Literature Review

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN NEPAL—15 YEARS ON

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Suresh C. Chalise and Milan Adhikary. 1996. *Women in Politics in Nepal (their socio-economic, health, legal and political constraints)*. Kathmandu: Centre for Consolidation of Democracy.

Milan Adhikary. 1995. *Women Graduates in Agriculture and Forestry Development in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Winrock International.

Shtrii Shakti. 1995. *Women, Development, Democracy - A Study of the Socio-Economic Changes in the Status of Women in Nepal (1981-1993)*. Kathmandu: Shtrii Shakti.

Shavitri Singh. 1995. *Statistical Profile on Women of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Shtrii Shakti.

Meena Acharya. 1994. *The Statistical Profile on Nepalese Women - An Update in the Policy Context*. Kathmandu: Institute for Integrated Development Studies.

Locating Women in Development

In 1970, when Ester Boserup challenged the implicit assumption that modernization naturally benefits both men and women, the concept of women in development (WID) was born (Boserup 1970). The international development community then identified a prominent role for itself: to intervene in women's lives in order to remedy the unequal state of affairs. An initial focus on welfare, particularly on women's health and education, gave way by the late 1970s and early 1980s to economic support for women, in recognition of women's productive role in the household economy, the significance of which had by that time been realized. The WID approach itself, in both its social welfare and its economic productivity modes, has more recently given way to a focus less on "women" and more on "gender". This latest shift in priorities is based on the view that women do not, in fact, stand in societal isolation, rather they are embedded in social structures of subordination created and maintained by specific legal, economic, cultural and political arrangements. Since women's overall subordination within society stands

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in the way of their access to development benefits, the new development approach prescribes intervention not only to improve women's *conditions*, that is, their material state, through enhanced access to resources, but also to impact their *positions*, that is, women's economic and social standing relative to men (e.g., Young 1988). Methodologically, consensus exists that effective policies targeted at women need to be rooted in up-to-date data and molded by a solid conceptual framework, which itself should be based in empirical realities.

The following article reviews a set of five studies of the status of women in Nepal published within the past two years. These include three survey studies and two statistical compilations. The publications follow in the wake of Tribhuvan University's study, *The Status of Women in Nepal* (hereafter *SOWN*), a multi-volume series based on both primary and secondary data which examined the status of the women of eight ethnic groups in eight areas of rural Nepal. The *SOWN* studies were published between 1979 and 1981 with the help of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The series was pioneering in several respects. Importantly, in examining women through the paradigm of development, it was the first extensive application of the concept of WID in Nepal. In recognition of the complexity of factors surrounding women's lives, the study was multi-disciplinary in methodology. Intent on locating Nepali women within a theoretical framework for analysis, many of the empirical findings of the *SOWN* series were analyzed through the inside-outside model.[1] Within the terms of this model, the *SOWN* study confirmed the multifarious nature of women's situations across the country. In particular, it distinguished more dichotomized communities, (i.e., communities which tend to confine women to the inside or domestic sphere), from less dichotomized ones. There is no doubt that the *SOWN* series of 1981 first set the agenda for the understanding of Nepali women, and for practical development interventions in their favour.

This review, focused on recent publications on women in Nepal, seeks to determine how the real-life situation of women, as depicted in these

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1 The "inside" aspect of this concept refers to the private domestic sphere of household activity, which a patriarchal value system characterizes as the proper domain for women. The "outside" sphere encompasses political, commercial and other forms of public activity outside of the immediate household environment. The inside-outside concept became influential in studies of the women's subordination through the work of Michelle Z. Rosaldo (1974). Its first application to Nepal that I know of was in the *SOWN* study series.

studies' findings and analyses, has changed since 1981. It also sets out to determine, through an in-depth assessment of the research methodologies and conceptual groundings of the studies, whether advances have been made since the *SOWN* study, in forming a better understanding of the status of women through research. Therefore, while it does not seek primarily to contrast the publications of the 1990s with the earlier *SOWN* study, connections and comparisons between the two are made as appropriate.

As a whole, I argue that research on women in Nepal, of the kind reviewed here, does not further our understanding of gender relations or of how, specifically, women's empowerment has been facilitated by the years of WID work that followed the *SOWN* studies. As donor-funded publications, both the survey studies and the statistical profiles conduct their research exercises primarily for the purpose of making policy recommendations for WID intervention. This practical focus carries on a trend first initiated in the *SOWN* study series. In the process, the publications tend to pay less attention to methodological perfection. The authors might argue that the urgency of women's problems necessitates this. But since faulty techniques of investigation in themselves prevent a more complete understanding of women's social position, policy components of the studies tend to be non-specific, glossing over the very diversity in women's lives that have been identified empirically. In the writings reviewed here, the authors also show a limited understanding of types of development intervention that have actually improved women's lives in the past 15 years, which further limits the utility of their policy recommendations. Moreover, undertakings in data compilation, as conducted by the two statistical profiles, are still as handicapped by the dearth of gender-specific data at the national level as the *SOWN* series was 15 years ago. This points to the inability of research exercises that have been conducted in the interval, to ameliorate such data shortcomings. In conclusion, this review identifies the need for a new approach to scholarship on gender in Nepal, one that is improved in quality and, as a result, in utility.

Women in Politics

The study of *Women in Politics in Nepal* by Suresh Chalise and Milan Adhikary is, as a whole, an inadequate representation of an important subject. This is doubly unfortunate since, in Nepal's case, women in politics constitutes a new area of research. Most fatal to its success are the methodological pitfalls to which it succumbs, in more

than one respect. For instance, the study takes as a premise, rather than a subject for investigation, that there is a direct connection between the political representation of women and their empowerment, although it is internationally acknowledged that such a connection is not necessarily as straightforward, as it is made out to be here.[2] The study's method of site selection is also weak. This study is the outcome of a six-week research exercise conducted in six districts in 1995. Four of Nepal's five development regions are represented by one district each (Saptari, Kathmandu, Kaski and Kailali), while the Mid-Western region is represented by two (Banke and Bardia). In this way, site selection is determined more by geographical representativeness than by more overtly *political* considerations, such as voting patterns since 1990, political party strongholds or focal points of political activism. A third, important deficiency lies in the inadequate explanation of the target population.

Recognizing that "distressingly low" numbers of Nepali women are presently active in the political process (p.1), Chalise and Adhikary set out to identify the issues that stand in the way of higher rates of political participation by women. To do so, the authors target 600 already politically active women, assuming that in this way they can more readily identify the constraints on increased political participation by women at local and national levels. However, they do not clarify how exactly "politically active women" have been defined for the purposes of this study. It appears that study respondents consist of women active in the formal political process, i.e., those elected to positions in local/central Government. It is not clear whether women involved in local units of political parties, or other spheres of politics, were also targeted. Nor is there a comparison with women who are, according to the criteria of the study, *not* politically active. The methodological deficiencies identified above are all the less comprehensible, given that *Women in Politics in Nepal* is co-authored by a political scientist, Suresh Chalise. Moreover, since Chalise is currently associated with the *Centre for Consolidation of Democracy (CCD)*, a non-governmental but not apolitical organization,[3]

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2 For example, UNDP's 1995 *Human Development Report* (Gender issue) claims that the link between the extent of women's participation in political institutions and their contribution to women's empowerment is not conclusive, and remains a subject of extensive research (UNDP 1995:41). On this point, I would argue, further, that neither Indira Gandhi nor Benazir Bhutto, whose rise to political power Chalise and Adhikary label as "heartening" to South Asian women's empowerment (p.7), are particularly remembered/recognized for their feminist inclinations.

3 Krishna Prasad Bhattarai of the Nepali Congress Party is *CCD*'s patron.

study findings are inherently subject to allegations of political partiality, so one would expect particular methodological care.

To start with, the study presents an overall picture of women in politics, both globally and in South Asia. This section is characterized by a series of sweeping statements which add little to the analysis on Nepali women in politics. For example, the authors state that "even after a decade of the [1985] Nairobi conference, equality between men and women is yet to be achieved" (p.5), a proclamation which amounts to a token reference to the WID programmes at the international level.[4] Primary data from the study itself include those on age, ethnicity, religion, family status, educational qualifications, as well as on the health, economic and social status of the questionnaire respondents. Most women were between 29-38 years of age. A majority of respondents were urban-based, of Hindu faith and literate, having studied up to or just below Grade 10. Interestingly, an estimated fifth of the women in politics were unmarried. The majority of women identified themselves as completely healthy. Study findings conclude with "political" and "legal profiles" of the targeted women, laying out their perspectives on women's political participation and status under Nepali law.

The authors' emphasis on socio-economic conditions as factors determining levels of women's participation in the political process places political participation, as an area of research, squarely into the "development" context. Such a standpoint makes an implicit assumption of a correlation between improvements in women's socio-economic standing, indicated, for instance, by improved health, and increased women's political participation. The authors do not verify on what grounds this neat assumption is justified. The detailed presentation of socio-economic information on the respondents is, however, given first, implicitly suggesting that these factors are explanatory of the empirical findings on women’s participation in politics, which are not revealed until as late as page 42 in a 60-page volume.

For secondary data, *Women in Politics in Nepal* draws on reports of the National Election Commission as well as on contemporary women's studies (Acharya's *The Statistical Profile on Nepalese Women* (1995), and *Shtrii Shakti's Women, Development, Democracy (1995)*). In both

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4 Since Chalise and Adhikary choose to address the international WID programme in their section "Women in the Global Context", it is surprising that they do not refer to the 1995 Women's Global Conference at Beijing, which preceded the study's publication by nine months.

instances, cross references to secondary findings are devoid of original analytical input, be it on the nature of the data itself, or on what it reveals. Instead, Chalise and Adhikary merely repeat this data, compiled in table-format, as it has been presented elsewhere. This shows that despite provisions in the 1990 Constitution for the reservation of 5% of party electoral tickets for women, women's political participation in multi-party Nepal has not changed significantly since Panchayat days.[5] Moreover, in 1993, women constituted a mere 4% of the Civil Service. Drawing on their own primary research, the authors tell us that a majority of the 600 women questioned agreed that politics was not, *a priori*, a male area of activity.[6] However, more than half felt that exceedingly low levels of political awareness among rural and urban women as a whole constrained them from becoming more active in politics. The fact that 78% of the respondents acknowledged that they had confronted some kind of social disapproval in relation to their political work, contrasts with the finding that 63% of the study respondents felt that their work was "highly appreciated" by their families (p.38).[7] Unfortunately, the study does not point to the potential implications of these two findings, both of which relate to men's (and perhaps other women's) attitudes towards women's political participation. Further examination of these contrasting statements could have thrown some light on the *gender-based* obstacles to women's political participation. The authors also claim that 46% of survey respondents had been politically involved for the past 5 years, i.e., since 1990, thereby pointing to, but not discussing in greater depth, one indicator of increased levels of political activity in the new democratic context. Overall, the study provides surprisingly little theoretical or empirical discussion of the pertinent and important implications of a multi-party system for political participation by women, as compared to those of party-less governance under the Panchayat system.

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5 According to reports of the National Election Commission, following the national elections of 1991 and 1994 and local elections in 1992, 11 women stood as Chairpersons of Village Development Committees, 18 served as Vice-Chairpersons and 7 women were represented in the House of Representatives. In contrast, in 1987/88, 12 women chaired village-level panchayats, 7 served as Vice-Chairpersons and 8 women were members of the National Panchayat (p.17).

6 This finding seems unsurprising, since the respondents were all active in politics. More pertinent to the question of how to increase women's level of political participation would be the views of women not active in politics.

7 The example of social disapproval cited in the study is criticism of political work that requires women to stay away from home overnight.

With a view to improving current indicators of women's political participation, the study proposes the legal adoption of an affirmative plan of action in favour of women in the areas of employment, education, health and politics. This policy recommendation appears abruptly at the end of the book (p.59), unaccompanied by any proposal for modes of implementation. The authors justify this proposed course of action on the grounds that it was agreed to by 87% of survey respondents. What this percentage figure denotes is the respondents' reaction to the ready-formulated statement "There should be legal provisions of reservation/quota system for women in education, health, employment and political representation", to which a fully/partially agree/disagree response was solicited (p.54). Structured statements such as these, of which the study regularly makes use in identifying women's viewpoints, are restrictive from the perspective of social science enquiry. They are inherently non-participatory and less able to capture potentially valuable nuances of response than less structured interview methods, and could even be accused of influencing the nature of the responses themselves.[8]

As a whole, it is difficult to discern why the study painstakingly disaggregates findings on the socio-economic and political status of the respondents by religion, geographical residence (hill/tarai) and family structure (nuclear/joint), yet chooses not to analyze variation in responses according to these criteria, or to refer to such factors when drawing policy conclusions. Specifically, Chalise and Adhikary's recommendation for a "massive" education and information campaign for gender awareness and political training for women, "through formal and informal agencies" and targeted at "both primary and secondary groups" (p.60), is so general that it could even have been put forward without having conducted the survey. Moreover, in the absence of any discussion of past/ongoing projects of this kind, it is implied that none have, in fact, been conducted to date. The authors define equal property rights for women and men as a third immediate policy recommendation, acknowledging that such rights will result in important social transformation. However, the authors do not appear to consider property rights an important enough policy recommendation to warrant more critical, detailed analysis of its potential implications, particularly in relation to women's political engagement.

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8 Robert Chambers argues that an exclusive reliance on questionnaires as a technique of investigation is likely to produce "artificial ‘chunks’ of knowledge" (1983:51).

Finally, by focusing exclusively on the perceptions of politically active women regarding the constraints they face in their work, *Women in Politics in Nepal* fails to provide insight into the viewpoints of Members of Parliament and local authorities of the dominant parties. Such an effort might have pinpointed the degree to which the current (male-dominated) state authorities do or do not identify a stake in facilitating increased levels of women's participation in politics. As a result of this omission, the study makes an artificial separation between women's political participation on the one hand, and the country's political realities, as well as its gender dimensions, on the other.

Working Women

The second survey study reviewed here is Milan Adhikary's *Women Graduates in Agriculture and Forestry Development in Nepal*. It seeks to investigate the employment prospects of women graduates in agriculture and related natural resource management (hereafter, Ag&NRM). The study compellingly argues that this is an important area of research in countries like Nepal, where a large proportion of women are engaged in the agricultural sector, given that "women in rural areas...respond more easily to female extension workers..." (p.1). It is, however, less easy to agree with the rather sweeping assumption made at the onset of the study, that facilitating increased participation by women professionals in the sectors of Ag&NRM will root out "the crux of *all* [Nepal's] developmental problems" (p.1; emphasis added). Adhikary uses primary data based on questionnaires and one Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercise, in addition to Government and NGO-produced secondary data. It is a pity that her questionnaires consist exclusively of structured questions, though they are at times balanced with more flexible forms of investigation, in the form of open-ended interviews. Survey respondents were 68 women professionals employed in the sectors of Ag&NRM. The study was funded by the US-based *Winrock International Institute for Agricultural Development*.

Adhikary, herself an Ag&NRM specialist, presents various social information about the women professionals in this field. The picture that emerges is that women in the 21-29 age bracket, mainly of Newar, Brahmin or Chettri ethnicity are working in the Ag&NRM sector. 54% of the women held Masters' degrees in the fields of agriculture (including animal and veterinary science and agri-engineering), pure science (botany and zoology) or social science (agricultural economics). In forestry, women had studied up to the undergraduate level. 75% of the women

professionals were married. The majority were mothers of less than three children, from which the implication is drawn that "professional careers and education have made women more conscious of their health and family size"(p.6).

The study reveals that more women graduates in Ag&NRM are engaged in the government and public sectors (including research centres) than in the private sector. In government organizations (the Ministries for Agriculture and Forestry, as well as their respective departments), a larger percentage of “desk-based” women professionals are employed than in the non-governmental sector, where the majority of professional women work on extension activities. Findings indicate that NGOs, despite having several features that are attractive to women professionals, are also perceived to have significant disadvantages. They appear to be more conscious of gender balance in their organizations, and offer more attractive salaries than public institutions. Also, as a result of a higher number of specifically women-oriented projects, NGOs as a whole offer more employment opportunities especially geared to women. At the same time, however, non-governmental employers are less able than their governmental counterparts to offer the job security valued by the majority of the women professionals. This is a result of the project-based nature of their work. Although governmental organizations do not positively discriminate in favour of women in the hiring process, and offer what Adhikary terms less "challenging" jobs—involving more desk-based and less field- or laboratory-based work (p.11)—they are in the position to provide special training facilities for women and offer more job security. The outcome is a job market presenting women professionals with a trade-off between economic and non-economic benefits.

Adhikary gives a gender perspective to her project by presenting the viewpoints of employers in Government and research organizations as well as in national and international non-governmental institutions on the situation of women in professional positions in the Ag&NRM sectors. Of 38 employers, 74% agreed that the female/male ratio of employees in their organizations was unbalanced, identifying a lack of qualified women in this sector as one reason for such an imbalance. Another factor noted was the unwillingness of female professional staff to go to the field in a profession that requires a high proportion of field-based activity. Adhikary compares these findings with the sampled women's own perceptions with regard to their work. A total of 56% admitted they were reluctant to stay in the field for long periods. Women's relative aversion to field work was based on the social objections they faced as well as on lack of support in

discharging household chores. Government employees reported male dominance at work, and an underestimation on the part of male colleagues of their productivity. Women workers in governmental organizations also felt that they were given fewer opportunities for skills development than their male counterparts.

The study concludes that women professionals continue to face more barriers to career advancement in the Ag&NRM sectors than do men. Overall, women still only constitute less than 8% of the professional workforce in Ag&NRM, a figure which speaks for itself. The study recommends, on the basis of open-ended questions put to both women professionals and employers, the institution of priority provisions in the workplace, including enhanced access to career development opportunities (fellowships, training, etc.) as well as to maternity leave.[9] In light of her findings, particularly with regard to women's perceptions of field work, Adhikary qualifies this policy recommendation by arguing that "the classic type of affirmative action programme, i.e., having fixed quotas for the proportion of women employees will not work, as some of the pressure against this type of work comes from the women themselves" (p.37). This presents a welcome example of an independent policy recommendation emanating directly from study findings, though it could have been backed up with a step-by-step account of how such a programme of action could be initiated, and by whom. As a whole, it might be the case that more focused areas of research, such as that selected by Adhikary here, and in contrast to that in *Women in Politics in Nepal*, can facilitate the derivation of policy recommendations. Adhikary's relative practicality at the end of her book contrasts, moreover, with the sweeping claims she makes in her introduction.

Updating the SOWN Study Series

Women, Development, Democracy - A Study of the Socio-Economic Changes in the Status of Women in Nepal (1981-1993) is a publication of the Nepali NGO *Shtrii Shakti* which sets out to provide a "selective update" of the data on women presented in the *SOWN* project of 1981 (p.xvii), in order to examine changes in women's conditions and positions in the intervening 12 years. Specifically, *Shtrii Shakti* set out to identify areas for development intervention to be implemented, presumably, by

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9 According to this study, the duration of maternity leave in Nepal, fixed by the Government at somewhere between 12-14 weeks, is less than half of the average duration of maternity leave at the global level (p.20).

themselves, the study's funders (USAID, the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) and the Canadian Cooperation Office (CCO)), or other WID agencies. The study's introduction begins with a rather cursory overview of current shifts in development thinking from an emphasis on "growth" to one on "equity". With regard to WID policies in Nepal, this section is critical of "an implicit assumption in development policy that development activities directed towards rural people automatically include women" (p.2). It claims instead that in actually bypassing women, "both women and the development process have suffered" (p.3). Moreover, because of ethnic and cultural variances in the Nepali context, the study (following the *SOWN* series) underlines the need to relate national statistics to specific geo-cultural situations, in order to form a real understanding of changes in the conditions of women's lives. With regard to its data collection component, the study accomplishes this relatively well.

This introduction is followed by a comprehensive account of research methodology. The study divided women's activities into the same six "components" established by the *SOWN* study, namely, economic, educational, legal, political and ideological/familial, treating ethnicity as a key variable across components. In this way, *Shtrii Shakti* carries on the *SOWN* study's (possibly limiting) employment of ethnicity as the primary indicator of women's heterogeneity. Central to its conceptual framework is the inside-outside dichotomy of the *SOWN* study, treated as a determinant of women's activities as well as their access to public power. *Shtrii Shakti* makes no attempt at utilizing independently devised/selected tools of investigation. Therefore, the study unquestioningly accepts the continued applicability of the *SOWN* categories and analytic models, as the most suitable means of examining the status of women in Nepal.

Two "approaches" were used in data collection: a quantitative approach (using household questionnaires and time allocation sheets, both based on those developed by *SOWN*) and a qualitative approach (using focus group discussion techniques, case studies and verbal feedback). Field work was carried out in 1992/93, both during the harvest season in August/September, and in the slack agricultural period between December and January. The sample size is considerably larger than that of *SOWN*: in addition to the eight rural sites covered by *SOWN*, two others are included, one in Lamjung, to include its large Gurung population, and one in Jumla district, inhabited by highland Parbatiya. These sites are justified on the grounds that they make study findings more ethnically and

geographically representative.[10] Moreover, to allow for urban development that has occurred since the *SOWN* study, *Shtrii Shakti* added a set of five sites in urban Nepal. In total, the study, conducted over a period of 15 months, covers 828 households in fifteen sites. It is not clear why time constraints are periodically identified as an underlying reason for aspects of the study which the authors regard as being less satisfactory (e.g., p.3, p.16, p.101), since as extensive an undertaking as an update of the *SOWN* series, should, from the initial planning stages, have been accorded plenty of time.

Study findings are grouped into chapters entitled Demographic Characteristics, Education, Economic Dimensions, Cultural, Political and Legal Setting, followed by Recommendations and a Summary of Major Findings. In addition to summaries and conclusions provided at the end of each chapter, this volume is accompanied by a separate 24-page summary supplement. However, in the absence of an index, it remains cumbersome for the reader to orient herself to the multitude of study findings.

The utility of this study is primarily that of identifying trends since the *SOWN* study series, by comparing empirical findings from 1993 with baseline data stemming from the *SOWN* study. On the subject of education, for instance, which, as an agent for awareness and change is allocated an entire chapter, *Shtrii Shakti* concludes that "attitudes towards the education of girls have shown considerable overall positive change" (p.57). Such attitudes were found to be more positive, overall, in urban areas than in rural ones. Nevertheless, households, primarily but not exclusively in rural areas, could still justify educating girls less than boys on the grounds that it would be more difficult to find husbands for educated girls. Twelve years before, the *SOWN* study had found that girls received less education because of their large share of household duties, at which time the difficulty of finding husbands for educated girls was considered almost irrelevant. *Shtrii Shakti* concludes that since then, "families appear to be adapting to a relative absence of school-age girls for household work" (p.43). Seen as a whole, then, findings point to a mixed picture regarding attitudes towards girls' education. On the other hand there is more support for girls' education overall. On the other hand, there are

10 The study raises the possibility that the eight *SOWN* sites could constitute "atypical" parts of the country (p.15), since they were inhabited by SOWN researchers for periods of up to two years, 12 years ago. However, since findings from the two new rural sites were not found to differ significantly from the findings of these eight sites, the authors go on to reaffirm the validity of all the findings.

new reasons for resisting or limiting female education. Also, there is a persistent reluctance to educate girls beyond certain levels. In both rural and urban sites, proportionally fewer girls are allowed to complete secondary school than boys.[11] Obstacles to higher rates of girl education at primary and secondary levels identified by the study include poverty and social conservatism as well as problems of access to schools in remote locations.

Women, Development, Democracy's most extensive chapter concerns women in the economy. It recreates the *SOWN* study's model for the analysis of economically active women using three spheres of activity: the family farm enterprise, the local market economy and employment involving short term migration. *SOWN* devised this model as a means of circumventing the under-valuation of women's input in the household economy in census statistics. In the *Shtrii Shakti* study, the unaltered model is utilized to measure changes in levels of women's economic activity in the period since 1981. The consistent pattern emerging from the 1993 findings is that women continue to contribute to the economy at a higher rate than men, as was the case in 1981.[12] Women's contribution is not only higher in terms of the overall household income but also in terms of time input.[13] With a national trend towards the replacement of what used to be a subsistence-based economy with one based on cash, and a real trend of increasing poverty, women's participation in the labour force is now identified as expanding beyond the household into the local market economy.[14] As a result, "women are doing more work in the

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11 According to study findings, 2% of girls in rural sites graduated from primary to secondary school. In the urban setting, this percentage figure increased to 27% (p.55).

12 In the rural sector, women undertake 67% of productive activity in the sphere of the family farm economy. Corresponding figures in the spheres of the local market economy and employment involving short-term migration are 41% and 25%, respectively. In the urban sector, 76% of the work in the sphere of the family farm enterprise is assigned to women; the involvement of urban women in the local market economy is considerably less at 24%, and amounts to a mere 12% in the third sphere (p.62).

13 Time allocation sheets used to discern women's labour input in economic activity reveal a work burden for rural women that is 30% higher than that of males and 37% higher than males in the case of urban women (pp.105, 107).

14 *Shtrii Shakti's* findings showed a 29.2% increase in the proportion of households in what is defined as the "lower income stratum" in all rural sites for which a comparison could be made with the *SOWN* study (p.119). The data for rural sites indicated that 31.8% of women were engaged in outside wage-employment in addition to farming their own fields. In the urban sector, this figure was 29.6% (p.65).

active labour force than ever before" (p.119). However, the majority of women's work is still confined to the family farm sector, amounting to unpaid work, and thus officially considered 'unproductive'.

Shtrii Shakti next reasserts the connection put forward by the *SOWN* study, of a positive correlation between women's position within the household, as measured by their input in financial decision-making processes, and their level of participation in the economy outside of the household. Overall, the study identifies an increase in male control of cash and decision-making, as women are being displaced from traditional spheres of productive activity and authority. However, as a result of "meaningful variations" between communities in the extent of women's participation in the wider market economy (p.201), women's decision-making inputs vary nationwide. These variations, the study suggests, are related to the strength of the inside/outside dichotomy. It is argued that with commercialization and monetization of the economy, highly dichotomized communities, are valuing women's unpaid labour even less. Therefore, even where there was an improvement in total household income as a result of development interventions such as provision of credit facilities, subsidy programmes and irrigation and agricultural lending, it was found that most women interviewed had *not* experienced any personal decision-making or financial benefits from their households' improved economic situations. For example, whereas in 1981 the *SOWN* study found that in the Brahmin/Chettri community of Bakundole, Kavrepalanchowk, 29.4% of men were in charge of household reserves of cash, by 1993 this figure had risen dramatically to 83.3%. Women's decision-making power regarding children's education had also decreased: in Sirsia, Dhanusa district, all decisions are reported to be made by men and even among the Baragaonle of Mustang, a community identified as among the least dichotomized in the sample, women now have less decision-making authority in this regard than at the time of the *SOWN* study.

However, the study findings also indicate that women are showing increased disagreement with the choices and decisions made by their husbands, as compared to findings of the *SOWN* study (p.202).[15] This empirical evidence is potentially significant, since "the increase in the amount of disagreement women voice about men's choices and decisions may be a precursor to them actually *acting* on their disagreement" (p.59;

15 In rural sites, disagreement was registered 58% of the time; in urban sites, 75% of the time (p.202).

emphasis in original). *Shtrii Shakti* could have elaborated more on this finding. Elsewhere, for example, the study reports that few women were able to abstract from personal experience in order to theorize about alternate life conditions. In bringing the two findings together, it could have been argued that if more women were able to perceive of their situation as less than what it *could be*, and in this way, “theorize about alternate life conditions”, they would more readily feel, express and, perhaps, even act on those convictions.[16]

Again mirroring the *SOWN* study series, *Shtrii Shakti* covers the area of women and politics in its next chapter. When compared to the *SOWN* study, levels of women's political awareness, participation and interest have generally increased, although "there continues to be a general apathy towards politics, even among educated women in Kathmandu" (p.143). For instance, a mere 15.2% of rural women could recall the Prime Minister's name. The equivalent figure for urban women was 51.2%. And only 29.2% of urban women expressed willingness to stand for election at the VDC level. *Shtrii Shakti* calculates that four times as many women voted during the 1992 local elections as compared to the elections examined in the 1981 *SOWN* study, indicating, they say, the positive impact of relative increases in women's rates of literacy and contact with the world beyond that of the community.[17] In welcome contrast to Chalise and Adhikary's methodology, *Shtrii Shakti* does not limit the definition of women's political awareness to the formal political process; awareness of local WID organizations and activities is also considered significant. Nevertheless, its overall findings in this category present a dismal picture of women's political awareness which, in turn, is likely to stand in the way of gender-based activism in the immediate future.[18]

Positing a close connection between women's political and legal status, this chapter goes on to address the status of women under Nepali

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16 This juxtaposition of levels of women's disagreement on the one hand, with women's self-perception on the other, draws on Amartya Sen's "cooperative conflicts" model of gender relations. According to this model, gender relations are characterized by the coexistence of congruent and conflicting interests, in which women may suppress an awareness of the elements of conflict. Thus, Sen identifies *perception* as an important aspect of gender-based inequality (Dreze and Sen 1990).

17 *Shtrii Shakti*'s finding is that more than 80% of women in rural and urban sites voted in 1992 (p.151). Singh quotes *Shtrii Shakti*'s finding as 85.6% (p.50).

18 Awareness of WID activities in rural sites increased from 5.7% in 1981 to 14.9% in 1993; in urban sites, 32.4% of women knew of local WID activities in 1981, compared to some 50% in 1993 (p.151).

law. Despite new laws introduced under the Constitution of 1990, *Shtrii Shakti* concludes that "the legal status of women has remained the same original construct as 10-15 years ago" (p.173). One problem is law enforcement. For example, although Article 11, Clause 5 in the new Constitution prohibits gender-based discrimination in rewards and compensation, and despite provisions for minimum and equal wages, discrepancies in wage rates between men and women continue to be practiced, particularly in the informal sector. Another issue is that of legal awareness. Only 11.4% of the women in 548 sample rural households were aware of the existence of the new Constitution. This percentage figure was 41.2% in urban sites. Thirdly, and most seriously, although Article 11, Clause 2 of the Constitution may prohibit unequal application of laws, unequal laws continue to exist in the *Muluki Ain* (legal code). Embedded in this national code of conduct are unequal laws with regard to family law, based on a Hindu patriarchal ideology. The study draws attention to gender-based inequality in property rights, showing how legal inequality is exacerbated in some communities by lack of legal awareness and incentive to act on legal rights. For instance, the Maithili women in Sirsia, Dhanusa and the Chettri community of Jumla, identified by the study as relatively less legally-educated, tend to be denied control even over their *dāījo/pewā*.[19] Interestingly, the Thakali women of Mustang, identified as relatively more aware about their legal rights, customarily make legal claims on parental property.

It is a pity that the "cultural" component of this otherwise readable chapter consists of only two pages, in which as many as five of Lynn Bennett's models of kinship, drawn from the *SOWN* study series, are discussed. Each model necessarily receives only the briefest of coverage. This exposition is unsatisfactory both for the non-anthropologist, for whom it is far too brief, and for the seasoned specialist, who is very likely to be all too familiar with this elementary analysis. If these models were to be invoked, they needed to be applied to the cases under study. Overall, this section is unable to provide new insight into the complex cultural arrangements that continue to subordinate women of Nepal in the 1990s. Instead, an appeal is made for more research in this regard, though *Shtrii Shakti* does not commit itself to this assignment.

Overall the *Shtrii Shakti* study, justly, treats its findings in a cautious manner: neither does it claim to set out a full profile of women in Nepal,

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19 *Dāījo i*s property brought by a woman to her married home, over which she has legal control. *Pewā* refers to a woman's self-earned income.

nor can generalizations regarding ethnic groups or city populations "be made freely" (p.14). Similarly, it underlines ambiguities in the status of Nepali women, while pointing to the difficulties involved in separating "the multitude of parameters" that contribute to the relatively low status of women (p.195). Cautious statements such as these are, nevertheless, conjoined with sweeping assumptions. For instance, the study's justification for its relative neglect of the "ethnographic" dimensions of women's status, defined as "socio-religious and socio-personal practices and values", is that this information "would not have changed much" in the intervening time period (p.7). Although the study documents women's and men's behavioral changes due to changes in awareness and perception over those intervening twelve years we are, contradictorily, also told that "socio-religious and socio-personal practice and values" are basically the same. The study thus avoids the responsibility of conducting research that could provide detailed qualitative accounts. Nor are those changes necessarily all in a positive direction. *Shtrii Shakti* points to an increasing trend in the number of women joining or being sold into the sex industry, an occurrence that was not apparent at the time of the *SOWN* study. However, its brief references (pp.139 and 169) come across more as after-thoughts than as the identification of a serious problem in need of a constructive policy recommendation.

Broad propositions also tend to mark the study's section on long-term policy recommendations, some of which move well beyond study findings to encompass issues related to national development. For example, the study recommends a diversification of Nepal's agricultural base, to produce "a more reliable balance between export and food subsistence crops" (p.185). Also, *Shtrii Shakti* opposes the structural adjustment programmes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), providing no macro-economic justification for this standpoint, only claiming that these programmes stand against women's interests. Policy recommendations such as these are no longer new in development debates. If the authors, nevertheless, felt inclined to repeat such policy sound-bites in their publication, they should have backed them up with convincing figures and trend analyses, and related them more specifically to women's long-term interests. It would also have been enlightening to know how exactly *Shtrii Shakti* would go about sharpening the links between "equality" and "development", rather than simply prescribing this course of action near the end of the volume.

Nor does the section on long-term policy measures with regard to women seem to be clear as to what kind of role donor agents should be

accorded. Donors are alternately criticized for pressurizing the Government to stem resources away from basic needs provision and into the export sector of the economy, and lauded for their financial might and international experience, and called on to "exercise subtle pressure on the Government [on gender issues], in a way that NGOs cannot" (p.182). This standpoint is accompanied by one that holds that Nepal today is lacking in "political will" rather than in "[financial] resources", in effecting improvements for Nepali women (p.179). However, as I have argued elsewhere, it is rarely possible to segregate these two aspects of state accountability in practice in the case of a Government as donor-dependent as is that of Nepal (Upadhya 1994). In reality, it is likely that the present Government's "political will" to carry out policies—not only gender-affirmative but also other types of policies—is contingent not only on its electorate, but also on the sources of its "financial resources", stemming from the donor community. I am not drawing to a necessary connection between levels of donor dependence of a Government on the one hand, and degrees of gender sensitivity, on the other. This would depend on a host of other factors, including the electorate's stance on gender issues. However, my argument here goes some way towards justifying why it is difficult to accept *Shtrii Shakti*'s simplistic position on state accountability which, as it stands, does not touch on important aspects of what is in actuality a multi-faceted issue.

Some of *Shtrii Shakti's* short-term policy measures are more focused. It recommends, for instance, that non-formal education programmes should not necessarily be restricted to the slack agricultural season between December and January, since time allocation exercises conducted under the study revealed that this is the time when both women and men, possibly as a result of an increase in other economic activities, spend less time on education. This is a good instance of a practical policy recommendation emerging directly from study findings. The two recommendations for facilitation of service-sector micro enterprise initiatives for women and their increased access to appropriate technology echo the *SOWN* study's recommendations for increased access of women to productive resources and employment and for increasing the productivity and efficiency of women's work through available appropriate technology (Acharya and Bennett 1981:316, 323). However, instead of merely making the same policy proposals after an interval of 12 years, indication could also have been made as to whether or to what extent these policy measures have been put into practice in the meantime and if so, to what effect.

An important omission is the study's lack of discussion of the policy implications of its finding of an overall fall in rates of women's income related decision-making within the household despite improvement in the household's finances. This finding is especially relevant to the formulation of credit programmes targeted at women which aim to achieve women's social empowerment precisely through economic empowerment. Further, it is not immediately clear why "educating women and other local villagers about the importance of *environmental sanitation*" should constitute a policy intervention specifically benefitting women (p.190; emphasis added). Overall, *Shtrii Shakti*'s well-placed caution, in the compilation of the empirical evidence, against both generalization regarding women's positions across geo-cultural settings, and against an exclusive reliance on quantitative data, is much less pronounced as it draws its long term and short term policy conclusions from that evidence. Indeed, one is sometimes left at a loss to see the relationship between the varied site-specific findings and the general policy recommendations. A similar criticism of the *SOWN* study put forward by Fujikura (1996:37) suggests that this is an enduring problem in the movement from research and analysis to policy recommendations.

Finally, for a study which sets out to facilitate derivation and implementation of *development action programmes*, scant mention is made of specific project interventions and related methodologies of execution. Two projects for income generation, credited to USAID and the (Nepali) Institute for Integrated Development Studies (IIDS), are mentioned on page 64. But the study provides no detailed description or analysis of the many current and past WID projects in Nepal. While the study states that WID intervention "has often enabled women to articulate demands and learn how to use organizational strength to counter gender bias and rigidities inside the home" (p.179), it does not indicate which kinds of projects have been successful or—equally importantly—which have been unsuccessful, in effecting such changes. Further, although it is argued that "interventions are most effective ...that work in the most intimate ways in the lives of women and their families" (p.64), no indication is given of the types of project methodologies that might be conducive to this kind of intervention. As a whole, *Shtrii Shakti*, which characterizes itself as an action-oriented NGO, provides little guidance on important aspects of policy and project formulation and implementation.

Profiling Women

One of the two statistical profiles on women reviewed here, Shavitri

Singh's *Statistical Profile on Women of Nepal*, is an uninspiring compilation of secondary information from standard published sources including Government reports and census surveys. Singh sets out to present basic information on women in Nepal for the benefit of planners and policy makers. The profile's contents are divided into two parts, the first consisting of an overview of the findings from national statistics, and the second of a presentation of those statistics in table-format. The first section in Part One presents overall statistics on Nepal, while the following four sections detail basic information on women in the spheres of health, education, marital status, levels of fertility, political participation and employment. The tables in Part Two broadly follow the order in which the information they present has been discussed in Part One.

It is not clear why Singh finds the *Statistical Profile* "encouraging", as she states in the preface, since this word can hardly be said to apply to the indicators presented. Using secondary data, Singh indicates that female rates of infant mortality in 1991 were still much higher than rates for male infants.[20] Maternal mortality rates in Nepal remain exceedingly high, just as female life expectancy at birth is lower than that for males.[21] With a fertility rate in 1991 of 5.6, Nepali women still spend a large part of their lives in pregnancy. And although statistics point out that literacy rates for women have increased significantly over the past two decades, this achievement needs to be qualified with the fact that rates for women in 1991 constituted a mere 50% of that of men.[22] It is reported that 28% of girls in the 10-14 age group are involved in economic work, as compared to 18.1% of boys in the same age group (p.36). This is hardly an encouraging picture of the status of Nepali women.

Singh makes no attempt to present data on women other than that which is readily available and which she appears to accept uncritically. At the very least, she could have pointed to the well-known discrepancies to which national-level socio-economic quantitative data is subject. Besides

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20 In 1991, female infant mortality stood at 101 per 1000 live births, while male rates were 94 per 1000 live births (p.ii).

21 Maternal mortality in 1992 stood at 800 per 100,000 live births (p.20). 1991 Census figures revealed that women's life expectancy was 53.5 years. This breaks down to 52.3 years for rural women and 59.5 years for urban women. In contrast, men's life expectancy stood at 55 years (p.76).

22 In 1991 the overall literacy rate stood at 39.6%, 25% for women and 54.5% for men (p.22).

general questions of reliability, this data is generally recognized as being unable to provide gender-specific information.[23] In one instance, in her section on "Women in Economic Life", Singh alludes to what has been recognized since at least the *SOWN* study, that national statistics on labour force participation in the formal sector do not account for women's value-adding activities, such as water and fuel collection, since they do not constitute income earning activities *per se*. However, "in the absence of reliable data", she argues, "this section ...considers employment in the *same terms* as those used in the surveys" (p.35; emphasis added). The study responds to this data deficiency through repetition rather than remedy. Singh, and her publisher, *Shtrii Shakti*, propose the publication of yet another statistical compilation for this purpose, but leave it unclear who exactly will be responsible for such a publication or where the reliable data will come from.

The book's policy recommendations fare poorly judged against its stated objective to provide "critical analysis" (preface). For instance, the Government and NGOs are advised to coordinate, pool and plan their efforts, though no indication is made of how exactly this could be facilitated. Very brief, descriptive mention is made of three well-publicized Government-run programmes, namely, Small Farmers Development, Production Credit for Rural Women and Intensive Banking Programmes. These are the only examples provided of ongoing WID projects in Nepal. Singh's optimistic conclusion, in which she discerns "a bright future" for Nepal's women (p.59), is unsubstantiated by the data she herself presents. As a whole, it is not apparent that Singh's publication adds anything new in terms of data on women, or analysis thereof, to that which is already available to policymakers and researchers, possibly at less than 500 rupees, the price for which this book is selling.

Meena Acharya's *Statistical Profile on Nepalese Women - An Update in the Policy Context*, preceded Singh's *Statistical Profile* by a year and, as a whole, provides for much better reading. In it, economist Acharya sets out to update her 1979 publication (based on the 1971 census) by drawing on the 1981 and 1991 censuses. Both Acharya and Singh base their information on the same sources, and both point to the poverty of statistical information regarding women currently available in Nepal. However, in her use of secondary sources of information, Acharya tries to be both more varied and imaginative. Amongst others, she draws on

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23 For example, Jyoti Tuladhar (1996:60) ascribes the gender-insensitivity of national-level socio-economic data to a "statistical purdah".

Asmita (a feminist, Nepali-language magazine), Tribhuvan University dissertations, South Asian statistics for comparative purposes and United Nations publications. Acharya also tends to aggregate information from several sources to produce comparative tables, something that Singh does less frequently. Acharya also periodically identifies data gaps and inconsistencies, evincing a more critical attitude toward secondary statistics. However, it may be noted that in her *Statistical Profile* of 1979, Acharya was equally critical of the statistics available in the 1970s. It is indeed discouraging that she comes up with little more than further criticism on this count, after an interval of more than 15 years.

This compact volume of 152 pages is divided into nine chapters. The first two chapters, on General Demographic Features and Social Characteristics, underline the significance of rates of literacy and fertility as well as ages of marriage (described as universal and usually arranged) as indicators of women's empowerment in Nepal. Findings coincide with those of Singh, as is to be expected given their common database. Despite increases, women's literacy today are what men's literacy were as many as 20 years ago. Acharya identifies fertility rates among rural and urban women as 6.2 and 5.3, respectively, reiterating the inverse relation between levels of education and rates of fertility to which Adhikary refers in *Women Graduates in Agriculture and Forestry Development in Nepal*. Accompanied by slight improvements in rates of infant survival, she finds a slight decrease in the overall rate of women's fertility. While Acharya points to a possible connection between rates of fertility and levels of income, she is handicapped by the lack of data in pursuing this connection in greater depth. Census figures from 1981 and 1991 point to only slight increases in the average age of marriage as compared to the 1971 census.

The next two chapters, "Economic Characteristics" and "Industrial Workers", provide interesting statistical information and analysis thereof, with regard to working women. For instance, Acharya identifies the notorious under-valuation in Nepali census figures of rates of women's participation in the work force, resulting from the current definition of the term "economically active". According to the 1991 census, 40.4% of the female population of 10 years and above were labelled as being "economically inactive". In 1979, Acharya had derived a set of alternative figures for this category by defining census figures for the female population in the 15-59 age group as the "potential labour force". In 1994, she added to her previous figures census estimates for the "economically active" proportion of the female population, estimates of "homemaker" and "student" proportions, coming up with what she feels is

an even more accurate estimate of the total percentage of working women in Nepal. According to the new calculation, women constitute slightly more than half of the potential labour force. Acharya's efforts at coming to terms with the inadequacies of census figures, however limited, can nevertheless be contrasted with Singh's reluctance to do likewise.

The chapter entitled "Women as Industrial Workers" finds that despite low levels of skills and cultural inhibitions with respect to women working outside the household, an increasing number of women are joining the ranks of industrial workers.[24] Driven primarily by economic necessity, women are congregating in low-paid, unskilled employment as irregular workers on piece rate salaries. And while access to independent sources of income may confer women increased status within the household, the impact of patriarchal values, says Acharya, under which physical work outside the household is viewed as degrading to the family status, also needs to be accounted for. Nevertheless, Acharya assumes that women working outside of the household will have "some" control over income earned (p.83). In view of the earlier cited findings of *Shtrii Shakti* with regard to women's economic decision making authority within the household vis-a-vis that of their husbands, it is clear that the degree of this control is likely to vary across Nepal, and, cannot, in fact, be taken for granted.

In her sixth chapter, Acharya makes some effort at identifying trends in the impact of development intervention on women. In the absence of any available data on past and current development programmes of non-governmental and government organizations, however, the study is only able to compare changes in selected demographic and socio-economic characteristics across 23 of Nepal's 75 districts. Non-availability of basic data of this nature underlines yet again the serious lacunae that exist in nationally-compiled statistical information. And it means that Acharya's assessment of the impact of development intervention rests on the *assumption*, rather than being rooted in *evidence*, that the socio-economic changes identified have resulted from development intervention (defined, broadly, as the opening of schools and the provision of roads and health services). Therefore, this assessment can amount, at best, to an approximation of the impact of development projects and programmes

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24 According to census figures, the percentage of women employed in the formal non-agricultural sector increased from 11.2% in 1976/77 to 23% in 1990/91 (p.68). However, a comparatively higher percentage of women (45% in 1991) is engaged in the agricultural sector (p.58).

over the last decade. Moreover, and as in the case for all the publications reviewed here, this *Statistical Profile* does not address specific development projects and methodologies, or analyze their relative rates of success in improving the socio-economic status of Nepali women.

Bearing in mind these limitations the findings provided are, nevertheless, worth reading. For example, trends in women's age at marriage appear to be influenced more by cultural practices than by levels of development, as defined above. Reference is made to a proportion of married women in Manang district (less developed yet influenced more by Tibeto-Burman cultural values) that is lower even than in the Kathmandu Valley, where the percentage of "ever married" women is already lower than in most other districts. Acharya explains higher rates of unmarried women in the Kathmandu Valley in terms of the impacts of urbanization.[25] On the subject of literacy, Acharya concludes that the more "developed" a district, the higher the female literacy rate, although socio-economic factors play a significant role in the relative literacy rate of the female population. She backs up this claim by pointing to the differentials in male/female literacy rates, which are highest in Baitadi, Bajhang and Doti districts. These are among the least accessible districts in the sampling. In contrast, the sex differential in literacy rates in Manang district, equally remote (though less dichotomized), was found to be lower, indicating influence from the more egalitarian behavior towards women in ethnically Tibeto-Burman communities. The connection between levels of literacy and access to schools is used to explain the higher average rates of literacy among urban women. Overall, Acharya emphasizes Nepal's dominant patriarchal ideology as an important obstacle in the way of women's empowerment.

Acharya discerns no positive relationship between increases in levels of women's literacy, enhanced awareness of family planning methods, and a reduction in fertility rates. 1991 census figures find a mere 24.1% of women employing means of family planning, although as high a proportion as 92.7% of women were aware of at least one such method. Acharya points out that research on the degree of control that women exercise over their fertility has yet to be conducted in Nepal. In a later chapter she returns to population policies in order to evaluate them from a

25 Overall, in 1991, the average age of marriage stood at 18.1 years for women and 21.4 years for men (p.30). On a regional basis, Tarai women marry earlier than women residing in the Hills. This, says Acharya, is evidence of "the forces of tradition exercis[ing]…maximum hold over women's lives" (p.34) in the Tarai.

gender perspective. Population policies in Nepal, she argues, continue to be conceptualized in terms of "population control" rather than in terms of "reproductive health". Family planning campaigns need to be directed not only at women, as they are at present, but also at men. One policy recommendation put forward as a means of countering what are referred to as "stagnating" rates of fertility (p.131), is innovative: unless women are ensured independent access to productive assets, rather than through their sons, argues Acharya (the example she uses is that of access to community and lease forestry), women will continue to perceive high stakes in the production of male progeny, one of the foremost factors underlying continued high fertility rates. Acharya substantiates this policy recommendation on grounds of efficiency, in addition to those of empowerment.[26] As a whole, this policy proposal would have been more credible had it been backed up by supportive evidence of its successful implementation, whether in Nepal or elsewhere in South Asia. Although Acharya refers to functioning women's credit groups under the Grameen Bank programme in Bangladesh, as well as to women's community forestry user groups in Nepal, these parallels do not appear to sufficiently uphold the potential viability of her scheme, whereby only the women-members of households would be authorized to access community and lease forest.

Regarding women's rights to landed assets more broadly, as opposed to female control over household rights to forest lands, Acharya, in 1994, retains the pessimistic attitude towards property rights for women first expressed in 1981. At that time she stated, "while the long term goal should be to provide equal rights of inheritance, this solution is not practical in the short run" (Acharya and Bennett 1981:316). Thirteen years later, she is still of the opinion that guaranteeing property rights for women "will take time" (p.126). It appears that for Acharya, the long term benefits for women of equal rights to property do not sufficiently outweigh the social costs involved in achieving such a social transformation, as they do, for example, for Chalise and Adhikary, the authors of *Women in Politics in Nepal*.

As was the case with *Shtrii Shakti*'s publication reviewed above, Acharya's *Statistical Profile on Nepalese Women* periodically succumbs to the temptation to present policy recommendations that may appear

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26 Bina Agarwal (1996:27-33) additionally substantiates arguments for giving South Asian women access to economic resources independently of men on *welfare* grounds, as helping to reduce households' levels of poverty and destitution.

constructive on first reading, but are self-evident and essentially empty. One example is the recommendation for "special programmes...tailored to the specific needs and cultural sensitivities of the numerous socio-economic groups" (p.139). Unfortunately, it is not clear what Acharya has in mind, since she does not provide project or policy examples. It is difficult to believe that Acharya did not encounter any such examples in the years that have lapsed since her initial *Statistical Profile*. As it stands, this policy proposal can hardly be said to constitute one of the "relevant policy conclusion[s]" (p.5), that Acharya sets out to provide.

Emerging Issues

The findings of the five publications reviewed above, based on both primary and secondary sources, present quite a consistent picture of the situation of Nepali women in the 1990s. Overall, it appears that there have been some, albeit gradual changes in women's *conditions* as a result of both development interventions and broader processes of urbanization (though women have benefitted less, in both respects, than men). In broad terms, women's literacy rates have increased though they remain low, fertility rates are slightly reduced and the age of marriage has increased marginally compared to 15 years ago. Indicators are more encouraging in urban than in rural areas. However, a significant trend over the past decade is one that points to an increased work burden for women. The majority of women continue to be engaged in the agricultural sector although, in view of a commercializing national economy and increases in the incidence of poverty, increasing numbers are joining the formal non-agricultural sector, a labour market in which they are marginalized in lower-paid, less productive avenues of employment. Despite some increase in literacy and social mobility, women's political and legal awareness, even about issues of direct concern to them, remains low. From all these studies one can conclude that although the situation of Nepali women has improved somewhat, it still fares poorly in comparison with the achievements made in other countries in the region over the same time period. It is, however, important to note that it continues to be impossible to rely on national-level socio-economic data as a reliable guide to women's life conditions, which may be better or worse than indicated by analyses that rely on that data.

With regard to women's *position*, defined here as their social and economic position relative to men, although variations are apparent nationwide, empirical evidence is, as a whole, also far from promising. Patriarchal values and customs embedded in religion, social customs and

the law continue to relegate women to a subordinate position in gender relations. Although some laws upholding gender neutrality have been put into practice, they are not sufficiently enforced. The findings reveal that patriarchy continues to adversely impact women's political involvement, employment in the public sphere, enrollment in higher education, and work performance, undertakings in which women will meet with social disapproval. Importantly, this system ensures that levels of women's self-appreciation, itself an important aspect of empowerment, are kept low. It is, of course, impossible to create precise statistical measures of as abstract a notion as "empowerment". Nevertheless, *Shtrii Shakti's Women, Development, Democracy* derives two proxy measures in its findings of decreasing levels of economic household decision-making by women despite increases in household income, on the one hand, and increased expression of disagreement on the part of women, with regard to their husbands' decisions relating to the household, on the other. While the first finding is discouraging, it is to be hoped that in the case of the second finding, women will begin to act on what are now only perceived levels of disagreement, which might lead to forms of gender-based social activism in the long term.

With respect to policy proposals targeted specifically at eliminating women's subordinate position in Nepali society, an amendment of the legal code's clause on property rights is underlined and advocated to varying degrees, by three of the five publications reviewed here. However, the majority of the policy recommendations laid out in the five publications are in fact a series of ameliorative measures, geared more immediately at improving women's daily life conditions, with the prospect that this will, in the long run, impinge positively on women's status in society.[27] As a result, despite the theoretical shift that has taken place, policy proposals largely remain focused on "women" rather than "gender". Policy proposals as a whole tend to be broadly formulated, at times failing to make a distinction between the specific needs of women, and development needs more broadly. Through empirical findings, all publications are able to paint a detailed, multifarious picture of women in Nepal. However, in deriving policy recommendations, they all have the

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27 As Agarwal (1996:42) points out, a clear distinction cannot always be made regarding policies targeted at women's conditions on the one hand, and positions, on the other. It is likely that these two types of policies reinforce one another. However, we should recall *Shtrii Shakti's* finding of a co-occurrence of improved household economic status (an improvement in women's condition) and a decrease in women's income-related domestic decision-making power (a decline in women's position).

tendency to transform women into an abstract, homogeneous target group, to be accessed via development intervention. Of the five publications, Adhikary's *Women Graduates in Agriculture and Forestry Development in Nepal* fares slightly better in this regard, a fact which I have associated with her more focused area of research. As a whole, however, the reader rarely encounters detailed recommendations that include indications of target population (for example, by ethnic group, income bracket, rural-urban setting), methods of implementation, time frame or estimated cost factors involved. On the question of policy implementation, more definite assignment of responsibility to the Government might have been a first step towards creating state accountability for WID programmes.[28] In drawing policy conclusions the publications also draw little counsel from some of the more substantive policy guidelines emanating at the international level, which might be relevant to Nepal's needs.[29] It is, after all, for this very purpose, that the huge expenses involved in organizing international conferences, are justified.

For publications which, by self-assertion, seek to support the action-oriented aspect of women's empowerment, surprisingly little indication is given of specific past or current WID projects in Nepal that can be considered successful. Close analysis of such projects and their methodologies would seem an obvious topic for investigation. It is not certain whether this reflects an omission on the part of the publications or whether the authors, despite being "development specialists", are unaware of accomplishments in this regard as a result of inadequate data (albeit, a data deficiency which the authors might have sought to remedy). Substantive investment of time, effort and money in WID projects in the past 15 years may as well be said to have been of limited value, if even development practitioners have learnt so little on the constitution of a successful project for women's empowerment.

Despite the dearth of information about specific WID projects, the overwhelming focus of the books reviewed in this article is on women as project beneficiaries. Due to this focus they are unable fully to unravel the complex of factors that create women's subordinate position in Nepali society. Project-oriented in nature, the survey studies tend to be

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28 The Nepali Government's unwavering "welfare" approach to women is reflected in its assignment of women's affairs to the Welfare Ministry which, since 1995, has been renamed the Ministry for Women and Social Welfare.

29 One such policy guideline is that proposed by the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 1990, which set a 30% participation threshold as the minimum for political decision-making positions at the national level (UNDP 1995).

methodologically weak. In this respect, room for improvement was identified in the selection of study sites, target groups, questionnaire content, expansion of open-ended research methodologies, and research time frame. The theoretical assumptions on which the empirical exercises of the survey studies are based, were also found to be limiting, consisting of neat but unsubstantiated assumptions, particularly in the case of *Women in Politics in Nepal*. *Shtrii Shakti's* study, *Women, Development, Democracy*, based on the most extensive research project among the books reviewed here, uses the *SOWN* study's inside-outside theoretical model to explain differences in women's status in terms of their ethnicity. However, location of its wide range of empirical findings exclusively within this framework for analysis is restrictive. It does not further our understanding of the status of women in Nepal by as much as it could have which, in turn, makes it all the more challenging to formulate appropriate policy measures for women's upliftment. *Shtrii Shakti* would have been better served in this endeavour, had it tested out competing theoretical and gender-specific concepts against the identified empirical realities. More extensive utilization of the wide body of gender-related literature produced by South Asian writers in particular, might have pointed to current, regionally relevant theoretical frameworks of this kind.[30]

Three of the five publications reviewed here call for more research and further data collection exercises on the status of Nepali women. However, falling victim to the methodological deficiencies identified above is itself, in part, a result of the donor-driven (and, therefore, policy-oriented and time-bound) nature of all of the studies. It follows, instead, that future scholarship on gender relations in Nepal, which is undoubtedly necessary, needs to employ a different approach, one that is less restrictive and, to quote Robert Chambers (1983:48), is free to be "out of fashion, out of favour or out of bounds", as necessary. Above all, future research needs to be methodologically more sophisticated, placing women's status at the *centre* of study. After 15 years of complaints, it is equally important that development practitioners initiate concerted and coordinated efforts to improve the national data base of gender-specific information. A first step in this regard will be to remodel the gender-insensitive theoretical assumptions which guide national-level data collection. Only this kind of

30 In this article, for example, I have cited Sen and Agarwal, two South Asian economists who have developed models of gender relations which have been applied to South Asian realities.

approach will significantly further our understanding of women in Nepal. This, in turn, should allow us to identify more practical women-oriented policy measures than those being put forth today in publications like the ones reviewed here. Only well-informed and specific policy measures stand any chance of effecting real change in Nepali women's lives.

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