter into this research relationship, and who I anticipated would not be risking retribution because of their interaction with me.

Further details of the research sample and process are included in the next chapter, but in anticipation of this, a brief summary of the five women selected to share their life narratives is as follows. The first person I asked to share her story was Rina who works with her husband in the teashop where I often ate while previously living in Mugu. I chose her because I had already built up a good relationship with her, she is a young woman who has had no formal education, she was living close by in the bazaar and easily available but had grown up in a village to the east of the bazaar. I knew she would be willing and able to manage the time and environment to share with me and that the bond of trust which is important to narrative sharing was already established. As mentioned, I wanted to hear from as wide a variety of experiences as possible, so the second person whose story I requested was Jangmu, who is from a very different ethnic and social background than Rina, belonging to the Bhotia people group from north Mugu. She identifies as being from a marginalized caste, language group and religion. Jangmu is older than Rina, has teenage children and no formal education. She currently lives in the bazaar and knew me from my previous work in the area. The third life story I listened to was from Dhanamaya who lives in a village to the south of Gamgadhi and is from a relatively privileged caste and economic situation. Other people recommended that I hear her story and she also voluntarily chose to share. She is the oldest of the five women and the only one who is a mother-in-law and grandmother. The fourth woman was Gita, Dhanamaya’s daughter-in-law. I selected her because she had a formal education, while none of the other women had participated in education, and also because I hoped that Gita’s story would contribute another dimension by linking with Dhanamaya’s. The last life narrative was shared by Hansa who lives in a village west of the bazaar. Her sister and other women recommended her as ‘having a story to tell’ and while I had no personal relationship with her, she came voluntarily to me and demonstrated willingness and trust. Relative to the other women, Hansa was from the poorest background financially and also the most marginalized (Dalit) caste. She has not participated in any formal education and her daughter was not currently attending school.

Needless to say, there were other women I wanted to select but had to leave out. While I was able to ensure variety, I had to accept that there would always be someone else whose story I could not listen to and someone whose experience of
privilege or oppression varied from those who were selected. I knew that I could only partially access the lives of some of the people I was interested in and I had to remember that the important thing for me was to be faithful to the relations in that space and time, and to the stories that were shared and the knowledge that was produced through the research, however partial (Sultana, 2007).

Narrative inquiry permits the gathering of a wide range of different kinds of ‘data’ (Etherington, 2004; Trahar, 2011), so while the five women’s life-narratives are central to this research, they were not the only data I collected while in Mugu. I also talked with educational stakeholders, reflected in my journal what I observed and what was going on around me, visited schools and education related offices and collected recordings of local ‘deuda’ songs. As acknowledged by Clough (2002) and Trahar (2011), notes recording informal conversations, events, images or feelings can be just as useful in a narrative inquiry as more formal interviews. These details can become the basis of research conversations or reflexive journaling, taking on significance or new meanings retrospectively. Often I found that quick jottings in my journal connected with what someone said at a later stage or became relevant in hindsight. Short extracts of some of these journal entries and conversations have been interspersed among the women’s narratives in the next chapter, giving an indication of how the collection of data in a narrative inquiry is a creative, dynamic process and how engaging as a participant within the research experience rather than remaining detached from it, produces richer and more significant stories.

In the context of researching issues of identities, power and education amongst women in Mugu it seemed particularly appropriate to use narrative methodologies such as women’s stories and ‘deudas’. A deuda is a special song/dance that is popular in western Nepal. The words of the song are composed by performers and the form and purpose varies according to the context or circumstances (further detail is provided in the glossary as well as throughout the main body of this chapter and the following chapter).

With reference to Maithil communities in southern Nepal, Davis (2009) suggests that the narratives of women are largely unacknowledged, underappreciated or misunderstood. Women’s knowledge, dilemmas and values are decentred while the exploits and speech of men are more commonly centred. She refers to storytelling, painting and singing as some of the few outlets for direct, extra-household expression that women have as compared to their male counterparts. Like Davis experienced with the Maithil women, I would suggest that storying and performing deuda are two expressive traditions that women in Mugu have developed to share
feelings, express preoccupations, form perspectives, examine values, mitigate suffering, create meaning and develop frameworks for action. Like the Tij songs examined by Skinner and Holland (1998), I believe that the deudas and stories composed by the women of Mugu are not merely portrayals of their lives; they are interpretations of those lives, they are means of creating identities, constructing alternative femininities, and ‘producing alternative ways of envisioning themselves’ (p. 100). Like the Tij songs, the women’s stories and deudas are spaces where they author ‘new worlds’ and ‘new selves’ (Skinner & Holland, 1998, p. 105).

Deuda performances are interesting in that they are both personal and public, they are at once individual yet collective, and how these aspects are balanced often depends on the particular context in which they are performed. It appears that deuda performances bear some similarity to the blues tradition as performed by Black women. Collins (2000) describes Blues as a site of expression of Black women’s self-definitions and suggests that:

> The blues singer strives to create an atmosphere in which analysis can take place, and yet this atmosphere is intensely personal and individualistic. When Black women sing the blues, we sing our own personalized, individualistic blues while simultaneously expressing the collective blues of African-American women (p. 116).

In common with South Asian epic songs (Wadley, 1991), as well as Black women’s blues, the deuda is appreciated or judged by its ability to do something for the audience, as well as the performers. A good deuda should have a strong message that creates emotion and produces feeling. Sometimes I was unable to understand the contents of deudas sung in Mugu but could gauge their quality by the obvious emotional involvement of performers and audience.

When requesting deuda performances in Mugu, I bore in mind that it is an art that can only be performed under certain conditions and in the right environment. For the first and second deuda I selected villages where I was known and trusted and where I also knew that the villagers were proud of their skills and happy to perform. I left it up to them to self-select participants, as is usual in deuda competitions; however I indicated that I would be pleased to see a variety of women involved, for example different ages, households and castes included. The first and second deuda performances were guided in this way, while the third and fourth were more serendipitous as they were volunteered; I was keen to accept as they added another dimension to what I had already experienced, being performed by an individual Dalit woman (Deuda 3), and by a men’s group (Deuda 4). Further details of how the deudas were arranged and performed are included in the next chapter.
It is also necessary to note that I had hoped to include more deuda performances but found myself limited to four for various reasons. Group deudas were costly both in terms of time and resources because they had to be organised at village level and came with expectations attached (for example that food for the audience as well as prize money would be provided). Other small groups and individuals agreed to perform deudas, and arrangements were made, but they never turned up, while others who were asked to perform declined. It was never my intention to force or coerce anyone and therefore I accepted their right to refuse and made no attempt to cajole. Each of the five women who shared their life narrative were asked if they would like to perform an individual deuda, but none expressed the wish to do so, not even those who referred to their deuda skills within their narrative. This confirms my understanding that deudas only happen when the ‘mood’ is right and it also increases my appreciation of the deuda performances that I was privileged to witness.

Part Five – relational research in Mugu

From the outset I attempted to be open and honest about my research purpose with participants. However I recognised that the wider ethics involved were as much my responsibility as the participants’. Like Estroff (1995), I question the extent to which it is possible for a person to consent to a process whose product they cannot really imagine. So rather than causing suspicion or embarrassment by asking an illiterate woman to sign documents, I focused on giving adequate information and answering any questions that arose. I also found it necessary to consider this as an ongoing process rather than a one-off session; it proved as important to discuss the issue of ethics after the women had shared their stories as before (Josselson, 2007). Informal chat after the storytelling took on significance as an opportunity for debriefing which proved useful to storyteller and listener alike. Not surprisingly, the women tended to have more queries about issues which directly affected them, such as not telling certain parts of their story to other people in the close community, rather than concerns about abstract issues such as how their story is represented or published in a different country. I also recognised that it was my responsibility to make appropriate reimbursement for food and time that people sacrificed in order to share with me. In an environment where people live on a literal hand-to-mouth basis, I considered it ethical to follow local protocol and offer reimbursement.

Before entering the field I anticipated that I would need assistance while in Mugu. I did not need an ‘interpreter’ in the traditional sense, in that I was fluent enough in Nepali to understand local people and communicate with them, but I knew that it
would be better not to proceed alone, for several reasons. One reason being that life in Mugu is very communal and relational and I knew that if I were to work alone, walk long distances alone and approach people independently, it would cause concern, discomfort and perhaps even suspicion. Despite, or perhaps because of, my previous experience and relationships in the area, people would be concerned for me as well as on their own behalf. Rather than asserting my independent nature, I knew that it was more appropriate to let someone else set up interviews and make the practical arrangements on my behalf. It had taken me a long time to learn that interdependence is not the same as dependency and that allowing someone to liaise or make the initial introductions on my behalf was not formal or hierarchical but a way of strengthening connections and giving legitimacy to relationships. I also knew that it would be helpful to have someone involved in the research with me, who could listen in their first language and give an overview or summary of anything that I missed and with whom I could have discussions about local vocabulary, practices and customs, as well as the various possible nuances of meaning in what was being said.

I am relatively fluent in the Nepali language, having studied it and used it for so many years; yet I was also prepared for it to be one of the major struggles of the research project. Before going to Mugu I had been using Nepali for four years in other districts (Kaski and Palpa) where I previously lived and so I was quite confident. However, when I got to Mugu I was shocked at how my language didn’t ‘work’ and how it felt like I had to start from scratch with my learning. My problem was not just a lack of vocabulary and difficulty with the regional dialect; it was also unfamiliarity with the way of living and the methods used for everyday survival. I needed to learn so many new concepts and even a new way of thinking. From this experience I learnt that translation is more than a technical proficiency in exchanging words from one language to another (Temple & Young, 2004). Accepting that language constructs meaning rather than expressing it (Barrett, 1992; Bradby, 2002) means that a struggle with language is central to this research project, just as it was central to my experience of living in Mugu.

I knew there would be many advantages, as well as challenges, in working with an assistant, but I was not sure beforehand how it would work out in practice. Once again I had to balance positive and negative factors and make decisions and compromises. I could not solve dilemmas; often I could only journal what my reasons for making the choices were. Just as it is vital for a researcher to be reflexive about their own positioning, similarly it is important to explicitly
acknowledge the presence of a translator in the research process. Qualitative research accepts that language is not neutral and is aware that it is necessary to be reflexive about the researcher’s positioning, but surprisingly, even qualitative research often ignores translators’ involvement. Temple (2002) comments, ‘much cross-language research continues with an unquestioning acceptance of the non-problematic use of translators... Currently, translators are ghostwriters – there, but generally unacknowledged’ (p.845).

In the end I made the decision to work with two Nepali colleagues, Rajendra and Anju, and gradually we created our own way of working in which we all had different roles and could contribute our strengths to the project in different ways. Rajendra is an educated male from a high caste (Brahmin) background who is confident in English, Nepali and also the dialect common to the mountainous area of the far west of Nepal including Mugu. I had worked with him in Mugu for several years prior to doing this research and appreciated his sensitivity, respect for rural living, concern about injustice and his ability to be reflexive as well as his technical language ability. Anju is a Chettri woman from Jumla (the district adjoining Mugu), she has a basic education and now works in community development. She has had a difficult life and can empathise with many issues that women in rural villages face. She speaks Nepali and the local dialect of Mugu, but not much English and she was not familiar with qualitative research methodology.

I accepted that I was not going to find anyone to work with who was a ‘match’ with the participants in term of social characteristics and who was at the same time educated, familiar with research processes and able to speak English fluently. I am not working within a positivist paradigm aiming to eliminate bias or conduct objective value-free interviews and do not assume that it is possible to get ‘truthful’ accounts on the basis of corresponding social characteristics. As Temple and Edwards (2002) point out, there is no single axis of similarity and difference, it is impossible to set up stable definitions of ‘them and us’ as there are many borders of fluctuating significance and a multiplicity of border crossings. Recognising this, I had to reflect on the dimensions which were likely to be most important as well as considering who was actually available to work with me.

Both Rajendra and Anju were familiar with Mugu without actually being part of the community, they were interested in the project and able to give the time to it that was necessary, and importantly, they had an attitude that I considered to be appropriate to the ethics of the research. The ethical issues which were relevant to
me also had to apply to Rajendra and Anju as they became involved in the research and formed part of the relationships that the research revolved around.

When listening to female participants' stories I mostly worked alongside Anju. In this context the dimension of gender identity seemed important to ensure that the women felt comfortable about sharing personal and intimate details of their story. We generally tried to let the women direct their own narrative flow and interrupted as little as possible. This was an appropriate style, not only because of the language issue, but also because women in Mugu are experienced in sharing stories amongst each other whereas they are less familiar with the more formal question and answer style of interviewing. The questions asked were mostly my questions and were intended to keep the flow going and also to give some (but minimal) direction. If I did not understand something or I needed clarification, I made a note and then asked Anju at the end. We could then check the details with the participant afterwards rather than disrupt the flow of their narrative.

As can be seen from the next chapter, the process and time spent with the individual women varied. Most of the women took at least a couple of hours to tell their story, but for some the sharing was shorter and more intense while others took longer to say what they wanted. For example, Dhanamaya's narrative seemed to flow quickly with words tripping over each other in a hurry, while Hansa and Jangmu both took longer to express themselves and often paused in the process. Hansa took an interval in the middle while Gita's sharing took place over a longer stretch of time with several interruptions and eventually a change of location to allow her to continue without distraction. Making or maintaining a relationship with these women involved following local protocol, such as accepting cups of tea and making small talk rather than rushing rudely ahead with my own agenda. But it also required that I was sensitive to the demands on their time and did not over-stay my welcome. Again this varied from situation, for example with Rina the 'pleasantries' were observed ongoingly when I ate in their teahouse, so the time set apart from her duties was the delineating factor, and with Dhanamaya the narrative interview was part of a longer stay in her household, while with Hansa the time was limited but as she had walked to reach me it was vital to start with eating and only then progress to talking.

I use the term 'narrative interview' to describe the process of collecting each woman's story in Mugu, but I am aware that different people understand this term in different ways. Riessman (2004) describes the narrative interview as a discursive accomplishment in which two people are actively involved in producing meaning.
together, while Josselson and Lieblich (2003) point out that a narrative research interview is different than a traditional research interview or a clinical interview in that it requires the researcher to keep her research aims and personal interests in mind ‘while leaving enough space for the conversation to develop into meaningful narrative. It has to procure “stories”, namely concrete examples, episodes or memories from the teller’s life’ (p.270). Like Josselson and Lieblich, my intention was to procure stories and I ensured that the conversation was left open by inviting the participants to talk about their own experiences. I did not have a fixed series of questions to work through, but I did have research aims in mind and used questions as prompts to encourage the women to share further and to include experiences that they considered relevant.

As Trahar (2011) points out, ‘the extent to which the interviewer will share aspects of her own life and experiences is contingent upon the extent to which she sees herself and her own stories as contributing to the development, the ‘thickening’ of others’ stories’ (p.50). In the context of Mugu, I was convinced that sharing my personal experiences would be unlikely to contribute to the ‘thickening’ of stories but rather risked distracting the women from sharing their personal stories or leading to conversations focused on comparing and contrasting our experiences, neither of which was my intention. These concerns, as well as the language complication, meant that while I was very much involved in procuring stories by inviting the women to share their experiences, I was not accomplishing it in a style of discursive reciprocity as envisaged by Riessman and other narrative interviewers. However, I still describe the narrative interviews as ‘co-constructions’ because I am aware that the stories produced would be different if the women had told them to someone else; their construction depended on me being who I am and the interaction between the woman telling the story and myself as researcher. In this sense the stories are co-constructions or ‘co-authored’ because they are produced within a relationship (Spector-Mersel, 2010) and are affected by that relationship, despite including a minimal verbal contribution from my side.

With the participants’ permission, we audio-recorded their stories but with the difficult logistics of working in a district that has no electricity or any other modern technical convenience, I accepted that listening and properly transcribing and translating would have to wait until later. Therefore Anju took rough notes that would be a point of reference during the time in the field until Rajendra and I could begin the work of transcription. While Anju was taking notes I was free to concentrate on what was being said, make eye contact and give encouragement to the participant
to continue her story. I had worried that three people might spoil the feeling of intimacy that is part of one-to-one conversations, but was pleased to find that it seemed to be conducive to storytelling; providing an audience for the story while still retaining the intimacy of a small group. Of course the situation varied from case to case; some stories were told in more challenging environments with a lack of privacy, sometimes the storyteller was distracted by interruptions or had to multitask while sharing their story, and for one of the participants Nepali was not her mother-tongue. We learnt rapidly from experience and my assistants helped me to make things as easy and smooth as possible. I accepted that the issues outside our control were part of doing research in the social world; I felt privileged to be working in the noisy, unpredictable and beautiful world of Mugu rather than the controlled environment of a laboratory.

It had been my intention to organise a narrative interview, a stakeholder interview or a deuda every other day and to spend the day in between focusing on making rough preliminary translations, discussing notes and preparing for the next day. I was not surprised when it did not really work out that way in reality. Often it took longer to reach a certain destination than anticipated, or someone could not be found when initially looked for or something unexpected occurred. Having had experience of time in Mugu I knew that things could only be planned loosely. With the long distances that had to be walked as well as having no phones or emails to rely on, schedules could rarely be planned much in advance and timetables made little sense when put in conventional box-format on paper. Despite being aware of all this, it was impossible not to feel frustrated at times when it seemed to take an incredibly long time to achieve something relatively simple. For example we repeatedly looked for Jangmu and despite being told that early morning was when she was most available it took many days before we actually met her. Similarly, I had anticipated that the first deuda would only take a few hours and could be ‘done’ in a day whereas it took a full day to walk there, then an entire day to organise the event and then a day to walk on to the next venue. However, I also reflect on how willing and helpful people in Mugu were, how often someone volunteered to run around the mountains just to assist with organising an event for me, and how much effort was expended on my behalf. Time has its own pace and value in Mugu and I knew that I had to plan according to the local contours and match my pace to those who were graciously participating in my research and allowing me to temporarily disrupt their lives.
Rajendra was kept busy with more than just the liaison dimension that I have already mentioned. Having previously worked together on education issues we had developed a strong professional relationship and I found it useful to be able to ask questions, and discuss the stories I was collecting as well as the ethical issues arising. Like both Edwards (1998) and Neufeld et al. (2002), I really benefitted from involving both Anju and Rajendra in the discussions about the research. And as exemplified by Edwards and Neufeld et al., I realize that it is vital to acknowledge these translators in the research because they have inevitably been involved as more than just technical language experts; in some ways they have acted as analysts and cultural brokers. This is also relevant to the transcription and translation work which Rajendra and I worked together on, and which proved to be just as challenging as collecting the stories in the field.

I have learnt that a research project which involves more than one language is not easy; there is time, effort and expense to be considered, and I found it challenging despite being familiar with the language of the participants. However, as Temple and Young (2004) point out, conversations with people who use other languages are difficult but not impossible and certainly they are necessary ‘if we are to move on from the objectifying gaze on difference’ (p.174). While it was frustrating to conduct interviews in a language not my own, I realise that the language issue was also an effective equalizer with regards to power. For example, more than one woman reflected on how they were aware of my struggle for words and this made them feel more relaxed about their own struggle to tell their story and to be open with me. I am also convinced that working with translators as colleagues benefitted the project – in fact, I cannot imagine not having involved them. I believe they have contributed quality and depth to the research which otherwise would have been lacking, and that they also played a key role in the support and self-care of the researcher.

Part Six – the researcher in Mugu

From where I was living, on the top of a long mountain ridge I could hear the massive Mugu-Karnali River thundering down in the valley below, yet up on the ridge, we had no water. A small plastic pipe had been laid and water occasionally came as far as the bazaar, but mostly it was diverted on to the fields on the way, or sometimes people cut the pipe somewhere along its length when they needed a drink. After several consecutive years of drought, life in Mugu was a constant fight for water. As well as living without water, there were many physical challenges in Mugu; too many rats, lack of food, no facilities such as toilet or shower, living in very
close confines with other people, no doctors or official legal system, and no roads in or out. No roads meant that getting in and out of the district was dependent on getting a lift on the helicopter which brought in the World Food Programme (United Nations) rice. When the weather was unsettled this was a dangerous flight between mountains that pilots were not willing to risk, therefore at times there were no flights for many weeks. The alternative was more than a week of walking over the mountains towards the south of the country, which was not recommended especially in the last decade of political instability.

While living in Mugu I never took any of these physical challenges lightly and I can tell some dramatic stories about them. But I did learn coping strategies and I am happy to be able to say that I never suffered any medical emergencies or long term effects from the living conditions. However, what often caused me pain was seeing other people suffer, and on such a widespread scale. I never got used to living amongst severely malnourished children, seeing friends being abused by drunken relatives or hearing the agony of an injured neighbour when there is no doctor to administer pain relief. I am aware of the dangers of constructing people as third world victims and the risk of acting within a ‘colonialist care discourse’ due to a misguided notion of ‘Western Girl-Power’ (Sensoy & Marshall, 2010). I have accepted that my role as teacher, development advisor or researcher is not to control lives or construct other people’s stories for them. However, I strongly agree with Connolly (2007) that I am always part of the ‘human community’ and therefore I must be guided by ‘reflexive relational ethics’ (Etherington, 2007), even though these may come into tension with other roles, such as that of academic researcher.

Some of the emotional dilemmas that arose during my fieldwork were familiar to me from my previous years of experience in Mugu, while some of the issues were new because they were related to being a researcher and using the relational methodology of a narrative approach. Not having any experience of counselling, it surprised me how difficult it was to sit and listen, just to listen, to people’s stories. As I sat with Dhanamaya in the sun outside her house and heard about her grief when her children died one after another and her anger when her husband turned against her – I entered into her story and I felt her pain. As I looked at the emotions on her face and listened to her story I became part of her experience and even though I have no children or husband, I could understand by entering her story with her. Frank (2000) points out that storytelling is a call for relationship and we need to engage in stories personally rather than systematically. Along with Frank, I believe that ‘any good story analyst has both an ethical and an intellectual responsibility to
enter relations of storytelling; I have trouble conceiving listening outside of a relationship’ (p.355).

This relational dynamic is what attracted me to a narrative methodology in the first place, convincing me of its appropriateness in the context of Mugu. However, it also gives rise to its own dilemmas. A narrative approach minimizes hierarchical relationship in favour of interdependence, and the co-construction of stories encourages the development of trust, rapport and a particularly intense relationship between narrator and listener. Connolly and Reilly (2007) describe how the intensity of the research relationships and the necessity of becoming an emotional insider rather than maintaining distance, caused Connolly tension. The participants were giving her a sacred gift that caused an inequity in the relationship. After they shared their most private and vulnerable selves she experienced difficulty in ignoring the needs they had expressed, reciprocating nothing and graciously exiting the interview to go away and use their data. This was also my experience; it felt exploitative to encourage the relationship and then walk away from it, all the while ignoring the participant’s genuine and immediate needs. Like Connolly, I felt that the notion of ‘publishing findings and making the world aware of such phenomena were a long way off and distant from the here-and-now interactions’ in which I was engaged with individuals (Connolly & Reilly, 2007, p.536). I had to make decisions about the degree to which I could become involved in people’s lives and there were no guidelines or procedures to be followed. I knew that I had to consider the dilemmas as individual cases and from the perspective of being a compassionate human being; as a woman guided by her own moral conscience; and as a researcher who believes in reflexive relational ethics. It was possible to respond to the requests of some people (for example, linking them with relevant organisations or arranging medical care) but not everyone. Connolly’s (2007) advice has been helpful; ‘doing this type of trauma or challenging research requires courage at the best of times, and fellow researchers must simply understand that research involving this level of human interaction and human relationship is going to feel messy’ (p.453).

The issue of self-care was something that my supervisors and I discussed seriously, before and after my experience in the field. Often concern for participants takes priority in discussions regarding the impact of research, and concern for investigators is rarely part of the conversation (exceptions to this include Dunn, 1991; Hyden, 1994; Riessmann, 2005). The two main strategies that proved invaluable for coping with the tensions and dilemmas arising in the field were
journaling and discussions with my two Nepali colleagues. The value of reflexive journaling as a part of qualitative research has been much discussed in terms of using it to create transparency through critical self-reflection, to add to the validity of the research and to have a record of information as a point of reference when the details become more distant, as well as it being a way to learn through writing and a means of becoming more aware of changes and personal development (MacNaughton, 2001; Ortlipp, 2008; Scheurich, 1997). As well as all these benefits, I found that journaling helped me cope with the pressures of living and researching in what was often an intense and claustrophobic environment. Due to the remoteness of the location it was not possible to interact with supervisors or other research colleagues; I could not schedule a meeting between interviews, pick up the phone or send an email when faced with new dilemmas. In this situation I relied more and more on journaling as a way to express myself, diffuse tension and get new perspective on what was troubling me. Similar to how Morrison (2007) uses ‘columns’ in her diaries, I used the right side of the double page to diary the ongoing events and research activities and the left side to scribble comments and evaluations. Often I went back and added an observation or evaluation alongside an event that took place some days previously. I kept my journal wrapped up in a plastic bag and never let it out of my sight.

Along with journaling it was helpful to talk with Rajendra and Anju as we walked back from interviews or meetings. Walking along ridges or down steep slopes we often talked back and forward and around in circles, sharing our queries, reflections and confusions. Most of the time we could not answer each others’ questions, but we could trust each other and share our own stories as they connected with the new stories we were hearing. Often I was surprised to find that the same ethical issues and dilemmas that I was pondering were also on either Rajendra or Anju’s mind. These walks functioned as debriefing sessions for me as researcher and also for my assistants as well as being opportunities for us all to develop reflexivity, deeper understanding of the research topic and further language skills.

While journaling and discussion were both very beneficial as coping strategies, it still has to be said that I found field work challenging. At times it would have been advantageous to have been able to step back from the intensity of the situation, talk things over with my supervisors, read the advice of others and accept guidance and reassurance from those with more experience. Sometimes I felt insecure following my own intuition and choosing the route as I went along; it often felt like I was
venturing into new territory without a map and therefore taking detours that were unnecessary. However, I realise that the desire for a ‘map’ was a misguided notion.

Trail maps are not used in Mugu. Even a detailed map of physical features can not show where paths have been blocked by landslides or which rivers can be crossed according to the season of the year. A bird’s eye view which neatly plots a summary of the situation some years ago within square gridlines is inadequate for Mugu. I learnt to find my way around and walk long distances to unfamiliar places by asking people for directions and getting support from locals along the way. No one could tell me the entire route, but they could each give me pointers for one section of the journey. People described things from a three-dimensional perspective and included the seasonal changes and other specifics of the context, which was much more appropriate to the nature of Mugu. It is even more obvious that social realities are not flat, consistent and coherent but multi-dimensional, changing and complex. I had to accept that a ‘map’ with a direct route plotted on it would not have been of any use to me. Despite feeling insecure, I had to make my own way, putting together bits of advice and understandings that I had accumulated, and following the local contours rather than imposing an artificial linear route.

**Part Seven – exiting Mugu**

I watched as my friends, neighbours and colleagues prepared a last meal for us to share together. They chopped up a goat on an old piece of corrugated tin. The blood ran thickly down the lines in the tin and dripped into the dust. The acrid smell of singed hair was soon replaced by the scent of meat, mixed with crushed herbs, roasting over the fire.

I wondered if I would be back again. I considered all the relationships that I had formed over the years in Mugu and then re-formed through the process of this research. I knew that my leaving would break the threads that bound me in multiple directions to these people. I reflected on how their stories had become part of my story and my story had become intermeshed with theirs. This is why it would hurt to leave, but it is also why the lines connecting us would never be completely severed.

It was almost time to leave and I stared up at the psychedelic blue sky thinking about how the stories of some of the people of Mugu would always form part of my story. I watched a huge raptor circling on the thermals above, gliding and hovering effortlessly despite its massive body weight. I realised that my story would change and be re-created an infinite number of times throughout my lifetime, yet the stories
of Mugu that had touched my story would never cease from being part of that story. It could be re-made but not undone. I realised that I would never return to being the same person I was previously. As Andrews (2007) has said, ‘to cross borders is to risk the self’ (p.507); and in time it becomes less about crossing cultural boundaries and more about living between cultural boundaries (p.509).

The raptor soared away into the distance as the helicopter approached. The noise of the rotor blades echoed off the surrounding mountains and disturbed the rhythm of my heart as well as my ears. There was a scuffle over the rice that had been dumped out of the helicopter and soon a fight developed. I took my place on board and covered my ears in preparation for the build-up of pressure. As we took off in a swirl of dust I could not hear or see anything. I wished I could have walked away, getting smaller and smaller as my friends watched me go. Instead, I tried to block out the motorised noises by putting cotton plugs in my ears and listening to the stories inside me. I heard the voices of the last weeks echoing in my head and in my mind’s eye I followed the narrow paths which I knew were below me; the tracks which ran along ridges and valleys and the lines which flowed down out of Mugu district apparently unhindered by boundaries and unhampered by borders.

In popular discourse the West is supposedly essentially linear, while as Ingold (2007) comments, ‘any attempt to find linearity in the lives of non-Western people is liable to be dismissed as mildly ethnocentric at best, and at worst as amounting to collusion in the project of colonial occupation whereby the West has ruled its lines over the rest of the world’ (p.2). As I left, I was struck by how significant lines are in Mugu; these are not necessarily straight lines, but they are very distinctive lines. Settlements form along ridges, people move between villages along narrow paths, trading routes follow the clear lines of rivers and valleys, lines of kinship are important, and the storyline is an integral part of communication. Lives in Mugu are not static or bound to one spot, they also move along their own lines. The lines of Mugu are different to the lines of County Down in Northern Ireland, or of any other place in the world, and therefore when carrying out research in Mugu it was appropriate to follow the lines unique to that context. Ingold’s (2007) conclusion, ‘colonialism, then, is not the imposition of linearity upon a non-linear world, but the imposition of one kind of line on another’ (p.2), reassures me that I made the right choice in taking a narrative inquiry approach; my experience of narrative research involved many dilemmas, but it also enabled me to examine my own position and allowed me to ‘follow the lines’ of Mugu.
Part Eight – transcribing and translating

Once back in the city I began to work with Rajendra on the transcription and translation of the data. I had rough notes, a general understanding and some partial translations (for example of the deudas), but clearly a more thorough and methodical process of dealing with the data was necessary. Recording and transcribing are not always acknowledged in research reports, yet it cannot be assumed that they are unproblematic processes (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999) and this is even more the case when translation from one language to another is part of the process. I was aware from the outset that decisions had to be made regarding how to transcribe and translate the data and that these would have repercussions on other aspects of the study, such as analysis and representation of data. I wanted to remain close to the data and be involved in the transcription myself, but I also knew my linguistic limitations as well as the time and financial constraints that I (and Rajendra) had to work within. A satisfactory compromise was worked out.

Rajendra made the initial transcription from the audio-recording into a notebook in Nepali, including pauses, repetitions and major non-verbal clues, making a note of sections that were unclear. Then working together from this draft Nepali transcription, and also at times referring back to the audio-recording, we translated the Nepali into a draft English version. This was as close to a literal translation as was possible, and at times involved long discussions around a word or concept in order to contextualise its meaning or to try to understand the speaker’s choice, emphasis etc. I had to make many notes in the margin as part of this draft translation. Following this, I typed up these translated notes making further decisions about leaving out repetitions and altering sentence structure so that meaning was not obscured. For a sample excerpt from each of these three stages, see Appendix E.

Even though we tried to keep the process simple and the number of stages to a minimum, it was time consuming and took many more hours than I had expected. Sometimes when I looked at sections of the final text I was disappointed that they seemed to have lost much of the character of the speaker, no longer containing the colloquialisms and ‘feel’ of the original. The translation process continued after I left Nepal because frequently I had to go back to the Nepali or the first English draft, for example to check if a metaphor I was commenting on was actually the image originally used by the speaker or if it had been translated into an equivalent English metaphor. Because the deuda was so difficult to translate satisfactorily and because
the local use of language in it imparts much meaning, I have included the Nepali transcriptions, as well as English, for each of the four deuda in Appendix F.

However, while transcribing and translating was slow and at times frustrating, I also realise how beneficial it was in that it kept me close to the data and made me intimately familiar with it. Recognising that analysis is an ongoing process, beginning in the field and continuing throughout the remainder of the research study, I realise that the task of translating the data became an important part of the process of analysis in this particular study.

**Part Nine – analysis**

As has already been pointed out, in narrative inquiry the researcher is aware that narrative analysis is something that is ongoing and continual. There may be times when the researcher is more explicit about the process or engaged in a more deliberately conscious way, but narrative analysis is not a distinct stage within the research process, which the researcher completes and then moves on to the next stage. Clough (2002) is troubled by the separation of ‘data’ and ‘analysis’ and like him, I appreciate that from a narrative inquiry perspective, a life-narrative should be ‘seamlessly self-analytical’ (p.15).

In his conversation with Clandinin and Murphy (2007) the distinction that Mishler makes between *narrative analysis* and *analysis of narrative*, is useful. He considers the analysis of narratives to be a more general form of qualitative research, and he suggests that anyone who is involved with data in a narrative form – analysing it into categories and themes, is engaged in this form of research. However, narrative analysis, which fits within narrative inquiry, ‘understands lives as unfolding temporally, as particular events within a particular individual's life. The final result is a story’ (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007, p.636).

In keeping with this latter and more specific understanding of *narrative analysis*, I have attempted not merely to think *about* stories, but to think *with* stories (Frank, 1995). It is not my intention in this thesis to dissect stories, reducing them to content which can then be analysed, but to think with stories in a way that takes the story as already complete and realises that there is no going beyond it (Frank, 1995, p.23). Thinking with stories and the ‘storying of stories’ (McCormack, 2004) is by no means a straightforward or uncontroversial methodology. I further discuss some of the challenges and risks in the next paragraphs, realising that in postmodern
research ‘storying methodology... is an emerging field: exciting and important, but still largely exploratory’ (Clough, 2002, p.4).

**Part Ten – struggles with stories and voices**

The issue of representation is central to this inquiry and it is my hope that this has been reflected throughout each section of the thesis; in the questions that frame the study, in the literature reviewed earlier, in this methodological chapter, as well as in the narrative analysis and discussion to follow. Any research claiming to take a postcolonial approach must be concerned with representations that construct ‘Third World’ women as passive or exotic or dependent or homogenous, or unwittingly stereotype them in any other way. As discussed earlier, the risks of colluding in yet another colonising research project are very real.

As part of trying to remain constantly vigilant against becoming an unwitting coloniser, I was determined that it was necessary to include as much of the women’s voices as possible, in the final presentation of my thesis. I did not want to merely include fragments of the women’s stories which could barely be heard amongst the researcher’s interpretations; to rewrite their story and make it mine so that I am still author and colonizer (hooks, 1990). Nor did I want to relegate their stories to the appendices; to marginalise the women and their lives. And so, as far as possible, I have included the full texts of the five women’s life narratives in the next chapter, even though it makes the chapter long. I attempted to compromise elsewhere and to be selective with other reflections and interviews. However, despite these efforts, I recognise that certain issues of representation and voice remain unresolved.

Obvious constraints on voice include the intrinsic nature of the thesis (its written form and necessity of being a certain style and length) as well as issues of language and translation, as already discussed. But the complex issue of ownership of stories is something that also needs to be acknowledged. Because of their co-constructed and relational nature, ownership of stories is not always so clear. Boundaries may be further blurred when someone’s story is translated by an interpreter and then included within a researcher’s story. Josselson (2007) believes that the text belongs to the participant while the interpretive authority belongs to the researcher (p.557). This is useful; but sometimes the ‘text’ and the ‘interpretation’ of it do not remain so obviously distinct from each other.
As well as presenting as much of the women’s voice as possible, in the next section I have distinguished between different speakers (using indentation), presented the deudas in their unabridged Nepali as well as English form, and in general attempted to be open and clear about the decisions that I have had to take and the processes involved. However, I acknowledge that ultimately in the presentation of a thesis, the researcher’s interpretation is omnipresent and that I must take full interpretive responsibility for my understanding of it (Chase, 1996). I am aware that readers will also make their own interpretations, and I have aimed to include enough explicit material to ensure that readers do not end up with ‘an impoverished basis for interpretation’ (Kvale, 1996, p.167) and are able to understand where my interpretations were drawn from, even if they don’t personally agree with them. As Clough (2002) warns, ‘the stories require investment - of energy and emotion and intellect – and so will speak differently to different people’ (p.18).

I have also been engaged in a personal struggle with my own voice in the ongoing process of writing my thesis. Along with many other reflexive researchers, I recognise that there is a fine balance between locating myself in the research and dominating the text (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Lincoln & Denzin, 1994; Etherington, 2006; Trahar, 2011) and I have found this balance difficult to maintain. I have also struggled to reconcile the different forms my own voice seems to take and which frequently clash with each other, for example, there is the cool academic voice which clashes with the emotional field worker and the literary storyteller. I have tried to blend these different voices together more subtly, but am aware that they continue to bump against each other and reveal the multiplicity of voices that are simultaneously mine. Like Leitch (2003) I recognise that;

I also have a much stronger sense of my ‘voices’ coming together, albeit that they are not yet in harmony and indeed may never be. I am aware, as any reader of this text will be, of how one voice has rubbed up against the other in various sections of the text, like flesh against a cheese-grater, but this was all part of the learning process for me, and I am resisting apologizing (p.202).

More than ever I realise the risks involved in reflexive writing and accept that in this type of research ‘the researcher is always partially naked and is genuinely open to legitimate criticism’ (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p.423). However, despite the risks involved I am convinced of the necessity of critical reflexivity in increasing the quality and trustworthiness of research.
Part Eleven – conclusions

The methodological story has been presented in this chapter in a form that makes some attempt to justify how and why particular research decisions were made from the outset to the conclusion of the inquiry. However, it must be emphasised that the story did not proceed in a straight line from outset to conclusion. There were many loops and circles involved, and there was much going back and forward. In inductive research, as in any heuristic learning, the progress seems to follow a line that is un-linear, but often this is not obvious in the final presentation of the research. The research questions which frame this study are not questions that I designed at the outset and used to guide me throughout; rather they are questions that were constructed by the study, coming out of the research. Rather than setting out to find knowledge that fitted with what I already knew, or confirmed theories that I had already chosen, I began with a ‘not-knowing’ attitude (Freedman & Combs, 2002), and a desire to understand people through the stories they tell. I have found this to be a more genuine and ‘real’ way of doing research, but I also have learnt that it is a challenging and unsettling way of approaching research and one which requires the researcher to live with uncertainty and to accept that there are risks involved.

In narrative inquiry it is not always possible, or desirable, to clearly demarcate the different stages in the research process or to neatly present distinct sections of writing under traditional headings. I acknowledge that sections of this thesis overlap, boundaries are blurred, and form is experimented with. It is my hope that some traditional methodological assumptions have been troubled and that as a reflexive narrative inquirer I have availed of the freedom and creative opportunities that postmodern research allows, while still retaining the integrity and ethical positioning that such research demands. As Richardson (1994) points out, we are freer to present our texts in a variety of forms and to diverse audiences. But this does not mean that anything is acceptable, rather it means that we have different constraints and dilemmas to deal with; ‘self-reflexivity unmask complex political / ideological agendas hidden in our writing. Truth claims are less easily validated now; desires to speak ‘for’ others are suspect’ and ‘the work is harder. The guarantees are fewer. There is a lot more for us to think about’ (Richardson, 1994, p.523).

Central to all the interwoven research activities are endless processes of selection and ‘in constantly justifying this selection, a ‘good methodology’ is more of a critical design attitude to be found always at work throughout a study, rather than confined within a brief chapter called ‘Methodology’” (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007, p.35, original emphasis). I would propose that it is vital that this critical design attitude be based
upon a perpetual concern for moral and ethical positioning and I hope this section has made more explicit some of the ways in which I have used my intellectual integrity and ethical positioning to make decisions throughout the inquiry. With regard to trustworthiness, ‘I hope that there is sufficient evidence of commitment to openness and accountability in this research to enable you to trust me’ (Trahar, 2011, p.137).

Behind every story there is always another story, and beyond every layer there is always another layer, therefore it is intended that the story of this methodology be continued in the narrative analysis of the next chapter. The Narrative Analysis chapter, which follows, is central to this thesis. As has already been mentioned, it intends to foreground the voices of five women from Mugu, but the chapter also allows other voices, including the reflexive voice of the researcher, to be heard around their narratives. The result is a layered story, in which the researcher is *bricoleur* (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Denzin, 1994), while the role of narrator is passed between various actors and the voices in the text are multiple.

While the majority of this thesis is written in the past tense, some excerpts of the Narrative Analysis chapter are written in the present tense. This is not to suggest that the events described in the present tense are ongoing or that some descriptions can be frozen in time more than others, but it is hoped that the contrast in writing style between sections will increase expressiveness and encourage a sense of immediacy as well as intimacy. Throughout the thesis names of people and places have been changed to limit the likelihood of identification.

In keeping with *narrative analysis* (rather than *analysis of narrative*), it is intended that the following chapter provides a narrative interpretation in a self-analytical manner. While the chapter will be followed by some discussion, there will not be any attempt to dissect the narrative into pieces or mutilate it line by line in order to reduce it to many single but disparate categories. It is acknowledged that the storyteller is being privileged over the story-analyst and that the next section necessitates a relationship between the narrator and the audience (or reader) in that it ‘requires engagement from within, not analysis from outside, the story’ (Bochner, 2001, p.149).
CHAPTER FOUR – THE NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Re-entry

As I step out of the helicopter in Mugu and begin the walk down the steep slope to Gamgadhi, I think of the preparations that have gone into this moment. I think of the funding, the reading, the planning and the discussions, the purchasing and packing, the organizing and agonizing and I wonder how I could still feel so inadequate and how all my careful preparations could seem so distant and irrelevant. Now I am in Mugu. I am vaguely nauseous and short of breath. I concentrate on breathing and taking one careful step after another and I listen to those around me. Just focusing on these things is enough. Slowly everything else recedes and my concentration becomes focused on my immediate environment, what people are saying to me and my own reactions. I realise that the moment of my arrival is not a momentous or isolated moment in time but is connected to the years spent in Mugu previously, to the months of reading and reflecting since I left Mugu and to the possibility of future theorizing. My body begins to adjust to the high altitude and the steep slopes and soon I can give my entire concentration to all that is going on around me.

There is much to be done in the initial days. As I renew acquaintances with old friends, report my presence to the District Office, meet the new government officials in the area, discuss my plans and expectations with Anju and Rajendra, and generally settle in, I notice changes in the area. New faces in offices and schools, a new bridge replacing the one that was bombed during the years of national conflict, people using solar-charged mobile phones and babies born since I left just over a year ago. I find that the local dialect is quickly becoming familiar to me again and also that things around me seem to fall somewhere in between being familiar and strange; I hope that I can use these factors to my advantage in my research, especially when journaling and listening to people’s stories.

Rina’s story

We sit up on the roof so that Rina will not get called to the kitchen. The afternoon is the slack time of the day but it is also when the sun is at its hottest so we sit far back on the shady side. Earlier in the week I had caught up with the local news as I ate my rice in Rina’s husband’s small ‘hotel’ and in return I had explained what I have been doing over the last year and why I am back in the district. Rina agreed to share her story with me later and her husband had made it possible by promising to
take over her responsibilities in the teahouse to free her up for long enough to talk to me properly.

So we sit on a mat up on the flat roof. I share with Rina that I am thinking it is strange that she has heard so many stories about the lives of other people, as they ate in her kitchen downstairs, yet I have never heard her story. She laughs and says that her job has been to cook the rice and then clean-up while others’ job has been to eat the rice and then talk. And so I encourage her to tell me about her life and how it was for her growing up in Mugu. The interview is being audio-recorded and Anju also sits slightly off to the side taking notes, so I am able to concentrate fully on listening to Rina. She speaks quietly and thoughtfully and initially looks to me for reassurance. There is a sense of ‘newness’ to her story and I am fascinated to sit and listen as her narrative gains momentum and her life takes shape in the following way...

My name is Rina Kumai. My parents’ home is in Rupa VDC, ward number five and my husband’s home is in Rupa VDC, ward number six. I’m 22 or 23 years now and was married at about 17 or 18. After the first year one baby miscarried. Then at 20 I gave birth to Sara. We have a small business here in the headquarters... a teashop with lodging. We’ve been running it since four years now. My father’s name is Kamal Buddha and my birth mother was Lila. My second mother who raised me is Sashi. My husband is called Dilip Kumai.

Keep going like this..? More..?

[Mm, yes, like this... tell me about when you were young... what you remember...]

My mother, who gave birth to me, died when I was about six years old. In that year three of my family members died within six months. At that time we were two brothers and two sisters. Then one brother and one sister died due to diarrhoea and then my mother also... My father faced difficulties caring for us after my mother’s death, so then he looked for another wife. Our second mother cared for us and raised us well. She gave birth to two daughters and one son. Because my mother died at a young age... or perhaps because my father is illiterate, I didn’t get the opportunity to go to school.

My own brother is studying in grade 8 and my young sisters from my second mother are studying in the lower grades... they are in grades three and four in the village. And my small brother has just started school in the first class. My husband has one elder brother and they still live in the village. He has no father, but his mother lives here with us. He has studied plus two and is now trying to do Bachelor... but with the amount of work involved in the hotel, he hasn’t managed the exams.
Mmm, what else?

[And when you were young...? Can you describe your early days of childhood?]

When small... mmm, I never saw my grandparents. We lived in a small house... part of a house. There was my father's uncle’s mother and husband... and we lived in a partitioned part of the house. We lived in part of it and these grandparents [relatives] lived in the other part. My parents worked for them. That grandmother she didn’t even let my mother give birth in the cowshed... she had to be on the road, I heard. So my mother gave birth to me outside on the path... You know that there still isn’t the practice to give birth inside the house or hospital, but to give birth in the cowshed. The woman is often alone and unassisted. She has to cook for herself and everything. Then on the 3rd, 5th, 7th, 10th, 15th and 25th day she has to wash with water and ash. After bathing she must drink some cow’s urine and stay in the cowshed. We aren’t allowed to use the same water as everyone else. Before giving birth to the child there is no opportunity to rest at all. Only when we start having pain do we then go outside to give birth. After the birth if there are many family members around, then sometimes the woman gets a few weeks rest, but if there isn’t enough help available, then within a week she is back to carrying loads and doing the work as normal. My relative gave birth to her third child recently, but it was the busy time and she could only rest six days before she had to return to the fields to harvest the millet and start carrying the heavy burden. That’s life – dukha. So if it’s a son, then a gun is fired and there’s music. Chaiti is played and relatives invited and fed... but if it’s a daughter it’s meaningless...

For us it was different. Sarala was special... my first baby fell [miscarried] and then it took time before I was pregnant again. While giving birth to Sarala I had a lot of dukha. They took me to the hospital here when things were not going well, but there was no doctor and anyway they can’t do operations here. So after four days of trying... here, then an organisation helped us to go down. People had to carry me up to the airstrip... more than three or four people... all that uphill, to Talcha. I was unconscious. My first time out of the district and I don’t even remember going... In Nepalgunj I gave birth to Sarala by operation. I was there a few weeks... so different, but I didn’t see much. I couldn’t go walking around... exploring. But I do remember the journey back. That’s the only time I’ve been out of Mugu. Now I’m pregnant again and we’ve been advised to go down to Nepalgunj for the delivery. My child was born in a hospital by cutting [operation]... would have been different in the village. She would not have survived... probably neither would I have.

So for my mother it was different... on the path and then losing a son and a daughter and then herself... I remember a little before then. Sometimes playing mud and stones and roaming in the jungle. But then later I only remember the ongoing work and tasks to be done. My
second mother cared for us... she washed our clothes and bathed us and did every type of work... her and my father did love us and made no difference amongst us...

Being the eldest, I had to do a lot of work by myself. Even though I was small (I was young and also a small child), the circumstances forced me to do so much work. Grazing the cows, caring for my small brothers and sisters, carrying leaves and pine needles, using the water mill for grinding, picking the millet, working in the fields, cutting fodder, cooking food, cleaning the house... so much work I remember... My second mother was pregnant frequently, so generally I did most of the work alone. In the village it’s our habit that before marriage we don’t carry compost or firewood, whereas in Bhote culture they do, so only these two jobs I didn’t have to do... everything else I did... I had to do.

I had some friendships with other girls and sometimes we would go together to cut grass and then we would sing with each other. But I had a heavier burden of work, so I don’t really remember being able to go to jatras or join in melas. We had livestock too... mules, a buffalo, bulls... so I had to cut grass for them, take them to graze and also look after my siblings. Each week I would also go to the water mill at night, sometimes with my parents or brother. We’d burn firewood and grind the millet, barley, wheat, maize, papad and so on...

The hotel work now is busy... heavy, and probably we can’t continue it, but still it has been less work... not so difficult as the hard work I had to do at home. Many of my friends are still in the village getting more dukha than me. They all got married and are giving birth... doing the farm work.

When my brothers and sisters were small I was so busy with the work. Now sometimes I think and wonder, ‘how are my parents coping without me?’ People from my parental home village all remember me well... I was never sitting idle with no work to do... and people would mention me as an example for others... for how their children should behave and how they should do. And I always wanted to support others in their work, so they remember me well, I would say. My second mother also loved me very much... But when I think about it, I realise how very strange my childhood was... I can remember that while my father was going to look for a second wife, to get married again, he would be away for long periods of time. I had to manage things all by myself, even though I was young. I was responsible for my young brother also. We had a great big wooden box for storing the rice. My father would put the rice he carried from the food corporation into the box. There was a small hole near the top and I could get my hand in and out through it. While the level of the rice was high I could easily reach with my hand and then I could cook it and feed my brother. When the level dropped I used a small ladle that would just fit in, so I could scoop some out. But then if it was lower than this I had to request someone else to come and help open and reach the rice, and only then could my brother and I eat. Strange days...
really had to work out so many things for myself and observe other people... I used to cook *roti*, rice and *kol*.

I had one aunt on my father’s side [phupu] who loved me most and tried to help me when she could. She would guide me with the work and teach me how to do it. Since the young age of seven or eight, when I’d lost my mother, I had a good relationship with my phupu... she was very close to me and still is. Still she comes to see me and we meet every week or month or whenever it is possible. After I got married my parents didn’t meet or speak with me for one year, but my phupu still came to see me at my husband's home and gave me the guidance and support I needed... When I was sick she helped, caring for me and showing me sympathy and love. Even from the small age I’d come and go from her house and the other members of her household also loved me. A few times my cousins and I enjoyed joining in the *jatras* together... but as a child I only remember joining in the *jatras* a few times... mostly there wasn’t the opportunity and just extra work to be done... but we did celebrate *Baisakh* and *Shrawan* full moon. People cook tasty food and eat lots and sing and dance and play *deuda*, and the *dhaami* is spirit possessed. In *Mangsir* most people celebrate *Bhos* and light big bonfires and warm themselves. Both married and unmarried girls can play *bhailo*... but like I say, I didn’t always join much...

I did receive a lot of *dukha*... different types of *dukha*, while I was growing up. I didn’t get education, I didn’t know the maternal *sukha*, I only worked and worked...doing the labour non stop... So I want my daughter to have a different *sukhi* life. I need to give her good care, lots of love and educate her... My own life already feels like it is long. I had a load to carry from a young age. By the time I was ten I had already been managing the household and had reared my brother... I hope it is different for my children. We can give them a different situation... but still... even now, in the remote villages women don’t have the opportunity to study. They have to be involved in the domestic situation... that’s their lot. Like other girls, I’m illiterate, so I’m worried about this and embarrassed now. I face difficulties also in the hotel because of this. Here everyone’s life is the same... because we have to do so much work from a young age we just can’t study. Then after marriage the responsibilities increase and our role is even more vital. Therefore women are very backward...

[Can you share a bit more about what you mean about education and how it would have made a difference in your life?]

Well... *sukha* is to understand things which you can read and write. I am illiterate, so I can’t even understand what is written on a notice board or sign. I still feel regret because I didn’t study. I sort of got a bit of an opportunity to study adult education for a couple of years. But I had to do so much work during the day that it was impossible to give attention... to use my mind for study at night. It had to be late at night
because that is the only time left. Then I would sit down and it was somewhat dark and a short time after sitting still I couldn’t hold my eyes open. We would all struggle but not be able to stay awake. And my parents also used to say ‘what's gained by study? Don’t bother going... the facilitator gets an incentive for teaching, but what is in it for you? You have to work from early morning, now you need your sleep...’ and it seemed true at the time. They never encouraged me to go. They didn’t say, ‘go, study, don’t do more work into the night, it will be good for you to go regularly to class...’

We did have a school in our village, but no girls used to go to it. Only two friends of mine, Nanda Devi Buddha and Nanda Kumai, went to school after their father scolded them and forced them. They studied up to class five but didn't do well with their education...

I now feel dukhit because I didn’t have the opportunity to go to school. Other women say they don’t need to study, but to me it is important. Now I am restricted, like disabled, in the hotel. If my husband is away I cannot write in the register [monthly accounts] who has eaten what... I have to ask someone else to do it for me. If I had gone to school I would have been able to write myself... so education would have helped me... but my parents were not to know that... and even if they had known I’d need it in the future, the immediate daily work was too much. So that’s just how it was for me... My younger sisters now go to school, but even they are not always regular – they stay at home to work or the master isn’t there or the school is closed... always something. Still, they’ve got the opportunity to go to school, which I never had. But some of the didi bahinis, my friends... their husbands are not good. They got married but then the husbands leave them... and they get more dukha as a woman. So I’m lucky that I have a sukha marriage. My husband loves and supports me. We didn’t do an arranged marriage...

[yeah? so how... ?]

I was 16 or 17. My husband was out of the district studying at that time. He got a study opportunity in Pokhara, just for a short time. He had liked me, but I didn’t know him. A didi from the village spoke to him... at that time there was a phone line from Gamgadhi. Then when she returned to the village she shared with me the news. She told me he had mentioned me... he liked me. So I gave her my photo and she sent it to him. Then I waited until he returned to the district. After he’d returned from his studies, he came to the village. He came with a neighbour, twice, while my parents weren’t at home. We made communication... sharing. I didn’t ask about the marriage with my parents... it wasn’t the culture to do so... The third time he came alone to the house. My parents weren’t there. With one of my good friends, we ran away from the village with him. Due to the Maoist war, it wasn’t possible to run away in the night time, so we just went in the afternoon. We stopped on the way, sitting on the path
and talking from time to time. In that way we reached Gamgadhi and were married.

His family accepted it but mine didn’t. For one year mine didn’t accept it. My father hadn’t actually looked or tried to arrange my marriage. It is our culture that if it’s an arranged marriage, then the son-in-law should do a lot of work for the parents-in-law. Two or three people had approached my father about my marriage, but I had rejected and my parents didn’t force it. There is about half and half... equal, love marriage and arranged marriage here. In my opinion, the arranged marriage which is forced is not appropriate... it doesn’t work or last. I have seen many cases when the husband leaves the wife and he remarries again and she has the problem. Arranged marriages are also expensive. A loan has to be taken to manage the food for everyone, the ornaments and jewellery, clothes etc. It is very difficult for the poor people. Some people also do the marriage at low cost, just going to the temple... but there is always pressure and expense and everyone expects...

So then after marriage we lived in his home. We only stayed a short time, so it was ok for me. To me, it is unfair that dai - bhai are allowed to stay in their same home but we bahini must leave everything familiar and adjust ourselves to an unknown environment and society. In general it is impossible for a daughter-in-law to make everyone happy. Mostly mother-in-laws and Jethani make life difficult. They appreciate a daughter-in-law who eats little, who works hard and who doesn’t like new clothes but is happy to make do with old simple ones... and who also respects everyone... who gives respect and support to all. So being a daughter-in-law is much more difficult. As is usual, my Jethani was responsible for inside the house... that was her given right. And as the younger daughter-in-law, I had to do the outside work which was of course the heavier, harder workload. The younger daughter-in-law only gets the food after the Jethani gives it... it is not possible to take it by yourself. In some households this can lead to quarrelling at any small incident. In my case I really didn’t have to stay that long and so I could just keep quiet. Now my mother-in-law lives with us, but that is different than me living in their house... but still sometimes it frustrates me because a daughter-in-law can never do enough... no matter how much a daughter-in-law does, the mother-in-law is never satisfied. Mostly we get by ok. I love and care for her and the fact that she loves and is good with Sarala is useful. Mostly mother-in-laws have talkative behaviour, gossiping all the time. They listen too much to people around them and then bring it into the house, picking a quarrel with the daughter-in-law. This is not so much a problem for me now, probably because we are not living in her place... Just occasionally I feel depressed by my mother-in-law’s behaviour and having to constantly serve her... but then she’s old and often unwell so I can excuse her attitude.

Like, for example, this year my mother-in-law went back to the village to celebrate Dosain. It is several years since she went, so it was a big thing
for her. On the fifth day, the full moon day, she got sick and had diarrhoea. My Jethani didn’t look after her or even wash her dirty clothes. My Jethaju, he cleaned her and sent for us. Sarala’s father carried her back here with difficulty. We got her treatment and I cared for her. She is old and she complains a lot, but I show her love and care for her well. Jethani’s behaviour is an embarrassment. She seems jealous of us here, or something. She often mentions us living here in the bazaar and having a good life while they struggle in dukha in the village. They show jealous anger. But the real situation is that I work from morning to night here, and do my duty by my family and that includes my mother-in-law.

Just the day before yesterday, my mother-in-law got sick again and was sprinkling cow’s urine on her clothes and around her in the room. She’s convinced that disease comes from menstruating women touching things regardless... carelessly. I’ve the teahouse duties to do, no matter what. If my husband is away I am responsible. More than a dozen people eat here on an ongoing basis. So no matter what time of the month, I am in the kitchen. This is a problem only to some people like my mother-in-law... ke garne? You know the practice in the village for menstruation?

[yes, I know something of it... but tell me about it please..]

In the Dhaami’s house women must stay outside in the cowshed for seven days. In other houses they stay five days. During menstruation the eating dishes must be kept separate as they are untouchable, others must not touch them. Often there is the practice to throw roti from a distance. We must not touch water and other edible things, or touch the un-dyed white clothing. We also shouldn’t eat milk or yoghurt otherwise the cow will dry up, it is said. On the third day of menstruation we should bathe and wash the clothing with ash. We use a river nearby the village which other people don’t use for water. Then on returning home, a young [pre-puberty] girl should serve them cow’s urine. We should drink a small amount and sprinkle some on the washed clothing. Then they do the same on the 5th day – washing, doing clothes and using cow’s urine. After that we can enter the house.

That’s how it still is in the village. But in the bazaar and other places people don’t so much consider it necessary...it’s not possible... especially younger people feel it has no meaning. But still in the village we have to adhere or they get upset...

[Who?]

...the old women. Here the women just sleep on the floor rather than in the bed, and they don’t touch their husband or others - except children... and if it’s possible, depending on who is in the household, they take a break from the cooking.
Anyway, I do my best to look after my mother-in-law and manage the work in the hotel... but this won’t continue... how it will be I don’t know, but in the coming month we will probably stop our teahouse business. We have been talking... Sarala’s father realises that we can’t continue it. We’ve been making only a small benefit and we’ve both been working non-stop. Now I’ve another baby in my stomach and I know I just can’t do it again, like when I had Sarala in my stomach... He also wants to complete his bachelors so that he can work in an organisation... in the community. Anyway, think about it... it might be the bazaar but there is not enough rice available – we can’t get sufficient rations from the food corporation for all our regulars... and then there is no water coming – we have been carrying water up from the river. Firewood is another dukha... we pay more than 300 or 400 rupees for a load... and still they want to be bribed and threatened to bring enough. So how can anyone run a hotel with not enough food, water or firewood? So we are going to get out of it soon. But then we still have to provide for ourselves – Sarala, the new baby, his mother, ourselves... He is thinking a small shop [stall] would be lighter work for me. If he took his exams then maybe he can get some opportunity... he knows many of those in the organisations who have stayed here over the years... but somehow we have to manage in the meantime. Mostly it’s the children we are thinking about... we have to hope it will be different for them than it was for me...

The sun has gradually moved down towards the horizon and several times Rina has been called from somewhere down below. I know I cannot expect her to give up any more of her time, but I sense that she is just as reluctant to return to the ‘real’ world as I am. Anju goes to get us each a cup of tea and to let them know that we would be back down shortly. I ask Rina how it felt to share in such a way and whether it was something she had done before. She thinks about it before replying;

It felt strange... I mean, I’ve never thought about it all at once before. I’ve thought about bits or shared bits but it is different putting all the memories together and explaining them to you. I didn’t know how to start and then it got going... like it was telling on its own and sometimes I was surprised and now I’m thinking that there is more even than I thought...

Mmm, and anything else you were thinking?

Also it felt ok telling you... I know you, and you have lived here so I don’t have to explain everything but also... I would not tell like this with my own family... with you it is not embarrassing and you are not living here so I can say it all. And at the start, before... you asked me lots of things[laughing] like managing the firewood and the names for things and I helped with that. So this was not so strange... it felt ok.
That evening I drink tea with Rajendra and Anju while sitting on a bench outside my room. Rina’s laughing reminder about the questions I’d had and the help I had needed ‘at the start’ brings to mind my early days in Mugu. I entertain my friends with some of the mistakes I made and the questions I asked when I first came to live in Mugu. As I reflect on Rina’s story I realise that I have still so much to learn and that there is much that these Mugu women can teach me. My struggle with the language remains a frustration and I am aware that I have to put excessive effort into listening carefully but I realise that this also helps to keep me from interrupting and teaches me to be a better listener. I go over Anju’s notes with her and we reflect on the afternoon. Rajendra outlines the interviews he is setting up for me with education stakeholders, including the District Education Officer who has invited us to his office, as well as with some ladies whose perspectives I’ve expressed interest in hearing and who are amongst the minority of females holding positions within the district.

I don’t feel I have done that much in the last few days, yet once again I am exhausted and ready to sleep. I hope that the rats allow me to rest undisturbed tonight.

**Interview with the District Education Officer (DEO)**

Rajendra and I are welcomed graciously into the District Education Office. There is the same air of empty formality as in most other government offices in Nepal, with a few people waiting outside for appointments, many men idling inside and desks draped with curtain material but otherwise unused. The DEO seems pleased to see us. He is sitting on a large chair that is incongruous in the small and rough room and behind him on the wall is a map of Mugu that has been nibbled round the edge by rodents to the extent that only the central area of the district remains. Once the introductions have been taken care of, I explain my background and purpose. After establishing that Nepali will be the medium for conversing, he indicates that I can start to record the interview and he begins formally with his introduction and continues in a rehearsed way that reminds me of someone making a public speech.

Mr S.P. Gurung points out that he has much experience but has held this post in Mugu for only seven months. He states that the educational situation of Mugu is extreme and not typical of the country of Nepal in general. He aligns himself with the government and ‘outsiders’ who are trying to assist the district and is critical of the local people who need to take more responsibility for their own progress. Making use of popular development phrases, he suggests;
This district is very backward in education. To make change and progress in education in this district, the attitude and behaviour of the people must change. Most of us office staff, we are from outside and it’s not possible only from our side, to make change and progress. Local people need to think and make contributions to changing education. We are providing support to develop the strategic plan and its implementation. But to make it sustainable is the work of the local people.

His criticisms relate to the infrastructure and learning environment of schools in the district, to teacher and pupil absenteeism and to how frequently schools are closed. He cites the example of schools in the north of the district where Bhote students in particular are not achieving their learning outcomes. Later in the interview, using the same formal discourse, he admits that there are also problems on the District Education Office side. These include being unable to adequately monitor and supervise schools, difficulties with teacher recruitment, weak relationships with schools and lack of inspection and follow-up, as well as the challenges of providing staff and training for Non-Formal Education (NFE) and the difficulties of good governance and successful implementation of programmes.

When asked about gender and education in the district he acknowledges that some progress has been made with an increased number of girls enrolling in schools due to the attraction of government and NGO scholarships and incentives for girls as well as attempts to employ female teachers. However, he points out that despite government investment, females are much less educated; the adult literacy rate of women is only 9% in Mugu and even the national statistics for the number of females working in government and NGO posts are low compared to male. He suggests that, ‘we still need to give more emphasis and priority to girls’ education’, adding that there are limited programmes for ‘targeting women’ and that ‘it would be better to develop women targeted programmes and implement them with continuity if we want to see changes and progress in this district’. He outlines two main programmes related to female education that the Education Office is currently implementing; Decentralised Action for Children and Women (DACAW) supported by UNICEF which aims to channel resources for women’s groups to advocate for the rights of women and children, and the recently launched School Sector Reform Programme (SSRP) which includes a focus on gender equity in education.

Regarding female education in Mugu, Mr Gurung is convinced that;

The major challenge of this district is poverty. The geographical structure of Karnali is very difficult. There is a lack of productive land
and lack of food, housing and clothing which has a negative impact on education. In society there is no knowledge about family planning. Giving birth to more and more children and getting more and more dukha, that’s how it goes here. Never any economic progress or increase - only progress and increase in giving birth to children. Therefore school aged children cannot go to school because they have to care for their younger siblings. And in general society here has not yet realised the importance of education and especially for girls...

Later he adds;

Still there is a lot of discrimination amongst son and daughter. They think it necessary to educate the son and ok not to educate the daughter as she is going to someone else’s house anyway - therefore boys are much more likely to get longer education, up to secondary and even higher level, while girls are lucky if they get a year or two at the local primary school. Especially in the janjati and Dalit community they make a large difference between the son and daughter. For this, awareness raising programmes need to be implemented and given continuity.

His reflections summarise his thinking;

What I observe in this district is not typical of elsewhere - it is more extreme. It is still basic access problems which are the issue and somehow changing people’s mindset. But how to do that..? Over time and with exposure..? Because this district is so far behind with education that is why it remains the most backward... everyone here describes themselves as ‘the most backward’. Certainly these challenges and barriers are major... and especially for the women, for girls.

I step out of the dark office into the bright mid day and it takes a while for my eyes to adjust to the light. I ponder the much used phrase ‘pachardi pareko’ and what exactly a ‘backward district’ full of ‘backward people’ means. I have a discouraged feeling as I walk down the track and through the bazaar. Images jumble in my head; I see crumbling school buildings, children at home looking after young siblings and teachers nowhere to be seen. These are scenarios I have seen many times. A new image comes unbidden to my mind of a woman being used as a target for those around her to aim at; the suddenness of the image, or perhaps the violence of it, surprises me.

**Jangmu’s story**

Before the sun has risen we walk up the length of the bazaar to near the top of the ridge. I have often chatted to Jangmu on the way through the bazaar and admired the cloth she makes, but now that I think about it, I could not say that I know much
about her life. We have come looking for her several mornings only to find that she was not at home; finally she is here and happy to welcome us. She serves us salty Tibetan tea and we sit on the roof while she recommences her weaving. Anju and I move closer to talk with Jangmu and Rajendra talks with the men, drawing them further away to give us privacy. It is still chilly because of the early hour. Jangmu is wearing a quilted jacket and has a blanket covering her legs as she sits at her loom. As well as her clothing, her jewellery and facial features identify her as being from the Bhote community. She speaks deliberately and seriously but often breaks into a smile or laughs in an uninhibited way, and all the while she is busy with the threads stretched out before her. Behind her the slope drops dramatically into a deep valley and beyond that the mountains rise forming a natural border between Nepal and Tibet.

[So, can you tell me about your life and how it was for you growing up in this district?]

Ehhhh... like what? There is not that much... what to say? You want my introduction and...?

[yes, start with that and then tell me about yourself, what you remember from growing up...how your life was from the earliest memories onwards...]

Hmmm... my name is Jangmu BK. In my village also there are Dalits. I am from the Karan area. In my village they call us ‘Kami’ rather than ‘BK’. My grandfather used to work with gold... a goldsmith. He used to make thin, thin gold jewellery... ear rings and Bhote women’s thick silver bracelets and either gold or silver ornaments. My grandfather died more than 13 years ago.

My home is Mastan VDC, ward number 8, Moba village. My husband’s home is Palan VDC, Rosha village. I am about 37 or 38 years old now. My husband left his home and came to live with my parents. That is how they arranged it. I have no brothers. I got married before 20 years of age... maybe about 17.

Shall I say more... you want to hear...?

[Affirmative noise]

My parents loved me very much. They are strong people, but always wanted good for me. Because I had no brothers, my parents looked for a simple and obedient husband for me. They wanted their daughter to have a good, sukha life and they also wanted a son-in-law in the house. They were thinking that if they had a simple son-in-law, then he would agree to live with them and they would get good care and support from him.
He does not play cards and gamble. If he is drunk he doesn’t make a nuisance of himself - he doesn’t have these usual bad habits...

So, for these reasons, they arranged my marriage to him. It was acceptable to both sides... so we were married.

Before that [pauses, laughs], before that I had thought to get married to... I had thought to marry another boy, from my own village. But I accepted what my parents forced.

I do have an older sister. My parents also made arrangements to marry my sister to someone who would join the family. But that did not work out so well... In the end it didn’t go according to my parents’ arrangements... [pause]

My mother gave birth to six sons and five daughters, as far as I have heard. But only my sister and I lived, all the others died at a young age... and some at an older age. I do not know so very much about this... the reasons... I am not sure... my grandmother [father’s mother] did not care very well for my mother, her daughter-in-law, because my mother is from Danlu... Also, I think because of the burden of the household work my mother could not care for her own children... but certainly my grandparents did not really give much care at all...

Women just have so much work... such a heavy burden of it. Even if they work continually, non-stop for nine months of the year, it is not enough. There is not enough food for the other three months...

We have fields we plough with only a single bull. By pulling the bull from in front and pushing from behind. Village women have to weed the crops, harvest the crops, carry the compost, cut and carry the fodder and collect the firewood...we have to prepare food and manage for the household even when there is nothing... All the woman’s responsibility.

As for washing selves and clothes...that is just not possible. Ahhh, so much work. Never done...

I stayed in my parents' house after marriage and I did all these tasks. Nowadays because of the rice distribution it is somewhat easier for women in the villages round about.

I have been staying in the district headquarters area since 2058 (2001). So in the present I have it easier... although, often just as much worry, I would say... That is eight years I have been in the bazaar. My parents are in Moba still. My father is 62 and my mother more, maybe like 65 years.

Some things have changed... improved in our village. Organisations are working there now. Many people have benefitted financially from the yarchagumba business. You know about this? [I nod, she continues.] From this they have bought livestock; yaks and sheep. Now my parents
are old. They receive ten kilogrammes of rice as distributed from the food corporation in the district headquarters. They carry this home and then make chang. Because my father has skills... is a skilled worker, he can earn the local red rice from Rupa, Lakan and other places. After collecting the rice, then he would request my husband to carry it to the village and my husband would do so. My father did woodwork and hand weaving, for example for ladies’ blouses and men’s trousers. He also can make dokos from the thin type of bamboo. He was successful...

[And what about before... when you were young? Can you share some of your earliest memories...what you know from your birth onwards..?]

We don't have the tradition of giving birth in the hospital. We also do not have much knowledge about such things... I was born in the village. My own children I gave birth to inside the house.

When I was born there was my grandfather and grandmother and my own parents at home. My village joins the Khasan area therefore we have some influence from them like practice of giving immunisation to children...

I always felt as a child that I was the favourite within the family. I got more attention... more love from my parents. So many children in our family died... Like when I got married, my parents gave me more clothes and jewellery than my sister...

But within the village we are the lower caste. When I was young I was always aware that the higher caste people from the village showed hela against us. Upper caste people also gave dukha to lower caste people who used to go to school. In our tradition the upper caste drink water from us. They also accept uncooked meat from us - but not cooked. We can drink alcohol together inside the home. Dalit and non-Dalit boys and girls can get married if they want but it is not allowed... not approved. From the milk, when we make butter, then the butter and ghee is accepted by non-Dalit, but the remaining butter milk is not. Strange... don't you think? And in our area we make oil from walnut and duthelo berries, grinding by hand. The oil is acceptable by non-Dalit, but the remaining peena is not. They consider such to be polluted.

Anyway, as a child, what I remember as well as work is playing about. I played a lot in the stones, mud, rubbish... I played nearby in the empty junctions and spaces between the houses.

We used to go to look after the cattle in the jungle. We had to take them to the forested area, the shrub area, to let them graze. We used to have 15 cows; I can still remember them all! I would always go along with others; other girls.

I only worked and played with other girls. The boys would just fight with us – threatening and teasing us! But when we girls united, then they
could not best us... and if they came to hassle us, then together we could easily defend ourselves...

In Bhote culture boys and girls do not play *deuda* together at night that is only amongst *Khasan* that they do that.

As a girl I had many tasks to do, but my main responsibility was looking after the cattle. Who else was going to do it? We have the tradition after the peak farming season – the planting time - is over, we take the cattle up to the *lek*... we have houses up there too. Mostly us girls used to go to look after the cattle there in the summer. Ehhhh, while grazing the cattle we would dance and sing and play. We had a laugh together... it felt like we were the only people around... our own group. But when we went to the houses at night, when the day was done, we used to think about our parents... then we would have liked to have returned down. We would be thinking ‘how much longer..? When can we return home..?’

...but I also had lots of other responsibility in the household. I had to carry loads, work in the fields, do the cooking, manage the firewood and fodder... like I have already said, in order to eat – there is no end to the work...

So... mostly work... the gaps between the work seemed short and not so frequent, but when I think back I do remember them very clearly... especially the times of the jatras... the village times - occasions. We celebrate *Kartik Purnima* in a big way. People came from far away and it is really enjoyable. We worship Kuldeu, Meth, Bhawani, Samaijau, Chalka... they are our gods, they are powerful and we must obey them well...

Then there is also Big *Losar* near the end of Pous and small *Losar* at the end of *Magh* or beginning of *Fagun*. These are the main festivals we celebrate. I remember the years when my parents gave me new material for wearing... and all the women would put on their traditional ornaments and jewellery with their new clothes. It really is enjoyable. I especially remember the times when we would invite relatives, at *Losar*. First we would call the nearby relatives and neighbours and we’d feed them. Then later we invited those who lived further away and provided food for them. Even now I can see those who came and what they were wearing! We do not celebrate *Dosain* or *Tihar*...

There is also another special occasion that I remember from when I was a girl. We carry the god’s image up to *Chaianath*. I remember, as a girl I was allowed to go with them a few times, in *Baisakh* to *Naichin* where there was a *mela*. Such fun! Some of us would wear the Bhote costume... traditional clothing and ornaments and we stayed there two days. The lamas did *puja*. There is a big *gumba* there. Then after returning from there to our village, we would do our own dance in our language. We call it playing ‘Bhote Sello’ dance. Sometimes these days
we are invited to perform our Bhote Sello dance for others in district headquarters...

[What else can you share about growing up? You have so many skills... and knowledge... and different languages... how did you learn all these things?]

My parents influenced me a lot... my mother really loved me. I respected my father a lot and was affected by his thinking and opinions. I used to think ‘my father has no son; I need to respect him and make sukha and good life for him...’ like a son.

I didn’t have so many of my own thoughts or ambitions when I was young. I just wanted to have enough tasty food to eat and to get new cloth for wearing. I wanted to be able to enjoy myself and also to be able to work harder... Things like cooking and house cleaning and managing the household, I suppose I learnt from my mother. Like... to begin with she would tell me how many manna of rice and how much water to add and how to salt the daal, and everything. But later I also had experience myself and could do it my own way... and learning my own way... how to do it through changing it. I also had aunts nearby who I would learn things from.

Some things I remember learning new, from relatives and from my own friends. Some things I just did... I copied from others, maybe... like this [touches receded hair on forehead]. Outside people sometimes ask why we do it. On reaching maturity, usually Bhotini used to make it this way. For this we pull the hair from the front... tightly... to the back. Then we fix it with a stick. After carrying heavy loads, the front hair falls out. Our husbands found it... [laughs]...we think it attractive... it made our husbands look at us...[laughing]... it used to be the fashion, so we did it... it’s not so common now, anymore...

And language... I just learnt from contact with Khasan people. We speak Karmarong, which only we know... it is not spoken elsewhere. Many people in my village, especially older people, still do not speak or even understand Nepali language. Mostly I only learnt to speak more Nepali after moving to the bazaar. But because my village borders on Khasan area, they used to come to our land to do labour. They farmed on our land as daily labourers. So at that time I learnt some of the language from them... things I needed to use. Frequent contact with them meant that I could more easily pick up the language later when I came here to the bazaar. But I still do not feel the comfort... the ease of speaking Nepali, not like my own birth language. We still speak it [Karmarong] in the house...

...My sons are learning different things in school. English they also study. You know that I never went to school. After my older sister got married and left home, I took responsibility for the work in the home. Someone once said to my father ‘you could have educated your daughter...’ But I never got any opportunity as a young person. And
there was never any adult classes [non formal education] run in our village. I would still be interested to study. As soon as we reached Gamgadhi, the first thing I did was to enrol our sons in school immediately.

My son taught me to sign my name. He wrote it up and then I wrote it under and I learned in that way... but that is all.

I have had a lot of dukha in order to make it good for my sons. It is my dream that having studied well, they will receive the good job opportunity... We are uneducated – blind, but they are educated and have their eyes opened ... [longer pause]

But you see for me there really never was any chance... Understand, please...

...my sister was much older than me...as I was leaving childhood she got married again and finally she left home. Listen, before that my parents arranged marriages for her... five in total. They lived, turn by turn, with her... with us in my parents’ home. But my father did not like any of the boys... there was always some problem... always a complaint or issue, so each time he gave pressure to my sister to leave the husband. That was within quite a short space of time... so much dukha, tension, in the household... so she was with five husbands within a short time.

After that she was fed-up. She looked herself and found a husband. With her sixth husband she left my parents’ home, getting married.

Then from that time I was busier in the household and had even more responsibilities than before... no time for anything else. Certainly it was not expected that I would sit idly in school.

Then later, after I got married, I also got pressure from my father. He would say ‘ehh, he is useless! Not a good husband, leave him!’ But I would reply back, ‘I am not my sister, I do not do like what she did... what you try to force...’

The tension increased. After two years of living with my parents we went to Rosha to live in my husband’s home. When my husband was ten years old his mother had died. Then there was only his father and young sister. We lived in his home for about a year. At that time I was still supporting my own parents and also doing all the work in Rosha. Doing the work in both places was impossible... running back and forward... the dukha only increased, with so much extra burden. I could not manage, so we left Rosha and returned to Moba.

Amongst other Dalits in Moba, our situation and living was good, so we stayed there and continued supporting my parents.

But the conflict with my father continued. My husband was tolerant. My parents did not behave well at all. They threatened me that they would
not give us any of the property. Really they showed bad behaviour. So I said we were leaving. Eventually we took our two sons and one daughter with us and left for India. We did not stay very long. After a while I suggested we return home and my husband agreed.

While we were in India they pressurised us about family planning. The doctor came from time to time to our room forcing us to think about it. We discussed it, my husband and me. We realised that many of our grandfathers and fathers descendents died. They had more descendents and more dukha. So rather than having more descendents dying, we agreed to have no more children. So I accepted family planning [permanent].

Eight days after I returned home my daughter died. [Speaks slowly, quieter] During the eight days she only drank water. She would not eat anything. I was so busy with the household tasks... just so much I had to do from morning until night... [pause] I could not focus on caring for her. I don’t know... After eight days she died. We were all so busy working... there was a lot to be done. Many children in the village die...for lots of different reasons... but often the main reason is not being able to care for them properly...

Those were difficult times. And still at that time my parents were giving me pressure... trying to force me to leave my husband. I requested them to give us land... but I would not leave my husband. They would not agree to this. We quarrelled and argued... the atmosphere was very negative. I felt so much dukha and pressure from every direction. It was a time of torture. Finally we took ten manna of millet flour and left home with little else. We walked to Gamgadhi. After five days of only eating millet bread, both my sons cried and begged for rice. On the sixth day we went to one local teacher and his wife. With palms pressed together we begged. We returned with five kilo of white rice. We ate two kilogram of this rice over the next number of days. The remaining three kilogram we made into rakshi and I began to sell it.

At that time there was a helipad in the school area, below the bazaar. The helicopter would dump the food corporation rice there. I heard that those who carried 100kg of rice from the helipad up to the food corporation store, they received one kilogram of rice. Finding this out, I sent my husband to carry rice. But when he went, a local man at the helipad grabbed my husband by the throat and told him he was not allowed to carry... that it was their tender... [pause] ...my younger son came running to the room crying that a khasan was beating up our father. Hearing this I ran down straight away. When I got there, the man was still holding on to my husband. Without a word, I grabbed the khasan by the throat. Then I said to him ‘hey, we are also poor, we also need to eat by carrying loads. I have come to quarrel with you because we are also humans needing to survive by working to carry the load. I have children to feed too. Everyone needs a share in carrying the load available...’ Then he let my husband go and I let go of him.
Since that day my husband has carried many loads. He’s strong enough and can carry a lot, so he can earn plenty of rice. I have sold much rakshi and everyone has had enough to eat, most of the time.

My sons, now, they don’t need to carry the load like me to get food. They are not illiterate like me. They are clever. They have been doing well with their studies. If I had another chance at life I would study also and sit on an office chair doing a waged job...

Education helps to open the eyes. If I had studied, I wonder how my situation would be like? Sonam who was born at the same time as me... he studied and now he is a permanent teacher drawing a monthly salary. Others who also studied have jobs. None of us girls studied at all. My friends are all still continuing in the dukha situation... some even more than me...

Ehh, making this material [gestures at her weaving], how much dukha I have had. While sleeping at night I have pain in my back from sitting like this, working long hours at it. And selling rakshi... what security or satisfaction is there in that? We are not supposed to be brewing it. From time to time the local administration opposes and searches the places... and if they find rakshi they throw it out on the street. If I had studied it could be that I would also have an office job. Being a janjati as well as a Dalit woman... if I had been educated I am sure I would have automatically received a job...

With difficulty we have sent both our sons to school. They say that if the children of ethnic groups study well, there is hope for them to get a good opportunity in the future. Our thinking has been, even if we need to sell this house, we will ensure our sons study well.

I thought it was a happy occasion, when after so much dukha, we managed to build our house and cope on our own here in the bazaar... but it was even better... the best day, when my eldest son, Pema, passed the iron gate of the SLC. That was the happiest time of all. Others might blame him for things and call him... names... but since he has been young he has always been conscientious at home. He has always supported me on the different work and issues. He has found no opportunity yet, but I hope he gets good work opportunity or a scholarship to continue his studies... these days they say Dalit janjati can get the opportunity... [Asks if I can help link with an organisation]

[So your children have had very different opportunities than you have had yourself... would you say?] 

Ahhh, completely different. I worked in the fields and jungle more like an animal than person. But even now when I am in Gamgadhi, my thoughts go back to the village. That is where all my memories are... and I am always there in my dreams, in the village. After I die, my soul will remain in the village, I suppose.
But I don’t have any regrets, I mean, I do not feel I have made any mistakes... My main worry has been that my children would not get the opportunity to study. But despite all the dukha, I have managed to send my children to school. I am sure it was the right thing... and it will be a great thing if they are given the chance to become something like a doctor or pilot, some day... [pause]

I also think I have done the right thing being involved myself, despite my own situation, in work in the community. For constructing a helipad in the village, I helped, working 18 days. I often led the way with things like repairing the water mill and maintaining the paths. Could be that seeing this type of work, this was the reason they made me ward chairperson. I can’t read or write but still often people ask my advice. It is like I do have some wisdom. But then the Maoists gave me so much dukha for that [being ward chairperson].

While I was in Gamgadhi, without consulting me, the villagers put my name down as ward chairperson. After the Maoists found out that I was chairperson, they came here to kill me. After my father found out about that incident he came from the village to Gamgadhi and told me to give my resignation from the post. I resigned. But even before that... they looted 240 yarchagumba from us and also took our rugs and ten kilogram of ghee. I was too scared to report it to the district administration...

And one time while my husband went to carry a load to Lakan village, they captured him. They threatened him, giving pressure and telling that they would kill him. In the meantime one of the teachers, who had been teaching in our village, reached there and heard the news. He went to them and said ‘he is a simple porter. Giving him hassle and taking action against him - punishing him, is not good. Give him to me... I will take responsibility for him.’ So after that they left him and he returned to Gamgadhi. But really they gave us lots of dukha. I have nothing positive about them at all...

[And for the future... what dreams or hopes do you have?]

My hopes are all for my children’s lives. That their life will not be as dukhit as mine... If they have less dukha than me, then it is worth it. But still I worry about my sons. The elder now is empty - unoccupied... if he does not get some opportunity, then it is difficult. Maybe outside the district he has a chance. He has an education so I want his future to include more than scraping the earth for a living. My sons are my hopes and dreams for the future... I hope they get the opportunity I never got...

[And anything else that is important to you... that you’d like to share?]

I think I’ve said most things... is it enough, perhaps..? And thank you for the opportunity to share... You will try to help us? If there is any opportunity suitable for my son... if you know anything... you will try..?
We leave after another cup of tea, but Jangmu's story stays with me over the coming days. I hear her voice and see the expressions flitting across her face time and again. I begin to realise the privilege but also the expectations and responsibilities that come with being a listener - a ‘receiver of stories’. That night I look up at the stars. They seem so clear and so close in the dark sky, and the hazy band of light that is the Milky Way is particularly distinct. I wonder about the stories I am collecting and the thoughts in my mind that seem to be as scattered as the billions of stars in the night sky. I know that patterns and connections will emerge from the data, but it is too early to look for them yet, so at this stage I am content to admire the wonder and contemplate the breadth and depth of what I am learning.

**Interview with Aruna Devi Malla**

The interview gets off to a slow and painful start and I feel that I am struggling. Aruna is the female representative on Mahakali High School Management Committee and she is also a member of the management committee of the recently established Rara Campus (college level), so I mistakenly assume that she will have a certain level of confidence and will feel at ease with an informal interview. I ask her about her role on the committees and as I try to encourage her to share about the gendered aspect of her role, it feels like I am interrogating her. She does not seem comfortable and I wonder if it is the venue (we are using the office of a local NGO as it was an empty quiet space that was available), or if it is because I am a foreigner with clumsy words and who she only knows by sight, or if it is Rajendra’s presence, or some other factor that I could have managed better.

Rajendra brings us small glasses of herbal tea and I change track and ask Aruna more general questions about the situation of women in Mugu. Gradually the atmosphere becomes more relaxed and while she still keeps her eyes downcast, I begin to hear her quiet words;

*What would you say about the situation of women in Mugu district?*

Women are busy in the household work, inside and outside. Most of the women are illiterate and lacking in knowledge. Society’s perspective of women is not good.

*Can you say a bit more... what do you mean by this..?*

Women cannot freely do their thing, society does not allow them to go forward... it is not seen positively if women sit with and speak or walk with men... they see that as ‘ruined woman’... Things are changing for
men... they are educated and are getting jobs, but for women it is different, things are not so much changing.

[So... can you tell me a bit more about what sort of opportunities or challenges the women in this district face?]

There are various opportunities available but women don't know how to get these opportunities. A programme to guide... to help understanding is necessary for women...

And mother-in-law, father-in-law, and husbands all need to get awareness raising about women's empowerment... some women can't even speak out, say their name... such shy women need to be empowered... that's what I think... what is said...

[What do you think would improve the situation of women... how can they become more ‘empowered’?]

Raise awareness from village to village... implement women focused projects providing information about health, education, nutrition, rights and so on... and... and manage adult education for women and implement sewing and other types of skill based activities...

[How is the current situation in Mugu regarding women and education?]

Compared to before, now there is much awareness. The number of daughters in school has begun to increase... but still we need to increase the awareness further... still the daughters of the most poor and marginalised are not in school. There needs to be awareness raising about equality for getting rid of the discrimination among sons and daughters...

From my own side... you know I am not educated... I only studied to class two. When I was still very small age, my parents died. My grandparents were old and poor. Because of the different farm work needing done, I had to graze the cattle. With difficulty my grandparents raised me... but that did not include continuing at school... Even after marriage I never got sukha... but my sons are both SLC passed...

After some further discussion about Mugu’s education system in general, I ask about who most commonly is excluded from education - who finds it particularly difficult to access education and she replies;

The extremely poor, women, Dalits, some ethnic groups, families that have a big number of children and households with illiterate parents... these are all behind regarding education... Some of them don’t have the awareness to give priority to education and others know it and want it... but their household situation makes it not possible. That's the problem – education would bring change to their situation... but unless their
situation changes they are not able to get education to start with... so it's... so they are stuck.

[Mmm, can you say more... what you mean by that..?]

Well, if they get education then they can get a job and improve their economic situation... but because their economic situation is so poor now, they cannot get education in the first place... that's what I mean... they are blocked.

[And to change this..?]

Then we have to change everything..! I don't know... maybe there is no solution... only slowly improving things... giving people more support to get into education in the first place... I don't know...

[And just finally, could you share a bit more about why you think education is important..?]

Those with education have 'four eyes'. If we have no education it is like only two eyes seeing in an empty way... Education is the individual's property... it's an investment.

[Could you explain more?]

It makes one become clever and helps on being able to look for... get an opportunity... It develops ideas... creates the environment for getting employment... It helps one to stand on ones feet. I think it also reduces the *heila* that one has to tolerate from others. But the uneducated have to be dependent on others to survive... whatever comes their way they have to tolerate... People are now seeing and hearing this from others, they are coming to realise and accept the importance of education... Both my sons are studying at plus two level now, my economic situation is very poor, so my elder son is working as well as studying. I hope they can continue their studies in this way... study and also work to support it, and continue in this way... but it is best for them to continue their studies, is my thinking. I was different... as a woman of the previous generation and an orphan... there was no chance, it was blocked... closed. My sons were also left without their father recently but have managed to continue with their studies... it is important, that is what I am meaning.

Some days later I talk with another lady who is also called 'Malla' (*Thakuri* caste) but while some of the discourse and content is perhaps overlapping, the contrast between Aruna Malla and Rekha Malla’s speech, appearance and attitude could not be more marked.
Interview with Rekha Malla

Rekha is wearing gold jewellery and modern Nepali style kurtaa-surwaal. She speaks loudly and at times her voice sounds harsh. I have visited the school she teaches in and I know her as someone who is politically active in the district and involved in NGO activities. The main excerpts from the interview are as follows;

[Can you introduce yourself, please?]

My name is Rekha Malla. My parental home is Khada VDC, ward number 2, Badal village. And my husband’s home is in Chadda. His name is Jiban Bahadur Malla, we got married in 2047 BS [1990]. I have been teaching for 17 years, 16 of which I have been a permanent teacher. I am also active in various social capacities. My husband is a respected man who is also involved in education and has many social and political responsibilities. My two eldest children, one son and one daughter, are studying in Kathmandu. My youngest son is here studying in class three in our own boarding school in Gamgadhi.

[There are not so many local female teachers... can you tell me about your own education and how you came to be a teacher?]

My father’s name is Ram Nath Bham [Chettri]. I did inter-caste marriage. My father worked in the District Administration Office at non-officer level. My parents gave birth to six daughters and one son, but only we four sisters lived. Probably not having a son, my father gave education to all us four sisters. My mother was always busy every moment of the day. She wanted to work continually and give us work continually too. She would work harder than even the neighbours. My father would say ‘stop worrying about four manna of milk, it is more important to send our daughters to school’. So I started my education in Bhanstok School which is nearby my village. As I would go in the morning, the villagers... neighbours... would tease, ‘oh, now our daughters also need to go to school?!’ My friends were mostly boys, probably because there were so few girls in school. So I seemed to spend more time with boys.

Then when I was only in the third class, my father made me a sixth grade pass from Talla School, and sent me to Jumla feeder hostel... with scholarship. I stayed in Jumla for nine years. I studied hard and learnt a lot. The environment was very different and it was a good education opportunity... a surprising one really. When I returned I got married and just over a year later I started teaching.

[Can you share a bit about the situation of women in Mugu?]

The situation of females from Mugu varies. The life of village women, and especially in remote villages, is the most difficult. Here in the bazaar, for the younger people... for children, it is starting to change, but
in the villages it is still not common for daughters to get an education. I believe that we need to educate all; otherwise we are all stuck in the same ditch. My peer group of friends, mostly they have given birth to dozens of babies, they get more and more dukha and they are suppressed by their husbands and his relatives. The women, they lack independence... they are not empowered. The wives sell vegetables while the husbands spend the money on alcohol and cigarettes.

Due to lack of education they back-bite, show jealousy and knock each other down in order to elevate themselves. I get frustrated when I see the situation – it’s like... it seems they don’t want to change. My goal is to empower the didi bahini of the district. But so often the unproductive traditional practices continue... this is the problem.

My husband is very supportive; he encourages me to be involved in social consciousness raising. That is my priority – to try to serve the female of far remote places of this district. I also hope that after their education my children will return and serve well... do great things in this district.

[You said your goal is to empower the didi bahini of Mugu – in your opinion how can this be best done?]

They need both the opportunity of an education and also awareness raising. Non government organisations and socially active people need to be involved in awareness raising activities and projects in all the communities, even the remote villages and especially amongst janjatis and Dalits.

[These groups are priorities?]

Yes because often janjati, Dalits, and people in isolated villages, they don’t have the awareness, the exposure... and they don’t get the chance to go to school and their situation is the most disadvantaged... the most backward. Like, I’ve been places in this district, remote places where the women don’t even know how to introduce themselves. They have never even left their own village or seen any further than the hill they live on. They are married before they bleed and their life never changes. If their awareness isn’t raised how will their life ever change?

[And in practical terms how do you do the awareness raising?]

In a variety of ways – we can do mass programmes to tell people about their rights and give them information and raise people’s motivation to be active. This is often through mic-ing and placard rallies and street dramas and speeches with dances etc. We also can do functional non formal classes with groups of adults teaching about nutrition, hygiene and child care, enterprise development, micro finance schemes and also teach adults to read and write and speak confidently in a group etc. There are many different ways – often it depends on the project and the
funding available and things... But awareness raising is a very important part of empowerment. It is the first step...

[So as well as awareness raising... the next step?]

People have to become proactive themselves and they also need education.

[why education?]

Education gives people confidence, it increases their knowledge and skills but it also gives them status and an open mind. It changes people’s attitude. Often that is the problem... women’s minds are closed here. There is no road and people have no exposure. They do what their parents do and don’t want to change their ways. Often people say they are too busy and can’t go to class – but I am even busier; after marriage I have had to manage all the household work and children and continuing my own study and teaching and supporting my husband to build our house and looking after relatives and being involved in community service... so much hard work. But hard work isn’t an excuse for remaining backward, in my opinion.

[Currently how is the situation regarding education for females in the district?]

At present, discrimination regarding providing education for boys and girls is decreasing. Overall there are more girls being enrolled in schools. But since there is no provision for practical education for girls, there is little benefit to be seen. They drop out after primary or lower secondary school and the facts and figures they have memorised are immediately forgotten. So it would be better to make education more functional. For females, things like sewing, agriculture, cooking, hotel management and related aspects should be given more emphasis... for female education there would be benefit...

Another thing, most of the girls receiving scholarships from government or NGO side, they are mostly not sending their girls to school. This needs to be changed - more monitoring and accountability is necessary, and parents need to be made aware about the importance and seriousness and made to understand about reducing discrimination for girls.

[And girls who are also from other marginalised groups, as you mentioned earlier... can you share anything about their educational opportunities or challenges?]

Girls who come from families that have many children or whose parents have lack of awareness and poor economic situation, they are less likely to be able to attend school unless they are very determined. And especially girls from such families who are also from lower caste; they have all the restrictions together. Caste is still a major issue, it continues to be deeply held in society. Even when I was small I used to think to do
something after studying well. I didn’t like the discrimination related to caste. From a young age I used to think, ‘what can I do about this?’ I didn’t know that later I would do inter-caste marriage. I played deuda when I was home from Jumla during the holidays. Playing and playing, that’s how I got married to my husband. But it was inter-caste marriage and society here didn’t accept the marriage, so we ran away to Kathmandu for a while.

After returning home they [his family] didn’t allow me to enter the kitchen to cook the food. They ignored me and I experienced a lot of hela. I got such dukha for about ten months. But my husband was always supportive and played a good role to smooth things. Because I got married with a higher caste person, many people told my father ‘chori palera ghar ritto, sallo balera chulo ritto’ [raising a daughter means an empty house like burning pine means an empty hearth because pine only creates ash, but no charcoal]. My didi also got married outside our caste; to a Brahmin. My father would say ‘even though I educated my daughters well, neither of them got married within their own caste.’ And he felt very dukha laagyo. But eventually seeing how my husband was a society man with reliable behaviour, he accepted it, realising that his daughter did the right thing.

So you see, I feel strongly about caste discrimination – it is meaningless and should be a thing of the past, in practice as well as ideology. Now there are plenty of lower caste students in the school. The teachers accept them but often the other students make a difference... because there are still so many social issues. But as with gender awareness, in this also we need to raise awareness and get rid of caste and ethnicity discrimination.

That is why the development in this district is so slow in coming – because of the backward attitudes and unproductive thinking. Also, when donors give resources then people mismanage them, using them for their own personal benefit. They are only thinking of their needs today and not considering their children’s future. The same is true in the government offices and institutions. It needs to change. We got a lot of dukha from the Maoists, but they are right that discrimination must be removed and that there needs to be more good governance and accountability. Bad management and corruption often affects the disadvantaged even more than other students.

[In what ways..?] Well, if resources are mismanaged for personal use, then the marginalised don’t receive – only somebody else benefits, like with scholarships, NGO support, feeding programme and so on. Similarly, no monitoring and no punishment or reward system from the DEO means teachers can discriminate by passing or failing students according to their own mood [on a whim] and often there are so many discipline issues with the students. Employment positions in general are given
according to politics or family connections – everyone knows... it is relations rather than... rather than the person’s ability. I mean, not merit. Exam cheating at higher levels is a whole... industry. But the most powerful have better chance than others... Teacher transfer [teachers are posted in schools and relocated with only a certain amount of choice] is also often unfair – there are many factors but being average, I mean fair, isn’t usually part of it.

Girls and other disadvantaged groups, their parents have had to make bigger sacrifice to get them into school, so therefore poor management is even more of a shame for them – they should be able to experience a good teaching learning environment. Outside teachers often don’t take this seriously. They come and go when they like, often staying in the district for barely half the school year. Yet they still get their salary including remote allowance... But the government officers sent here are often the incapable people who don’t stay long and don’t care about the issues anyway... so all students suffer... but especially the disadvantaged.

This type of thinking and attitude is causing problems in this district. The government and NGOs need to support for making change. At the minute those who can, send their children out of the district or to the private schools here in the bazaar... We have to find ways... But everyone knows it is necessary to change, meaning... there needs to be improvements... I think...

[and how optimistic do you feel about these changes... improvements? Are they happening? How do you feel when you think of the future?]

Of course, change always happens... development will come eventually when everyone has the awareness... and that’s why I say there has to be education. My own life and situation has improved. There are differences and opportunities here also, more than before. But I’m also thinking that in my old age, if it’s difficult to continue here, I can go down... we can retire to the terai...

After some further conversation and plenty of questions from Rekha’s side about my experience and education, we thank her and take our leave. I look out from the bazaar and the early evening light highlights the depth and many dimensions of the view. I realise that no photograph or painting could do justice to the ‘dimensionality’ of the scene before me. I can see ridge after ridge disappearing into the distance; more than half a dozen layers are visible and each ridge is a different colour and even within ridges there are many variations of tone and shade. There are villages nearby and also hints of small clusters of houses clinging on to hillsides in the distance. I am beginning to appreciate how the lives of women in Mugu are as multi-dimensional as the view. As I reflect on their narratives I feel like I am looking into a
kaleidoscope which is continually being shaken. I can identify some of the little chips of glass that are tumbling around; there are different castes, languages, religions, ethnicities, geographical and social locations, economic situations, family circumstances, kinship roles, ages and responsibilities. I feel disorientated by the changing colours and the seemingly endless combination of patterns, but I don’t want to look away.

Deuda one – women of Mugu

The dimensions of the mountain ridges are even more impressive when walking up and down them rather than just looking at them. We have been walking all day, first dropping down into the valley and then several hours later climbing back up the other side, ending up at a village that looked close but was in reality an entire day’s journey away. For those unused to the scale of the Himalayan environment, distances and time are difficult to judge.

As we climb up the steep, terraced mountainside, I ask Anju and Rajendra about deudas. I am amazed that they can walk, breathe and talk at the same time. They are proud of being able to play deuda and inform me that people from the city and from non-western parts of Nepal would not have any idea about deuda. They describe how the deuda is a means of entertainment and that it is a literary way of expressing feelings and ideas. Anju suggests it is a means of sharing ‘higher thoughts’ and Rajendra points out how people often wear traditional clothing and use local dialects, taking pride in their sense of common identity. They describe different types of deuda, including how it is commonly performed as a group or by an individual and how it varies from being a ‘ghar deuda’ performed publicly in the home or village as a common celebration marking an event, to a ‘bon deuda’ which can be sung while working in the jungle or isolated place and usually relates to relationships, nature, love or tragedy. They enjoy describing the different rhythms that are common, how the two ‘sides’ of the circle retort back and forward like a debate, and how villages compete against each other so seriously at festivals that deudas continue for many days or nights. Sometimes they only end when people get drunk or start to fight. Laughing, they tell me about young people illicitly playing deuda at night in cowsheds and some of the repercussions.

Both Rajendra and Anju emphasise the importance of deuda as a means of expression and of sharing feelings in an oral fashion. Anju comments on how a deuda can be an opportunity to say things that would not get said in other contexts and how it puts everyone’s ideas together and connects up disjointed thinking.
Sometimes after a tragedy deuda can be a means of bringing comfort, acceptance and healing. Rajendra is aware that deuda can also be used as a tool to influence others in ways that are not necessarily positive. He refers to the example of political parties who use deuda as a means of disseminating information aimed at convincing or indoctrinating audiences, as well as how older people try to maintain traditional thinking in communities through the practice of ghar deuda. Anju retorts to this by pointing out how it can equally be used as a means of challenging social practices and she refers to her own experience of how Non-Formal Education groups used deuda to debate issues such as community forest management and how to make changes at village level. I ponder their examples, becoming aware that deuda can be used to reproduce and strengthen the status quo or used to disrupt existing social norms. I laugh at the example of a local child-club who shocked their elders by using deuda as a public forum to shame those who had been caught during the week using the path as an open toilet instead of the newly built latrines in the village. Not surprisingly, the children’s deuda drew a large audience by sharing the details of how they had patrolled paths with sticks night and morning, and who they had caught with their pants down!

We are welcomed to stay the night in the village and the next morning as we make preparations for an afternoon deuda competition, I have a sense of anticipation. When the ceremony begins, I am treated as a foreign dignitary even though I have often stayed in this village in the past. I feel self-conscious seated amongst the male leaders of the village with a flower garland around my neck. There are some preliminary speeches and welcome songs and then the group of women who will perform the deuda come forward dressed up for the occasion and looking as self-conscious as I feel. They are mostly upper caste (Chettri) women and are older married ladies who have volunteered to compete. The audience sits around on the ground and perches on roofs; in groups of women and groups of men. As well as providing the prize, I have also been requested to take photos and send them later, so I fulfil my obligations as photographer. I am happy to be able to leave the judging of the competition to others more experienced than myself and enjoy the performance. Even though deudas are sung slowly and each of the paired lines are repeated twice, I know from experience that it will be difficult for me to understand the words, so I enjoy the appreciation on the faces around me and look forward to translating and discussing the recordings later.

The women jostle into formation, both sides taking each other’s arms. The circle begins to shuffle round, first in one direction then the other. There are a few false
starts at a chorus. Initially their voices are ragged and not in unison but soon they pick up volume, their feet and hand gestures come together, and their voices become harshly harmonious as they sing;

A) Happiness on the birth of a son, sadness if it’s a daughter,
Half on the earth are women, yet never getting sukha.

B) Taking the son to school and sending the daughter to the forest,
Arranging her early marriage and sending her off to the in-laws.

A) Tasty food, warm clothing and extra love to the sons,
From she’s small, work, hela and more work for the daughter.

B) From the cowshed to the forest, carrying firewood and compost,
Work in the fields work in the home; that’s the woman’s lot.

A) Learning the work in the parents’ home, continuing work in the husband’s home,
Mother-in-law, father-in-law and husband, their word must be obeyed.

B) Rising early to fetch water, then cooking food in the morning,
Grass from the jungle then firewood too, and sending the kids to school.

A) Late in the day a few mouthfuls of food, always eaten in haste
While working the compost and the fields, all the jobs must be done.

B) Nursing one baby at the breast with another in the stomach,
No timely treatment so one illness follows another.

A) Without any care, alone in the cowshed giving birth,
Don’t touch the unclean mother, still the old traditions.

B) How many mothers and babies are dying, nobody understands
The woman’s very life, it is considered so common.

A) Never eating their fill, and not getting a rest,
Woman is destined to spend her life crying, that’s her fate

B) Still following the old traditions, none are educated
Efforts to do good, no one pays any heed.

A) The wife is as a shoe for her husband’s foot,
Rights and authority have no meaning, only repression.

B) Men are always honoured, women always hela’d,
When both will be equal, when will that time ever come?

A) Our desires and wishes, when will their turn be,
To move forward, to become educated, it is an uphill struggle.

B) Thinking about the troubles of women, our hearts cry,
You listened to our feelings, sister, now our hearts have lightened.
The afternoon has long since gone by the time the prizes have been distributed, appreciation speeches made and closing rituals performed. The light has faded from the sky and everyone has dispersed, but I can still hear the rhythm of the deuda as I reflect on the afternoon. While waiting for our host to cook the rice, we work on a rough translation. Poetry is even more challenging to translate than prose and the task becomes a process of analysis and interpretation rather than merely a technical language exercise.

The topic I had given for the deuda was deliberately broad; ‘Women of Mugu’. In brief summary, the deuda begins with a comparison of a son’s life with a daughter’s. It moves on to consider a woman’s way of life and the demands of a routine day while contemplating the ways in which women are mistreated and taken for granted. Duty, ‘old traditions’ and issues of purity are upheld, and at the same time, questioned. Education is seen as contributing to gender differences (with sons in school and daughters outside school), and as a possible solution to gender differences (moving forward as a female and aiming for equality are linked with education). Throughout, the deuda is emotional and expressive, using deliberately blunt and dramatic language. Towards the end of the song, the women criticise the patriarchal society they live in, implicating men and expressing a desire for equality. It could be suggested that the deuda begins descriptively and then moves into a more political or confrontational style. Initially the women explain how the situation is; they continue by referring to issues that are of significance; then they question the fairness of the treatment they receive and finally they bring the deuda to a climax by expressing a desire for change. The women begin and end the deuda by mourning what it means to be female, but throughout the song they propose alternative possibilities and they acknowledge that even this deuda counts in a small way towards those possibilities in that they conclude by saying how their ‘hearts have lightened’.

Anju, Rajendra and I discuss endless combinations of words and various possible interpretations, until my head hurts and my eyes stream with the smoke from the fire. After eating everyone stretches out on the floor in the communal room and it is time to sleep. The night sounds of snoring, coughing, barking, and gnawing combine with the remembered rhythm of the deuda and infiltrate my dreams. Even while sleeping my mind seems to be busy processing the significance of all that I am hearing and feeling.
Dhanamaya’s story

Before moving on to another village to participate in our next deuda, I want to talk with Dhanamaya. Several people have said to me that I must hear her story, and as our host she has already started on a few occasions to share some of her life experiences, only to be interrupted in various ways. So when the opportunity arises and she has time to spare, we sit on a bench outside her front door and she does not need much encouragement to begin;

I’m an old woman now [laughing]. There’s a lot you wouldn’t want to hear... not about before. Anyway, now things are fine. Now I can sit and talk... [gives some instructions to her youngest daughter and a neighbour]

My name is Dhanamaya Rawal... [calls for her pipe] Smoking my sulpa helps me think... I’ve had a hard life, full of dukha. I hope my children have a different kind of life... but now I am experiencing sukha. I’ve these [gestures to grandsons] and my neighbours around... and I live here well [gestures with chin to house]. But it could be that I leave all this soon... Do you want the formal... the proper names of my family? You’ve met them... [takes grandson on lap]

[First tell me a bit about yourself... about before. You started to tell me last night but there wasn’t time then to hear it all...]

My parents’ home was Rara... that’s where I was born. My husband’s house was also in Rara. At that time we had a seasonal house in Mattigaon. We’d stay here in Mangsir through until Fagun and the remainder of the year we would be up in Rara. Later the government displaced us all from Rara. You’ve heard about that? It was made into a national park area...They provided us with a bit of land in Gabar in Banke district. Most of our people are now staying down there, on the terai. So we also have a piece of land there now. I have two brothers who are living down in Gabar. I’m the only daughter of my parents. I think my husband is almost 60 years old and I am about 10 or 12 years younger. I got married in Rara when I was 12 years old. My mother died when I was young, about 8 or 9 years of age, and it was about three years before my father married again.

[Mmm, tell me more about your life as a young girl, before you got married...]

When I was young I was strong and healthy. I suppose... I reckon I was good looking... cute, when I was young. My parents loved me a lot. I menstruated by about ten years of age. I used to help my parents a lot, both in the house and also caring for the livestock. I was very useful in the household. I remember playing with friends too... We’d run around wild... often with our own thoughts and imagination, like we were
somewhere else...in another place completely. We thought we had a lot of work to do... and we did... but now I realise we had a lot of fun, enjoyment... we were quite free and unrestricted... what we didn’t know was just how much it would increase, the work... and not just the amount, but the dukha and pressure also. Us girls used to wash ourselves and our clothes in Rara Lake. Being the eldest I was always responsible for my brothers. Taking the cows to graze in the jungle was also specifically my job. I didn’t get the chance to study. At that time the only school was in Rara. None of the girls studied then, that’s just how it was. My brothers were sent to school and studied up to grade 7 or 8.

In those days things were different. If outside people came to the village we would say ‘Gorkhali aayo’ and we were afraid. And if foreigners passed through, it wasn’t very frequent... but if they did, we wondered if they would take our children or do something bad... so we would hide with our children, just in case. And when we were young we only had millet, papad, chinu, and wheat in the village... now it is different with rice available from the food corporation and the donor rice... and there is everyone sitting in school... and definitely more awareness in the village... we cook on pressure cookers now... and here’s me talking to a foreigner [laughs heartily]

Like most women I survived living in an extremely difficult situation. Like most women, I can’t read or write... I had to work hard from morning to evening... and usually into the night as well. It’s understood that women are only for doing the hard work and birthing descendents. I had 24 pregnancies and gave birth to 17 live children. Sometimes there was food to eat and sometimes we were empty. Always working in the fields, working in the home, caring for the cattle in the jungle... always work and more work, only work. Still women face such a life even though I said some things have changed. [Disturbance from children, grandson falls] Children are still dying – you know Manju Kumari bahini lost her baby last week... [She asks if I know who she is talking about etc]

[So what about when you were a young girl growing up?]

I was a young girl doing the regular things. Most of the time I was in the jungle with the cattle. That’s when I met my husband. Ours wasn’t an arranged marriage, we ran away together. Before that... before getting married, for a couple of years I was grazing the cattle and would meet him in the jungle. He’d already been married twice and had left both girls... the first time from Badal and he lived there, but it didn’t work. The second time, paying jari, he married and lived with her for about a year. I knew he liked me. He told me he was going to marry me. My parents didn’t agree, they didn’t allow me to marry him. My husband made many promises. He talked about how sukhā our life together would be, he said many things. Being of the same mind we ran away together and went to my husband’s home. [breaks off and asks if my ring is silver or fake etc]
A year after getting married at about 12, I gave birth to my first daughter [pause] she died at three months. Then after that one daughter and two sons... a year or a year and a half between each... these four children all died. Such dukha. Then the gods willed that the fifth child that I gave birth to would survive. I usually fed my children milk, bread, rice... whatever was available. I remember my hopes for each one and the despair when they didn’t live. Some died from diarrhoea and others from breathing problems [asthma]. In this way I gave birth to 17 children but amongst them only four are alive – two older sons and two younger daughters.

I remember I used to have to put the baby under the upturned doko while I went to the fields to work. I had to do so much work all by myself. Here we have a saying ‘to be born as a daughter is to have an ill fate’

My husband spent his time with some social involvements and political things. Eh, he used to go different places here and there... wherever he liked. He gave me lots of dukha. We had plenty of land so production wasn’t the issue, but managing the work, single handed was the issue... while one baby was on my back there was always another in my stomach. We also had guests coming continually. I often had an orphan or two staying and I’d look after them.

But when one child died, then for a long time I remembered all the deaths constantly. Then my husband started threatening me, ‘your children don’t live therefore I must take another wife’... and he did start looking around and trying to find someone else suitable. So then we fought a lot... always arguing and quarrelling... and then hitting... [expressive gestures and dramatic voice]. Most of it I can hardly remember... why would I want to? Those were the days of dukha, they are like a blur of smoke now, black memories only. But some incidents do stand out clearly in my mind even when I try to forget them. I used different ways to try to stop him marrying another woman. By this stage my husband was spending his nights playing deuda with the girls. In the afternoon he carried on with politics and social work. Now he was no longer sleeping with me and I was spending my nights crying and crying, feeling only the most extreme dukha. Oh those were the dark days for me... being a woman was only dukha for me...

I always hoped that if I gave birth to enough children that there was a chance that at least some would survive. And my husband had become a dhaami. After becoming a dhaami it isn’t allowed to do family planning [permanent]... We have the culture that... we say, ‘one son isn’t a son’ [one son isn’t a family - isn’t enough].

Now my eldest son is 24 years old. Because so many of my children died, I gave him special attention. It was our dream that if we gave good education to our son, he would get a good job opportunity. I didn’t make
him do housework or all the work in the fields, but gave his education priority. So he doesn’t have so much of an idea about the home or farming tasks.

When I got married I never thought I’d give birth to 17 babies. I thought my life would be better... I’d get more sukhā when I got married. I was so naive... unaware of how a girl’s troubles only increase when she becomes a woman. I was so young at 12 years. I didn’t really have any idea when I made my own decision... how was I to know what my destiny was..?

After getting married and receiving much dukha, I slowly became more and more depressed. I learnt that boys give empty promises; they lure the girls to get them and then give them only dukha. We are the stupid ones for believing... expecting. Most women face this same situation... eh, a woman’s life isn’t a life... We women face so much dukha and from no direction do we get any sukhā. Cutting fodder, chopping firewood, carrying water, managing the food and household tasks and the children... so much dukha. And all the while, the husband runs around freely, able to walk and roam where he chooses, even without a purpose. Ahh, the different days I passed...

But being strong, I managed all the things. I spent the days like a mule. But I didn’t go down under the heavy burden... Now my fortune is good. I managed to ensure the education of my two sons. My eldest son has secured the permanent teaching position. First he was temporary and then he got permanent. We have good status here in the village and an uncle was on the committee... so he got transferred to here... now he’s head teacher. My daughter-in-law is also educated and is holding a job. I feel that now the sukhā days have come. I had so much dukha, but now more than anyone in the village, I have sukhā. My son is managing everything for me.

When my elder son was born we arranged his marriage. At his birth his father made communication with the village below about his marriage. It is the established tradition, ‘your daughter and my son... let’s arrange the marriage’. But he [son] also didn’t like his first wife and left her. He got married again to a girl from Phatal, running away like us.

My daughter-in-law’s generation is very different to mine. She is educated and knows things that I didn’t know. My son got her a job. She can read and write and talk to people outside the home. Mother-in-laws always quarrel with their daughters-in-law, but I know this isn’t good... if we love and care for our daughter-in-law then she will be happy and do more work. I have always tried to be supportive because I appreciate her. Her behaviour is good. She doesn’t have as many difficulties as we faced in my time... she surely has an easier life. I also hope that my second son will get married to an educated girl.
Now it feels that my dukha days are finally over and many things are bringing me sukh. When my son survived that was the beginning... but still it took time for the suka to come. When my eldest son got a job... that was true suka. And his marriage to my daughter-in-law also brought suka. We had an old house and eight years ago we rebuilt it. Look around... now we’re living securely at the top of the village. My son has managed the treatment for the arthritis which I suffered from some years ago... now I have relief.

Last year I was out in the jungle cutting grass for the buffalo. A piece of wood pierced my foot and became a bad wound. I couldn’t walk anywhere or do anything. I’d never been so bad. Before, even when I was ill, I could crawl around and complete the tasks somehow. My daughter-in-law cared for me well, providing intensive care, even toileting me. She served me with my sulpo pipe. When I sit and suck on my sulpo, it somehow helps me think... it’s a habit... a habit of the older people here, but it allows my mind to wander as I breathe the smoke. They tell me it is not good for me... but a lot of things in my life were not good for my health... but ke garne? That’s how life is...

These days I am well and healthy. I only have to help with a little of the work. I have enough good clothing and tasty food. My eyes had become weak and at night it is difficult for me to see. But my son managed a solar light for us. After the dukha comes the suka... because of the dukha, the suka is... Now I am lucky, to the same extent... just as before I was unlucky...

My sons I am content about. But my daughters I am still worried about. I was in the situation that the sons were sent to school but the daughter was put to work in the home. Differences still exist among sons and daughters. The reality is, if there is good food available, it is still put out for the boys and the girls don’t receive any... Because I was an only daughter my parents showed me love. But they didn’t send me to school. We aren’t making such discrimination... we’re sending our daughters to school and hoping they both get a good education. The older daughter has had problems from she was born, including with her heart. She has missed quite a lot of school so she is in class four, same as the younger one. She is nearly the same age as I was when I got married. Now everyone in the household is studying. I only in the household am illiterate. Sometimes they tease me, calling me ‘lapchya’. I’ve realised that you must get an education. Education makes you clever. If you have the paper you can go ahead, get a monthly salary no matter what... be in control of circumstances...

My oldest son has a bachelor and the younger is studying at plus two level. The girls are in class four. My priority now is to support my son and daughter-in-law and make sure my daughters and grandsons complete their education well. We’ve discussed, maybe in the future they will be able to go to boarding [private school]... let’s see when we go down [to the terai]...
And these two [gestures at the girls] I intend to let them make their own life... their own decisions. If they don’t want to marry, that is fine with me. And they can study up to as far and as high as they can. The youngest is a capable girl, useful in the house and good at looking after my grandsons and she can grind as much grain in a morning as I can. I have hopes for her... but my other daughter... that is a worry... I have the worry about her health and her not being able to do so much... not being so capable... We have to manage better medical treatment for her somehow. Of course, everyone’s hopes are in their children...

[Anything else about your life that you would like to add?]

You know we are thinking of going down to the terai after the winter? Because we have land there, our son has advised us to go down. We’ll take our two daughters and the two older grandsons also. So now my worry is about how that will be... I will have to leave everyone behind here and go to a new place. I will be separated from all the friends here... I am wondering about the different habits and food and not sure if we will adjust easily. It’ll also be a problem if any of us gets sick because my son and daughter-in-law will be still here... never mind the worry about heat and snake bites... [laughs] I’m certainly afraid of those! I also wonder how they will manage here in the home and fields... oh, plenty of worries. But what to do, we have to take the advice. I hope that after a year I’ll come to know everything and that life will become easy... after all, there is always the chilgardi or helicopter... if something happens it is possible to come and go, I suppose. And we do have relatives down below. But I just hope they can manage the home here... anyway, we don’t know about any of that... the future... I have told about my life but can’t tell you about what is to come...

Dhanamaya is a skilful storyteller, using her hands and eyes to communicate as well as her words. She ignores most of the disturbances going on around us and does not seem to feel inhibited when other family members come and go. After telling her story she then proceeds to question me about my life. She offers me advice about getting married and having a family, saying that she hopes I have not left it ‘too late’ even for a foreigner. I laugh because I have received such advice many times. As well as requests for help I also receive much sympathy in Mugu. I see concern on my friends’ faces more often than envy. It is with obvious reluctance that Dhanamaya eventually gets up to do some chores and we take our leave.

As we walk towards the next village we are quiet for a while. When Anju speaks it is obvious that we have all been contemplating Dhanamaya’s story; ‘How can anyone survive 7 miscarriages and the deaths of 13 children?’ she asks. There is no answer to that, but we reflect on how she has made sense of her life; the meaning she ascribes to being a daughter, a wife, a mother and now a mother-in-law and
grandmother. We consider her theory that ‘after the dukha comes the sukha... because of the dukha, the sukha is...’ There is much to ponder so I am glad that it is a long way to the next village.

Deuda two – women and education

It is late when we enter the village so it is good that we have sent word ahead. Dogs bark announcing our approach. On the outskirts of the village there is a shelter for crushing grain and we see a few shapes huddled in blankets and talking quietly. As we pass by I ask, ‘Aama, aren’t you cold?’ Laughingly one woman replies, ‘we’ll light a fire shortly... then we’ll sleep well knowing that someone else is struggling with the weight of our work on their back’. They all laugh and we bid them good night. They will stay there for three or four nights until they can purify themselves and rejoin the household. If several women from the same household menstruate simultaneously then the joke is on the men who must do the women’s work for several days.

The following evening everyone seems well prepared for a deuda competition. A group of women have clearly been planning all day. They form a circle with one side made up of younger girls wearing a more modern style of clothing and the other side of older women. They are also of mixed caste with both sides of the circle including upper and lower castes. Space is limited so they are performing on a roof top, circling around a pile of grain, with the entire village congregated and urging the performers on. The women begin with polite formalities and attempts to win favour that make us smile, but soon everyone becomes more serious. I can observe the emotions on the faces of those standing around as well as the singers;

A) We all women would like to first say ‘Namaste’
   With hands pressed together we greet you this day.

B) We first wish to welcome you with mala garland,
   It is a great thing you come to hear our say.

A) We are backward, the female from this undeveloped district,
   The forgotten of the country, we are the last women.

B) We are from the remote place, the unknown reality,
   Listen to the things of our heart, hear our words.

A) The land is hard and unproductive are the steep slopes,
   Our lives also are full of dukha and debt.

B) Every day we work the fields, going from lek to river valley,
   We women carry heavy loads and rest we never find.

A) From the rays of the sun, the world is bright,
But we are always in the dark without any education.

B) We sit in the smoke and work in the dirt,  
   Our eyes are blinded and our minds are dead.

A) With kuto in our hand and bauso on our shoulder,  
   We have no tools or sources for developing our education.

B) We only know to hold the hasiyaa, to cut grass and collect firewood,  
   A pen we don’t know how to use, who will teach us?

A) It is sad, we are troubled, we have never studied,  
   We can read the sky and land but not the books.

B) We know the seasons and the crop order,  
   But the alphabet and counting we cannot know.

A) Some females have scaled Mount Everest, the top they have reached,  
   But we do not cross the river or get as far as the school.

B) The Daaphe flies and sits in different trees,  
   But women cannot change their situation or habits.

A) The sun, moon and stars they are our witness,  
   Day and night we women work and have dukha.

B) The earth is watered with our tears, dust becomes mud,  
   But who will support us, who will give us an opportunity?

A) Like the milichaur and field as lalapatan, like the golden nose ring  
   This beautiful could the life of an educated woman be.

B) Always working and a life full of hardship for us,  
   Good food and clothing and a sukhī life for men.

A) They tell us we need to become aware and to discard our old traditions,  
   If we also had the opportunity, we would move ahead.

B) On a moonless night the stars shine bright,  
   What education would be like for us, we have no idea.

A) Hear our feelings, oh our friends, oh our brothers,  
   We request your help, for the good of our development.

B) With no opportunity for study, we are shy now,  
   First men, please give support for poor women to raise their status.

A) Our sister, you have come to our village to hear our voice,  
   Please don’t forget to share our dukhi voice with others.

B) The wind is blowing, it carries our singing away,  
   Dear sister namaste and sincere thanks to you.
This deuda is strikingly different to the previous one, not only in content but also in style. It is longer, sung in a different tone that changes several times and is laden with intense words and imagery. Only later can I begin to examine some of the concrete images in the deuda and the abstract ideas that they are used to represent. I deliberate over the song at length. Often a line or phrase suggests several different readings to me, and because I am working with Rajendra, his interpretations offer further variations and possibilities. I come to realise that there is no single reading of a deuda; that it is open to multiple interpretations and that this is part of the reason why the deuda is meaningful to groups of people. Each woman performing the deuda, with her unique experiences, can attach a different meaning and significance to the words she is singing, yet still be part of this collective way of expressing feeling and sharing emotions.

We are invited to listen to the words which come from the heart of the 'last' and 'forgotten' women. They liken their lives to the environment around them which is unproductive despite the effort involved, and it is only through their toil and tears that life is sustained. The darkness and weight of their existence is contrasted with the brightness and possibilities of an education. School is depicted as a world apart from farming and life as a student as very different from the reality of women's lives; education does not come through using rough farming tools such as a hoe or sickle, and a pen cannot be used for cutting grass or firewood. Their knowledge ties them to one place and restricts their mobility while an education allows others to change, to climb and to move ahead. The dukha of women's work is as constant and universal as the sun, moon and stars and is contrasted with the ease and abundance that men enjoy. With education their unproductive lives could change and become fertile and pleasant like a grassy meadow. They could become beautiful lives, worthy of admiration and of lasting value like a gold ornament. Although quite what they would be like or exactly how this could be, they are not sure. In concluding, they make an appeal to their listeners' help, not just to hear them but also to help them. They specifically entrust me with sharing their 'dukhi voice' with others. The last stanza describes their singing being carried away by the wind and we are left wondering if this is a reference to their environment as pitted against them and their attempts to be heard, or whether they see nature as working with them sharing their words and dispersing their message abroad.

We have walked in a large circle and tomorrow we will return back to the bazaar. Word has spread that I'm interested in learning about the lives of women and I'm invited for tea and a chat with various women in the village. One young Dalit woman
insists that I should talk to her sister who is married into the village and has small children. I tell her that it is her sister’s choice and if she is willing she should send me word and I can return. Just before I leave, the girl’s sister says she is not sure, but she will come to me if she decides to share her story. Her name is Hansa Nepali.

**Deuda three – a Dalit woman**

On returning to the bazaar I call in to the Women’s Development Office but the Officer is out of the district on training and it is uncertain when she will return. As I leave, I speak to the janitor who I have met before. Hari-Kanya is a Dalit woman from across the river and the story in the bazaar is that she went and sat on the doorstep of the government office every day until she wore them down and they gave her the job. She has no school education but is active in a Dalit NGO in the bazaar and a women’s group in her own village. She says, ‘I hear you have been learning to play deuda’. I laugh and reply that I still can’t play but I am enjoying observing them, to which she retorts, ‘I used to be better than any of them’. It seems she competed frequently in groups and as an individual. I ask her if I could hear her perform an individual deuda about how it is for her as a Dalit woman in Mugu. She promises to come to me when she has time off, and seems happy about the idea.

Hari-Kanya arrives at my room a few days later and asks for a few moments to prepare herself for the deuda. She requests some paper and I give her a small notebook and a pen. I know she cannot read or write but that her daughters are in school, so I am not surprised when she slips them unopened into the material wrapped around her waist. After drinking a cup of ginger tea, she commences;

- Knowing nothing and understanding nothing, we are *dukhit*,
  Seeking for the justice of the law, we weep with tiredness.

- Poor are our dwellings and remote is our district,
  Women’s liberation when will such movement take place?

- Few are those with awareness, many are ignorant still,
  The feelings of women, who will support them?

- Men and women are two wheels of one cart, it is said,
  But truly weighty is injustice for *dukhit* women.

- Programmes come and go, but there is no change,
  Why the discrimination between two wheels? No one speaks.

- So much jungle below and naked mountain above,
Why no opportunities for study, our hearts cry out.

- Women’s lives they are busy 24 hours a day,
  Yet there is no one to speak for us, why do we have no rights?

- Lack of education, how can awareness be?
  Men cannot understand our emotions; our hearts are breaking.

- Like young chickens scrabbling with our head in the dirt,
  Wanting to fly high like the eagle, who will do good for us?

- Accepting labour and work from the downcast, but not our untouchable water,
  When will lasting peace come and when will the low caste be uplifted?

- Still untouchability and discrimination to Dalit women,
  Everyone's blood flows red, why the discrimination amongst castes?

- We all live in the same district, we dwell in the one place,
  How can dogs be allowed inside, but not Dalits? How can we endure it?

- Why so much hela, where does this tradition come from?
  This cannot change until everyone considers it seriously.

- Women of the house perform worship and receive power,
  But we are considered unclean each monthly, and must sleep outside.

- Before marriage, our desire is for a good home and descendants,
  Dharma and Karma; men important and women always behind.

- Duties we have many, who gives us our role to perform them?
  Daughter, daughter-in-law, wife and mother; what is our role?

- Between our birth home and marriage home, our heart is at rest in neither,
  But we are expected to live together in unity, and a son we must give birth to.

- For what our future might be, we are dependent on fate,
  But for opportunities, we women must go out and seek.

- Men and women, equal like two wheels of one cart,
  When will it come, our day of sukha and equality?

- Peace and development we need in our remote district,
  Only then will Dalit women get the just opportunity

After thanking her and telling her how much I appreciated her performance, I ask Hari-Kanya if she would like to say anything about what she had sung, perhaps comment on some of the lines and ideas in it or how she felt while singing it. My expectation is that because this was an individual deuda it would be interesting to hear some of her meta-narrative. She looks confused and says that she enjoyed singing it and hopes that I enjoyed listening to it. I make another attempt, encouraging Anju to look through the text and ask Hari-Kanya any questions that
might help us to better understand the deuda. Anju seems reluctant and Hari-Kanya looks apprehensive; I realise that I have misjudged the occasion. To everyone’s relief, I drop the issue and invite my friends to come and eat with me.

Some days later, as we work on a translation of Hari-Kanya’s deuda I reflect on my mistake. I had been hasty; attempting to analyse when it was the time to admire and starting to tear something apart when it was the time to enjoy its wholeness. I had prioritised my needs as researcher over the role that had been expected of me – that of appreciative audience. Now, after some time had lapsed, was the appropriate occasion for engaging in analysis rather than during the performance. It also occurs to me that unless I am careful it could be that my attempts at analysis reduce rather than increase the meaning and impact of the deuda.

Hari-Kanya’s deuda is both personal and political. It is emotional throughout, with references to crying, weeping and hearts breaking. Yet it is also located in a national and legal context, mentioning ‘the justice of the law’, women’s liberation movements and issues of rights and caste discrimination. She questions popular development jargon such as the common phrase that ‘men and women are two wheels of the one cart’. Towards the middle section of the deuda she refers to lack of education as an effect (and perhaps even a cause) of discrimination. She queries how change can come about when there is no opportunity for education, but she does not explicitly refer to education as a solution.

Hari-Kanya’s understandings of being a woman and being a Dalit are intertwined throughout the deuda. When she speaks of ‘us’ and ‘we’ she is speaking as a Dalit woman, which is more than just the sum of being female and being Dalit. She cries out ‘yet there is no one to speak for us,’ and asks, ‘who will do good for us?’ Her statement ‘men cannot understand our emotions’ suggests that men will not speak for them and her comments that high-caste people still consider their water polluted and don’t allow Dalits in their homes, means that high-caste women will not speak for them; and so, ‘no one speaks’. She continues by describing women’s conflicting roles and how their loyalties are divided between their natal and married households yet they are expected to bring unity and harmony by giving birth to a son. She states her acceptance that no one can know the future or alter fate, and then she balances this with the suggestion, ‘but as women we must come out to seek for opportunities.’ Perhaps she is indirectly answering the dilemma of who will speak and act for them by suggesting that Dalit women themselves must seek out opportunities. Her conclusion suggests that her understanding of sukha is more than merely a lack of dukha. She equates sukha with equality and believes it will only come through
striving for peace as well as development. She sees real progress as development without conflict or discrimination; only then will Dalit women know justice.

**Gita’s story**

I decide to return to Dhanamaya’s village and hear her daughter-in-law’s story. I know that Gita is an educated girl who is now a young wife, mother and daughter-in-law and is struggling to continue her studies. The stories I have heard so far have mostly been from women who have not participated in formal schooling, so I am hopeful that this will be an opportunity to hear another perspective and gain further insight. I am also interested in hearing a story that will complement Dhanamaya’s without necessarily being congruent with it.

Initially we start talking in the kitchen area but there are competing demands on Gita’s attention and at times she is distracted by what is going on around us. Later we move into the back room and it is easier for all of us to focus. I am better able to follow Gita’s narrative and she seems more willing to share in a personal manner.

I ask her to begin by introducing herself and then to tell me about growing up in Mugu;

> My name is Gita Rawal. My parental home is in Phatal village, Shilaa VDC. My husband’s house is in Pipal VDC, Mattigaon village. I have six sisters and two brothers. I was born into a poor family...my father does not hold a job. Because we had lots of family members, I didn't have too heavy a workload as a child and from amongst my sisters I was the one who got the chance of an education. One of my brothers is studying with me in plus-two and the other is in grade nine. And you know... now I have these three sons. [Some interaction with the boys]

[Can you share about your life, starting from when you were born and what you remember from when you were growing up...]

> When I was born in Phatal there was my father and mother and grandmother in the home. My older sister also. She is smaller than me. She was the one who had to look after the cattle, so I got the opportunity to go to school. Later, after she got married then my younger sisters did the work... and somehow I got the opportunity to study. Only me and my brothers... none of my sisters, older or younger, went to school at all.

> I was born in the cowshed; everywhere in the villages the practice is still the same. I think I was a healthy baby because I haven’t heard that I wasn’t... [disturbance from child falling]
My earliest memories are not so clear, but I do remember being with my older sister a lot. We picked flowers from the fields and played dhungaka gattha. Occasionally we played hide and seek with friends and I remember my sister and her friend collecting scraps of material and things and we made girl and boy dolls and played at marrying them and so on... and various other games...

At the peak of working time, the busy season, I used to go with my older sister and my mother to help with weeding the beans and millet. Then in Kartik, harvesting millet and also cutting grass for fodder. In free time I would help with bathing my younger siblings and also with the cooking. But from almost as early as I can remember, I went to school. Then from grade six onwards, the school was far from my village and I had to walk. It was three hours going and three hours coming. So by the time I returned it was night and there wasn’t so much time for anything else. I would take out my books and study on the road, as I walked. I remember doing hours of English verb spelling practice in that way!

I was always a keen and motivated student. Always we were on the first or second bench. I studied up to grade three in Phatal and then grades four and five in Nanglo Primary School, which takes about an hour and a half to reach walking from my village. Then from grade six I studied in Mahalaki Higher Secondary School (MHSS) in Gamgadhi, the district headquarters. That is three hours walk from Phatal, as you know.

Even at secondary level all the teachers knew who I was. From grade six I had a big group of friends who were girls. There were 17 of us. But the girls from the district headquarters area were more proud and full of themselves... Some of the boys also supported me as friends. Earlier on I could perform well in all subjects... I was very competitive. I felt science; Nepali and English were my best subjects in grade 6. But later on, after grade 8, when I couldn’t get the opportunity to be regular at school, then it seemed like these subjects became the more difficult for me.

One thing stuck in my mind from MHSS. There was a course under the pre-vocational education subject and I took the Scout Training conducted in our school. It wasn’t a long course, but I remember we learnt how to make potato chips, sujiko haluwaa, and malpuwa. I still remember that clearly. The rest of the time it was just class, I’d say...

There was one day only that I ever remember not attending class and not informing the teacher. It was because of the household work that once. I always used to go to school... not everyone did like that, not even the teachers never mind the students... Occasionally my parents would say ‘don’t go to school today, go and help graze the cattle’. But
crying and making a lot of protest I would still insist on going to school. I would have been happy to go to school even on Saturday!

After marriage I lost a lot of school time... that has been a big frustration. But my young brother-in-law is also studying, so I let him go to school and I've had to remain to do the housework... [serious expression]

[Anything more you would like to share about growing up? How it was in your community... or how you felt... what your expectations and dreams were?]

[speaks slowly] I was fortunate with my childhood. My parents really loved and cared for all of us children... they didn't make differences by scolding or discrimination... My grandmother was very loving. She only died a year ago... she was very old... maybe nearly 100 years old. My mother is called Kalyani Khadka. Her and my grandmother taught me to cook and do the household chores and how to manage the children and husk the rice using okhal and mussal and especially how to prepare the food... and all these things they taught me I am still doing... also making good buttermilk. Both my father and mother influenced my life. Despite being illiterate, they sent me to school. They supported and encouraged me for my education. The school had been just recently opened in our village. They would say 'you need to go to school and study well and you will get a good job'. In our community there wasn't even one reading and writing female. There were no girls older than me who went to school. I did hear that one of our uncle's sisters studied before getting married... but I never actually knew her or even met her... So I didn't really have any dream or anything. I didn't think much about getting a job after studying, and I didn't have the thinking that studying would make me thulo. I got the opportunity and enjoyed being good at it... it was all. [Baby dirties on the floor and she attends to it while talking]

Pratima and Hira studied with me. Pratima did auxiliary nurse midwife and she has a job now. Hira studied up to IEd [Intermediate level in Education] and for a short while had a VDC job. Most others who studied haven’t done anything. I am trying to complete my Intermediate now... But we all got married... because I gave birth early I’ve had difficulty continuing with my studies. Like I already said, that’s been my tension... Everyone thinks it’s a bonus and I am fortunate to have the opportunity to study and also that I have a community job... I am FCHV [Female Community Health Volunteer]. And it is true, it’s good, and respect is involved... but I can’t manage everything well at the same time. If I study and attend to pass my IEd, and also do my role as FCHV, then how can I manage all the household work, my children, the outside farming and supporting my husband? I have to do all these things... somehow. I can’t do less of one in order to do the other... that’s not possible... not acceptable...

[A pause and then she continues in a brighter tone] School for me was [shrug with hand] ok... it was good. I don’t know about all schools... but
mine were ok, maybe they are all the same... Now there are two boarding schools which they say are better... but then, well, going to school was something, enough... I always passed the year and moved on to the next class, so that was OK. But a lot of the friends... they didn’t come so regularly or the teacher didn’t like them and they didn’t pass... they didn’t continue – they dropped out. You want to hear more... about this?

[Yes, tell me about your school days and why they were important to you...]

Some bits I remember better than others... The teachers - the local sirs, they are teaching more than those who come from outside... they go down at festival time and it’s a long time until they return... but then local teachers, they have other tasks, especially at planting and harvest time, so they also don’t teach so much... Sometimes if no one [teacher] came we would read from the textbook to each other... I’d be the monitor and get the others to repeat the part...

At high school some teachers managed the discipline better than others. I remember class six was a big number of students... some teachers had no discipline... like one sir never had control of the class... everyone just laughed... That is a problem. Sometimes we didn’t have textbooks and that was also a problem. They didn’t come into the bazaar, so for months we couldn’t properly start and then it was so late for the year course. But mostly, for me, school was fine. I knew it was my good fortune to be there. For some students it was difficult, for sure... they got a lot of punishment from the master or they got dukha from the other students for some reason. But I didn’t face any of that... there is a story... everyone knows that... in one school it was very... there was a tragedy recently. A teacher was always punishing a student. On the last day of term he locked him in the toilet. But then he forgot to release him. Sometime later local people found the student in the toilet... dead. He had written on the wall with his faeces, ‘sir, sorry I didn’t do homework’.

Our school was just normal. Usually we did prayers and drill in the morning, then class. If it was too cold and dark inside then we did it outside in the sun. Or at primary level, mostly there was no furniture so we always did it on the ground in the sun. The master read the lesson and we repeated or did exercises. Later on, in secondary level, exams caused more tension... English and science were not strong at higher level, but overall my experience of reading in school was ok... fine really. I was never once beaten.

[Earlier you mentioned about how becoming a daughter-in-law and mother caused tension with your studies... can you share a bit about that time in your life and how it was so...?]

Mm... [pause and slow start]... as everyone knows, in this area there is only ongoing work... in the winter mornings carrying compost and sottar,
then in the day carrying firewood, cooking food, managing the housework and then feeding everyone, washing the dishes and scrubbing the pots... In the summer going to the fields to weed all day after doing the morning tasks in the house, here and there tending the cereal crops and doing all the various tasks... then returning home at night to repeat all the household tasks... that’s how life is for women here. And most children have to support their parents, like I said, most don’t then have time for study. But the truth is, daughters get more dukha when they move to their married home compared to their parents’ home... it’s a new place, there’s new work and extra responsibilities, the relatives are new... and especially because there is the habit of engaging the daughter-in-law in the majority of the work... and so the daughter-in-law gets even more work and dukha than the daughter. I didn’t have to do so much work in my parents’ house, but after marriage I got more and more dukha... ultimately all females’ life is full of dukha...

[various interruptions so we move into the other room]

Mine was not an arranged marriage, like quite many other friends, we liked each other and ran away... See, there was one didi from my own village who got married into this village, about a year or two before me. My husband consulted with her, asking her ‘are there any suitable girls in your village Phatal?’ Then this didi shared about me with him. So he came with two friends to see me and meet me. We made communication. And after that we met again in between a few times. Then soon, while studying in grade 8, I got married with him, Sunil Bahadur Rawal, running away with him after school and going to his village. I hadn’t asked or consulted anything with my parents before the marriage. After I had run away, then my father came here searching for me. Both sides accepted the marriage...

After getting married, straight away I got an increased workload. My mother-in-law used to say ‘useless lazy bohari, not knowing how to work’ and she would be continually criticising me to my husband, describing me as ‘having seen nothing’ [lacking experience / knowledge / exposure]. I only smiled in return, even hearing such things and slowly I became more mature. I realised that this was just how it was... Sometimes my mother-in-law also scolded me directly. Then I would try to accept it in the same way as when my own father used to scold us children to discipline us. In the village there is often so much arguing and fighting amongst mother-in-laws and boharis. But when I didn’t fight back, then people were surprised and used to look at us and comment, ‘so educated boharis do not have the practice of quarrelling with their mother-in-law!’

It is traditional to only show love to the daughter-in-laws who do more work. I gradually learnt to do all the work by doing it more and more. I had to... The relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law needs to be positive and deep. In villages the mother-in-law is generally responsible for cooking and sharing in looking after the children, while
the daughter-in-law is responsible for the outside work like in the fields and jungle... this is the culture... If the daughter-in-law doesn't do the heavier outside work and also share some of the housework, and the mother-in-law does it for her, then the other mothers of the village will say, 'see... the bohari is useless and no good at her work and must hate her mother-in-law leaving such work to her...' 

At the beginning my mother-in-law really hated me. She would often say I was from a poor background and knew nothing and so on... But I didn't respond or answer back... and later she came to understand and admit 'my bohari is tolerant, she is accepting her role...' And she didn't scold me as much and soon she began to stop criticising me.

I want them to have a peaceful old age... I don't intend for them to lose their honour. Often mothers-in-law cause problems in the villages because of their favouritism of the younger unmarried sons... they spoil them. She could have created tension between her other son and me, but my younger brother-in-law respects me like a mother. He likes and supports me. Another thing in my situation, because my mother-in-law continued giving birth late and at the same time, as a daughter-in-law, I was also giving birth... in the village this situation often results in disputes and arguments over the upbringing of the children. Similarly, in the village there is so much arguing all the time, about work and food. These are the two main things.

Another problem is that the neighbours back-bite so much. They tell gossip to the mother-in-law or daughter-in-law regarding what the one said about the other, and so it gets back to them. My mother-in-law's young daughter, who has health problems, has very bad habits. Things that didn't happen or things I didn't ever say, she tells her mother. Several times, because of her doing this, my mother-in-law came to pick a fight with me. There are enough tensions without increasing them with things like that...

Before getting married I was thinking only about study... that was my main concern and what burdened me... but after marriage, only household work and babies. Daughter and daughter-in-law is such a different thing. As a daughter I had no weighty workload at all. After becoming a daughter-in-law it increased from every side. I was fourteen. Because all the community are so busy doing all their different work, as daughter-in-law I also didn't have a minute to sit idle or they would gossip and criticise. The pressure comes from the mother-in-law and also from the other women in the village... they are always nearby and quickly ready to comment. Having children quickly and looking after them well, keeping the household running and working laboriously on the farm... these are the minimum that the other women are looking for - expecting... If I were to not fulfil these, then they would criticise loudly and at length... I do wonder and worry about my future. I am thinking and thinking about my own life from one side, and also on the other hand how to make good relationships amongst the household, how to
increase the affection and attachment... so I wonder how I can manage my life to go on in a good way...

After the marriage, my mother-in-law gave pressure to my husband, ‘you got married to a studying woman... but now she needs to quit and do the household work.’ But my husband didn’t agree with her. He reassured his mother that what they didn’t have... whatever we couldn’t produce, he would see that they purchased it instead, but that he would make sure that somehow his wife’s education continued. And so they did give continuity to my study...

[but then?]

While in grade ten I gave birth to my first son... we celebrated our wedding marriage then. Everyone was happy. But before that my mother-in-law had been afflicted with arthritis for some time. So then I couldn’t go to school that year from August until January. During that time I had to stay at home. I was busy caring for her and trying to manage everything myself. Just the once, without attending, I went to school in January and took the SLC pre-test. Santosh [oldest son] was born that October so I hadn’t been able to do any preparation for the exam. That year I failed the SLC exam and it was the worst disappointment of all. After two years my second son Samir was born and then a year and a half later my third son was born... and that's about it... with difficulty I re-sat and got my SLC...

[and now?]

Now I'm enrolled in plus-two [Intermediate]... but I can't manage to attend so regularly... I’m also a voluntary health worker. That's means I distribute basic medicines in the village and counsel people or give advice. Mostly I do worm tablets and painkiller distribution and I provide advice to women who have given birth, helping them to take care of their babies. The women in the village are happy about my help and support. Last year the community learning centre was set up in Pipal VDC by the District Education Office, so I have been working as a social mobiliser and collecting information, that's my responsibility. I get a small amount of pay for this – not a salary, more like reimbursement...

So along with all the other household duties that I have talked about, I don't have much time... like I have said. Like all the other daughters-in-law in the village... we are all busy in our various tasks and different work. Occasionally we go together to weed the beans and get grass or firewood or compost from the jungle. They all like me because I never fight with anyone or speak roughly to them... but now, my next worry is how I’ll manage in the house when my mother-in-law goes down below [to the terai]. If I'm on my own how will I manage my small son and I also won't be so confident with no one to guide me regarding household behaviour... could be the household will become poorly managed... other things might happen... As I said, I have a lot of worries and
concerns... [Her youngest son has fallen asleep in her arms and she puts him on a mat on the floor]

[Anything else you would like to share... anything else that is important to you...?]

I love my parental home. Now I only get to go about once a year, usually. But still I love it. And when my grandmother was alive she showed me so much love and attention. Every year, carrying one of the boys, I go for a visit. Everyone there, and especially me, enjoys it so much. They love to see me. Usually I can’t stay so long... I can’t stay so many days because I have to get back here. But it’s a special time and will always be important to me... [pause]

...my husband is also extremely helpful. I appreciate all his ideas and attitude. When I couldn’t attend school, he helped me try to read the grade nine and ten subjects at home. He has always encouraged me for my study. Even when my mother-in-law said ‘don’t study’, he helped me study. He loves us and has managed all the things well for us. He is busy and has lots of responsibility... his organisation - he is secretary of the NGO, his school, his village and home responsibilities... I support him the best I can and do my share of the work – but it is a heavy burden and will increase also...

My own priority is to study and pass my IEd. But also to make sure my brother-in-law and sons study too. The two girls, my sisters-in-law, are also our responsibility. With our limited income that means there is economic pressure on my husband... Helping my husband, I want to ensure the good lives and opportunities of the others... These are the important things... and how my life has been... these I have shared...

I thank Gita for sharing and she assures me that she enjoyed talking. She says she has never tried to tell about her life to anyone before because everyone around knows her. She adds that it felt different putting everything together and sometimes she forgot that I was there while at other times she wasn’t sure if she needed to explain a bit more so that I would understand. As I have done with everyone else, I outline what I will be doing with all the stories I hear, and check once again that she is happy for me to use her story as part of my thesis. She gives permission and asks if there is anything else that she can help with. While we drink a cup of hot sweet tea she expresses the hope that someday her sons will go to college and do research.

Deuda four – men’s deuda

Before I leave Dhanamaya and Gita’s village, the men perform a deuda for me. I express my appreciation and explain that I had hoped to hear from the men. I am wondering if they felt left-out when only the women had the opportunity to perform
last time. The participants are a mixture of ages and some are wearing T-shirt and jeans while the majority wear baggy pants that are tight from the knee to the ankle and homespun woollen jackets. They sing:

A) Give your attention dear sisters, understand dear brothers,
   We are singing these deuda today for our women.

B) Listen to our words we request you, we have much to say
   Hear about our women, we want the situation to change.

A) Using the traditional methods they work all day, throughout the year,
   Always the same situation for the female of this remote mountain area.

B) The female has kuto and bauso and the male has the plough,
   No education, carrying the heavy load; when will it improve?

A) We fathers are also illiterate, we send our daughters out with the cattle,
   We need to become clever and send our girls to school instead.

B) In other places women are educated, they are ahead,
   Now we also need to consider; we need to educate our women.

A) Let’s abandon the old unproductive beliefs, let’s send daughters to school,
   For women’s rights and progress, we will help.

B) The female of educated places, they are leading the way,
   Why are we always behind? Now we need to move forward.

A) Sons and daughters are equal, they should both be in class,
   We need to give the light of education now to our daughters and sons.

B) Pocketing sulpa and tobacco, going to the jungle,
   It is not a good life for the women, living in dukha.

A) We should develop kitchen gardens, get rid of tobacco,
   We must give the opportunity of education and improve the level of health.

B) Lots of dukha women are facing, from early morning on the farm,
   They have neither full stomachs, nor even clothing for the body.

A) They are busy cooking, managing the water and all the household chores,
   Life in the remote place; always facing dukha.

B) Tending the farm, managing the firewood and cattle,
   Cooking food and caring for the little ones, this is the life of dukha.

A) She must sleep in the cowshed, the woman, while she is polluted,
   With little regard for health, after her monthly time she bathes.

B) If her pregnancy is difficult, there are no facilities,
   We must carry them in the doko, there is no medical help in the village.

A) It is a difficult situation, ours, to care for the safe deliveries,
The life of women is short, speaking of dukha.

B) Sulpa in hand and doko on back, they must go to the jungle,  
    With wounds on their hands in all seasons, and cold in the winter snow.

A) Mothers and babies do not have good health, giving birth in the cowshed,  
    Having no medicine and no hospitals, many do not survive.

B) We must make the change, not just the talk,  
    In this last backward district of Mugu we must hope for development.

A) So much dukha and no awareness, so many poor women there are,  
    This is the reason why our women are backward, now we must help.

B) Carrying our women far from the village for difficult delivery, still they are dying,  
    Education and awareness we must awaken, one day perhaps it will be well.

A) If we intend our district to develop, we must all think carefully,  
    On hearing about the situation today, we must try to improve.

B) We are happy on this occasion to express the situation,  
    We bid you all namaste as we go now on our way back to work

We talk about the men’s deuda as we walk the hills the following day. The men acknowledge that women in Mugu have particularly difficult lives and they express regret at the situation. By comparing Mugu to other places, the men link women’s dukha to the region. They connect the difficulties of women and their health with the environment and climate of Mugu as well as with ‘natural’ female issues such as menstruation and pregnancy, and also a lack of resources and general development in the district. Because of being male, the men are not affected by such problems but they strive to support their women, for example by carrying them to the nearest health care facility in the case of complicated deliveries. In the deuda the women become the problem needing addressed; their poor health, their bad habits and their educational deficiencies need attention. The solution proposed is ‘development’. Due to the scale and extent of the problem, it is logical that the men cannot ‘carry’ women out to developed places so they must bring development in. They suggest that they must ‘make the change’ and help by bringing in education and awareness; only then will the issue of women’s ‘backwardness’ be addressed and only then will there be hope that the district will ‘move forward’ and one day perhaps ‘it will be well’.

Hansa’s story

I am surprised when Hansa Nepali (from the village where I recorded the second deuda) meets me in the bazaar. She is still hesitant, but says that she thought ‘why
not?’ and so she came when she had other tasks to do in the bazaar. She has a baby tied on her back and a small girl is clinging to her arm. Once we have had something to eat, we sit with our backs against a wall, and after a cautious start, Hansa has a lot to say in a short space of time;

[Can you tell me a bit about yourself... who you are and what it was like when you were young and growing up..?]  

Ok. Mmm, not really sure what to say... perhaps... there are lots of other people who can talk better. I... I don’t know anything. You know I am uneducated... and there are other women who talk well...

[I reassure her again that I want to hear her story, just whatever she wants to share and that there is no pressure...]

What do you want to hear...?

[Start by telling me your name and where you are from...]

I am Hansa Nepali and I am from Rahu VDC, ward no 4, Rahu. I married into Laami village. I have one son and one daughter. My parents are both dead now...

You want to know about my family?

[Yes, first tell me about when you were very young. Who and what do you remember?]

I don’t remember so much... it wasn’t such a good situation. We were poor... then it got worse later... It was not so bad until my father died and after I was married was also the most dukhit time...

[Can you tell me about when you were a young girl... describe what it was like when you were small in Rahu, who you first lived with and what you did... I don’t know anything about it and would really be interested to hear...]

In Rahu there were my grandparents and my own parents and my two older brothers, as well as uncles and many cousins... and then my younger brother and one younger sister. Being the oldest girl I was always busy, and it was a household with many people, so there was a lot to do... you know, all the usual things – inside and outside tasks. We didn’t have cattle or land of our own, but still there was plenty to do... and then for other people... I was also mainly responsible for my younger siblings... looking after them every hour of the day. As well as cooking; cleaning the dishes and pots; planting; weeding and harvesting... all the duties. Because we’ve such a problem with water in Rahu, every day I had to do several trips down to and up from the river,
carrying gagris of water, with mud in them, all the way up the hill, often dragging my bhai or bahini along. That's it... I mean, I said there's not much worth telling...

[And your household... how was it? Describe it a little...]

We are ward four which is the Dalit part of the village. All close together... small houses with many of us living in them. Like I said, my grandparents were alive then... and my parents as well as uncles and aunts [father’s brothers and their wives]. There was plenty of activity and also lots of arguments and quarrelling. We were never quiet or lonely... that came later when I was married. My grandparents argued... often loud when my grandfather was drunk. My own mother and my grandmother fought a lot... there was little they agreed about... always blaming and back-biting. My grandfather would sometimes beat them both if he was in a temper. He would laugh and say that would give them something to agree on. But he became a frail old man and only his tongue was active then. Mostly my father didn’t look for a fight and he’d just agree to whatever any of them suggested or said... He avoided them and wasn’t home much. They said he played cards and drank just to keep out of the house... but I don’t know or remember that much. I was with my young cousins a lot. I was up before the light, early in the morning, to start carrying water. Mostly I didn’t quarrel or argue so much as some... I knew what I had to do. I remember my brothers getting the tastiest food if there was any, like eggs and honey and ghee, while my sister and I didn’t get any. But I don’t remember complaining about it. And sometimes if my brother had a heavy school bag, my parents would send me to carry it to school with him. My three brothers went to school but my sister and I didn’t. My sister being younger than me, complained sometimes. Once or twice she went along with our brothers, but then the master sent her home. When she requested our parents to go to school, my mother said, ‘ahh, what do Dalit girls need to study for? They would just laugh at you.’ The second time she requested, she got beaten and went about her work in the fields crying... I don’t think I questioned much. Maybe I was more mature or maybe I just don’t remember myself. In this district being born as a daughter is known to be a lost destiny. But my younger days were not so ill fated as later times... I do remember I was always disappointed to have to wear the same old dirty thatuwa clothing. That was an embarrassment, especially when some girls got new material for the festivals. When young we celebrated the festivals even if it meant more loans. I always liked Poush time when we’d play bhailo. Married and unmarried could join, according to our family and caste group, we’d get together in groups of girls. During 15 days we would sing bhailo in our home. All us girls sleeping in one place – dancing and singing and enjoying ourselves. We’d collect little bits of food from the houses and store them together. On the final day we’d go together for a picnic and play making one dressed up ‘behuli’ and ‘behula’, girl and boy.
We also traditionally sing ‘chanchadi’ and ‘balo’ and ‘champha’ dances. You are familiar with these? While singing *chanchadi*, we use a type of thin bamboo and dance. In that singing, people used to dress and make up the ‘balo’ [broom], and dance on one side, then as small girls we would dance on the other side. In the *champha* dance we used a ladle, we’d put it in the top of an upside down *doko*. Then a woman sits inside the *doko* and makes the ladle dance from side to side, from inside. Men and women compete in the dance as a deuda. In *Chaitra* we celebrate ‘biu chardai’ - putting the seeds for planting, in the fields, with everyone eating in the fields and enjoying ourselves.

And I remember one year for *sauni sakranti* we went to Rara Lake and sang and played deuda. Coming back some of the older boys and girls stole some apples! I remember those days... Sometimes at festivals some people would get rice. But when we were young there was normally only millet, chino, foxtail... never rice. For me, best of all was any opportunity to play deuda. Even from a small age I played... sometimes going at night with my older cousins. I wasn’t meant to be there but often I’d go... even to join in the ‘maya prithi deuda’ [*love and affection deuda*], playing in the cowshed. Sometimes while working in the jungle or fields, the boys would come and take our necklace or bracelet and then tell us which place to come to play deuda that night... we’d only get the beads back then. Sometimes we’d play nearly all night... then returning in the morning exhausted and having to start into all the chores and housework. Even though I was amongst the youngest – after marriage it is not acceptable to play deuda in that way... I was actually very good at playing... so they’d let me join. I could beat the boys often. If I heard someone good was playing, then I wanted to compete. Later when life was difficult and I wasn’t a young girl able to play this type of deuda, I only sang ‘bon deuda’ and those were lonely days... [long pause].

*[Mmm, and as you grew up..? Was your life similar or different to others... can you describe more..?]*

Being Dalits, we were very poor. We lived very basically and always had so many needs... and things just seemed to get worse and there was more pressure. From a young age we had to work for other people... like carrying compost for other people, to earn three *manna* of millet a day. We haven’t the tradition for girls to carry compost or firewood before marriage, but I had to do it anyway.

Sometimes there was also trouble with my brothers going to school. We lived quite near the school and sometimes when my brothers were small they would go early. Once, I remember, someone gave them *gaali* saying ‘eh *dum*, why do you go to school so early in the morning... in fact, why do you go to school at all?’ Laughing they beat my brother up. Then my older uncle, on hearing this from my mother, was furious. He went to the upper caste person and fought with them saying ‘my family
did not go into your home, they didn’t touch your food or go near your water. School is a public place, why do you show us Dalits so much hela? My sons are allowed an education too…” After that I don’t remember the same thing happening again...

[...and in your life, what else was happening? How was it with you at that time?]

Mmm... like I said, our situation was not good... and it didn’t improve. From seven or eight I was working for others to earn foodstuffs - we call it ‘baur game’, I had a heavy load from the household work as well. Because of being so poor, we had to do much, much work. Everyone busy day and night and especially me and my sister.... When I was about nine or maybe coming ten I was sometimes playing deuda at night and I had an older cousin-brother who was my good friend... he supported me in many ways. My own older brother told my family and they were not pleased... I was not supposed to play deuda anymore. My mother and grandmother said it was time for my marriage. They told my father that a husband should be found for me. My father was not so concerned and told them not to rush... but he was drinking a lot by this time and not so useful. So my mother discussed it with my uncles and so they looked. They found a boy from Laami village. I had never seen him but had heard that he had already been married but that she had gone away with another man. The jari had been settled and now he was looking for another wife. So arrangements were made. Shortly afterwards I was married. He was about 25 to my ten years. We had to take a loan and even so, we couldn’t manage much of the wedding... I hardly remember much about the ceremony, I was only an ignorant child... my relatives gave me guidance what to do and how to do it. As is still common, I returned home to my parents’ house for some time after the wedding. I hadn’t started menstruating yet. Then a short while after the wedding further disaster hit our household. My father was found dead. He’d been returning home late at night and it was a dark night with no moon... it seems he fell off the path. He’d been missing for days before they found his body. Then we had to take further loans to manage his funeral. So our situation became hopeless... my mother wailed for days and weeks, worried about how she could manage the future and for her children and the amount of debt... [long pause]

[so you stayed on in your parental home?]

I stayed on for almost half a year... Because of our poor economic situation we only did the death rituals for a short time. My eldest brother - who is quite some years older than me - mostly managed, along with my uncles’ guidance. Some months after, when my menstruation had already begun, my mother told my uncle and he saw to it that I went to my married home then...

...Then started even worse times. I got dukha from every direction and nothing prepared me for the role I had as a wife and a daughter-in-law. I
was only about 12 and had no idea... I was very ignorant. He was not a tolerant husband and my in-laws hated me... I really didn’t know how to be a wife and a daughter-in-law. The work I knew how to do because I had already done so much in my own home... but the workload increased and they did some things differently... or wanted some things done differently...

... we all shared the one big room, so my mother-in-law knew what I was doing all the time and could continually comment and criticise. Everyone hated me. Their situation was better than ours, not so poor and having small amount of land... so this meant more work for me and one more thing for them to be proud about and hate me for... I cried a lot and didn’t sleep well and then during the day I struggled to do the heavy tasks. Once I went home to my parental village. I cried and begged my mother to let me stay. But she told me I would bring shame on my household. She advised me I would get used to the new environment like all daughters-in-law do. She also had tears in her eyes when she sent me back...

But worse dukha followed. A few months after I moved to my married home, my father-in-law died. People began blaming me for the bad luck of both my father and father-in-law’s deaths. They talked about me negatively behind my back and they didn’t speak to me except to tell me to do things... to order me around. I began to realise how truly bad a woman’s destiny was... They observed the rites more strictly... my husband was wearing the white clothing. But those days have become unclear to me... I moved slowly and didn’t interact with anyone much. I worked alongside my mother-in-law and Jethani and younger unmarried sister-in-law... and other relatives, but they didn’t talk properly or share anything with me.

My health was not good and I had become very weak, but still I had to do the heavy workload... mostly outside, but also early morning and late night in the house. One morning, a short time after my father-in-law’s death, I went with both my mother-in-law and Jethani to the water mill. We were carrying the grain on our backs. I had been vomiting. The load was heavy and going uphill I collapsed beside the path. Mother-in-law and Jethani asked me questions. Because no one had asked for so long, I told them how I’d been feeling unwell. They became worried and made the arrangement that straight away we would go to see a relative in the village. In the afternoon we went to visit the old lady. This old aunt asked me questions and checked me. She told them not to feed me anything and to bring me back empty tomorrow and she would give me something for the baby I carried in my stomach. In this way I learnt that I was pregnant. The next day my mother-in-law brought me back and I stayed the night with that old relative. In this way I learnt that I was pregnant. The next day my mother-in-law brought me back and I stayed the night with that old relative. It was only the next day that she [mother-in-law] explained... I really didn’t know anything... Because my husband’s father had died, for some time his wife should not have slept with him, so I could not have had the child... my mother-in-law said. She
called me an embarrassment, dishonouring the family and warned me about my behaviour. I was ill and thought I was going to die anyway. I couldn’t even reply. I really hadn’t known anything... But somehow I had to continue with my normal tasks despite the pain and bleeding. The work had to continue... that was the only thing that was no different.

During the next couple of years several babies fell [miscarried]. My own grandfather died and my mother also became unwell. At that time I didn’t go home very often... it didn’t help anything... and things had become more of a problem with the Maoists and the conflict then. No one travelled too far, unless they had to, or unless they were running away. Anyway, even though it is nearby, I didn’t go.

Sometimes during this time I thought of my childhood days. I would sing deuda alone in the jungle and cry while getting the firewood or fodder. Sometimes I would look around at others and wonder how my life had come to this. Some people in my married home had come to accept me by then, but none loved me. My own bahini was the only one from my parents’ house who came to see me regularly and show me love. But at that time I couldn’t share with her... how could she understand such a situation? There were a few girls the same age almost as me... I would see them going to school from the non-Dalit part of the village. They’d be wearing their school uniform and carrying a light bag... going to school. How different we had become... we were different with nothing in common. I couldn’t even imagine how it would be to be them... I had never even gone a day inside school. I don’t know really... maybe it could all have been different for me... but what would someone else’s knowledge have done for me? Would it have given me a different life? All the other problems would have been the same... I think the dukha would still have been so... Anyway, none of my friends studied, all of them have got married and had children and they are just as dukhi as me. Their parents-in-law and husbands treat them badly. They too have only dukha and work and more work... so much heavy work.

A few of the girls from upper caste families in my home village did complete school and do the exam. One is a teacher but the others haven’t done much difference. And any of my brothers who studied... they weren’t able to complete school. Now they are farming like the rest of us... still they worry about the food for that same day. Everyone has their own dukha. And those who don’t have any wealth or status to start with, don’t have a chance for sukha...

So eventually one baby stuck, after several miscarriages, and I carried it with difficulty to almost the full time. She was a small weak baby and I was weak and slow to recover, but somehow even with the ongoing work that I had to do, I managed to care for her. Everyone had hoped for a son... her father had no interest in a daughter... once again I experienced only hela in the household. One day I was working near the edge of the roof with my daughter on my back. I thought ‘if we fell off no one would notice.’ I don’t mean... I had no intention to do it, but I just
meant that I realised if it happened, it wouldn’t make any difference...

[Hansa is emotional, so we take a short break and have some water, resuming later. She feeds her son and then gives him to her daughter who wraps him up in her shawl and disappears off with him for a while.]

[So can you tell me something about the time after your daughter’s birth...?]

After my daughter’s birth the security in the district became a problem. If it wasn’t the army giving us dukha, it was the Maoists. We regularly had to feed whole hordes of soldiers ‘passing’ through and there were several incidents... They fired from here - the army - and killed two boys on the other side of the river there [points]. They were running away and got shot in the back... they were only teenagers... not more than children. So when things got bad several of the young men from the village left... they went down, out of Mugu. My husband and his cousin also decided to go. He had plans to go to India and earn money... So he left. He went and we didn’t hear anything from him. He was away for more than five years. Certainly no money came back to us... if he ever earned any. Apparently he was carrying bricks in India... I was thinking ‘fine, don’t come back, I will manage the dukha and raise my daughter myself... it’s no different to me.’

So during those years my position in the household was intolerable... but I had to tolerate it. It was just a pattern of getting up early, working until late at night and not thinking about anything. I cannot remember one season from another... they all became the same to me. I didn’t even feel so much pain anymore.

Once during that time I got sick and my baby got sick. She was in her second or third year... we hadn’t named her. For myself I cared little, but I needed help for her, so I walked and crawled with her to my parental home. It took almost the whole day even for that short distance. When I reached I found that my mother and many villagers there were also sick. My aunt helped me for a few days and we got medicine for the baby. After some time my mother told me to return... that my place was still in my married house. Because I knew I would only be a burden in the already hopeless situation of my parental home, I returned. A relative helped me carry my child back. My in-laws had not been looking for me and they didn’t ask me anything. They often said that if I had been a proper wife and had brought a proper dowry in the first place, then my husband would never have had to leave...

And so those years passed... during that time my mother never recovered. She died and my elder brother managed the arrangements. I went for a short time to the village. So now I have no parents and no grandparents.

Recently my younger sister also married into Laami, so we are much closer now. That was a happy day. I know what dukha she will face and can support her. She is older now, not a child, so we can share more.
Like me she is continually busy, but at least we can see each other from time to time and we know where we are. Her in-laws don’t have the reputation of being so hard as mine, so I am hopeful that she won’t experience what I have gone through... but now mine also have softened a little. No one can fight with someone or hate them forever, for no reason, I’m thinking. Also, now I have finally got a son...

[Mmm, tell me about that...]

My husband returned about a year... no a year and a half ago. He was empty handed. But still, he is my husband so I was happy to see him back. At least I have a husband. But still I had no son. Some of the upper-caste people, if they were quarrelling with me they would call me ‘aputi dumini’ [sonless dumini]. Then the god gave me a son and my luck changed... It was a difficult birth and now I have health problems. I bled so much... still I am not feeling strong. My lower stomach [womb]... something is not right... it has fallen. I need an operation or something... they say a camp [medical camp] is coming... but now my... it is outside...

...so still I face difficulties doing my work. Even walking can be difficult never mind carrying loads. It is a difficulty... but other things are not so bad anymore... I have a son and a husband, and while my in-laws still don’t love me, at least they don’t hate me anymore. I have a place in the household now and I am slowly becoming more mature. My mother-in-law is always difficult, but my Jethani has slowly come to know me better and shows a little more kindness. We named my daughter Sabina. Here in the village it is the custom to name them late. And we have celebrated my son. My husband and Jethaju arranged chainthi at the appropriate time, and we had singing and drums to bless him... the bonfire burnt all night. I was too weak to know much... I was hardly conscious, but it was still a satisfaction. Even if I hadn’t survived, I felt at least I had finally managed to experience some joy and honour.

Slowly I have recovered, but like I said, I have pain below my stomach continually and I need something done. Now my situation in the household is not so difficult as before... but my work is more rather than less... I don’t know how long I can continue - but I have no choice. I worry about my own health and also the future of my small children... these worries are with me all the waking hours and even the sleeping hours also...

[Tell me about your children... how is your daughter and how does she spend her time?]

She is a good girl... helpful and obedient; she never gives me problems... now she is healthier and doesn’t have the difficulties. But she is still small and I hope... I worry about her having dukha... she will
have *dukha*, like all girls... But already she is capable. She helps me with most of the tasks. She is usually at my side and doesn’t complain as long as I am around. She must be near seven years now.

We did enrol her in school... all the girls are enrolled now. But she hasn’t been regularly... because of the home situation and she didn’t like to go without the school dress... we aren’t able to manage the things she needs. Anyway, she had to support me, especially this last year... At the beginning I tried and sent her to class one, but she didn’t complete. The girls are all enrolled again... but like her, most aren’t able to go. They have to take the cattle to the jungle... but some times of the year they can go. Some of the organisations give help. I still think I can send her when things get easier... if I can get help from an organisation or somewhere, then I will send her regularly. And by the time my son has grown we will be able to send him... by then we will be in a position to make sure he attends, by then. Maybe it’s not too late for my daughter also... People often tell me I would do better to send her to school. Things are different now... anyone can go to school. My sister has gone to adult education classes for some weeks. With my health and workload, I couldn’t manage to attend... and there would be little point for me... I must focus on my children... like I said, they are always my concern. It’s my hope that I will be able to raise this baby properly, that he will have good opportunities... that he will look after us in our old age. He will have that responsibility...

[Once again she requests my help regarding her own health and how organisations can help for ‘opportunities’ for children. I try to give her the information she requests and tell her I will introduce her to the relevant people in the bazaar who may be able to assist.]

There are a few parts of the story that we clarify with Hansa after she has finished, checking that we understood properly, and we add these to our notes. Hansa shares how she was surprised about telling her story; that it felt both difficult and easy, that she found some of the memories upsetting and yet she could not stop sharing them and how she feels tired now, but does not regret sharing. One part of the story is confusing to Anju and she asks Hansa about it. The reason Hansa’s mother-in-law gave for her enforced abortion was that the pregnancy should not have happened due to the recent death of her father-in-law; Anju asks if this is common practice for Dalits or for people in Mugu or why it happened, because she had not heard of such practices, even amongst Brahmins who uphold rituals strictly. Hansa does not answer directly but points out that she did not say it was a Dalit thing and that she only said it was what her mother-in-law told her. She adds, ‘*koi*, I knew nothing... only that she hated me at that time... who knows? I certainly didn’t know. It was just my mother-in-law...’ and then she becomes more defensive saying.
that she doesn’t want to go back to remembering that time and that we must not tell anyone here about ‘that thing’. We reassure her about confidentiality and once again explain what will be done with the data and how we will be careful about confidentiality and anonymity at every level. Again she gives her permission for the story to be used as I have outlined. After a last cup of tea I reimburse her for her time and we bid each other farewell.

The researcher in the story

I am tired and itchy. So often I feel overwhelmed by what I hear and a sense of inadequacy continues to nag at me. My conscience is clear that I have fulfilled the recommended ethical guidelines but still I find it difficult to walk away from people whose eyes I have looked into and whose lives I’ve stepped into by encouraging them to share the significance of those lives with me. What I see and hear around me raises strong emotions in me and I want to react. But I know that I cannot carry everyone’s burdens for them; I do not have the ability, finances, time or power to do so. I analyse my desire to help. I want to get involved in the lives of those around me, but I don’t want to interfere with those lives. I have a conscience about ignoring the need that is surrounding me but I also have a fear of acting in an unwittingly harmful way as happens so frequently. And so, I am left with a tangle of emotions with which I not sure what to do.

Time has passed and I know that soon I need to think about leaving Mugu. The last days are intensive. I try to fit in as much as possible; journaling continually, collecting statistics from the district level offices as well as some last interviews with staff from schools, NFE groups and NGOs, collecting together as much contextual information as is possible.

One evening as I walk down through the bazaar I see a foreigner talking with some local staff outside their office. Word spreads quickly in Mugu and I already know that he is representing a French NGO and has just arrived to monitor a programme they sponsored. I see him frowning as he concentrates on what someone says. Everyone round about is staring in his direction. He looks tired and scruffy. He clumsily stoops and enters a low doorway, following the others inside. I am shocked because suddenly I catch a glimpse of myself. There are no mirrors in Mugu and I am used to looking at the local people around me and feeling that I am one of them. I am surprised at the spurt of anger that goes through me when I realise how out-of-place the bidesti looked to me, and how I must always look, to those around me. My reflections are interrupted by someone nearby who asks me if I know him and
why I didn’t speak to him. I respond sharply that I don’t know him, that he is from a different country and we don’t even speak the same language.

For several days there has been no water in the bazaar so I decide to go with a small group of women friends down to the river. We carry bundles of clothing to wash and also a bag of meat and some potatoes to cook on a fire. We have plans to turn this into a fun event. We pass a small school on the way. The building is crumbling, there are a few boys playing in the yard and no one else to be seen. I don’t stop but continue on past. We swim in the shallow bit of the river, laughing and talking as we wash the clothing we have brought with us. The water is cold but the sun is hot. After spreading the clothes out to dry on the smooth stones of the beach, we sit by the fire and listen to the fat sizzling. I try to smooth down my frizzy hair and I put sun cream on my already burnt face. When the black on my hands from the fire mixes with the cream someone laughs at my war paint, and I give up. The fatty meat kebabs and small roasted potatoes are the best I have ever eaten. My friends sing shrilly and then request me to sing an Irish song. ‘I can’t sing’, I protest. They say ‘everyone can sing’, and tell me ‘don’t be shy’. I am startled because these are the same words I have heard many times in schools and literacy groups when girls and women refuse to speak and are instructed ‘don’t be shy’. But I have learnt that I cannot sing, so I share a riddle with them instead and then request them to teach me some local songs of Mugu.

Reluctantly we leave when the fire dies down, taking some gagrīs of river water with us. We pick nettles on our way up the path; later they will be made into soup. The person walking in front of me sings quietly about ‘a silent song’ and I try to pick out the words. The conversation moves on to my imminent departure. The women offer me blessings and well wishes, telling me to return soon and preferably with a husband, perhaps even a whole family. The joking continues. I know I cannot stay but I also know it will be difficult to leave. I wonder how I will be able to share any of this story, never-mind all of it. I wonder how anyone will ever understand. I only understand a part of it, myself. The woman in front ends her song:

Oh I sing a silent song, I sing alone,
Life is dukha and strife, but we are living, still we are singing.
Oh I sing a silent song, I sing alone,
May the future bring sukha, and the blessings of a good song.
CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION

This chapter contains a discussion of the main concepts that emerged from a synthesis of the narrative analysis (presented in chapter four). The discussion is built on the understanding that there is no universal experience of being a ‘Mugu woman’ and that it is vital to challenge common stereotypes such as ‘Third World woman’ or ‘Nepali woman’. The chapter attempts to recognise the uniqueness of the women’s individual life-narratives but also to consider how their stories are expressions of what is valued and shared collectively.

The first section focuses on how gender and other intersecting identities are constructed by women in Mugu. It discusses the genre they use for telling their life stories, the emphasis they place on relational dimensions and the importance of the concept of respectability in their lives. Their experiences of the interlocking effects of oppression and privilege are discussed and the ways in which the women negotiate power relations as an integral part of their lives is recognised. The second part of the chapter moves on to examine how understandings of education are embedded in the women’s gendered constructions of their lives. It considers the meaning the women attach to education, their varied perspectives on the value of education, as well as the costs and challenges that they recognise and how these relate to their personal and communal experiences.

GENDER AND INTERSECTING IDENTITIES CONSTRUCTED BY WOMEN IN MUGU

Women’s genre of dukha

Women in Mugu have certain notions about how life-stories should be told and what gives a woman her story. As chapter four shows, the women in this study who shared in detail about their lives were from different villages and various social, economic and demographic locations; yet they all framed their stories within a genre of dukha. The Nepali word ‘dukha’ conveys a multitude of meanings (see glossary) depending on the context of its usage, but in the context of the women’s stories it is most commonly used to mean hardship or suffering.

When listening to the women’s narratives initially, I was struck by how frequently the word dukha was used, yet it was clear that the stories were not told as passive
complaints; while the narratives were focused on dukha, the women did not present themselves as victims. In contrast to literature which has been criticised by Raheja and Gold (1994) for providing a unitary representation of feminine passivity in South Asia; the majority of the narratives were told in a tone suggestive of an active boast and conveyed strength and pride. The women of Mugu use the genre of dukha in a way that is similar to how Grima (1991, 2004) describes the Paxtun women of Afghanistan and Pakistan who commonly share tales of misfortune as a means of gaining respect for themselves and their story. She suggests that older rural women in particular, organise their life stories into a chain of crises and stresses, and those who have experienced more suffering feel they have more of a story to share (1991, p85). Paxtun women perceive their suffering as action according to their code of honour and morality (Grima, 2004, p.126).

Despite containing moments of extreme sadness and despair, the stories of the women of Mugu seem to be more focused on inspiring my admiration than eliciting sympathy. The women seem to be intent on invoking an emotional response from their audience, but they do so by centring the tale on how they coped with suffering against all odds, rather than abandoning themselves to grief. This is perhaps most obvious in Dhanamaya’s narrative. Dhanamaya begins her life-story by stating that she has had ‘a hard life, full of dukha’ and continues by outlining the multiplicity of tragedies in her life, punctuating them with comments such as ‘being a woman was only dukha for me’ and ‘a woman’s life isn’t a life... we women face so much dukha’. Yet ultimately the story goes beyond despair by emphasising the action Dhanamaya took and focusing on her sense of survival and ability to cope with hardship. She points out that ‘like most women I survived living in an extremely difficult situation... I had to work hard from morning to evening and usually into the night as well’. She describes how she employed different strategies to prevent her husband from taking another wife, and how she eventually succeeded in raising and educating her children. Her boast is that ‘being strong, I managed all the things... I didn’t go down under the heavy burden’. She believes that because she bore her suffering without ‘going down’, she is now able to enjoy the good times; ‘I had so much dukha, but now more than anyone in the village, I have sukha’. In Mugu, women gain respect with hardship and age; they value suffering and use it to prove themselves. It is by bearing hardship that women gain respectability and a good reputation in the community. If a woman goes through troubles, rather than running away from them or selfishly freeing herself from them, it is for the sake of honour.
Hansa is hesitant as she starts telling her story and she points out that there are others who can ‘talk better’ and know more than her. Yet her sister recommended her and she came to me without coercion because she knew that she had a story worth telling; because of the suffering she has borne, her experiences of life as a woman are valued. As Hansa narrates her story she confesses that there were times when she felt like giving-up. She describes how she cried a lot and could not sleep and how she went about her work slowly. On one occasion as she was standing near the edge of the roof she became aware of the seductiveness of the idea of giving-up compared to the dukha of continuing. Yet at the core of her narrative is the fact that she struggled on and bore the suffering as expected of a woman. She points out that despite her weakened health she still continued to do ‘the heavy workload’ including the outside labour; after her forced abortion she continued on with the normal tasks irrespective of the pain and bleeding; and as she considers the future she states, ‘I don’t know how long I can continue – but I don’t have any choice’. Hansa also emphasises, not just the quantity of dukha she has had to bear, but how long it took before she was recognised as a reputed woman who bore her suffering well. For many years she had to tolerate her ‘intolerable position’ and it was only eventually after much dukha that she was accepted and has ‘a place in the household now’.

Dukha is considered an imperative for female respectability in Mugu, but it does not appear to be relevant to the lives of men. The women use the genre of dukha to prove themselves as respectable females and their narratives include examples of how this is normatively regulated, for example Gita speaks of how her mother-in-law’s scolding as well as the gossip and criticisms of the other women in the village ensured that she did what was expected of a young woman. Gita, Hansa, and Rina all describe different ways in which they were obliged to bear certain dukha because they did not want to bring dishonour to themselves or their family and community. In contrast, the genre of dukha does not apply in such a way to men’s lives and they are free to attempt to avoid, run away from or get rid of dukha. When problems arose, Hansa’s father avoided the household by drinking and gambling elsewhere and Dhanamaya’s husband did the same by playing deuda with girls. When Rina’s father was faced with the dukha of raising his children after his wife’s death, he could not cope, so immediately he looked for another wife to do it for him. Gita’s husband, Dhanamaya’s husband and many of Rina’s friends, show how it is acceptable for men to abandon their wives and choose someone else if their marriage is not going smoothly. However, for women there are many social restrictions involved in getting re-married and often the death or disappearance of a
husband starts a time of extreme dukha for women (as exemplified by Hansa’s mother and the threat that faced both Dhanamaya and Hansa). In their deuda the men claim that they do not have a sukha life - they experience problems and a ‘difficult situation’ – nevertheless, it is clear that the men associate dukha with a female way of life. Within a short space of time the male performers use the word ‘dukha’ six times; they describe their women as living in dukha, facing lots of dukha and experiencing lives that speak of dukha. In Mugu, dukha is a gendered concept and the women consider it to be at the heart of female honour and reputation.

The women frequently describe their dukha as being comprised of literal and metaphorical burdens that they must bear. Each of the women describes the heavy physical loads they have carried, whether it was baskets of fodder on their back, gagris of water, or children. They also recognise the emotional weight of dukha that women have to bear. Jangmu refers to the double burden of trying to look after her in-laws’ and parents’ households and both Jangmu and Dhanamaya speak of the weight of their grief over the death of children. The women’s emotional burdens of dukha may not be so visible or easily measured as the physical loads they bear, but it is obvious that they are considered no less weighty.

Examples of men carrying loads are mentioned, such as Jangmu’s husband who porters rice, however, it is clear that the women identify the carrying of burdens with being female. The women are adamant that they bear the weightiest work load. Early in her narrative Jangmu states that ‘women just have so much work... such a heavy burden of it’, the first deuda describes the arduous tasks which are typically part of a woman’s day, and Dhanamaya explicitly compares a woman’s heavy burden of dukha with a man who can ‘run around freely’ and is able to ‘roam where he chooses, even without a purpose’. In their narratives, the women consider themselves, rather than their men folk, to be the primary load carriers.

As well as bearing responsibilities for their families, the dukha which women boast of carrying, includes the burden of hospitality and community service. Dhanamaya speaks of the orphans she looked after and Jangmu describes how she led the way with village projects including construction and repair work. As well as these practical tasks, the women acknowledge their responsibilities related to notions of female purity and pollution. For example, Rina mentions certain rituals that are expected amongst women of her village during menstruation and after child birth. However, issues of purity are generally given less emphasis in the women’s narratives than their other concerns regarding workload and contribution to household and community. Much scholarly work about South Asian women, in the
past, has focused on purity and pollution issues (see Amore & Shinn, 1981; Bennett, 1983; Kakar, 1978; O’Flaherty, 1980). From an upper-caste male perspective, the ideal woman has been constructed as one who is modest and subservient, who is restricted to inside the home and whose sexual honour is guarded carefully (Derné, 1994). In contrast, the women of Mugu construct female honour in a more dynamic manner which includes the dimension of purity, but goes beyond this to an understanding of female respectability as actively bearing dukha.

Earning honour and respectability through bearing the burden of dukha brings women protection and security both in their household and within the wider community. However, if a woman tries to avoid or run away from dukha, it is not just her personal honour that is risked, it is also that of the larger family circle and community. Joseph (1999) suggests that honour assumes the ‘interconnectivity’ of selves and points out that one’s sense of esteem and legitimacy is often dependent on the actions of others. Women do not control honour, but they do hold the key to men’s honour; women’s individual behaviour centrally impacts on men’s honour and on the reputation of the family collectively. This can be seen from examples such as when Hansa’s mother refused to let Hansa run away from her difficult married life and live in her natal home, because that would ‘bring shame’ on the household. When Gita is reflecting on her own behaviour and her relationships within the married home, she states that it is important to her that her parents-in-law have a peaceful old age, and adds, ‘I don’t intend for them to lose their honour’. Through bearing burdens of dukha and ensuring that they do not deviate from the life path that females are expected to follow, women contribute to their own respectability; men’s reputation; and family honour. In Mugu, where relationships are valued, this is of utmost importance.

The women’s visible and invisible burdens are not fixed, immutable loads. They vary over time, across space and according to women’s roles and relationships. How the women articulate the increase and decrease of their burdens and how they account for the ebb and flow of dukha is a thread which runs through each of their life narratives, and will continue to be examined throughout the remainder of this section.

The importance of the relational

In Mugu the relational aspects of the women’s lives are an important focus of their narratives. Women are often judged by their relations with their kin and they present themselves in the context of those relations. In contrast, women largely ignore how
men interact with each other. Men in Mugu have ‘social involvements’ and ‘political
things’, brothers and fathers live in joint households and men spend their leisure
time together, yet the women are vague about details of men’s dealings with each
other. Husbands and fathers are often away, out of the district, going someplace,
working elsewhere or not at home, and with the exception of Jangmu’s father’s
conflict with his sons-in-law, the women’s narratives are relatively silent regarding
masculine dynamics and male interrelations. From the women’s perspective, their
own relationships with each other, and with the men in their household, are of most
relevance and are therefore centred in their narratives, while men’s interactions are
relegated to the margins. The women describe their experiences as daughter, wife,
daughter-in-law, and mother (and mother-in-law when relevant). They make sense
of their lives in terms of their relationships and according to how they identify with
these various relational roles.

Brewer and Chen (2007) have suggested that in non-western cultures, such as
Asia, the self-concept is defined more collectively, primarily based on social
embeddedness, while the tendency to define oneself in terms of individual
autonomy and separation from others is a Western habit. In Mugu, women appear
to be judged and defined by their relations, and also to be more socially embedded,
than men; perhaps a gendered dimension could be added to Brewer and Chen’s
cultural consideration.

Even though they complain that daughters have more work and less sukha than
their brothers, overall the women reminisce about their lives as daughters in a
sentimental and positive way. Usually they construct their childhood home as a
place of love and care, and they describe their early years in a light-hearted tone.
Jangmu recalls dancing and singing in her girlhood and Dhanamaya speaks of wild,
carefree days that included imaginative games. Hansa has not forgotten the hard
work, squabbling relatives and lack of resources that characterised her childhood,
yet her face becomes animated as she recalls deuda competitions and festival
celebrations, and she speaks of her early years in a tone that is light compared to
her adulthood. At my bidding the women reflect on their childhood, yet it is really the
years that follow after girlhood that are the focus of their narratives, and they
emphasise that it is after they get married that they truly take on the responsibility of
bearing burdens of dukha and become women.

The contrast between childhood and adulthood is particularly significant for Gita.
Like most of the other women, marriage is the critical turning point (McAdams,
1985) in Gita’s life. In telling her story she describes events as occurring ‘before

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marriage’ or ‘after marriage’. ‘Patrilocality’ is the most common form of residency in Nepal and in keeping with this practice, after marriage Gita moved to live with her in-laws. As a married woman she resides in her parents-in-law’s home and functions as part of their joint family. Gita admits that she did not have so much work to do in her parents’ house, and she compares this with the ‘increased workload’ she had to take on ‘straight away’ after getting married. She states that, ‘after marriage I got more and more dukha’, and emphasises that ‘daughters get more dukha when they move to their married home compared to their parents’ home’. Although Hansa’s childhood was very different to Gita’s, because she already had a heavy workload as a daughter, Hansa also describes how her dukha increased with marriage. Her workload became heavier and her in-laws wanted things ‘done differently’, she declares ‘I got dukha from every direction and nothing prepared me for the role I had as a wife and a daughter-in-law... I was very ignorant’.

Both Gita and Hansa describe themselves as ignorant and only becoming ‘more mature’ after marriage and the hardships they face. In the initial days of living together in the joint family, Gita is criticised by her mother-in-law as not knowing how to work, as having ‘seen nothing’ and as knowing nothing. The women’s comments about themselves and each other, suggest that young girls are dismissed as being ignorant of dukha and real knowledge of life. A woman is considered to have begun living and to have a story to tell only when she has borne the hardships of life as a wife, a daughter-in-law and a mother. It is not surprising that none of the women recommended that I listen to a young unmarried girl’s story; from their perspective she would not have much of a story to tell. It is the knowledge of dukha that the more experienced woman has, that is most valued and appreciated in Mugu.

Gita, Hansa and Dhanamaya all describe marriage as bringing an end to their childhood and resulting in a transition from parental home to married home and increased dukha. Jangmu’s experience appears slightly different in that she does not make a permanent transition to her husband’s home. Nevertheless, she does refer to marriage as a turning point in her life and it is marriage that marks the beginning of a time of increased dukha for Jangmu, even though it is her own parents rather than her in-laws who are mainly responsible for the increase in tension that she suffers.

In Rina’s case, an increase in dukha commences long before she is married; the turning point in her life story is her mother’s death rather than her marriage. Her
mother’s death acts as a parallel to marriage in that it marks Rina’s separation from her mother, the end of the love and care that she can expect as a daughter and the beginning of the increased load of dukha which she can expect as a woman. And so it is that Rina says she can recall some details of playing and roaming in the jungle before her mother died, ‘but then later I only remember the ongoing work and tasks to be done’.

The women’s narratives emphasise the vulnerability of the new daughter-in-law and how she is at the bottom of the household hierarchy. Even though Rina and Jangmu do not live permanently in the patrilocal residence, they both spend some time living in the joint family situation with their in-laws and recognise the difficulty of the position of the young daughter-in-law. Gita, Hansa and Rina all stress that the role of daughter-in-law is the most vulnerable position in the household and they each speak with feeling about their mother-in-laws in particular. In their narratives the women make use of both personal comments and generalizations in order to describe the significance of the role of daughter-in-law. There could be various explanations for this shifting between personal and general experience, including that it is used by the women as a method to bridge individual stories with communal experience as well as a means of avoiding being involved in too much direct criticism of those in authority. An example of this is when Gita is describing some of the tensions she faced as a young daughter-in-law. She says, ‘because my mother-in-law continued giving birth late and at the same time, as a daughter-in-law, I was also giving birth...’ then she pauses and finishes the sentence with ‘in the village this situation often results in disputes and arguments over the upbringing of the children’. In this way she implies that she did not agree with her mother-in-law regarding the issue of child care, yet she avoids directly criticising a respected elder and she also aligns herself with the other young women in her community who share the experience.

While all the women speak of the precarious position of the daughter-in-law in the married household, it is clear that the daughter-in-law’s situation is dynamic and that the extent of her vulnerability is affected by many factors. How well a daughter-in-law copes with her dukha often depends on her reputation and family status in the community prior to marriage; how much affection she gets from her husband; how quickly she produces a son; and how much support she retains from her natal home and female friendship groups. In the past, research from a male perspective has often focused exclusively on the structural constraints that young wives/daughters-in-law face, and in doing so, has ignored the more dynamic aspects of the young
women’s experiences (Derné, 1994). Standard anthropological ethnographies (see Dumont, 1966; Inden and Nicholas, 1977; Trautmann, 1981) have been criticised for their unproblematic accounts of submissive girls who are given away in marriage, dissimilated from their natal home, and subordinated to their husband and conjugal kin. Similar to what Jeffery and Jeffery (1996) and Raheja and Gold (1994) note from their studies in India, the women in Mugu do not speak as unquestioning bearers of ‘tradition’ or as submissive brides given away as part of a reified cultural system. Rather they construct themselves as actively involved in the processes and the complex negotiations, for example, in managing the hierarchical relationships that marriage brings. However, for some women this plays out more smoothly than for others. Gita and Hansa both experience difficulties as new daughters-in-law and face opposition from their in-laws, yet their stories soon diverge.

Gita quickly won her husband’s affection, she produced three healthy sons, and she has maintained contact with her parental home, enjoying the occasional visit. The wide friendship group she had when young has narrowed, but she claims she is still well liked and has friends amongst the women in her married village. All these factors have strengthened Gita’s position as a daughter-in-law and when combined with her strategies of tolerance and determination to work hard, it is not surprising that her mother-in-law soon stopped criticising and scolding her and that she was accepted fairly quickly by her in-laws. In contrast, Hansa did not receive affection from her husband, it took a long time before she bore a son, her natal family could not offer her any support and her social position was perceived as weak in the community. Each of these circumstances combined to make Hansa particularly vulnerable in a community where she had few female friends and was at the mercy of her in-laws who do not have a reputation for kindness. It was a tragically long time before Hansa’s position became more secure and she was accepted as a respectable woman in her married home and community.

Everyday life in Mugu is very much segregated into male and female grouping. Women work together and sit together and spend whatever leisure time they have together, and female relations are very important to the women. Sometimes this is in the form of friendship groups such as when Gita goes to work in the jungle with other peers, or in the form of reliance on an older reputed woman in the village to broker a ‘marriage’, as mentioned by both Rina and Gita. But usually it is family and kin groups that are most significant in the women’s lives and in the formation of their relational identities. From the women’s narratives we get a sense of how daily life revolves around a central core of kinship relations, and in particular, female
relations within the household. The importance of the relational will continue to be emphasised in the next section as the women’s interdependence is examined, and the ways in which a woman’s power varies over time in the patriarchal household and the strategies women use to regulate this, will be considered.

**Interdependence and multiple patriarchies**

Dumont (1965), Geertz (1973) and Marriott (1976) reject the notion of a universal individual self as a Western concept and claim that in some parts of Asia people do not conceptualise themselves as individuals or have a defined sense of self. More recently this has been criticised as a blatant form of ‘othering’; denying a person individuality suggests that, as a Westerner, I have an individual, bounded, reflexive and agentic self, while you as a non-Westerner are an inversion - you are unbounded, passive, integrated and dependent (Ewing, 1991; McHugh, 1989; Sökefeld, 1999). From the Mugu women’s narratives it can be seen that they value interdependence; they appear to be focused on the goal of social harmony rather than maximising their own autonomy. This does not suggest that the women lack individuality or agency, but that they often valorise relatedness and connectivity rather than autonomy.

The women express strong negative feelings about loneliness, isolation, and conflict, and the prospect of too much individual responsibility is threatening. After her marriage, Jangmu desires to live in harmony with her husband and parents but this proves impossible. She speaks of the conflict with her parents and the pain of broken family relationships, ‘we quarrelled and argued... the atmosphere was very negative. I felt so much dukha and pressure from every direction. It was a time of torture.’ Much of Jangmu’s narrative is concerned with her attempts to resolve the household conflict and her hopes for a harmonious living environment. Rina reflects on how strange her childhood was, saying, ‘I had to manage things all by myself, even though I was young. I was responsible for my young brother also.’ Then she relates the story of the big rice box. Rina is not complaining about the workload itself as much as the issue of having to cope alone and without the guidance that a young girl would normally expect. Similarly, Hansa does not just lament the proportion of work that she became responsible for as a young daughter-in-law, but how she was ostracised by her in-laws and how her female relatives did not ‘talk properly or share anything’ with her. Gita explicitly outlines the ideal way of working interdependently, describing how women can best share the household responsibilities, and stating that ‘the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law needs to be positive and deep’. Her own relationship with her mother-in-law has not always been
smooth, yet Gita’s fear about the future is whether she will manage when her mother-in-law moves to live in another area and the same fear is mirrored in Dhanamaya’s narrative when she considers leaving her family and wonders if she or they will manage to adjust to living independently.

The women construct their lives based on a belief in mutual responsibility for each other and a conviction that they can better cope with their burden of dukha together than they can separately. However it is also clear from the narratives that living interdependently is not always straightforward, and while the women refer to an ideal of living in harmony, they do not naively assume that they are allies. As McHugh (1989) points out, ‘while relatedness is of central importance in South Asia, this does not eliminate the concept of the individual. Concepts of both individuality and relatedness exist, and the ways in which they are articulated and reconciled express tensions inherent in South Asian social life’ (p.77). The complexities involved in interdependent living and the struggles that take place amongst and between women are worth further consideration.

Nepal is situated within a region that has been described as ‘the belt of classic patriarchy’ (Caldwell, 1982; Moghadam, 2002). Mugu displays features characteristic of classic patriarchy, including the patriarchal extended family being the central social unit; the head of most households being male with the senior man in the house having authority over everyone else; women being subject to forms of control and subordination; and girls marrying at a young age into large families, gaining respect mainly via their sons and late in life acquiring power as mother-in-laws (Moghadam, 2002).

While the women construct their identities from within such a classic patriarchal context, their narratives show that they experience patriarchy in different ways. Therefore it is more appropriate to refer to multiple patriarchies than a single universal system of patriarchy, and it is important to recognise that the experiences of the women are more complex than merely a representation of men as oppressor and women as oppressed. As pointed out by Okely (1991), it is necessary to examine the ways in which women are ‘apprenticed’ in their own subordination as well as the ways in which they evade these conditions. Kandiyoti (1988) proposes an important and neglected entry point for the identification of different forms of patriarchy through an analysis of women’s strategies in dealing with them. The ways in which ‘men and women resist, accommodate, adapt, and conflict with each other’ over the nature of patriarchal systems is what she terms as ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ (p.285).
Referring to the woman’s life cycle in the patriarchal extended family which is common in South Asia, Kandiyoti (1988) observes how the deprivation and hardships experienced by the young bride are eventually superseded by the control and authority she will have in the household as a mother-in-law. She suggests that the cyclical fluctuations of a woman’s power position, combined with status considerations, result in her active collusion in the reproduction of her own subordination. ‘They would rather adopt interpersonal strategies that maximise their security through manipulation of the affections of their sons and husband… Even though these individual power tactics do little to alter the structurally unfavourable terms of the overall patriarchal script, women become experts in maximising their own life chances’ (p.280). So, through resisting passivity and subordination, ironically, women become actors with an interest invested in the very system that oppresses them. It follows that women have a complex relationship with this patriarchal system and may view its possible breakdown with ambivalence. While women may not be content with their position and role within this traditional system, they may still do all they can to prevent its breakdown. Those who have already paid a heavy price of an earlier patriarchal bargain lose out in every way if the normative order changes and they also fail to enjoy any benefits in their later life. It has been pointed out that if there are no empowering alternatives, the generation of women caught ‘in between’ suffer a genuine tragedy (Kandiyoti, 1988; Molyneux, 1985; Wolf, 1975).

Reference is made in Hansa, Gita, and Rina’s narratives to the powerful position that a mother-in-law may occupy. Hansa’s story, in particular, demonstrates how a mother-in-law exercises power over others in the household. It is clear that resources are managed, labour is controlled and even Hansa’s sexuality and reproduction are restricted - not by her husband or the male head of household - but by Hansa’s female in-laws. Although Hansa lives in a patriarchal society, with her husband and male in-laws owning the land and making the decisions, it is the women in the household that she experiences as agents of domination.

As relatives from the same household, Dhanamaya and Gita’s stories dovetail together to reveal their rivalry, negotiations, and bargaining with patriarchy. From Dhanamaya’s perspective, the good days have finally come; her days of fighting for her husband’s affection and working ‘like a mule’ are over and she has attained the sukh that the other women can only hope for. She boasts about her eldest son Sunil’s support, how her needs have been met and how she can now enjoy an easier life. A new daughter-in-law poses a potential threat to a mother-in-law, but
since Dhanamaya has been able to successfully initiate her daughter-in-law into the household, hand over the bulk of her duties and still retain Sunil’s support and affection, the risk has been mitigated. Dhanamaya is aware that her situation could change, for example, when she moves out of Mugu to live in the terai. However she is in a relatively secure position because she has her son’s affection, she has male relatives in the terai, and she will continue to have responsibility for her grandsons who will move with her.

Gita states that her intention is to honour her parents-in-law and as she concludes her narrative she declares how much she appreciates everything her husband does and that she aims to ‘support him the best I can and do my share of the work’. However this does not mean that she perceives herself as an obedient and passive wife or daughter-in-law. Gita is forthright about the frustrations and compromises marriage has brought (the relevance to her education will be discussed in the latter part of this chapter). She describes how she actively manipulated her mother-in-law through smiles, silence, tolerance and a strategy of not fighting back. She also boasts of her husband’s affection and how he supported her in her studies and even defended her against his mother’s criticisms. Both Dhanamaya and Gita emphasise Sunil’s affection as son/husband and boast that he is ‘managing everything for me’. At the time of narrating their stories Dhanamaya’s husband is no longer so relevant, and Gita’s sons are not yet old enough to be the pivotal focus of the women’s attention. At this point in time Dhanamaya, Gita, and Sunil are the key players involved, they use interpersonal strategies to ensure that they claim their part of the ‘patriarchal bargain’ and their narratives reveal how they ‘resist, accommodate, adapt, and conflict with each other’ over resources, privileges and responsibilities (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Despite women in Mugu facing similar burdens of dukha, they do not view themselves and each other from the same vantage point, and they do not necessarily perceive each other as allies. The cyclical fluctuations of women’s power and their constantly shifting interests can set women against each other, even when they work in the same household and genuinely want to live interdependently. However it is not just different female roles within the family (such as daughter-in-law/mother-in-law relations) that set women in opposition to other women. Mentions of instances beyond the household level, where women are complicit in the subordination of other women, need to be examined. How social identities such as caste, ethnicity, and economic status intersect with gender, age and kinship role cannot be ignored.
Interlocking effects of oppression and privilege

In constructing selves – respectable selves – the women show a tendency to emphasise their own claim of subordination. They more frequently focus on the oppression and hardship they suffer rather than the privilege they experience. Fellows and Razack (1998) call this process, by which a woman comes to believe that her own claim of subordination is the most urgent and fails to interrogate her complicity in the subordination of other women, the ‘race to innocence’ (p.335). Fellows and Razack discuss how women, in pursuit of respectability, recognise only the ways that they are positioned as subordinate, and therefore each woman strives to maintain her dominant positions. Paradoxically, each woman asserts her dominance in this way because she considers it to be the only way she can win respect for her claim of subordination. Fellows and Razack (1998) suggest that ‘the race to innocence’ and related practice of pursuing respectability serve to ‘reinforce systems of domination and maintain hierarchical arrangements among women’ (p.336), they point out how systems of oppression (such as capitalism, imperialism and patriarchy) rely on one another in complex ways and they recognise that it is futile to attempt to disrupt one system without simultaneously disrupting others. Making reference to Collins (1991), Fellows and Razack emphasise that this ‘interlocking’ effect means that systems of oppression come into existence in and through one another. An example of this, when applied to the lives of the women in Mugu, is that caste exploitation cannot be accomplished without gender hierarchies.

The ways in which social identities intersect within the women’s narratives will now be considered briefly. Due to the complexities involved, each of the five life narratives will be examined separately. However, because of the word constraints within which I am working, it is acknowledged that the following discussion can only be a selection of some of the more obvious examples, rather than an attempt to represent an overview or summary of the multitude of complex possibilities. The significance of education in relation to the women’s intersecting identities will not be discussed here as it will be the focus of the latter part of this chapter.

Rina

Rina describes herself growing up as a well respected girl in her village; she was hard working and did not deviate from the expected life path for a Nepali speaking, high-caste Hindu female. Although Chettri is not considered as pure as Brahman or
as powerful as Thakuri, it is nevertheless, a privileged caste. Although Rina experienced some economic constraints both as a child and recently in her married life, these were not described as major. Therefore it could be said that Rina is relatively privileged with regard to social, economic, ethnic and caste identity. However, as is common in ‘the race to innocence’, Rina focuses her narrative on the dukha of growing up, rather than on her other privileged identities. She emphatically states that ‘I did receive a lot of dukha... different types of dukha, while I was growing up. I didn’t get any education, I didn’t know the maternal sukha, and I only worked and worked... doing the labour non-stop... so I want my daughter to have a different sukhi life’. In this way, Rina emphasises her oppressed position as eldest child in the family and as a young girl who lost her birth mother and therefore had ‘a heavier burden of work’ than others.

She does, however, show recognition of her privilege compared to that of her mother’s, especially with regard to access to resources such as health care. Because Rina is a different generation than her mother, lives in the bazaar rather than the village, and her husband had the network connections and means to get her to a hospital out of the district, she survived childbirth. Rina is aware that it ‘would have been different in the village... for my mother it was different... on the path’. She also points out that ‘many of my friends are still in the village getting more dukha than me’; she acknowledges that her life in the bazaar with a supportive husband who is a businessman, is privileged compared to women who must farm in the village and who do not have a good marriage.

Rina’s comments on menstruation reveal how she struggles to resolve the tensions that arise when various identities intersect in the particular socio-cultural context in which she lives. She outlines the ‘rules’ which apply to menstruating women. These are caste rules that govern the behaviour of females who are considered temporarily untouchable because of the pollution of menstruation. Rina describes these practices as valued by Chettri women, but then qualifies this by adding ‘that’s how it still is in the village. But in the bazaar and other places, people don’t so much consider it necessary... it’s not possible... especially younger people feel it has no meaning’. She describes how it is not practical for her to adhere to such practices as sleeping outside and not cooking during menstruation when she is responsible for cooking for everyone in the teashop on an ongoing basis. She suggests a compromise which entails adhering to the practices if she is back in the village but behaving more flexibly when she is in the bazaar. She does not sleep in her bed during menstruation, but she does not sleep outside either - instead, sleeping on the
floor is the compromise she proposes for women living in the bazaar. This example shows how Rina negotiates her identity as a respectable high-caste woman but also as a young business woman living in the bazaar. It is an example of how identities are dynamic and multidimensional and how experiences of gender vary with other social identities and contexts.

**Hansa**

In Hansa’s narrative, her gender and caste identities are emphasised, but the ways in which they interlock with other axes of oppression (and less often, privilege), are also visible. Hansa is from the Dalit caste, which is perceived by others as the lowest and ‘untouchable’ caste. She describes the extremely weak economic condition her family suffered when she was a child and she connects this with her caste status, ‘being Dalits, we were very poor... and things just seemed to get worse’. As a Dalit from a poor landless family, Hansa had to earn food by working for others. In Nepal this is considered a degrading type of work and is very different than women farming their own land or being involved in semi-professional positions like Gita, or business, like Rina. The expense of incidents such as festivals, funerals and weddings further exacerbate the situation and result in Hansa’s family borrowing money and getting into a ‘hopeless situation’. Hansa sums it up by stating, ‘our situation was not good and it didn’t improve’.

Hansa describes with enthusiasm how she was good at deuda competitions as a young girl; she could even ‘beat the boys often’. But her mother and grandmother were worried about her behaviour and decided that she needed to be restricted. Often Dalits are construed by other castes as being uncaring of their reputation; this incident suggests otherwise. However, excluding Hansa or chaperoning her were not viable options for the family because of the costs involved (but they would have been an option for an economically secure high-caste family), and so it appears that they chose the only option available; they married Hansa off at a young age.

Hansa’s family’s weakened social and economic status, meant that she was very vulnerable within the community and particularly within her married household. An example of this is how the meagre wedding and dowry that Hansa’s family provide are long held against her within her married household. Much of Hansa’s narrative is focused around her isolation and subordination amongst her in-laws. The oppression she experienced was largely amongst her own gender and caste; her mother-in-law and sister-in-law are the villains of the story. It has been suggested that not all low-caste communities in Nepal put pressure on women to bear sons.
because both sons and daughters are perceived as economic assets (Cameron, 1998). The oppression Hansa faced because she did not immediately bear a son may have been related to her husband being a landowning Dalit; certainly Hansa connects her eventual acceptance by her in-laws with being able to produce a son.

Hansa discusses her subordination at household level in detail; however, she also makes reference to oppression at the community level. An insult directed towards Hansa by ‘some of the upper-caste people’ is one example of how Hansa’s gender and caste identities intersect to oppress her. She relates how she was called an ‘aputi dumini’ by upper-caste neighbours while quarrelling. This is an offensive way of saying ‘barren untouchable woman’. An upper-caste woman could not be insulted in such a way, nor could a Dalit man, nor even a respectable Dalit woman who had borne sons. In this way the phrase was used to insult Hansa on various levels; to strike to the core of her multiple and intersecting identities.

Dhanamaya

Dhanamaya is from a privileged caste and ethnic background, she has good economic and social standing compared to others in her village, and her family are land owners both in Mugu and in the terai. She recognises how the passing of time has resulted in historic changes in the district and in her personal experience, and she is aware of how her mature age and her role as mother-in-law add to the privilege she currently enjoys. At this stage of her life Dhanamaya's multiple identities appear to intersect in a manner which allows her an easy sukha life. However, her narrative suggests that the way in which gender identities are embedded in other identities is a dynamic process that changes and is constructed differently at various stages of life. The identities which appear to privilege Dhanamaya now, previously interlocked differently causing her much suffering.

As a young wife and mother, Dhanamaya was part of a high-caste, Hindu family who owned a large quantity of land. She did not have female in-laws, her husband was a shaman so he didn’t practice birth control, and she was living in a region which was renowned for its lack of health care and neonatal knowledge, as well as its unproductive land. Therefore she was responsible for an excessive amount of hard manual labour and also under extreme pressure to produce a son. The tragic result was that Dhanamaya experienced seven miscarriages and the death of thirteen children. The point is not that as a Mugu woman she experienced suffering despite her other (privileged) identities, but rather, her experiences were such because of how her gender is embedded within her other social identities. It is not
possible to know how Dhanamaya’s life might have been if any of her identities had been changed, for example if she had been low-caste instead of high or if she had not been solely responsible for the labour of the farm, however, it is certain that her experiences as a woman would not have been the same.

Dhanamaya now enjoys family, resources, health, security, and power. She does not say that despite her dukha she now has sukha, but rather that it is because of the dukha that she now has sukha. It is necessary to take into account the ways in which identities are situated as multiple and layered and existing at once within systems of both privilege and oppression, in any attempt at understanding the complexities of lived experience.

**Gita**

Like Dhanamaya, Gita does not directly examine her caste or ethnicity. She acknowledges that her married home is better economically positioned than her natal home and includes how this benefited her personally. An example of this is when her mother-in-law was pressurising Sunil to stop Gita from studying. As Gita’s husband, Sunil was able to reply by saying that his wife would continue to study and whatever they couldn’t produce, ‘he would see that they purchased it instead’. However, even their strong economic standing cannot help Gita in managing to divide her time successfully between bearing children, nursing her mother-in-law and at the same time continuing her education. How her education is compromised will be further considered in the last section of this chapter.

Gita describes how her subordination as daughter-in-law has largely been resolved, yet the conflict between her commitment to her family (especially as daughter-in-law and mother) on the one hand and her commitment to her profession and education on the other hand, remains unresolved. At the centre of the narrative are her attempts to articulate and reconcile both individuality and relatedness. She realises that to others it appears that she has many intersecting axes of privilege, but for her the dilemma remains as to how to balance and manage her different identities, including that of academic student; professional woman; wife; mother; and daughter-in-law. She deliberates how:

> Everyone thinks it’s a bonus and I am fortunate to have the opportunity to study and also that I have a community job (FCHV)... And it is true, it’s good, and respect is involved... but I can’t manage everything well at the same time. If I study and attend to pass my IEd, and also do my role as FCHV, then how can I manage all the housework, my children, the outside farming and supporting my
husband? I have to do all these things... somehow. I can’t do less of one in order to do the other... that’s not possible... not acceptable.

Gita’s identities may be perceived as privileged by others around her, yet she describes the ways in which they interact and how this causes her to experience tension that proves difficult to resolve and ultimately thwarts her in achieving her education goals

**Jangmu**

Despite its apparent simplicity and sparse narrating style, Jangmu’s narrative is perhaps the most complex. Her gender identity is presented as deeply embedded in her ethnic identity as well as in intersecting caste, regional, linguistic, and religious identities. Her lived experiences of being a woman are very different from the other women’s; for example, it is difficult to imagine Dhanamaya, Gita, Hansa or Rina grabbing a man by the throat and arguing their point.

Jangmu expresses pride in her Bhote identity, describing her enjoyment as a Bhote woman performing *their* dance, in *their* traditional clothing and using *their* own language. She strongly identifies with the Karan region and disassociates herself from the Khas Nepali people, language, and religion. She compares the ease of speaking her own birth language ‘Karmarong’ rather than the national Nepali language and she describes the enjoyment of *Losar* festival, declaring, ‘we do not celebrate *Dosain* or *Tihar*’, which are the national Hindu festivals.

At the outset of her narrative, Jangmu identifies as ‘Kami’, explaining that she is a Dalit amongst her own Bhote people. In Nepal it is commonly held that the caste system operates only amongst Hindu Nepali communities and is not recognised amongst indigenous groups such as Bhote, Sherpa etc (Bista, 1991; Bhattachan, 2008), but Jangmu’s narrative reveals how caste hierarchies have been absorbed into their Bhote community. So, within the Karan region Jangmu’s family were perceived as low caste and experienced *hela*, however *Khasan* Nepali people (for example in the bazaar) would be largely unaware of these caste differentials and would identify Jangmu only by her ethnicity. The caste system as practiced by Jangmu’s family appears to dictate the social hierarchy and the food purity rules, however, it does not appear to be applied to female sexuality. Jangmu does not mention purity rules for women and her father’s habit of pressurising his daughters to leave their husbands and remarry would suggest that Hindu caste rules regarding a woman’s sexual purity are not relevant.
Referring to her parents’ village and social standing, Jangmu acknowledges that, ‘amongst other Dalits in Moba, our situation and living was good.’ As a child Jangmu enjoyed a privileged position within the family, perceiving herself as favoured over her sister. Because she had no brothers, she sometimes took on a boy’s role in the household, ‘I used to think “my father has no son; I need to respect him and make sukha and a good life for him...” like a son.’ The Karan area in the north of Mugu is well known as a dry and unproductive area and the description Jangmu uses of the Bhote ploughing with one bull is like a metaphor for doing the impossible, it is an image of human kind being pushed to the limits in order to survive. Just as impossible is the woman’s task of ‘preparing food and managing for the household even when there is nothing’.

All the women depict themselves as struggling with dukha, and Jangmu is no exception; she describes the heavy physical and emotional loads she has had to bear. However, Jangmu goes beyond this, using images in her narrative that highlight her role as a fighter, a traveller, a trader and at times a hero. She proves her strength physically as well as by making decisions, taking the initiative and being an astute business woman. Like the other women, she recognises the value of interdependence, especially because resources are limited and labour is so intensive. However, as a last resort, she does not shy away from acting independently and she does so without experiencing the degree of fear of public censure that concerns the other four women.

Jangmu frequently interacts in a masculine world and does not appear subordinate to male relatives or strangers, at household or community level. Her narrative reveals her as being free from patriarchal restrictions, for example on her mobility, and as acting autonomously in decision making and in controlling resources. She takes the initiative in the public world of business and trading by weaving and making and selling alcohol. In these ways Jangmu’s experiences as a woman are very different to the other four women.

However, it would be a mistake to romanticise or over-privilege Jangmu’s lived experience as a woman by ignoring how her gender identity intersects with her other social identities. At village level, Jangmu suffers hela as a Dalit woman and at district level she faces oppression as a Bhote woman. She is the warrior who defended her family by grabbing a Khasan man by the throat; but when her home is looted by Maoists and she suffers huge loss of property, she is ‘too scared to report it to the district administration.’ Perhaps a Bhote businessman would have reported such an incident, or an educated Hindu woman. But as an uneducated Dalit Bhote
woman, who speaks Karmarong, is not Hindu and runs an illegal business, Jangmu is scared to go to the police.

From this brief consideration of Jangmu’s experiences it can be seen that personal narratives cannot be disconnected from their socio-cultural context. The mutually constitutive and reinforcing nature of oppression has been glimpsed, and once again, the emphasis has been placed on how experiences of gender vary according to women’s other social identities.

**Concluding the intersectional analysis of the women’s narratives**

Through applying an intersectional analysis I have attempted to show how the women simultaneously position themselves in their narratives as women and, for example, as low-caste, ethnically marginalized, and non-Hindu, or as daughter-in-law, economically poor and Dalit. This approach has enabled me to avoid reducing people to one category at a time and also to recognise social positions as relational (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Endorsing intersectionality has meant that rather than producing an analysis that is embedded solely within an essentialist or universal collective experience as ‘woman’, I have been able to attend to the myriad overlapping and mutually reinforcing oppressions and privileges that the women uniquely experience (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008).

It is also important to note from this intersectional analysis that not only do different women experience their gender and other intersecting identities in different ways, but that individual women also experience these intersections dynamically according to different contexts (Olsvik, 2008). As contexts alter, for example, when women grow, marry, and relocate, or simply as they move between different locations and situations, their experiences of how their identities interlock also change. Dhanamaya’s narrative shows how age and generation, as part of the lifecycle, make a huge difference to the ways in which her identities interlock. Rina reveals in her discussion how the intersections of caste and gender vary according to her rural or ‘urban’ location and Janmgu’s story suggests that she is oppressed by her caste and family position when amongst her own community, but when living in the bazaar it is how her ethnicity intersects with her gender as well as her business role and perhaps her illiteracy that are of more significance. Recognising that identities can intersect to create privilege in one context but become a form of oppression in a different context is another reason to advocate the use of an intersectional analysis rather than an approach which has additive, fragmentary or essentialising tendencies (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006).
UNDERSTANDINGS OF EDUCATION

Defining and constructing education

When the women speak about education in their narratives, they are generally referring to either formal schooling or non-formal education classes. The women make many references to learning that takes place outside of school or classes, such as Jangmu's description of how she learnt to speak Nepali and cook. However, they tend to discuss these informal learning experiences separately and describe themselves as educated or not according to whether they attended school or learnt to read and write in organised classes. Hansa commences her narrative by declaring, 'I don't know anything. You know I am uneducated', and near the outset Rina explains, 'because my mother died at a young age, or perhaps because my father is illiterate, I didn't get the opportunity to go to school.' The women perceive formal schooling as 'real' education; they discount informal learning; and literacy classes, or non formal education classes, appear to be ranked somewhere in the middle. This is similar to the hierarchy that Robinson-Pant (2000, 2004) found in her ethnographic study in Nepal, with literacy programmes being considered by many men and women as a second rate, cheap and flexible alternative to formal education, but still better than nothing.

In their narratives, deudas and interviews, the women connect various local images and metaphors with education. Several times education is referred to as sight and as bringing light, both of which are valued in Mugu district. Jangmu compares her 'blind' state with how her sons have had their eyes opened by education. In Aruna's interview, she states that education is important because 'those with education have 'four eyes'. If we have no education it is like only two eyes seeing in an empty way.' Dhanamaya's story depicts how literally and figuratively her son's education has given her sight. By educating her son, Dhanamaya has made her future secure; she can rely on her son to provide for her needs rather than struggling on like a blind old woman with a heavy burden. More literally, she describes how her son bought her a solar panel to light up the house because her sight is failing in her old age. Therefore, through her son's education and profession, she can now see. Dhanamaya also refers to education in terms of a ticket or pass. Because her son got the 'papers' from school he has been able to enter into the world of salaried living, and through him she has also gained entry into a world where there is more security, choice, and control over circumstances.
In the second deuda, the women describe how the world is lit up by the rays of the sun, but how they ‘are always in the dark without any education’. They speak of ‘working in the dirt’ which aptly describes their outside farming labour, while ‘sitting in the smoke’ refers to their cooking tasks inside. The previous line’s mention of the bright world around them makes a stark contrast with their next line that is delivered in a flat monotone, ‘our eyes are blinded and our minds are dead.’ Later in the deuda they suggest that the life of an educated woman could be as beautiful as a golden nose ring and like a meadow that is fertile and pleasant or a place where people choose to meet and enjoy their surroundings. Most of the women performing this deuda are wearing nose ornaments, but ones made of brass. Gold is something much more valuable and long lasting than what they have. They make it clear that they speak hypothetically rather than from personal experience, ‘this beautiful could the life of an educated woman be’ and they appear to know more about the stars than they claim to know about education, ‘on a moonless night the stars shine bright, what education would be like for us, we have no idea.’

The women who have no education perceive education as a means of sitting which contrasts with their identity as load carriers. There are several mentions to those who are literally ‘sitting in school’ compared to those who work day and night carrying dokos on their back. Education is also seen as leading to the option of sitting in the longer term, Jangmu says ‘if I had another chance at life I would study also and sit on an office chair doing a waged job’. The image of educated people sitting on chairs inside offices is contrasted with those who are uneducated and work like animals outside in the fields and jungle. As the younger daughters-in-law, both Rina and Hansa had to do the heaviest outside tasks. Hansa describes how she sang sad deudas alone in the jungle. Rina speaks of how her mother gave birth to her alone on the path because she was not even allowed to use the animal shed. Both Dhanamaya and Jangmu make direct connections between themselves and the animals they see themselves as mimicking. The image of education is linked with sitting on a chair and is the antithesis of the uneducated woman’s life as an animal outside in the fields and jungle.

Pigg (1992) discusses how government officials and development workers are considered as a class distinct from farmers in Nepal. She links this with Nepal’s political history (particularly the systematic oppression of the Rana regime) as well as the more recent history of Nepal’s education system and international development input. The women in Mugu use education to create a link between this farmer ‘class’ who work outside in the fields and those employed to sit inside offices.
as government/non-government staff. How this forms part of their hope for their children’s (and their own) future will be further discussed later in this section.

The women also connect education with the bazaar rather than the village. Rekha shares about how things have improved ‘here in the bazaar’ but that ‘the life of village women, and especially in remote villages, is the most difficult... in the villages it is still not common for daughters to get an education.’ Similarly, Rina explains how there was a school in her village, ‘but no girls used to go to it.’ She mentions two girls who were the exception because their father forced them to attend school, however, ‘they studied up to class five but didn’t do well with their education.’ Rina adds, ‘even now, in the remote villages women don’t have the opportunity to go to school.’ She describes her own unsuccessful attempt to attend literacy classes in her village. She was a young teenager with ‘so much work to do during the day that it was impossible to give attention... to use my mind for study at night.’ Village lifestyle and the demands of subsistence farming did not seem to be compatible with education. Rina expresses her regret at the lost opportunity now that she lives in the bazaar, she says, ‘I’m illiterate, so I’m worried about this and embarrassed now. I face difficulties also in the hotel because of this.’ Education was not relevant to village life but now that she has a business in the bazaar she admits, ‘I still feel regret because I didn’t study... education would have helped me.’

The women comment on how the situation has changed over time, even within their lifespan. Dhanamaya speaks of her own childhood, saying, ‘I didn’t get the chance to study. At that time the only school was in Rara. None of the girls studied then, that’s just how it was.’ She comments on how things are different now with ‘everyone sitting in school.’ Being the eldest of the five women, Dhanamaya is able to reflect back to experiences that pre-date the memories of the younger women (Hansa, Rina and Gita). Her comments about hiding children from fear of foreigners, as well as the use of the old term ‘Gorkhali’ for outsiders are examples of how her socio-historic context differs from the younger women’s. Dhanamaya states this explicitly when she says, ‘my daughter-in-law’s generation is very different to mine... she surely has an easier life.’

Despite being from a younger generation than Dhanamaya, Hansa also observes that ‘things are different now... anyone can go to school’. She points out that ‘all the girls are enrolled now’, including those from oppressed castes. However the women recognise that it is necessary to differentiate between enrolling in school, attending school and passing school or gaining school qualifications. Hansa claims that it is different now because her daughter has been enrolled in school while in her
generation none of the Dalit girls were enrolled, but then she admits that her
daughter does not actually attend school. People tell Hansa that she ‘would do
better to send her to school’, yet when she weighs up the costs involved, she is not
quite sure if she would ‘do better’. The costs of education will be further examined
later in this section.

**Education and dukha**

In the second deuda, the women link dukha with being female, being from Mugu,
and being uneducated. All the women express the hope that their children will not
have as much dukha as they have had, and they mostly put their hope in education
to bring this about. The women see education as a way of alleviating dukha. They
hope education will mean lighter burdens, less hardship and more opportunities.
Rina explains, ‘I want my daughter to have a different sukhi life. I need to give her
good care, lots of love and educate her.’ Jangmu states, ‘my hopes are all for my
children’s lives. That their life will not be as dukhit as mine’ and speaking about her
eldest, she says, ‘he has an education so I want his future to include more than
scraping the earth for a living’.

The uneducated women add their personal experience of not accessing education
to their claims of dukha and subordination. Dhanamaya describes how she survived
in difficult conditions and how ‘like most women, I can’t read or write. I had to work
hard from morning to evening and usually into the night as well...’ She compares her
own life with her educated daughter-in-law’s and concludes, ‘My daughter-in-law’s
generation is very different to mine. She is educated and knows things that I didn’t
know... She can read and write and talk to people outside the home... She doesn’t
have as many difficulties as we faced in my time; she surely has an easier life.’ Yet,
as discussed in the previous section, Gita points out how Dhanamaya disparaged
her as a new daughter-in-law for ‘knowing nothing’ and ‘having seen nothing’;
clearly this was despite Gita being literate and having an education up to class
eight. From Dhanamaya’s perspective, education is a privilege and therefore a lack
of education can be used both in the pursuit of respectability and the race to
innocence (Fellows & Razack, 1998). However she does not value an educated way
of ‘knowing things’ as much as she values the learning that women gain through the
experiences and hardships of life. This is why, from the women of Mugu’s
perspective, it is not the educated woman who has a story to tell, but the woman
who has knowledge of dukha.
Rekha speaks as an educated woman in her interview and, while she utilises NGO and development discourse, she still uses the genre of dukha when referring to her life experiences. Like Gita, she brings to the fore the tension of managing the household tasks and study. From Rekha’s perspective, the ultimate woman is the one who can claim to have managed the burden of all the possible roles that a woman can be expected to fulfil and this includes education. In her opinion, a successful dukha story is not one like her mother’s, with concerns about ‘four manna of milk’, but an ‘even busier’ story such as her own; she says, ‘I have had to manage all the housework and children and continuing my study and teaching and supporting my husband to build our house and look after relatives and being involved in community service.’ Rekha bluntly states that in her opinion, ‘hard work isn’t an excuse for remaining backward.’ In Rekha’s personal experience, education has not been a means of alleviating dukha, but it has become part of her dukha story.

**Education and the relational**

Some of the women seem to suggest that the roles of wife, mother and daughter-in-law are less compatible with education than that of daughter. Gita’s narrative is the clearest example of this. She describes how she was able to attend school as a young girl because she had a lighter workload and despite being illiterate, her parents encouraged her. She was a model pupil and when occasionally told to stay at home and work, she claims that ‘crying and making a lot of protest I would insist on going to school.’ However, she points out that ‘after marriage I lost a lot of school time and that has been a big frustration’.

Early marriage has been identified as a barrier to girls’ education by many studies (see for example Boyle, Brock, Mace & Sibbons, 2002; Chitrakar, 2009; de Groot, 2007; Herz, 2006). However, the issue of marriage has mostly been considered in an unproblematic manner; often from a legal perspective condemning under-aged and forced marriages (by capture or as arranged by parents). There has been less discussion around girls’ elopement (with the exception of Ahearn, 2001), or beyond this, to issues such as how marriage relates to notions of collective responsibility, girls’ sense of duty and family commitment and the tension that exists between these values and participation in education.

As a wife Gita was able to continue her education to a certain extent; she describes how her husband defended her even when her mother-in-law said ‘don’t study’, and how he helped her to read the grade nine and ten subjects at home when she could
not manage the time to attend school. But Gita also relates how, with her ever-increasing duties as a daughter-in-law and then a mother, it became impossible for her to continue giving priority to her studies. She explains how she had to nurse her mother-in-law and do all the outside work, and how in the same year she gave birth to her first child. These responsibilities meant that when she tried to sit her final school exams (SLC), without attending or doing any preparation, she ‘failed the SLC exam and it was the worst disappointment of all’.

Gita describes how she continues to experience tension managing her studies and her household work. She perceives education as conflicting with her role at home, and in her narrative the former becomes associated with personal ambition, while the latter is perceived as collective duty. She wants to study and pass IEd level but she also wants to manage the housework, her children, the farming and to support her husband. She concludes, ‘I do wonder and worry about my future. I am thinking and thinking about my own life from one side, and also on the other hand how to make good relationships amongst the household’ and later, ‘my own priority is to study and pass my IEd. But to also make sure my brother-in-law and sons study too.’

In Gita’s experience, education was more compatible with being a daughter than with being a daughter-in-law, wife and mother; however, the other women’s narratives show that daughters also face constraints. In Mugu daughterhood is very short. Dhanamaya ran away with her husband when she was no more than 12 years old, Hansa was married off by her family at around the age of ten and Rina’s mother’s death brought her girlhood to an abrupt and untimely end when Rina was about six years old. The circumstances vary, but all five women are married before they leave their teenage years.

It is often pointed out by educational stakeholders in Mugu (and has been recognised in scholarship, for example by Chitrakar, 2009; Herz, 2006; Pherali, 2011) that parents are very aware that they will soon lose their daughters to strangers through marriage. Hansa refers to the proverb ‘daughter’s birth, lost destiny’ and parents sometimes quote this proverb to justify their long term thinking for their sons and short term thinking regarding their daughters. Dhanamaya, Gita, Rina and Hansa’s stories all demonstrate how their destiny was ‘lost’ to their parents in the long term. Jangmu’s narrative reveals how her parents deliberately planned her life outside the regular patrilocal framework, yet ironically, her destiny is more lost to them, in the end, than some of the other girls who are separated by marriage from their natal home but maintain good relationships. The first deuda
begins by declaring ‘happiness on the birth of a son, sadness if it is a daughter.’ Having witnessed the love that many parents have for their daughters, this line makes sense when it is understood in the context of the sadness of knowing that a daughter will eventually be ‘lost’ to the household, rather than mourning the baby girl’s birth. And thus, educating daughters who are a ‘lost destiny’ is commonly perceived as having no long term relevance for parents.

It also appears that there is little to be gained, in the short term, from giving a daughter a basic education. In Mugu survival is the most urgent need and households experience constant pressure in merely procuring enough food and water to stay alive. In the short term, girls’ education does not contribute to these urgent needs and therefore schooling cannot easily compete with the reality of everyday lives. As a daughter, Hansa was relied on to collect water, Rina was expected to care for her little brother and Jangmu was responsible for grazing the cattle which were the family’s livelihood. Had these girls attended school, these contributions to the household would have been severely missed; as Jangmu rhetorically asks, ‘who else was going to do it?’

Educational stakeholders, such as the District Education Officer, often suggest that children from large families miss out on education and they recommend that family planning and reduced family size would increase opportunities for education. Their suggestions reflect education policy and popular development discourse, which often take an unproblematic view that education reduces fertility rates and improves health, which in turn, positively impacts on education (Jeffery & Basu, 1996). The women’s narratives do not suggest that the situation is as straightforward as this. Gita points out that because she had many siblings she was able to be spared and could attend school. Jangmu suggests that because there was only her, after her sister left home, she had no chance to go to school. And because Rina is the eldest child she recognises that her labour is indispensable. These examples show that in large families some, rather than all, children may get an opportunity to be educated, but they also reveal that in small families it can be the case that no one gets the opportunity of an education.

Hansa says she enrolled her daughter when she was little but that she did not pass the first year, and now she has been re-enrolled but does not attend regularly. Hansa’s narrative reveals that her daughter has become useful in the home more rapidly than she made progress as a student. In the short term her educational gains cannot compare with her contribution of working in the home. Dhanamaya insists that her daughters have the opportunity to continue with education as long as
they want and she expresses a desire for them to become educated. However, Dhanamaya also points out that one of her daughters is not achieving very well at school and makes it clear in her narrative that what she actually values in her daughters, on a practical day-to-day basis, are characteristics such as being capable and useful in the house and the amount of grain they can grind in a morning.

In a district like Mugu where the immediate need for survival is so pressing, it is not surprising that tension emerges between educating girls and using them in domestic work. Because girls’ education is less relevant to parents in the long term, it is also more likely to be compromised in the short term and especially when faced with urgent competing needs of daily survival.

**The costs of education and investing in the ‘patriarchal bargain’**

The women are well aware of the costs involved in education. Indeed, this is often the issue which they identify as lying at the heart of their own lack of education, or at least as a link in the chain of circumstances which led to them remaining uneducated. Costs of education can be split into the direct resourcing costs of attending school and opportunity costs (King and Hill, 1993). There are references in the women’s narratives to the direct costs of education, such as Hansa’s reference to the school dress she cannot afford for her daughter. But overall it is the opportunity costs involved that are presented as being much more of an issue. The burdens that the women bear as young girls and teenagers are the costs that need to be calculated when parents are considering the costs of education, because, if the bearer goes to school, someone else needs to carry that burden. There is no question that the opportunity costs for girls’ education in Mugu are substantial; as already discussed, the women all elaborate on how their work contribution as a child was vital to the survival of the household.

In the context of the poverty of Mugu it is not surprising that the women are so aware of the costs of education. It is significant that in their narratives the women also pay attention to who must pay these schooling costs. For each person educated someone else must pay the cost, and the women’s point is that it is usually another woman who has to make the sacrifice and pay the cost of bearing an increased burden. The costs of schooling have frequently been discussed in educational scholarship, yet there has been less recognition of who has to bear these costs.
Gita received an education along with her brothers, but her sisters had to make the sacrifice; because they bore her share of the load as well as their own, she was able to give continuity to her studies as far as grade eight. Dhanamaya explains how she prioritised her eldest son’s education and because so many of her children died she gave him ‘special attention’. She did all the work in the house and fields herself, and even though she had to ‘spend the days like a mule’ she says proudly ‘I managed the education of my two sons’. Similarly, Jangmu points out that as soon as they came to the bazaar she enrolled her sons in school despite the enormous pressure they faced regarding their daily needs and uncertainty about the future. She asserts, ‘I have had a lot of dukha in order to make it good for my sons’. Jangmu’s husband was also busy carrying loads, however, it was Jangmu who fought to get this opportunity for her husband, who turned the rice that he earned into something profitable that allowed the family to survive, and it was Jangmu who took full responsibility for her sons schooling and welfare. And thus, she proudly concludes; ‘my main worry has been that my children would not get the opportunity to study. But despite all the dukha, I have managed to send my children to school. I am sure it was the right thing...’

So in their narratives the women emphasise that education means cost and sacrifice for them, yet they also tell us that they pay it willingly or at least desire to be able to pay it. This is because of their belief in education as an investment and their conviction that it is an especially wise and long term investment when it is for their sons. Ensuring the education of their sons is one of the ways in which women can ‘bargain with patriarchy’. It is a way of contributing to the system which will ensure that in the long term they acquire power in the household. Because she is already a mother-in-law, Dhanamaya can relate how, by investing in her son’s education and bearing the extra burden of dukha which that entailed, she is now reaping the reward. Because of her son’s good upbringing and successful education he now has respect in the community, a full time salaried job and stability in the household. Because she provided for him, he is now in a position to provide for her. She boasts of how her son has managed the resources and medicine she needs; how he has rebuilt their house at the top of the village; and how he has provided her with a good daughter-in-law and grandsons.

However, even careful investment in a son’s education does not offer any guarantees. Jangmu’s narrative is an example of the risks involved. Despite her committed investment in her sons over many years, she continues to bear the household burdens of dukha and worry, even though her eldest son has
successfully graduated from school. She describes him as still being ‘empty’ and ‘not yet having found any opportunity’. Despite their education, the boys have not secured any position which would enable them to care for their mother and allow her to retire her burden of dukha. Jangmu is still hopeful that an opportunity might arise soon, although her appeals suggest that she is becoming more desperate in this regard. She also realises that her son may need to leave the district to seek employment. For Jangmu there is no guarantee that her investment in education will provide security for her old age, indeed there is the threat that it may increase her dukha and burdens by taking her sons away from her and leaving her to suffer alone in her old age. This would be the genuine tragedy that Kandiyoti (1988) speaks of; despite having paid a heavy price as a ‘bargain’ earlier in life, Jangmu would also fail to enjoy any benefits later in life.

**Education and intersecting identities**

Because gender intersects with other identities in the creation and maintenance of power relations, the women’s understandings of education are not just linked to gender, but also to other intersecting identities. In her interview, Aruna briefly refers to her personal situation to explain why she is not educated. Her grandparents raised her after her parents’ death, but because they were ‘old and poor’ she had to help with the farm work and could not continue past class two. Aruna’s gender and economic status as well as her being an orphan, intersect to create barriers to education. Similarly, Rina links her parental situation and the amount of work needing done on the farm with her lack of education. She says that because her mother died when she was young and also because her father was illiterate, she did not have the opportunity to attend school. However her brother is able to attend so it is clear that it is not just her family circumstances, but rather how they intersect with gender that is significant.

Hansa emphasises her family’s poor economic and social status and links this with their Dalit identity. She describes the heavy load of housework as well as ‘working for others to earn foodstuff’ from a young age. It seems that despite the extreme economic hardships, Hansa’s brothers attended school. She states that, ‘my three brothers went to school but my sister and I didn’t.’ When her sister protests about this her mother says, ‘ahh, what do Dalit girls need to study for? They would just laugh at you.’ When her sister pursued the issue she was physically punished and sent to her work in the fields. In this case, Hansa constructs gender as interlocking with caste to deny both her and her sister access to school, and describes how her mother explicitly articulates this. Hansa also refers to how her brothers faced caste
discrimination in school. While Dalit boys had access to education, they still faced barriers to full participation and it appears that those who came from poor economic and social backgrounds experienced this more acutely.

In contrast, Gita describes her positive experience in school. She speaks of being a conscientious and capable pupil, but in her narrative the intersections of her privileged identities remain unexamined. Whether her experience of not being beaten by the master or bullied by other students was in any way linked to her caste and ethnic identity and respectable landowning family background, remains unexplored.

In her interview, Rekha explains how she faced caste discrimination as a newly married woman, irrespective of being highly educated and having a professional status. At the outset of her interview she explains that she ‘did inter-caste marriage’. This was not marriage between high and low caste, but between two high castes (Chettri and Thakuri). It is significant that her father expresses his disappointment that both his daughters married into a higher caste than their own, by saying, ‘even though I educated my daughters well, neither of them got married within their own caste’. So while Rekha advocates education as a means of raising awareness and reducing caste-based practises, her father thinks that well educated daughters should adhere to caste rules. However, when their families see that they both exhibit good social, economic and political standing in the community, their marriage is eventually accepted. Had the marriage been between high and low caste or had they not both been well educated with much professional potential, the story may have been different.

Jangmu ponders how things might have been, asking the question, ‘if I had studied, I wonder how my situation would be like?’ She speculates on how her identities which currently intersect oppressively could have intersected to bring privilege instead – had education been in the equation. Jangmu says, ‘being a janjati as well as a Dalit woman, if I had been educated I am sure I would have automatically received a job...’ Perhaps Jangmu is referring to policies of affirmative action relating to social inclusion, which have become the focus of debate recently in Nepal (Asian Development Bank, 2010; Bennett, 2005); she suggests that as a woman from a marginalised caste and ethnic background she would have an increased opportunity of gaining employment – if she were educated. In this sense her narrative points to a belief in education as the key or catalyst that enables caste and ethnic identities to be turned upside down; that transforms oppressed caste, ethnic and gender identities into an interlocking ‘trump card’ that would entitle the
bearer to ‘sit on an office chair and do a waged job’. As well as considering the barriers to education that interlocking identities present, in Jangmu’s narrative we are offered a view of education as a possible means of transforming intersections of oppression into intersections of privilege. Unfortunately it has to be acknowledged that she only speaks of this hypothetically as she has not directly or indirectly experienced it as such.

From the women’s narratives it can be seen that education is not necessarily at the forefront of their understandings of themselves and their lived experience; nevertheless, it is part of each woman’s story. Even those who have no personal first-hand experience of education, and are not concerned with focusing on technical dimensions of the provision of education, still speak of the meaning of education and its importance and value; and they do so in different ways according to their uniquely intersecting identities.

**Concluding the discussion on understandings of education**

This discussion has examined how women’s constructions of education are intricately embedded in their intersecting identities. It has looked at how identities interlock to restrict as well as create opportunities of education and it has also considered how education is perceived as having potential to interact with other identities to change existing power relations and alter how women position themselves and their shifting identities.

With reference to research in Nepal, Robinson-Pant (2008) suggests that national policy and international education research have focused on the functional or instrumental dimensions of education which rely on a fixed notion of identity and neglect to look at the symbolic aspects of education which entail an understanding of multiple and shifting identities. From the narrative analysis it can be seen that the stakeholders who were interviewed frequently rely on a more formal educational policy style of discourse which reflects the focus commented on by Robinson-Pant (2008). They make reference to functional advantages of education and mix this with the rights discourse that is common amongst government/non-government organisations, resulting in discourse about Mugu women and education that suggests a fixed notion of identity. This contrasts with the five women’s life-narratives when they talk about their own experiences. As has been pointed out in the discussion earlier, there are some indications in the Mugu women’s narratives that they value education for its direct functional purposes (such as Rina’s regrets that she cannot manage the books in the teashop or read signboards) but there
appear to be more emphases in their narratives on the symbolic value and motivation of education. Education is symbolically described as light, as sight and as an entry ticket or pass. It is ideologically perceived by the women as a way that leads to new opportunities and lifestyles, of sitting rather than carrying, of access to economic benefits, security and mobility rather than dependency on animals, soil and a ‘backward’ village life.

Historically, in Nepal, being uneducated has been associated with backwardness and a lack of consciousness or empowerment (Caddell, 2007; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1999; Shields & Rappleye, 2008), and as was pointed out in the literature review, this is particularly significant with regard to gender and the region of Mugu. From their studies amongst young women in central Nepal, Holland and Skinner (2008) comment on how an ‘educated person’ was a social identity that women valued highly and that lack of education often caused feelings of insecurity. There are many references in the Mugu women’s narratives that bear this out; however, this discussion has also attempted to point out that how the women value or perceive social identities connected with being ‘educated’ varies according to how their identities intersect. In this chapter, the individual and unique ways in which identities and education interact in the women’s narratives have been explored and through examining these intersections this discussion has been able to gain insight into the shifting, complex and unstable nature of the constructions of power relations.
CHAPTER SIX – CONCLUSION

The concluding chapter reflects on the process as well as the significance of this thesis. It returns to the theory that has informed the study, and considers the appropriateness of the choices that have been made; the approach taken; and the lens used, in response to the research questions that frame the study. It then outlines the significance of the contributions made to knowledge before reflexively considering the experience of the inquiry as a whole and finishing with a discussion of the potential for further research.

RETURNING TO THE PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In the introductory chapter three research questions were outlined:

- How is gender constructed by women in Mugu and how does it intersect with other identities in their life narratives?
- How are understandings of education embedded in gendered power relations in the lives of women in Mugu?
- How can reflexivity be used to problematize the power dynamics inherent in research and to contribute to methodological approaches taken to researching across borders?

In order to address these questions various theoretical frameworks were considered and decisions made regarding the most appropriate frame for this study. These decisions shall be re-visited and evaluated in the following section.

Theoretical frameworks; competing conceptualisations

At the outset of the literature review, concerns about some strands of Western feminism, human rights, and instrumental approaches to international development, were discussed. These frameworks were rejected as inappropriate for this study and instead, a postcolonial feminist perspective was adopted and intersectional theory was used to inform the thesis. Reflecting back over this narrative inquiry of women’s lives in Mugu, confirms my decision that a postcolonial feminist lens, and more specifically an intersectional approach, was the appropriate frame for this study.
Western feminist discourse has been criticised for universalising women’s issues and in doing so, producing reductive and essentialised constructions of women from the Global South that deny the diversity of their experience and oppression (Mohanty, 1988, 2003; Trinh, 1989). Just as Mohanty (1988) has denied the existence of a monolithic ‘Third World’ woman, who is frozen in time and space; using a postcolonial feminist perspective, this thesis has denied the existence of a homogenous ‘woman of Mugu’ and by applying an intersectional analysis it has acknowledged the diversity of the women’s experiences and the intersecting power relations in their lives. Examining how identities intersect in the women’s lives has enabled me to consider how the women are simultaneously oppressed and oppressor, victim and agent. In this sense, intersectional theory has provided ‘an alternative to false universalisms that subsume difference under hegemonic western understandings’ but also to cultural relativism ‘that would abandon any universalist claim in favour of reified and absolute conceptions of difference’ (McEwan, 2001, p.105).

The potential and limitations of a human rights perspective was also considered in the review of theoretical frameworks. From the narrative analysis of the women’s constructions of identities and education it can be seen that there are occasional references to rights, but that these are limited. There are some indications of rights discourse in the interview with Rekha, who was amongst the educational stakeholders interviewed and also in Hari Kanya’s deuda when she refers to ‘the justice of the law’ and ‘discrimination to Dalit women’. However the five women who were the focus of this inquiry did not apply a rights frame to their narrative and (with the exception of an ambiguous remark from Jangmu possibly regarding affirmative action relating to social inclusion issues in Nepal) they did not make use of rights discourse in constructing their identities.

Instead, the women focus on the value of relational issues, goals of harmony, and the collective, as well as emphasising a sense of duty and responsibility. At times these values are constructed as being in tension with personal ambitions and individual desires. However, the women seek to resolve these tensions rather than strive for independence from them. The women do not prioritise personal success, and neither autonomy nor individual entitlements are depicted as an end in themselves. Neither dependency nor independence is valorised; rather it is issues relating to interdependence that are central to the narratives. Analysing the women’s narratives from a human rights perspective would have made it more difficult to foreground such values as well as not being as appropriate for examining
the complexities of the interplay of the women’s relational identities as an intersectional analysis.

While a human rights framework was not considered appropriate to this study, the value of international human rights is recognised. However, from a postcolonial feminist perspective, criticisms regarding the Western history and false claims of universalism of international human rights instruments cannot be ignored (Marks & Clapham, 2004) and suggestions that human rights are not relevant to the practical reality of many women’s lives cannot be overlooked (Stacy, 2009). Perhaps studies such as this one, which centralise the complexities of lived experience and recognise that how women experience oppression depends on the intersections of their multiple identities, could be used to positively influence human rights theory. De Nobrega (2010) criticises human rights law and practice for treating people as though they have linear identities and attempting to deal with one issue at a time, in a one-dimensional manner. She suggests that human rights instruments can be strengthened, improved and made more effective through the application of an intersectional framework. Intersectionality could be used to improve and expand current international human rights theory, and by applying an intersectional framework, human rights instruments and organisations could be transformed to be less Western and more genuinely universal. As de Nobrega (2010) suggests, intersectionality would not solve all the problems, but it would encourage consideration of questions about power, privilege and access and it would also help to uncover inadequacies and contradictions in current human rights theory and praxis.

The value of intersectionality has begun to be recognised in gender studies and there appears to be an increasing interest in the concept; however, it has received little attention in education and international development studies. International development approaches have largely relied on instrumental or human rights perspectives with regards to gender and education. Such approaches tend to generalize across countries (and continents) and fail to attempt to understand the lived experiences of women and girls. Robinson-Pant (2004) points out that attempts to generalize tend to mean that in practice discourse is underpinned by Western values and this means that local definitions are reduced to ‘cultural beliefs’. There may be recognition that strategies for implementation need to be adapted to local context, but often definitions of ‘gender’ and ‘education’ are assumed to be fixed and singular (Stromquist, 2002). In contrast, this study has attempted to use an intersectional analysis to break down such unitary definitions by considering the
complexities of women’s identities and how they intersect. As Arnot and Fennell (2008) have recommended, this inquiry has been concerned with exploring in greater depth the constructions of gender within nations with a desire to gain insight into the opportunities and constraints around women’s gender identifications, as these need to be considered in international agendas if they wish to be truly universal rather than ethnocentric and imperial.

From the data analysed in this inquiry, it can be seen that different power relations affect each other within the women’s lives; these power relations strengthen, undermine, reinforce and compete with each other (Olsvik, 2008). It is important to note that attempts to examine these power relations separately (as much of the education and development literature does in presenting bullet point lists of barriers to girls’ education) cannot capture the dynamic interactions between the power relations nor the influence they have collectively. Therefore the single, multiple or additive approaches to analyses of power, that are so common in education and development studies, are considered inadequate and have been rejected in favour of an intersectional framework for this thesis.

Reflecting on intersectionality

While an intersectional framework has been adopted in preference to other theoretical approaches, there have still been challenges and difficulties associated with this choice. As has already been pointed out, one of the major challenges frequently associated with intersectionality is the issue of complexity. Along with Buitelaar, 2006; Ludvig, 2006; McCall, 2005 and many others, I have struggled with the frustration of having to accept that I could never fully do justice to understanding the complexity of the lives of the women of Mugu. Like Yuval-Davis (2006) I recognise that in specific historical contexts and in relation to specific people there are some identities which are more important or dominant than others in constructing specific positioning, and I have attempted to focus on these. However, I am aware that there were always other identities and other dimensions of intersections that I was unable to examine. The flip-side to this challenge regarding the infinite complexity is that the irreducibility of social identities is recognised and the creative, dynamic interplay of power relations is acknowledged.

An intersectional analysis also tolerates ambiguity and paradox. As Baxter (2007) points out, there is always the danger in research, of being hampered by our own definitions and conceptual frames which tend to ignore dissonance and contradictions in quest of cognitive consistency. This leads to researchers becoming
fixated with attempts at explaining anomalies – which are only identified as such because of the frame used in the first place. Relying on an intersectional framework, as well as a narrative approach, has allowed me to appreciate just how the Mugu women do make sense of their lived experience; but also to allow that there is paradox and ambiguity in their narratives that at times do not make sense. One example of this is the way in which Hansa accounts for, but leaves ambiguity surrounding the reasons for her forced abortion. In a one-dimensional power analysis it would have been difficult to explain the ‘anomaly’ of why a low caste woman was forced to abort her baby, but from an intersectional perspective it no longer appears as an anomaly and although I still do not fully understand the power struggles surrounding the sad incident, the framework is creative and dynamic enough to accommodate such an ambiguity. Another example is how the women perceive themselves as powerful and strong but also as subordinate. By breaking down dichotomies such as oppressor/oppressed and agent/victim, intersectional theory accommodates the paradox of being simultaneously powerful and subordinate.

Drawing on intersectionality as a feminist approach which recognises the ambiguities and complexities of lived experience has been useful in order to avoid one-dimensional analyses, simplistic generalisations and stereotyping (Cole, 2009). But it could be inferred from this research that perhaps the metaphor proposed by Crenshaw (1989), of interlocking oppression as a traffic junction, is too neat and precise an image to fit with the women’s experiences. Crenshaw described how, ‘discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them’ (1989, p.149). In the context of the women’s experiences in Mugu and in the light of the discussion regarding how narratives navigate the tensions of inhabiting both privileged and oppressed identities, a more dynamic metaphor would be appropriate. Perhaps the interlocking of ice crystals is of relevance to intersecting identities in this context. Ice crystals are constantly changing and growing as they move through the atmosphere and collide with others and stick together in an aggregate to form a snowflake. How the ice crystals interlock is affected by micro-environment factors such as temperature and humidity and in turn the environment is affected and changed by their presence, but exactly how ice crystals grow, change and stick to each other remains controversial. Snowflakes have properties in common, yet no two pathways are the same and no two crystals are exactly alike. Like the women’s narratives, each snowflake is unique. Snow can be seen at a
glance, yet to understand the individual snowflake requires a more focused examination and an appreciation of the complexities involved in how ice crystals interlock, just as a deeper understanding of women’s lives in Mugu necessitates that experiences are individually considered and the complex intersections of multiple and shifting identities are examined.

Intersectionality is not a new concept yet it is only in recent years that the idea has seemed to burgeon (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006) and feminist interest has increased. Much variety exists in intersectional theory and in its practical application, which can be confusing. Prins (2006) makes a distinction between systemic approaches to intersectionality which focus on structure (and which she associates with the US), and constructionist interpretations which adopt a more relational and dynamic view of social identities and power (commonly associated with Europe and Scandinavia in particular). I would claim that this inquiry has been especially influenced by examples of intersectionality that are more constructionist than systemic in approach, and which have been recognised as particularly compatible with narrative methodologies. Prins (2006) proposes that identities are not about naming and categorising, but rather they are about narrating and co-authoring; identities are narrative understandings about ‘who’ someone is rather than lists of characteristics that inform us about the ‘what’ of a person. She concludes that narrative constructions of identity are ideal tools for understanding how power is relational and dynamic in its intersections.

Similarly, Cole (2009) advocates exploring gender and its multiple intersections through the use of narrative methodologies. She draws on intersectionality in order to consider the ways in which personal narratives can illuminate hidden complexities of power relations while avoiding essentialisms and oversimplifications, and discusses the potential of intersectionality and narrative in relation to ‘undoing’ gender. It is my hope that the compatibility of narrative methodologies and intersectionality has been demonstrated throughout this inquiry (and the appropriateness of the narrative approach to the thesis as a whole will be further reflected on later in this section).

Since no framework is perfect and none can ever hope to fully accomplish all that needs to be understood and examined with regards to identities, power relations and education as constructed by women, the need for continued struggle, debate and deliberation within intersectional research is acknowledged (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). It is recognised that this thesis forms part of that continued struggle within intersectional research and in doing so makes a contribution to
feminist understandings of intersectionality. This inquiry is one example of how an intersectional analysis can be productively applied to make visible the multiple identities and unstable constructions of power that are central to women’s lives.

**Contributions to knowledge**

This inquiry contributes to global scholarship by questioning assumptions around universal understandings of gender and education. Attention has been drawn to the need for research which breaks down singular definitions of gender and education and this study has attempted to challenge such definitions. It contributes to the existing body of knowledge by deepening understandings of the complexity of power relations as experienced in the everyday lives of women in Mugu, and how these relate to education. Rather than considering power as a fixed and unchanging structure governing women’s lives, this study has recognised the dynamic and unstable nature of power relations as constructed through processes of social interaction; instead of relying on a structural or one-dimensional theory of power, this research has used intersectional theory to analyse how multiple identities intersect to form power. Much of the existing literature has depoliticised education by focusing on technical aspects, whereas this study has examined how the women’s identities (including gender, caste, ethnicity, position in the family, age, role in the household/community, and economic status) intersect creating unequal power relations, and how understandings of education are embedded in these relations.

As well as illustrating the usefulness of the theoretical perspective of intersectionality in analysing power relations, this inquiry is unique in applying an intersectional approach in the context of Mugu, Nepal. Such analysis of education and gender are lacking in Nepal in general and in Mugu in particular. The Karnali region (and especially Mugu district) has been identified by the government as a target area for intervention, yet it is very much under-researched; this study begins to address the gap in Nepal’s scholarship. It is also recognised that aspects of this research could be useful to a wider audience. It may have relevance as an example of an intersectional analysis, to other countries in the Global South, and especially within South Asia.

International research on gender and education, and particularly in the context of Nepal, has been dominated by the quantitative paradigm and this study helps to redress the balance. It contributes to scholarly discussions around the issue of power dynamics involved in the research process as well as the role of reflexivity in
relation to ethical research. This inquiry has foregrounded women’s experiences and their constructions and definitions by using a narrative approach, by taking a postcolonial feminist perspective and by applying an intersectional analysis. It has refused essentialist and homogenising constructions of women and has challenged assumptions regarding who can talk about education and whose voices should be heard. It is intended that this thesis adds to the growing body of studies which are not just about narrative inquiry but are examples of narrative inquiry.

REFLECTING ON THE JOURNEY

Research as a journey is one of the most common metaphors used to explain the methodological challenges encountered during specific research projects (Pirrie & Macleod, 2010). I, too, have found the metaphor of a journey useful for reflecting on this research project, but I do not refer to a ‘hero’s journey’ which has inspired many research students (Fessenden, 2009), nor even the type of journey undertaken by lonely planet tourist travellers, as referred to by Mackenzie and Ling (2009).

When I reflect on this research journey, I am reminded of the herders in Nepal, who move their sheep and goats or yaks from the winter territory up to higher leks (high Alpine valleys), grazing them all the while. Perhaps I originally expected the journey to be more of a quest or trek and assumed I would be taking the most direct route, on a relatively obvious path, which would climb continually until I reached the destination. Instead, I found that ‘the path is made by walking’ (Nepali proverb) and that there was no mapped-out route to be followed or fixed itinerary to be adhered to. For the Himalayan herder the focus is on the journey rather than the destination. Herders must find the balance between staying long enough in one area and also knowing when to move on to fresh pastures. They must not get lost in areas of unsafe ground, yet they must also avoid places that are too commonly frequented and over-grazed. As a researcher I had to gauge when I needed to read further or move on to a new area and I had to accept that some topics were too large or too controversial, while others were already well researched. I learnt that the research process is about the journey, with all its detours and false leads, rather than about following a clearly demarcated route to a summit. I soon realised that reflexive research, like herding, is a lifestyle rather than just a day job or hobby. It is an attitude and a way of thinking that cannot be contained within nine-to-five or certain hours of the day; but, like seasonal herding, the research journey is not permanent and there is an eventual endpoint. At times herders work in groups, but much of the
time is spent walking alone. They may have passed through that area before, so it is not just about visiting new landscapes, but about seeing things afresh and with new eyes. Quests and treks are often perceived as trying to pit one’s strength against the environment, whereas herding in the Himalayas is all about being tuned into the environment and working with it. It requires one to be adventurous enough to try out new directions and methods as well as being constantly attentive and observant. Like a herder, a good researcher has a mixture of skill, intuition, experience and readiness to learn from others and take advice; but also an acceptance that ultimately the learning and transformation comes from the journey itself.

**Closing reflections**

As a narrative inquiry this thesis is built on the premise that we construct and know our worlds through narrative; we experience reality through the stories we tell and live. The use of metaphor is often a significant part of storying reality. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) point out that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life and not just in language but in thought and action; they suggest that the way we think is ‘fundamentally metaphorical in nature’ (p.3). In the course of this research I have become aware of the many metaphors connected with colonial histories and imperial thinking. I have attempted to examine my own thinking to ensure that there are no remnants of notions about ‘bringing light to dark places’ through education, ‘journeying to unchartered lands’ to carry out research, or bearing ‘the white man’s burden’ of responsibility for bringing civilisation to barbaric places. I found metaphor useful in the task of examining my own privilege as well as the women’s oppression. For example, the women themselves used the metaphor of light for education, so rather than avoiding using this (or branding it a ‘colonial metaphor’), I found it possible to extend it and play with it reflexively. As I stepped out of a dull room and could not see anything because of the strong Mugu sun, or as I took photographs of rays of sunlight catching on swirls of smoke and obliterating the view as though behind a curtain; I realised that light not only illuminated but also blinded, and by turning the metaphor around in this way, I realised it applied to the privilege of my educational background.

I have reflected on the more obvious metaphors used by the women in their narratives (such as light and carrying burdens), however I am also aware that metaphors used more subtly are particularly difficult to translate and can get lost between languages. I have to accept that there are likely to be many metaphors that the women consciously and unconsciously made use of that I have been unable to appreciate. I also have to accept that all the months and years of reflection on this
study, much of which is recorded in my journal, cannot be incorporated into this one piece of written work. I hope that a reflexive approach has flavoured this thesis; however I accept that only a small amount of the reflexive details can be included; not just because of word limits, but because I do not want to risk drowning out the women’s voices by making my own voice too central or dominant.

Recent qualitative research methods’ literature commonly accepts that the temporal nature of narrative precludes our ability to replicate past research findings (Arvay, 2003) and recognises that researchers need to identify and document how their background, positioning and assumptions as well as their behaviour, affect all the stages in the research process (Finlay, 2003, p.21). It is usually agreed that without some degree of reflexivity, research is ‘blind and without purpose’ (Flood, 1999), but the extent to which researchers should engage in and present their explicit self-aware meta-analysis remains controversial (Finlay, 1998, 2002); researchers must tread carefully lest their work be criticised as self-indulgent (Sparkes, 2002).

Like Bishop and Shepherd (2011), I recognise that it is only through systematic, ongoing reflexivity – including a continuing examination of personal subjectivity – that we can avoid self-indulgence. It is through reflexivity that we gain awareness of the hidden agendas in our writing and the assumptions that shape our research. I am convinced that it is by being honest and transparent about these insights and by presenting details of our own biography that we demonstrate moral integrity in our research (Kvale, 1996), despite the risk that this leaves us feeling vulnerable (Trahar, 2011). However, heeding Bishop and Shepherd’s (2011) warning, I recognise that my reflexive analysis cannot be presented as objective reports or ‘truth claims’. Therefore, in keeping with a narrative paradigm, I acknowledge that my reflexive accounts are narrative constructions; they too are temporally situated; they are only one perspective and one possible construction or interpretation. As Andrews et al (2011) point out in their discussion about narrative inquiry, ‘whatever we document, it is not only a creation, but our creation’ (p.21). By bringing honesty to the fore in this way, reflexivity is a vital component of qualitative research and allows readers to make judgements about the ethical quality of the research. Acknowledging the situated and constructed nature of our reflexive accounts as well as our research findings does not eradicate the ethical tensions, but it does help address some of the moral tensions involved in issues of interpretation and representation (Riach, 2009). As Sultana (2007) suggests; ‘while some scholars have argued that acknowledgement of positionality, reflexivity, identity, and representation does not necessarily result in politically engaged research and
writing, and may not result in destabilizing existing power relations or bring about dramatic changes, the alternative of not heeding such issues is even more problematic’ (p.383).

I have to accept that knowledge is always partial; that there is no perfect method, only a less imperfect way. Like Reed and Speedy (2011), I recognise that narrative inquiry illuminates some moments but leaves other moments in the dark and I have learnt that I cannot know everything; I do not need to know everything because ‘there is no everything’ (p.120). I have come to realise that there is always another layer, another dimension and another story that I have not been able to reflect upon or narrate. This is not a weakness of reflexivity or narrative inquiry but an indication of commitment to doing ethical research - a refusal to be involved in unethical research which fabricates reflections as objective accounts, denies that something is always privileged and fails to acknowledge that there are countless factors which it has not been possible to include. This narrative inquiry has not attempted to ‘hide behind the terminology of academic language games’ by gaining advantage through using terms such as ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’, but has attempted to prioritise a focus on critiquing whether the work is ‘useful, insightful, or meaningful – and to whom’ (Bochner, 2000, p.267).

The experiences of this research lead me to conclude that the risks involved in narrative inquiry are outweighed by the many positive dimensions of the approach. I have been engrossed in the ‘messy yet rigorous and cumulative process of doing narrative inquiry’ and have attempted to do so in an ethical, critical and artful manner (Reed & Speedy, 2011, p.120). Like Trahar (2011) ‘I established narrative inquiry as the most appropriate methodology for my study, because I was investigating meanings of experiences but, at the same time, the research process itself was a series of experiences, a journey’ (p.139). As has already been shared, the approach taken has not been straightforward; I have faced complexity and confusion, I have risked vulnerability, become aware of the danger of striving for too much coherence, experienced frustration over something always being privileged and at times I have been dissatisfied that ‘there is no everything’.

Following the example of Clandinin, Pushor and Orr (2007), I have attempted to be rigorous in checking each phase of the narrative inquiry, which includes eight main elements: justifying the study; naming the phenomenon being studied; critiquing the particular methods being used; describing the process of analysis and interpretation; positioning the study in relation to other research; considering the uniqueness of the study in terms of being a narrative inquiry; addressing the ethical
issues arising and examining the process of representation. In keeping with a narrative inquiry that claims to move outside conventional social scientific writing and that aims to open spaces for thinking in new ways, I hope that the basic criteria used to judge this research project will include transparency, trustworthiness, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, accountability, transformativity and substance (Speedy, 2008). I agree with Richardson and St Pierre (2005) that writing must be held to high and difficult standards of evaluation and that mere novelty does not suffice for narrative inquiry work. The four criteria that they propose are useful with regard to judging the merits of stories and in assessing whether narrative research is reliable and meaningful: substantive contribution (does it contribute to our understanding of social life? Is it a credible account of a cultural, social, individual or communal sense of the ‘real’?); aesthetic merit (does the piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text and invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying and adequately complex?); reflexivity (how has the author’s subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgements about the point of view? Does the author hold herself accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people she has studied?); and impact (does this piece affect me emotionally or intellectually? Does it generate new questions or move me to action or to try new research practices?) (p.964).

It is my hope that you, as reader, have been asking some of these questions in order to evaluate this narrative inquiry as these are the questions I have been asking myself as I have constantly interrogated the narrative of this research project.

LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING AHEAD

This research has contributed to new ways of knowing and understanding; it has uncovered voice, asked new questions and heard multiple perspectives in the context of Mugu district, Nepal. As researcher, I have taken seriously the women’s request in their deuda, ‘Our sister, you have come to our village to hear our voice, Please don’t forget to share our dukhi voice with others, The wind is blowing, it carries our singing away, Dear sister namaste and sincere thanks to you.’ It has been my intention to fulfil this request without betraying the trust of the narrators.
Throughout this study I have reflected on the challenges and risks involved and the concerns experienced, but I am also aware that the positive dimensions need to be recognised. I believe that for the women, constructing their stories and songs was a positive and beneficial experience. The women’s meta-narrative as well as their comments and body language indicated that narrating and singing about their lives were reaffirming and empowering experiences. I have also been able to reflect on how my relationships with people in Mugu district were further strengthened rather than threatened by the fieldwork process on which this study was founded.

This research has also contributed significantly to my personal and professional development. I had to leave Mugu in 2008 under difficult conditions of extreme political unrest and local conflict. I regretted the lack of closure experienced. The opportunity to return, without being affiliated to any organisation or with any political agenda (in the national sense) was an ideal opportunity to visit the district again, renew relationships and take my leave in a less tense atmosphere. This research has also influenced my attitude and approach to education and development work in general. It will be significant with regard to decision making about my future role as an ‘educationalist’, in what capacity I will return to Nepal and especially in how I will relate to the people I am working with. I hope that the new understandings I have developed will enable me to work more sensitively and appropriately, but also with more confidence.

Through this project there have already been positive opportunities for interacting and sharing with Nepali colleagues and the academic community of Nepal and I hope that this will continue in the future. Narrative methodologies are new in the context of research within Nepal, and even qualitative methods are not commonly used by Nepali researchers, so the opportunities I have had to share about this study have been valuable. I hope that the methodology as well as the content of this study will be useful in influencing the international community, Nepali academics and policy makers. I hope to use some of this inquiry for the basis of publishing a book in the future. It is my desire to use this research in a way that will ensure that the women’s voices are heard outside Mugu; so that it will not be just ‘the wind blowing’ their words away and that the women will not always think of themselves as ‘the forgotten of the country’ and ‘the last women... from the remote place, the unknown reality.’

In order to further understand the multi-layered and multi-dimensional realities of lives in under-researched areas of Nepal, there is potential for other creative methodologies to be used, including arts-based methods. Such research would offer
further ‘kaleidoscopic’ views of the complexities of lived experiences and would also value the creative participation of women as well as provide them with opportunities for self-representation and self-definition. Additionally, in view of the recent years of violent civil conflict in Nepal, I would suggest that there is a need for research projects such as Smith and Neill’s (2005), which recognise the transformative potential of narrative approaches; using participatory methods of inquiry to ‘develop a language of possibility for action’ (p.6) and to bring hope and optimism to education within Nepal.

In Nepal and in the remote northwest of the country in particular, there are intersecting identities which have not yet been examined and perspectives which remain unheard. As well as gender, caste and ethnicity, other identities such as disability and age are under-researched. The voices of women who are perceived as deviating from ‘the expected life path for females’ have also been silenced, for example, the stories of widows, unmarried women and co-wives have seldom been heard. Dimensions such as the impact of conflict; modernisation; political and social change; and migration from the district were mentioned in the narratives of the women of Mugu. They were not a focus of this study but need further consideration.

In conclusion, there is clearly potential for further research in Nepal and particularly in Mugu; research which is appropriate and ethical, and does not ignore the dilemmas of interpretation and representation or betray the trust of the participants. There is a need for work which aims to share the words of the women of Mugu; words of lament as well as hope and expectation,

Oh I sing a silent song, I sing alone,
Life is dukha and strife, but we are living, still we are singing.
Oh I sing a silent song, I sing alone,
May the future bring sukhā, and the blessings of a good song.
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APPENDIX A

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THESIS:
ACF – Action Contre la Faim
ADB – Asian Development Bank
APROSC – Agricultural Project Services Centre
BPEP – Basic and Primary Education Programme
CBS – Central Bureau of Statistics
CEDAW - Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CPA – Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CRC – Convention on the Rights of the Child
DACAW - Decentralised Action for Children and Women
DEO – District Education Office
EFA – Education for All
FCHV – Female Community Health Volunteer
FWLD – Forum for Women, Law and Development
GO – Government Organisation
GSEA – Gender and Social Exclusion Assessment (Nepal)
ICESCR - International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
KIRDARC – Karnali Integrated Rural Development and Research Centre
MDG – Millennium Development Goal
MoE – Ministry of Education
MoES – Ministry of Education and Sport
NEPC – National Education Planning Commission
NFE – Non Formal Education
NGO – Non Governmental Organisation
NORAD – Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
NPC – National Planning Commission
OCHA – Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR – Office of the High Commission for Human Rights
PLA – People’s Liberation Army
SESP – Secondary Education Support Programme
SLC – School Leaving Certificate
SSRP – School Sector Reform Plan
UCPN-M – United Communist Party of Nepal -Maoist
UN – United Nations
UNGEI – United Nations Girls Education Initiative
UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund
VDC – Village Development Community (administrative division of a district)
WB – World Bank
WFP – World Food Programme
APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY:

Aama - mother

Bahini – young sister

Baisakh - mid April to mid May

Bandh – a strike, closure or blockage

Ban Manchhe – forest people

Baur garne – there are other more common terms in Nepali (such as ‘anna kamaunu’) therefore she says ‘we say baur garne’ which is the local phrase (meaning working for others to earn food)

Bauso – farming implement used to hoe, but larger and heavier than a kuto, more like a pick

Bazaar – market. Used in Mugu when referring to Gamgadhi which is the administrative headquarter of the district as well as being the only market in the area

Bhai – young brother

Bhailo – a Nepali song / game for girls. Often they collect money or food in return for singing and blessing the household. In other areas of Nepal it is traditional at Tihar, but in Mugu where Tihar was not traditionally celebrated, it is played at different festivals

Bhos – a winter festival particular to Mugu district

Bhote or Bhotia – Nepali people of Tibetan/Burmese origin. In some areas of Nepal the name ‘Bhote’ is used pejoratively, but this is not the case in Mugu

Bhotini – Bhote female

Bideshi – foreigner

BK - Biswakarma (‘god of iron’). Dalits practice caste-based discrimination among themselves, BK or Kami are considered as being at the top of the hierarchy and other Dalit castes as minorities. However the ‘upper castes’ treat all Dalits, including Kami / BK as untouchables.

Bohari – daughter-in-law. Commonly used as a name rather than merely a kinship term

Bon / ban – forest or jungle

Brahmanical – referring to the ideologies and practices promoted by Vedic literature and by Brahman priests
Brahman / brahmin – a high caste group in Nepal, known as the priests and scholars of the country. Brahmins were ranked in the Muluki Ain as the most religiously pure caste group (and ranked as highest of the four varnas in Hinduism in India).

Chaianath – a pure site, high up in the mountains

Chainthi – celebrations for a son on the sixth day after his birth. It most commonly includes music and dancing as well as various rituals

Chaitra – mid March to mid April

Chang - locally brewed alcohol similar to beer

Chettri – high caste group in Nepal, known as the warriors of the country. Brahmins and Thakuri consider Chettri to be ranked lower than themselves in caste hierarchy.

Chilgardi – literally ‘eagle vehicle’. Many of the older people in Mugu call the aeroplane a chilgardi

Daal - Lentil soup that is eaten mixed with the rice. In Mugu it is made from red beans but still called daal

Daaphe – Nepal’s national bird of the lophophorus family, sometimes known as Himalayan Pheasant

Dai – elder brother (kinship term and also term of respect for a man)

Dalit - oppressed people, so called lower caste or untouchable groups within Hinduism. Janjati are not within the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy, but some indigenous groups have been influenced by this hierarchy and now discriminate within their own people group on a basis of caste. So, for example, despite being non-Hindu, Jangmu is considered low caste amongst the Bhote people

Deuda – A system or tradition of special songs/dance popular in western Nepal. In Mugu deudas are performed by individuals or groups and are composed by the performers for various purposes. They are usually slow and repetitive and in a distinctive rhythm. Further contextual details are contained throughout the main body of the text

Dhaami – Hindu shaman. People believe that a dhaami is an oracle of the masta god (god which has no image only manifest through an oracle). They become possessed by the god’s spirit and have special ability to solve problems such as sickness, famine, crop failure, etc. They are chosen by the community because they show signs of having special powers. Certain rules apply to ensure they maintain their purity. Shamanism is less common in urban areas and most common in the rural areas of western Nepal.

Dhungaka gattha – game played by picking up and throwing small stone from the ground and catching it while throwing next stone

Didi – elder sister (kinship term and also as a respectful term)
**Doko** - traditional basket made and used in Nepal for carrying from the head. Made in a conical shape from thin type of bamboo

**Dosain** – Dosain and Tihar are the main Hindu festivals, celebrated nationally

**Dukha** (dukhi / dukhī) - this word conveys a multitude of meanings. Usage includes: pain, trouble, grief, sorrow, misery, suffering, sadness, hardship, hurt, distress, unhappiness, worry, anguish, mourning etc

**Dum** – inferior person (of unknown origin), later known as ‘untouchable’ or Dalit

**Dumini** – female of ‘dum’

**Fagun** – mid March until mid April

**Gaali** – scolding, a rebuke or being spoken to in abusive language

**Gagri** – special shape of water container, usually made of brass or copper with wide base and narrow neck that broadens out at the lip

**Ghar** – house or home

**Gorkhali** – local name for officials who came from the central government to collect taxes from the village leaders in Karnali

**Gorkhali aayo** - literally ‘the Gorkalis have come’

**Gumpa** – Buddhist monastery or shrine

**Hasiyaa** – a type of farming implement like a sickle

**Hela** – There is no single word to cover the Nepali concept of hela, although it is similar to oppression. *Hela* is used for domination, neglect, and violence usually manifest through beating, scolding, threats, withholding love, overburdening with work, looking down upon and general lack of care and love. It is also commonly used to mean ignore, discriminate, to give the cold shoulder, disrespect, and disregard.

**Janjati** - Indigenous people groups of Nepal. The Nepal Government has identified 59 different janjati groups, but this currently being contested. Their existence as minority groups has only recently been recognised and the definition of janjati continues to be contested. Usually janjati is considered to be those in Nepal who are not Hindu, do not have Nepali as their mother tongue and have a longer history in Nepal than non-indigenous peoples or nationalities. Socio-economic conditions vary hugely amongst janjati, but ‘in the field of ethnic identity, language, religion and culture, indigenous peoples of Nepal are discriminated by the dominant group’ (Bhattachan, 2008)

**Jari** - de facto divorce. Jari is customary practice in which a man who commits adultery with another man’s wife is allowed to keep the wife if he pays the cuckolded husband cash compensation. New laws in 1964 abolished this practice but it continues in Mugu. The compensation is often negotiated according to the value of the woman’s dowry / ornaments etc. The woman is not involved in the discussion
**Jatra** – festival

**Jethaju** – husband’s elder brother

**Jethani** – husband’s elder brother’s wife

**Kami** – see BK

**Kartik Purnima** – full moon of mid October to mid November

**Ke garne?** - common phrase which translates literally as ‘what to do?’

**Khas / Khasan** – Local people of Karnali who were of non-Vedic Aryan origin and who did not wear the sacred thread but were later converted to Chhetri / Brahman by the Hindu priests. The ‘Khas language’ was later dubbed as Gorkhali language and then was called Nepali language. The history of khas / khasan is complex and the word is not so commonly used these days in Nepal, but from Bhoteperspective, it is used to refer to locals in Mugu who are not janjati.

**Koi** – a slang word that is like a shrug, often accompanied by a twist of the forefinger to mean ‘who knows?’ or ‘I don’t know’

**Kol** – local soup often made with sweet corn and other pulses

**Kurtaa-sunwaal** – women’s tunic style of dress worn with trousers and a shawl, common in the urban areas and especially with younger women. Often considered a more practical alternative to a sari or the various styles of ethnic dress still common in Nepal

**Kuto** – farming implement used to hoe

**Lalapatan** – fertile meadow where animals graze, roaming freely

**Lapchya** - literally ‘thumb printer’; those who cannot write their name are requested to put their thumb in ink and stamp it instead of a signature

**Lek** - high pasture area. Often villages have their own lek with temporary dwellings established

**Losar** – Tibetan New Year (often approximately the same time as Chinese new year but celebrated differently)

**Mahila** – woman

**Malpuwa** – a food dish

**Mangsir** - mid November to mid December

**Manna** - one manna is the equivalent of two small teacups

**Matawali** – alcohol drinkers

**Mela** – fair

**Milichaur** – grassy area or ground where people meet together
**Muluki Ain** – country code

**Mukhiyas** – the local elites in western Nepal who collected tax from their village for the central government

**Naichin** – holy site

**Okhal** and **mussal** – large sized mortar and pestle, often made from wood, used to crush rice etc

**Pachardi pareko** – ‘backward’; commonly used in the sense of less developed or advanced, lagging behind in progress, slow or reluctant

**Panchayat** – the political regime in Nepal from 1961-1990 (absolute rule by the king with the help of his selected advisers)

**Phupu** – father’s elder sister

**Poush end** – January time

**Puja** – religious devotion as performed by ordinary people; showing honour; or worship carried out by Hindu priests or Buddhist lamas

**Rakshi** – locally brewed alcohol

**Roti** – round flat (unleavened) bread usually made from millet or wheat flour

**Sati** – illegal Hindu practice of a widow cremating herself on her husband’s funeral pyre in order to fulfil her role as a wife

**Sauni Sakranti** – celebration at start of Nepali month of Shrawan

**Shrawan** – mid July to mid August

**Sottar** – pine needles and leaves collected for making compost

**Sulpa** - clay or wooden smoking pipe, often smoked by women as well as men in rural areas. It is filled with locally grown tobacco and mixed with a little bit of fruit / berry juice to sweeten it. A glowing coal is placed in the bowl to light it. The smoker does not pollute it by touching the pipe with their mouth so it can be shared communally within the household. A small net cloth is used along with the hand to cover the stem and bridge the gap between the smoker’s mouth and the pipe.

**Sujiko haluwaa** – a food dish

**Sukha / sukhī** - opposite in meaning to ‘dukha’, usually refers to happiness, pleasure or an easy life

**Terai** – the low lying plains in the south of Nepal

**Thakuri** – a high caste of Nepal, previously the rulers of the country. Some groups of Thakuris still continue to refer to each other as ‘raja’ (king). They often consider themselves more powerful than Brahmins

**Thatuwa** – traditional white cloth made locally in Mugu area
Thulo – literally ‘big’, used to mean reputed, powerful or high status

Yarchagumba – (Cordyceps sinensis) a caterpillar fungi that is believed to have many medicinal properties and is prized as an aphrodisiac by the Chinese. The fungus germinates in the ghost moth larva and grows from the body of the insect. A kilogram can sell for more than £3000.
APPENDIX C

MAP OF NEPAL

About the map:

Nepal is bordered by India on the South, West and East, and by China on the North. The capital city is Kathmandu which is slightly east of the centre of the country. The seventy five districts of Nepal have been marked on the map. Districts considered more developed appear in a darker shade while those less developed appear lighter in accordance with the Human Development Index. Karnali region has been outlined with green, and Mugu district is visible in the centre of Karnali.
APPENDIX D

EXCERPT FROM EDUCATION SECTION OF NEPAL’S THREE YEAR PLAN APPROACH PAPER:

Notwithstanding these achievements there remain some major problems such as inability to develop school infrastructure in accordance with defined norms; to retain girls and children from deprived communities at school; to provide higher education opportunities to all; to update all levels of education; to regulate institutional schools; to level the learning achievements of community and institutional schools; to manage teachers effectively and to link education with production, employment and practice. Other problems and challenges facing this sector are: ineffectiveness of national literacy program; inability to make education inclusive as per expectation; lack of coordination in early childhood development; inability to create child friendly environment; problems in the implementation of free compulsory basic education; lack of sustainable resource to make secondary education progressively free; inability to improve access of common people to technical education and vocational training and lack of coordination in the work done in this sector; politicization and weak management of higher education; poor quality of education and lack of reliable educational statistics at all levels.

APPENDIX E

TRANSCRIPTION EXCERPTS (FROM RINA’S NARRATIVE)

Nepali draft:
My mother, who gave birth to me, died when I was about six years old. In that year three of my family members died within six months. At that time we were two brothers and two sisters. Then one brother and one sister died due to diarrhoea and then my mother also... My father faced difficulties caring for us after my mother’s death, so then he looked for another wife. Our second mother cared for us and raised us well. She gave birth to two daughters and one son. Because my mother died at a young age... or perhaps because my father is illiterate, I didn’t get the opportunity to go to school.
APPENDIX F

DEUDA ONE (TOPIC: WOMEN OF MUGU)

A) Happiness on the birth of a son, sadness if it's a daughter,
   Half on the earth are women, yet never getting sukha.

B) Taking the son to school and sending the daughter to the forest,
   Arranging her early marriage and sending her off to the in-laws.

A) Tasty food, warm clothing and extra love to the sons,
   From she’s small, work, hela and more work for the daughter.

B) From the cowshed to the forest, carrying firewood and compost,
   Work in the fields work in the home; that’s the woman’s lot.

A) Learning the work in the parents’ home, continuing work in the husband’s home,
   Mother-in-law, father-in-law and husband, their word must be obeyed.

B) Rising early to fetch water, then cooking food in the morning,
   Grass from the jungle then firewood too, and sending the kids to school.

A) Late in the day a few mouthfuls of food, always eaten in haste
   While working the compost and the fields, all the jobs must be done.

B) Nursing one baby at the breast with another in the stomach,
   No timely treatment so one illness follows another.

A) Without any care, alone in the cowshed giving birth,
   Don’t touch the unclean mother, still the old traditions.

B) How many mothers and babies are dying, nobody understands
   The woman’s very life, it is considered so common.

A) Never eating their fill, and not getting a rest,
   Woman is destined to spend her life crying, that’s her fate

B) Still following the old traditions, none are educated
   Efforts to do good, no one pays any heed.

A) The wife is as a shoe for her husband’s foot,
   Rights and authority have no meaning, only repression.

B) Men are always honoured, the women always hela’d,
   When both will be equal, when will that time ever come?

A) Our desires and wishes, when will their turn be,
   To move forward, to become educated, it is an uphill struggle.

B) Thinking about the troubles of women, our hearts cry,
   You listened to our feelings, sister, now our hearts have lightened.
DEUDA ONE – NEPALI

A छोरा जन्म खुटहुन्नै, छोरी जन्म दुखी ।
आधा धौताम महिलाहरू, कहिले छैनन सुखी ॥
B छोरा जिल स्कूल लाउन्या, छोरी बन धाउन्या ।
सानीमा किरुखाली हिखा पोइली घर पाउन्या ॥
A मिठो खाना राखो नाना, माया बड़ी छोरालाई ।
साने देख कमाईका, हेला गर्न्या छोरीलाई ॥
B गाई गोरा बनका दाउन, मल पोसो गर्नु ।
खेतको काम घरको काम, महिलाले गर्नु ।
A माति घरमा काम सिको, पोइली घर धानु ।
सासु ससुरा श्रीमानले, भनेकै मानु ।
B विहाने उठि पानी ल्याउनु, खाना पनी पकाउनु ।
जंगलको घाँस दाउरालाई, बज्जा स्कूल लाउनु ॥
A दिउसोमा दुई गास खाना, हतारमा खानु ।
मलपोसों खेतीपाली, सबैका धाउनु ।
B काखो बज्जा साने हुन्छ, अकों बज्जा कोख ।
समयमा उपचार छेल, रोगी माधि रोग ॥
A गाइको गोरा बज्जा पाउनु, सुसार नपाउन्या ।
पुरानो चलन अभी, सुक्की नदुःथया ॥
B आमा बज्जा कति मछल्न, कोहिः बुझैन्न ।
महिलाको जीन्द्रीलाई, सामाय सम्बन्ध ॥
A पेट भरी खानाकी नाई, नत आरम्भे छ ।
जीन्द्री रोही काट्न पनि, महिलाको कर्म हे छ ॥
B पुरानो चलन अभी, कोहिः शिख्रत नाई ।
रामगर कुरा गन्याकन, मायता हिखा नाई ॥
A खेत्राका जुलाका जसाँ, जोइन्न मान्दान्छ ।
हक अधिकारको मतलब छेल, दमन गदान्छ ॥
B पुरुष सच्छे मानेने हुन्छन, महिला सच्छे हेला ।
    दुमशरी चराचर हुने, कहिले आउला बेला ॥
A हाम्रो दुःख चाहनाको, कहिले आउला पालो ।
    शिक्षित चन्द्र अधि बढ़न, चबुनु छ उकालो ॥
B महिलाको दुःख सम्भी सम्भी , हाम्रो मन रुन्छ ।
    मनका कुरा सुनि दियो दिदिदि, मन हलुको हुन्छ ॥
DEUDA TWO – (TOPIC: WOMEN AND EDUCATION)

A) We all women would like to first say ‘Namaste’
   With hands pressed together we greet you this day.
B) We first wish to welcome you with mala garland,
   It is a great thing you come to hear our say.
A) We are backward, the female from this undeveloped district,
   The forgotten of the country, we are the last women.
B) We are from the remote place, the unknown reality,
   Listen to the things of our heart, hear our words.
A) The land is hard and unproductive are the steep slopes,
   Our lives also are full of dukha and debt.
B) Every day we work the fields, going from lek to river valley,
   We women carry heavy loads and rest we never find.
A) From the rays of the sun, the world is bright,
   But we are always in the dark without any education.
B) We sit in the smoke and work in the dirt,
   Our eyes are blinded and our minds are dead.
A) With kuto in our hand and bauso on our shoulder,
   We have no tools or sources for developing our education.
B) We only know to hold the hasiyaa, to cut grass and collect firewood,
   A pen we don’t know how to use, who will teach us?
A) It is sad, we are troubled, we have never studied,
   We can read the sky and land but not the books.
B) We know the seasons and the crop order,
   But the alphabet and counting we cannot know.
A) Some females have scaled Mount Everest, the top they have reached,
   But we do not cross the river or get as far as the school.
B) The Daaphe flies and sits in different trees,
   But women cannot change their situation or habits.
A) The sun, moon and stars they are our witness,
   Day and night we women work and have dukha.
B) The earth is watered with our tears, dust becomes mud,
   But who will support us, who will give us an opportunity?
A) Like the milichaur and field as jalapatan, like the golden nose ring
   This beautiful could the life of an educated woman be.
B) Always working and a life full of hardship for us,
   Good food and clothing and a sukhi life for men.
A) They tell us we need to become aware and to discard our old traditions,
   If we also had the opportunity, we would move ahead.
B) On a moonless night the stars shine bright,
   What education would be like for us, we have no idea.
A) Hear our feelings, oh our friends, oh our brothers,
   We request your help, for the good of our development.
B) With no opportunity for study, we are shy now,
   First men, please give support for poor women to raise their status.
A) Our sister, you have come to our village to hear our voice,  
   Please don't forget to share our *dukhi* voice with others.  

B) The wind is blowing, it carries our singing away,  
   Dear sister Namaste and sincere thanks to you.
DEUDA TWO – NEPALI

A नमस्ते छ पहिला हामी, सबै महिलावाट।

स्वागत गद्दी दिविलाई, हात जोडी आज।

B मानिने स्वागत गर्न, हाम्रो छ चाहन।

महिलाका कुरा सुन्न आयौ, हाविक कामन।

A अविकसित जित्नालाको हामी, पछि पद्याको महिला।

देशदरि बिन्याम्ना हामी, अल्टिमेट महिला।

B हामी ही दुर्घटको महिला, नजारिदो सत्य।

सुन्नस हाम्रा मनका कुरा, सुन्नस हाम्रा शब्द।

A सुखा माटो उत्पादन नाइ, भिरालो जिमन।

जीवनभर दुखको दुख, ब्रमण माधि ब्रह्म।

B लेख देखि औल सम्म, बनपाखा बेनी काम।

सवै भरि भारी बोकु, कहिले नाइ आइम।

A सुरक्षा किरणवाट, सर्पारे उल्ल्याद।

हामी सवै अन्धकार, शिखा नभयाले।

B दुवाही बसनु पनि, फोहरेको काम।

आका पनि फुटिनसको, गाइसको दिमाग।

A हातमै छ कुटो सवै, बाउसी काँधमा।

हामी शिखित वन्नलाई, छैन बोन साधन।

B घाँस दाउरा गर्नपनि, हसिया चलाउन।

कहल समाहू जान्यानाइ, को होला सिकाउन।

A दुख लाग्छ दुखित हुन्छी, पहापाएका नाइ।

आकाश भ्रूङ पद्र बक्के, किताब सक्ने नाइ।

B कुन्नवाली कहिले लाउन्या, समय भाहा।

अंक अक्षर भायाहैँ, अनुकार लाग्छ।

A कोइ महिला सगरमाथान्त्री, चुचुरोमा पुगे।

हामी नदि तरेकानाइ, न त स्कूल पुगे।
B रानीबनको उड़ने डाँके, रुखे रुख फरनछ।
महिलाकन सँवे भारी, पुराने चलन छ।

A तारा चन्द्र सूर्य सबै, छन हामरा साँच।
दिने राते काम गानूपने, रुख महिला माधि।

B आँसुले पृथ्वी मिज़्ज़, माटो गिलो हुनछ।
कसले गराला सहयोग, अवसर कसले दिनछ।

A लाना पाटन मौलीौं, सुनका बुलाकिक।
शिष्कितभायां महिलाको जीवन, तेलि रामो होलाकी।

B जन्मे भर दुधाहे कु छ, काम गानु सवैलाई।
भिटो खाना रामो लुगा, सुखमर्य पुरुषलाई।

A वाठी वन महिला मन्नछन, पुरानो चलन छैडि।
हामी पनि अवसर पाया, बढैछै अगाडि।

B तारा फन चमकनाछन, जुन नमभयकी रात।
हामीलाई शिख्र कसले होता, विचार छैन साब।

A सुन हामा साथी भाई, भावना हामरा।
अनुरोध छ सहयोग गर, विकास रामरा।

B पढ़नलाई अवसर नाइ, लाजलाः अहिले।
दुधाह महिला अधिव बढन, पुरुषको सहयोग पहिले।

A हामी बहिनी गाउं आइन, आवाज हामो चुन।
नविर्सी दुखी आवाज, अरुलाई भन।

B हावाले उडाई लग्ना, हामरा पितालाई।
प्याली बहिनी नमस्ते छ, धन्यबाद तिमीलाई।
DEUDA THREE (INDIVIDUAL WOMAN, TOPIC: A DALIT WOMAN)

- Knowing nothing and understanding nothing, we are dukhit, Seeking for the justice of the law, we weep with tiredness.

- Poor are our dwellings and remote is our district, Women’s liberation when will such movement take place?

- Few are those with awareness, many are ignorant still, The feelings of women, who will support them?

- Men and women are two wheels of one cart, it is said, But truly weighty is injustice for dukhit women.

- Programmes come and go, but there is no change, Why the discrimination between two wheels? No one speaks.

- So much jungle below and naked mountain above, Why no opportunities for study, our hearts cry out.

- Women’s lives they are busy 24 hours a day, Yet there is no one to speak for us, why do we have no rights?

- Lack of education, how can awareness be? Men cannot understand our emotions; our hearts are breaking.

- Like young chickens scrabbling with our head in the dirt, Wanting to fly high like the eagle, who will do good for us?

- Accepting labour and work from the downcast, but not our untouchable water, When will lasting peace come and when will the low caste be uplifted?

- Still untouchability and discrimination to Dalit women, Everyone’s blood flows red, why the discrimination amongst castes?

- We all live in the same district, we dwell in the one place, How can dogs be allowed inside, but not Dalits? How can we endure it?

- Why so much hela, where does this tradition come from? This cannot change until everyone considers it seriously.

- Women of the house perform worship and receive power, But we are considered unclean each monthly, and must sleep outside.

- Before marriage, our desire is for a good home and descendants, Dharma and Karma; men important and women always behind.

- Duties we have many, who gives us our role to perform them? Daughter, daughter-in-law, wife and mother; what is our role?

- Between our birth home and marriage home, our heart is at rest in neither, But we are expected to live together in unity, and a son we must give birth to.

- For what our future might be, we are dependent on fate, But for opportunities, we women must go out and seek.

- Men and women, equal like two wheels of one cart, When will it come, our day of sukha and equality?

- Peace and development we need in our remote district, Only then will Dalit women get the just opportunity.
DEUDA THREE – NEPALI

- विनियम कानून वसीमा वोटका वोटका, थैक भई भन्ने रुनौछ।
- नयाँ नयाँ सचेत छन् तथ्य अबूभ छन्
- महिलाको भावनालाई, को मान्यता दिन्छौ?
- एक रथका दुई पाण्या भन्ने, महिला पुरुष साथी
- मध्ये छ अन्याय यहाँ दुख महिला माथी।
- कार्यकर्म आउँछन् जानन्तन, परिवर्तन हुने नाई दुई पाण्या विच विचेद किन्? कोई पनो बोल्ने नाई।
- तत्तामुक भरिएको माथि डाडा नागेन्द्र
- पढाइको अवसर छैन, मूल रोएको छ।
- चौबीस घटना व्यस्त हुन्छ महिलाको जीवन
- तैपान बोद्धने को छ, किन अधिकार हैन?
- शिक्षाको सामाजिक कारण चेतना कहाँ हुन्छ?
- भावना वुभन्ने पुरुषनाई, मन हाम्रो रुन्छ।
- कुखराको चल्ना जस्ता कपालमाथि धुनो
- चिल जसो उड्न होने, को गरला भनो?
- थम चल्ने काम गराउन्छ पानी नचलाउने दिनो शानि कहिले होला, तनजाती उठाउन्छ।
- छैने न्यू बिचेद गछल, दलित महिलाकन
- रगट रातो सवेको छ, जात-भात बिचेद किन?
- जिल्ला एउटै वस्ति एउटै, एका ठाउं वस्तु
- कुद्रक भित्तर दलित बाहिर, कस्तै सहनु?
- किन धेरै हेला गछल? कहाँको चलन?
- सवैवे नसोचे सम्य सकिन्न बदलन।
- पुजा गर्ने शक्ति पाउने घरका महिला
- छैई पडल छैने न्यू, सुल्नु पनि बाहिर।
- रामो घर सलान पाउने चाहना विवे अघि।
धर्म कर्म, पुरुष गणि, महीला पांडु पांडु।
- काम क्या मध्ये छल्ले भूमिका को देना?
  छोटी वुहारी स्वागती आमा, के भूमिका होला?
- माहीती पाइली दुई घर हुंडा सुख छल्ले मन
  मिलियुरी बस्नुपर, छोरा दिन जनम।
- महिला के होला भगी खाग्यमा भर पनें
  अवसर खोजन बाहर निस्की, हामी महिलाले।
- महिला पुरुष सरी पाँग्रा एक रक्षक
  कहिले आउलान हामा दिन सुख समानताका।
- शान्ति विकास चाहिएको छ, हामा दुर्गम जिल्ला
  तब मात्रे दलि महिलाकान, न्याय अवश्य मिल्ला।
DEUDA FOUR (MEN’S DEUDA – TOPIC: WOMEN AND EDUCATION)

A) Give your attention dear sisters, understand dear brothers,
We are singing these deuda today for our women.

B) Listen to our words we request you, we have much to say
Hear about our women, we want the situation to change.

A) Using the traditional methods they work all day, throughout the year,
Always the same situation for the female of this remote mountain area.

B) The female has kuto and bauso and the male has the plough,
No education, carrying the heavy load; when will it improve?

A) We fathers are also illiterate, we send our daughters out with the cattle,
We need to become clever and send our girls to school instead.

B) In other places women are educated, they are ahead,
Now we also need to consider; we need to educate our women.

A) Let’s abandon the old unproductive beliefs, let’s send daughters to school,
For women’s rights and progress, we will help.

B) The female of educated places, they are leading the way,
Why are we always behind? Now we need to move forward.

A) Sons and daughters are equal, they should both be in class,
We need to give the light of education now to our daughters and sons.

B) Pocketing sulpa and tobacco, going to the jungle,
It is not a good life for the women, living in dukha.

A) We should develop kitchen gardens, get rid of tobacco,
We must give the opportunity of education and improve the level of health.

B) Lots of dukha women are facing, from early morning on the farm,
They have neither full stomachs, nor even clothing for the body.

A) They are busy cooking, managing the water and all the household chores,
Life in the remote place; always facing dukha.

B) Tending the farm, managing the firewood and cattle,
Cooking food and caring for the little ones, this is the life of dukha.

A) She must sleep in the cowshed, the woman, while she is polluted,
With little regard for health, after her monthly time she bathes.

B) If her pregnancy is difficult, there are no facilities,
We must carry them in the doko, there is no medical help in the village.

A) It is a difficult situation, ours, to care for the safe deliveries,
The life of women is short, speaking of dukha.

B) Sulpa in hand and doko on back, they must go to the jungle,
With wounds on their hands in all seasons, and cold in the winter snow.

A) Mothers and babies do not have good health, giving birth in the cowshed,
Having no medicine and no hospitals, many do not survive.
B) We must make the change, not just the talk,
   In this last backward district of Mugu we must hope for development.

A) So much dukha and no awareness, so many poor women there are,
   This is the reason why our women are backward, now we must help.

B) Carrying our women far from the village for difficult delivery, still they are dying,
   Education and awareness we must awaken, one day perhaps it will be well.

A) If we intend our district to develop, we must all think carefully,
   On hearing about the situation today, we must try to improve.

B) We are happy on this occasion to express the situation,
   We bid you all namaste as we go now on our way back to work.
DEUDA FOUR – NEPALI

A) ध्यानदिन दिदिबाई बुझठो दाँजधाई।
आजहामी देउझा गाउँदा हाम्रा महललाई।

B) हाम्रा शब्द सुने सँग, माथि छ भनालाई।
महिलाको बारेमा सुन, विश्वित बदललाई।

A) पुराना चलनका साथ, दिन वर्षै को काम।
महिलाको आवस्था उसै, दुर्गम पहाडी ठोै।

B) महिलाको कुटो बाउँसो, पूर्वकन हलो।
शिशु छैन भारी योकु, केलेहोला भेलो।

A) बुझठाहामी निरक्षि छी, छोरी कन गोरै लाउन्या।
अबहामी चलाख बनौ, वन नाई स्कूल पठाउन्या।

B) शिशुक्षित छन असुङ्गका महिला, अगाडी बदन।
हामी पनि सोचौ अबै, महिलालाई पठाउन।

A) कामतलगाया पुराना चलन छोड्नी, छोरी स्कूल पठाउं।
 महिला अधिकार र उन्नतीका लाग, हामी सहयोग गर्न।

B) शिशुक्षित ठाउँका महिलाहुर, नेतृत्वमा पुरस्त।
हामी दिन संघ पाड़, अब अगाडिव बन्न।

A) छोरा छोरी वराबरी, दुवैलाई स्कूल लाई।
शिशुको ज्योति दिहौ अबै, छोरा र छोरी लाई।

B) सुप्रा तमाख गोजाउँदो हाली, जगल जानिप्रमन।
सफा नाई यो जिन्दिगी, दुखभाला घर्नछिन।

A) करेसाबरी तरकारी लगाई, तमाख हटाउं।
शिशुको अवश्य ठोै, व्यस्था स्तर बढाउं।

B) कवि छेरै दुःख गैटिन, बिहाने देखौ खेतमा।
पेट भरी खानकी नाई, लुगाइज्ञन आइमा।

A) खना पकाउँ रानी ल्याउँ, घर अन्दा समान्नू।
 दुर्गम ठाउँको जिन्दगामी, संघे दुख पाउँ।

B) घास दाउँरा गाउँगरेल, खेतबारी हेंनेतू।
बानापकाउँ बालबन्याहर, जिन्दिगि दुःखी छ।

A) गाई गोठ सुन्न पनै, महिला छाँझ हुंद।
व्यस्थको देर विचार छैन, बैनामा नूढाउँ।

B) सुक्वागाई गडचढ़ भया, केहिनाई सुविधा।
 गाउँभामा मेहङ्कल छैनन, दोकामा बोकिल लाई।

A) गाईं छ अवस्था हाम्रो, सुक्वागाई स्थानो।
 महिलाको जीन्दी छोटो, देख लाचछ भन्न।
B) पिद्यु डोको हात सुम्पा, जंगल दाउरा घास।
धाव हात बाहमास, चिस्सो हितमास।

A) आमा वच्चा स्वस्थ छैनन, गाईगोड जन्माउन्या।
औपनिवाई अस्पतालनाई, ढैंर मरिजन्या।

B) कृपकृण हैनन अब, परिवर्तन गर्नुह।
पिद्वाइएको मुगु जिल्ला, विकासको आशा छ।

A) दुःख अति चेतना नाइ, गरिव महिला ढैंर।
पाँछ परिन हासि महिला, अब सहयोग गरी।

B) सुल्क्याहो सपांत ठाडा लग्नी, महिला मरेकै छ।
शिक्षा र चेतना जगाउँ, भलोहोला एक दिन।

A) जिल्लाको विक्रास गर्न, रामो सोचौ सवै।
अवस्था सुनीहल्यी आज, अधि बढौ खोजौ।

B) खुशिने गदगद भयो, अवस्था बनाउँ।
सबैलाई नमस्ते हामो, कामको बाटो लागु।