

May-2008

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Recommended Citation

Martin, Kirsty and Adhikari, Sita (2008). More than Books: A Study of Women's Participation in Community Libraries in Rural Nepal. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9(3), 241-255.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol9/iss3/13>

More than Books: A Study of Women's Participation in Community Libraries in Rural Nepal

By Kirsty Martin¹ and Sita Adhikari²

Abstract

In Nepal there are clear gender roles and accompanying expectations about male and female behavior in social spaces. Based on these expectations and traditions there are key obstacles to local women's opportunities to be active participants in social life. The creation of two community libraries in village Nepal in 1999 and 2001 has created opportunities for women's involvement in community-based activities and programs. Through their involvement in library activities, women gain access to education, information and communication and the opportunity to learn about financial matters. This paper explores the impact that women's involvement in the library has on their overall community participation. It also explores the potential of the library as a vehicle for important 'grass-roots' social change.

Keywords: women's participation, local community and social change.

Introduction

“In our community a girl cannot spend time in a public place, she cannot attend a social gathering, take part in or watch a sporting activity or engage in any activities outside the home. These social rules have placed real pressures and limitations on females in our community which in turn has had a negative impact on female mobility, especially in terms of their access to education. These social behaviors directly affect a girls' development notably in terms of her personality and she continues to lose her independence as she gets older” (*Adhikari, field notes, September 2007*).

Personal and social life in Nepal is shaped by specific male and female gender roles. As the opening quote explains social space is generally not considered the place for

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Nepalese women. Given the social and cultural values attached to women's participation in social space this paper explores how women's participation is redefined as a result of their involvement in two community libraries³. Through taking part in the libraries' programs local women have become actively involved in their communities by gaining access to literacy courses, information and communication knowledge and obtaining cash loans and financial skills. As one woman says,

“I use the library to borrow college text books. It would be very expensive for me if I had to buy the course books from the shop. We also get the chance to become involved in various activities including training, workshops and public gatherings about different community issues all arranged by the library” (*Adhikari, field notes, September 2007*).

Since August 2006 the authors (Martin and Adhikari) have worked together to investigate the way that gender expectations impact on the opportunities available to local women in two rural communities in Nepal. The research focus on gender and participation came about as a result of preliminary findings from the Finding a Voice project investigating the way poverty could be reduced through communities' increased access to information and communication technologies. Between August 2006 and December 2007 Adhikari carried out qualitative research in Jhuwani and Agyauli village communities and worked closely with staff and volunteers from both of the community libraries. Additional fieldwork and data analysis was conducted by Martin⁴.

Gender roles in Jhuwani and Agyauli Communities

The roles allocated to males and females have been written about in ethnographic studies across Asia⁵. International scholars have shown that cultural factors need to be considered in order to understand the significance of separate male and female roles⁶. Crucial to understanding how social life is gendered and the meaning attached to those different roles is learning how gender distinctions are lived out in specific social and cultural contexts.

To come to an understanding of the way social life is gendered in Jhuwani and Agyauli communities the authors mapped local people's daily routines by sketching their

³ The ideas contained in this paper are derived in part from an international research project concerned with exploring the potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for poverty reduction called Finding a Voice. FaV is an Australian Research Council collaborative research project involving Queensland University of Technology, University of Adelaide, UNDP – United Nations Development Program (Indonesia) and UNESCO (South Asia). The project began in March 2006 and spans five countries: Australia, India, Indonesia, Nepal and Sri Lanka. There are local ethnographic action researchers in India, Indonesia, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The FaV study investigates how technologies of communication can be implemented for the benefit of local people. (See www.findingavoice.org)

⁴ FaV is a qualitative research project which employed various research tools including extensive participant observation, in-depth formal and informal interviews, short answer questionnaires, mapping techniques and extensive thematic based content analysis of the research data.

⁵ Cameron, 1998; Karim 1995; Sullivan 1991 and Rozario 2001.

⁶ Karim, 1995.

'daily activity charts'⁷. Analysis of the charts revealed that male respondents have outdoor responsibilities. Their outdoor roles include planting crops and selling farming products like rice, milk and vegetables. They are also expected to represent the family in social meetings and community gatherings.

Women's daily chores, in contrast are usually indoor day-long activities including child care, cooking and washing. Women do carry out some outdoor chores including collecting firewood and fodder however these chores seldom afford women opportunities for social interaction. By the time the chores are completed there is little or no time to take part in social activities outside the home⁸. It is not only time constraints that prohibit women's social interactions, as described in the opening quote there are social taboos surrounding women's involvement in activities in public spaces.

The personal and social implications of these different gender roles are lived out on a number of levels. Due to the large amount of time women spend carrying out domestic chores in the home they have less leisure time than men. While men have time to watch television or listen to the radio, in general women have less time to engage in such activities which would offer them access to information about their activities or events in their societies. During one of her field visits to a nearby village Adhikari describes the activities she observed in the home:

Girls below ten years of age were in the home doing all the household work and caring for their younger siblings. The women later told me that they have to work the whole day for their two meals a day. They said that women have double the responsibility of the men. They have to take care of the home and also work outside on other people's land or collect stones and break them into pieces and sell them (*Adhikari, field notes, March 2007*).

Underlying the social tradition of women's work in the home and their resulting lack of time and opportunity to be involved in social activities is the social expectation about women's destinies. In Nepal it is taken for granted that women will marry and leave their family home. Women will marry anywhere from age 12 to 25⁹. The fact that all girls will inevitably 'leave' the family home fuels the argument that there is less reason to invest in a female child's education compared to a male's. Educating a daughter, as one local woman said, is like 'watering someone else's garden'. As a result of this social belief concerning marriage many girls miss out on gaining an education although significant efforts have been made to address this social inequity.¹⁰

⁷ Adhikari recorded a sample of twenty local men and women from different castes and backgrounds in Jhuwani and Agyauli communities, including ten males and ten females.

⁸ There is one important exception to this for the women in the two communities where this ethnographic research was carried out (Jhuwani and Agyauli). Upper caste Hindu women (more so than lower caste women) gather at nearby temples. The women meet to pray and sing Hindu songs on special (holy) days. In these communities this occurs about 15 times in a year.

⁹ The exact age depends on a range of factors including family income (for dowry), caste (finding a suitable husband for the girl), education, class, village versus city life, and other social factors.

¹⁰ Acharya, M. and Acharya, P.1997: 15.

“Parents are not ready to invest extra money in their daughter’s education. They will be ready to sell their land or take out a loan to invest in their son’s education but in the case of daughters they do not like to invest too much money. If there is school and college near her house probably she can study otherwise she is compelled to stop her education” (*female library member, 2007*).

Another important factor that impacts on women’s social mobility in Nepal is that women do not have the same access to the family income as the men do. This lack of access to funds does not necessarily derive from the family’s economic status but instead reflects who has control over the family ‘purse strings’. One woman describes her experience of not having access to her family’s money:

“My family has a small leaf plate and bowl making business and we earn good money from the industry but I always run out of money. My husband controls all the income and I am not able to use any of this money for myself” (*female library user, 2007*).

In Jhuwani and Agyauli communities the gendered nature of community life often constrains women’s access to information, education and financial resources. However, women are finding other ways of gaining access to finances and resources. In the case of Jhuwani and Agyauli, this can be seen in the activities which have developed around the two community libraries.

Jhuwani Community Library

Jhuwani Community Library (JCL) was established in 2001 by community people with support from an international Non-Governmental Organization called READ (Rural Education and Development) Nepal¹¹. Prior to 2001 there was no community library in the village area. The local community supported the idea of creating a community place where they could read, learn and meet together. The Jhuwani youth committee began requesting and collecting funds from the community people to help establish and build the library.

Jhuwani is a village area five kilometers from the closest market (town) area. Jhuwani is located in Chitwan district in the centre of Nepal, approximately 170 kilometers from Nepal’s capital city, Kathmandu. The library services a population of 25,000. The area has a majority of lower caste and indigenous ethnic groups including *Tharu*¹², *Darai*, *Mushar* and *Tamang*¹³. The prevalence of such a high proportion of socially disadvantaged groups in the community reinforces the need for community initiatives and organizations to address key inequities including access to affordable

¹¹ Today, JCL has a range of partners including; READ Nepal, Mrigakunja buffer zone user committee, Chitwan National Park, Village Development Committee (VDC) Bachhauli, Chitwan, Nepal Family Planning Program, Equal Access, King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation & Asia Foundation.

¹² For a detailed discussion of the social disadvantages facing Nepali Tharu people see Guneratne, 2002:32.

¹³ For more information about the many different castes of Nepal see <http://countrystudies.us/nepal/31.htm>

health care, education and employment. When JCL was first established it was hoped it would provide community activities and promote the involvement of local indigenous groups and lower caste people¹⁴.

JCL's Women's Section

In an effort to empower women through learning and skills training, JCL created its own women's section in 2002. The group's first activity involved encouraging a group of women to come together and share their experiences with one another using a microphone. Adhikari devised, coordinated and ran JCL's early women's program. Every program had more than 50 female participants. Most of the participants were from upper caste groups in the community and were literate. JCL ran more than 20 programs for women using this format.

Following the completion of the program the library staff and volunteers encouraged the local women to read books. The library volunteers focused on collecting books which specifically addressed women's issues. From this time the number of female members of the library started to increase.

In addition to merely accessing the library's reading materials, women also became more involved in the library's activities. The engagement in public activities was new for many local women. One library member describes her early involvement in the women's group at JCL.

“A few years ago there were hardly any females using the library. I was also hesitant to come to the library at first because there were no other females coming. If only one female comes to the library then community people do not see it as socially acceptable. That is why I felt strange attending the library in the beginning. The women were afraid that people might criticize them and say she is a bad person. Some friends and I thought we could make it easier for female users of the library” (*female library member, JCL 2007*).

JCL's pioneering program to encourage local women to read at the library encountered significant obstacles. Socially disadvantaged and lower caste women felt intimidated and were reluctant to join in the library's activities. More than 50% of the people in Jhuwani are from the lower caste indigenous group known as *Tharu* and most *Tharu* females are illiterate or neoliterate housewives¹⁵. Initially, only 20% of the participants in the library's programs were *Tharu* women.

Mobile Library

Partly in response to the poor participation rate of socially disadvantaged women, JCL developed the 'mobile library' facility. The mobile library aims to ensure neo

¹⁴ In Nepal castes are ethnic groups within a single society whose relations to each other are ordered in terms of a particular ideology of purity and pollution (Guneratne, 2002:37).

¹⁵ In Nepal, literacy rates have been measured at 55.1% for males and 24.9% for females (Acharya, 1994: 478).

literate women have access to the library's materials to help them develop their literacy skills.

A representative from JCL's women's section visits women in the villages and loans them books, toys or reference materials. The women can borrow these items free of charge. On the following visit the women can swap the books or toys. JCL has in excess of 4,500 books and village women who have no opportunity to frequent the library have regular access to library resources through the mobile library facility. The mobile library also provides local women with information about contraception and family planning.

Saving and Credit Groups

JCL created the women's-only saving and credit groups in 2004. Today JCL has 42 women's saving and credit groups with a total of 500 members. The saving and credit groups are now officially registered as the Jhuwani Community Saving and Credit Co-operative Ltd.

The local saving and credit groups meet monthly to collect the money and to lodge members' loan applications. JCL also has a monthly working committee where members' loans are declined or accepted. The working committee also draws up the rules and regulations for the co-operative. Members usually borrow money to pay for small scale household expenses including children's school fees, family health checkups, fees associated with cattle and seasonal farming.

Community based Credit schemes

Nepal has a history of community-based credit schemes which were implemented as part of Nepal's development aims of the 1980's.¹⁶ Two well known schemes devised to make credit accessible for village women include the Small Farmers Development Program and the Intensive Banking Program. Both these programs target lower income groups.¹⁷

While in Nepal the proportion of economically active women has always been higher compared to other South Asian countries¹⁸ borrowing and saving money through financial institutions is still not possible for most village women in Jhuwani and Agyauli. Coupled with the fact that local women do not have the same access to family income as men, the local saving and credit groups are an important part of women's regular economic activities and planning.

“Women's access to credit is limited because both formal and informal credit institutions cater to property owners who can provide collateral. All formal credit institutions seek tangible collateral for loans. Women are effectively excluded from institutional credit since women have little access to inherited property. Village moneylenders are also more interested in earning high interest or in acquiring the debtor's property than in financing people in need. Women's access to institutional credit is further restricted

¹⁶ Acharya, 1994:487.

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ Acharya and Acharya, 2007:18

by their confinement to household activities, their lack of mobility, and their lower level of awareness and educational attainment. They are more prone to fall prey to the exploitative conditions of village moneylenders than are men” (ADB, 1999:26).

Women across other parts of Asia also have difficulty utilizing financial institutions. Indonesia has similar micro-finance groups for women that are community based. In Indonesia the system local micro-credit system is known as *simpan pinjam* – literally save and borrow.¹⁹ These groups of women meet together on a monthly basis to save or borrow small amounts of cash. Similar to women in Jhuwani community, the women save/borrow small amounts of money to cover household expenses or children school fees.

In addition to the community-run saving and credit schemes there are other larger South Asian banking projects which aim to empower local people through providing cash loans. This is the premise of the Grameen Bank which has operated as an independent bank in Bangladesh since 1983.²⁰ The mission statement of the Grameen Bank is that through access to significant financial services poor men and women can be empowered to realize their full potential. The scheme offers local men and women access to a range of loans including; micro-enterprise loans, village phones, higher education loans and their scholarship schemes.

The JCL’s decision to open a women’s only saving and credit scheme responds to the same social disadvantages that the Grameen system is premised on, namely women’s lack of access to formal financial institutions. It aims to enhance the life opportunities of poor women. However in contrast to these project-driven credit schemes the saving and credit co-operative at JCL was set up by women to help individual local women manage their households. One member of the group shares her thoughts about the saving and credit group.

“The library’s saving and credit initiative has not only supported women in running their households but it has also helped make men aware of the importance of saving and respecting females in our society” (*library member, JCL 2007*).

The social response to the introduction of the saving and credit scheme at JCL has been positive. The female members of the library increased in response to the women’s programs run by JCL.²¹ The other notable social benefit of this

¹⁹ Martin, PhD thesis 2004. <http://www.library.unsw.edu.au/~thesis/adt-NUN/uploads/approved/adt-NUN20050608.145600/public/01front.pdf>

²⁰ As of November, 2007, it has 7.39 million borrowers, 97 percent of whom are women. With 2,475 branches, GB provides services in 80,511 villages, covering more than 96 percent of the total villages in Bangladesh (see <http://www.grameen-info.org/bank/index.html>).

²¹ Membership data of JCL:

2002-2003: Male -130 Female -40

2003-2004: Male -180 Female -42

2004-2005: Male -272 , Female-90

women-only credit program is the increased involvement of poor and marginalized women. The increased number of female members accompanying the saving and credit groups also saw an increase of *Tharu* women's involvement. Today, out of the 574 female members of the co-operative 60% are *Tharu* women.

Income Generating Programs

Most of the local people in Jhuwani are dependant on subsistence farming for their economic survival. There are also a number of people in the community who are unemployed. JCL hosts various income generating activities in the local community which are open to all members of the community. The library organizers have a specific aim to encourage women in income-generating activities as many have never worked outside the home before and this is a rare chance for them to gain access to skills training. Another aim of the programs is to motivate local people to use the library to access information as well as provide a place to discuss community issues. JCL has hosted a range of income-generating programs including; flowery culture training about how to farm specific kinds of flowers and sell them to the national market, goat distribution, beekeeping training and mushroom farming training for the community people. JCL also runs workshops about farming techniques, seasonal diseases and cattle razing. While males are usually involved in this outdoor work, JCL ensures the equal participation of females and males in the training. The social acceptability of the community library and its programs is in part derived from the fact that the library is a community space open to both men and women.

Information

In addition to the saving and credit co-operative, the income generating programs and the mobile library facility, JCL runs a range of other community-oriented programs aimed at increasing local participation in the community. In conjunction with its community partners JCL has been working toward upholding the environmental protection of the area by organizing various environment awareness workshops in the community. JCL has distributed literature and screened audio visual programs to educate the community about local environmental issues. Some of the issues it has addressed include; deforestation, wild-life protection, poaching and transference of diseases from wild to domestic animals. JCL is located close to the Chitwan national park and many local people rely on the forest for their livelihood. The ecological and social survival of the community relies on respect for the environment and protection of wildlife.

Access to health services and information, especially in regard to reproductive health, poses a significant challenge for local women. The library

2005-2006: Male -322, Female-570

2006-2007: Male -348, Female -574

operates an ambulance which is crucial in medical emergencies. Prior to the library's ambulance service there was no facility in the village to bring women safely to hospital. The transportation service of the ambulance is critical in Jhuwani as public transportation methods such as taxis or rickshaw do not exist.

JCL also has a weekly health clinic specifically for women, which focuses on reproductive health. The library also hosts women's health camps and offers general treatment for pregnant women. JCL offers health care to both men and women in the form of a free dental camp, Tuberculosis and HIV awareness campaigns and an eye camp. It is through their membership and involvement in the community library that women access important medical support which is otherwise inaccessible or unaffordable.

Communication Technologies at JCL

JCL has 8 computers, internet access, DVD player, a phone connection, a fax, a laminator, a printer and a scanner. In 2002 JCL ran its first community computer training course. Of the 102 participants, 66 were male and 36 were female. Interviews showed that despite being outnumbered by the male participants, local women are interested to learn about new communication technologies. They want to learn about the internet and to write emails to their relatives. One local woman describes why she has chosen to enroll in the library's computer course.

“My husband is living and working abroad. Calling overseas is very expensive for me. I want to learn how to use the internet so I can send him an email and I would also like to chat with him. So because of that, I have enrolled in the basic computer course at the library” (*house wife, JCL 2007*).

In order to learn more about the ways that men and women use technology in their daily life Martin and Adhikari composed a short questionnaire survey of people's access to different information and communication technologies (ICTs).²² Analysis of the survey data revealed that men and women interact with new technologies in different ways. Generally males have more access to 'new media'²³ compared to females. This is largely due to the gender roles of males and females in the community discussed above. The time women spend in the home carrying out domestic work limits the time they have to engage in activities such as using computers and talking on mobile phones. The other issue for women is the cost attached to the use of such commodities. As many women do not have the same access to the family's financial resources as their male kin, even if a woman has the time to engage in these activities she seldom has access to the funds to pay for the internet connection/usage or to pay for the SIM card for the mobile phone.

²² Between August 2006 and August 2007, Adhikari surveyed 14 respondents in Jhuwani and Agyauli communities. The 2 page survey asked people about the types of information and communication tools people access in their daily lives. Martin and Adhikari analyzed the technologies used by men and women and also compared the different technologies between library members and non members.

²³ In this paper this term refers to mobile phones, digital cameras, computers, fax and the internet.

JCL is situated in a remote village and the only alternative computer/internet access is located five kilometers away in the market area. There is no public transport to the market and village people must travel there by foot or bicycle. The private computer institutes located in the market area offer computer training courses but these are expensive and considering the travel time simply not plausible for many local people.

Since JCL opened its computer section, it has provided the community with the only village-based computer training and internet service. While women feel reluctant to travel the long distance to the town to access the computers, the affordability and accessibility in their local villages has made JCL's computer training programs appealing for local women. Women can now use certain communication facilities (internet, phone and fax) at a cheaper rate at their own village library and this is helping to overcome the gender inequities inherent in access to new media resources.

Agyauli Community Library

Agyauli Community Library (ACL) was established in 1999 with the support of READ Nepal. Like JCL, ACL has various partner organizations²⁴. Most of the people in the Agyauli area are lower caste, or *dalit*, and there are many poor and landless people in the area. When choosing the location of the library one social worker insisted that due to the poor socio-economic conditions of the area, Agyauli would be an ideal location because it could provide much needed social benefits to the local people. Today the Agyauli community people are proud that they established the community library and see it as an important vehicle for social development.

Agyauli is located in Nawalparasi District. The closest city, Narayanghat is 37 kilometers away in neighboring Chitwan district and the nation's capital, Kathmandu is 180 kilometers away. ACL is located beside a small local market area along the east-west highway of Nepal.

ACL's Women's Section

Based on the success of the women's section at JCL, the ACL management committee and community people decided to create a women's section at ACL. In 2004 ACL organized a large gathering of women. During the gathering the group elected members of the ACL women's section committee. Today the women's section is active and hosts a range of different women related programs for the library and community.

Since 2002 ACL has run a total of 41 literacy classes within the Nawalparasi district under the direction and coordination of the District Education Office (DEO). More than 800 local women have benefited from taking part in the literacy program. 70% of the participants were from the lower caste groups in the community. ACL also has a range of books that help the literacy development of local women who are in the process of learning to read and write. A teacher at a local community centre tells how she uses the books from ACL for her work:

²⁴ Today ACL has a range of partners including READ (Rural Education and Development), District Development Committee, District Education Offices (DEO) Equal Access Nepal Community Learning Centre Danda

“I love to read the books related to literacy skills for illiterate women. I am the facilitator of the women’s adult literacy class in my area run by the community learning centre. I can find here many reference books for my work elsewhere, so I come to the library” (*female library user, ACL 2007*).

ACL now has two literacy classes involving 25 rural women. The women who live close by come to the library to read and/or borrow big letter books. Like JCL, ACL helps neo literate women by providing big-letter books which are not otherwise available for rural women.

Saving and Credit Groups

Due to the success of the women’s saving and credit groups at JCL, the ACL management committee decided to create their own saving and credit group in 2007. ACL now has 18 saving and credit groups with a total of 230 members. Out of this group 20% are from the *dalit* community. The program not only provides saving and credit facilities but encourages women from different castes to participate in social activities and the ACL’s knowledge sharing program. One group member tells why she felt it is an important program.

“The women’s saving and credit program is a most effective program for us. This program is playing a role as a bridge between community women and the library. This program opens the way for us to come to the library and utilize the different services available in the library” (*female library user, ACL 2007*).

The creation of the saving and credit group provides an opportunity for all local women to borrow and save money. The monthly saving/ borrowing amount is intentionally small (Nepalese Rupees NRS 20 – US\$0.32) so that women with little income can still participate in the groups.

“Savings and credit groups can act as an initial inducement for group formation and serves a useful purpose in bringing women together... It empowers women to the extent that household members and the women themselves feel that they are contributing to the maintenance of the household. This recognition by themselves, their immediate family members, and the local community seem to be the most valued aspects of these small savings/credit and income-generation programs” (*ADB, 1999:97*).

Income Generating Courses

Similar to JCL, ACL hosts various income-generating courses for the local people. In 2006 ACL hosted a candle making training program. The program involved 10 local women who learned how to create and decorate candles. The women are now producing candles and selling them at the local market. These income generating courses

combined with the saving and credit program has seen local women gain more confidence in dealing with financial matters. Access to loans has seen local women open their own small business including goat raising, buying seeds for farming, investing in cattle while other women have established their own small tea shop.

New Technologies and new look Women's participation

Both JCL and ACL have incorporated new technologies into their programs by providing public computer courses and internet access. In addition to these training courses their investment in new media has entailed learning about digital content creation and distribution opportunities. During a content creation workshop²⁵ held in Tansen Palpa District in December 2006 both the JCL and ACL groups learnt basic skills relating to digital story telling²⁶. Since December 2006 JCL and ACL have made a total of 17 digital stories. Groups from JCL and ACL have since discussed making more digital stories in the future focusing on the issues of children's welfare, gender and participation, social roles, property rights, domestic violence, women's health, and caste discrimination²⁷.

The digital story telling technology allows literate and illiterate people to be involved and record their voice. Using this format everyone can tell their story in an audio-visual format. Through promoting the creation and distribution of digital stories (alongside their other programs) the library has become a stage for community voices. The library's adoption of new media training, creation and distribution also marks the continuation of its role as facilitator of social programs for women. The ways in which the community library can facilitate women's participation through new media is illustrated below with Bamiya's story.

Bamiya's story - JCL²⁸

Thirty-two year old Bamiya is a regular reader at JCL. She used to be illiterate but that changed five years ago when the government ran a literacy program for adult people in the community. After taking part in the literacy course, Bamiya was still not able to read thick books but she could read thin books with big letters. She recently finished reading a book about a woman who used to eat betel nut during the day. Her small daughter also ate betel nut regularly. Both the mother and daughter became afflicted with mouth cancer. Bamiya herself also used to eat betel nut regularly. She said she was not aware of the harmfulness of betel nut until she read the book. When she had some money

²⁵ The workshop was run as part of the FaV research project and focused on building national and international networks to foster local content creation and distribution.

²⁶ Digital story telling consists of combining visual images with audio recordings. Creating a digital story often involves cameras, computers, scanners and photos. The audio and visual components are combined using specific software to make a 'mini movie'.

²⁷ JCL plans to expand the distribution mechanism of digital story telling in the community through the use of an LCD projector. READ Nepal and UNESCO have agreed to supply the projector.

²⁸ Parts of this ethnographic example have been published in Martin, K., Koirala, D., Pandey, R., Adhikari, S., Acharya, G and Kiran MS (2007) "Finding the Local Community in Community Media: Some Stories from Nepal", *Asia Rights*, Issue 8. <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/asiarightsjournal>.

she used to go to the shop and buy betel nut. After reading this book and learning about the harmfulness of these betel nuts she stopped eating them²⁹.

The books Bamiya reads are short but interesting and informative. She doesn't have much time to read, but she sometimes takes out a book to read while grazing the cattle. She shares her new knowledge with her friends and also motivates them to read.

Bamiya has access to big letter books from JCL. In fact JCL has more than 1,000 big letter and simple Nepali language books which cover a range of subjects including farming, diseases and child care. It also has books with information about how to write an application for citizenship to the district office as well as other practical knowledge about how to manage a saving and credit group and how to run a co-operative.

From listening to Bamiya's story one notices the difficult transition from being a illiterate to a literate person. The scarcity of big letter books outside of JCL and ACL together with the lack of follow up to the government-run literacy courses unfortunately means that most of the neo literate people soon forget the reading and writing skills they learned at the course.

JCL has a weekly video program for the community people. Every Saturday between 11am and 1 pm community men and women bring their children and gather in the library to watch the visual program. One week the JCL volunteers screened the digital story of Bamiya on the television using a DVD player. More than fifty people saw the digital story and they expressed their happiness that the story was based on a real village woman and told an important local story. Bamiya became something of a local folk hero and an inspiration to other illiterate women in the community.

JCL was later invited to give a presentation about the progress of its digital story telling programs at a conference in Kathmandu and Bamiya's story was screened during the conference. Following the conference, READ Nepal published the story about Bamiya in their monthly newsletter. One well-known newspaper reporter traveled to Chitwan from Kathmandu especially to visit Bamiya. Following the visit the story was published in the national newspaper, Kantipur National Daily. After the publication of the newspaper article the message was broadcast on Radio Lumbini (Rupandehi district).

Bamiya's story shows how her connection to JCL opens up opportunities for her to tell her story and share her new knowledge with other neo literate and literate people in her community. The community's support for Bamiya validates her desire for personal improvement. At the same time it sanctions the community library as a place where such change is permitted to occur. In this example JCL has become a socially acceptable public space for local women that seemingly escaped the social taboos circumscribing other community places.

Conclusion

Through their participation in JCL and ACL programs local women have gained access to training courses, literacy programs, information and communication

²⁹ The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) regards betel nut to be a known human carcinogen. In countries and communities where betel is consumed extensively, there are vastly higher levels of oral cancer [2], and in Asian countries where it is consumed, oral cancer forms up to 50% of malignant cancers (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betel_nut).

technologies and financial assistance. These opportunities are simply not available or not affordable elsewhere for these women. Such social engagement is new for women in Agyauli and Jhuwani communities.

Given the uniqueness of these community libraries and their programs one can ask what this study reveals about women in local communities. The libraries facilitate an unprecedented sense of social interaction and engagement amongst local women. Through their involvement in these programs women come to define them as 'their own' and even develop a sense of community ownership, as evidenced by the women's saving and credit groups.

What is fascinating about this example of women's engagement is that the community sanctions the library and its programs for women. This socially acceptable space has become a vehicle where social change not only takes place within the confines of the programs but is shared by the wider community audience when they watch the digital stories of women's experiences.

This notion of local women making choices that shape their lives and the lives of other women in the community depicts a very different set of social relations to one where women are not engaged in activities outside the home and cannot read or write.

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