MITERI GAUN: Let Us Live Together
The Life and Work of
Radha Paudel of Nepal

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A NOTE TO THE READER

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews, and a table of best practices in peacebuilding as demonstrated and reflected on by the peacemaker during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the table of best practices if you are interested in peacebuilding methods and techniques, or go to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemaker's own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemaker's work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights — as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women — those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation — must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.[1]

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER — Radha Paudel

Radha Paudel, the founder and president of Action Works Nepal (AWON), has been described as "one of those people who just makes things happen." She founded AWON on the principle of action over lip service, and assists primarily rural, poor and marginalized women to live dignified lives in a country still recovering from a 10-year civil war.

Paudel began her career as a nurse as the civil war between the Maoist insurgency and the government army broke out. Working in Karnali Zone, an isolated, mountainous and conflict-ridden area in the Mid-Western Region of Nepal, she witnessed women and girls arrive day after day at the hospital suffering from gender-based violence or preventable diseases. But getting them help was risky. She was targeted by both the Maoists and the government, as each side suspected her of assisting the other. At times, Paudel had to move from house to house to escape being abducted or killed.

The armed groups eventually started to trust her as she was courageous and defiant in her dedication to helping women, but also because she was one of the only medically trained people in the area. She began treating injured soldiers and rebels in their field hospitals, and eventually negotiating with the two sides to access communities in need became easier. Paudel later raised enough money to establish a blood bank and a hospital for maternal surgery — the first in the region.

Paudel's experiences during the 10 years of violence prompted her commitment to change the culture and overcome the barriers to resources that kept rural women poor and marginalized. With AWON, she has started several campaigns to promote human rights and give women a voice in local and national affairs. The *Miteri Gau*, or Let's Live Together Campaign, engages all levels of rural communities in a dialogue on the rights of women and the various roles of family and community members in a peaceful society. The SHARP Campaign — Sexual Harassment Response and Prevention — addresses harassment on public transportation and in educational institutions.

After the civil war ended and the constituent assembly was created to draft a new constitution, Paudel began working to incorporate a gender perspective in the process and brought the voices of rural and conflict-affected communities to the capital. She is also working closely with political leaders, security personnel and media to build accountability on women's rights, protection and participation according to U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Her simple motto to the complex dynamics of gendered democracy and post-conflict reconstruction is "no women, no peace."

CONFLICT HISTORY — Nepal

Located in South Asia on the south side of a 500-mile long stretch of the Himalayan Mountain Range is the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal.[2] Home to the tallest point on earth, Mount Everest (*Sagarmatha*), the landlocked country is bordered to the north by China and to the east, west and south by India.

To the south of the Himalayan range is the hill region of the country, which is home to the capital, Kathmandu. Housing the central government and leading educational and medical facilities, the Kathmandu Valley is considered the hub of the country's wealth and power.

To the south of the hill region and bordering India is the Terai plains region, home to approximately half of the country's population. Nepal and India have an open border that contributes to a multitude of security challenges, including the trafficking of weapons, drugs, and women and children by armed groups that conduct criminal activities in Nepal and find safe haven across the border. Historic isolation due to regional geographic differences has created distinct cultural identities within the country, which has also contributed to a lack of access to economic resources for some groups.

In the middle of the 18th century, Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered individual kingdoms and entities, marking the beginning of one central Nepalese government. However, the government did little to address the issues of isolation experienced in the rural areas, and the country's leaders further isolated the citizens by limiting influence from and relationships with other countries.

Before the introduction of multiparty elections in the late 20th century, a mixture of Rana elites and Shah kings ruled the country. The 1990 people's movement (*Jana Andolan I*) resulted in the creation of a constitutional monarchy and the drafting and implementation of a new constitution, although King Birendra remained in power. The Nepali people provided some input into the drafting of the constitution, although it was penned primarily by the cultural elite and brought little real change for the rural and marginalized populations, specifically members of the Dalit caste, the poor and women at all levels of society. Widespread poverty and inequality continued despite the reforms.

Following several years of political instability, a Maoist insurgency, known as the "People's War," began in 1996. The Maoist's People's Liberation Army (PLA) managed to unify some marginalized communities under a banner of equality and human rights; however, the reality of the strategies wielded by the group included coercion and brutality, and the years of the insurrection meant increased instability and fear for the people of Nepal.

The PLA established their headquarters in the rural hill region of Mid-Western and Western Nepal due to its geographic isolation. Throughout the 10-year conflict, the people who lived in these regions found themselves caught between the official government and the unofficial Maoist "parallel government," with both sides vying for control and resources at the expense of the region's marginalized residents.

In 2001, while the war was affecting mainly rural areas, the capital and the country as a whole were shocked by the news of a royal massacre in which King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya and other close relatives were killed in shooting spree by Crown Prince Dipendra, who would later kill himself. Following King Birendra's death, his brother Gyanendra was declared the new king. During the same year, peace talks were initiated between the government and the Maoists. The failure of the peace talks later that year led to an increase in fighting, and several attacks were carried out by the PLA on Nepal Army and police posts.

A significant turning point in the conflict occurred in February 2005 when King Gyanendra, citing a need to defeat the Maoist rebels once and for all, assumed direct control over the government and dismissed the elected parliament. King Gyanendra's repressive actions turned a three-sided conflict (the king, the opposition political parties, and the Maoists) into a two-sided conflict, with the Maoists and the parties finding common ground in their opposition to the king.

The second "People's Movement" (*Jana Andolan II*) in April 2006, saw hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets to call for an end to the conflict and the repressive rule of King Gyanendra. This pressure eventually led to the resumption of peace talks and the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) between the Maoists and the government on November 21, 2006. The Maoists joined the interim government in 2007, but quit after a few months to demand that the monarchy be eliminated. In 2008 the parliament approved a law to abolish the monarchy in Nepal, and Nepal was declared a federal democratic republic. Although exact figures vary, the 10-year conflict claimed at least 13,000 lives and left more than 200,000 people displaced.

Although Nepal's conflict has ended, the political instability that has plagued the country since the 1990s continues. Since 2008, Nepal has had seven different prime ministers over the course of six years. This instability has adversely impacted the country's economy and made it difficult to undertake the large-scale infrastructure development projects that are needed for long-term economic development. Many Nepalis are also frustrated by what they view as the government's inability to provide basic amenities such as clean water, electricity and quality education. Millions of Nepali citizens have migrated abroad, primarily to the Middle East and Malaysia, in order to search for employment opportunities to support their families.

The political instability has also prohibited the writing of a new and permanent constitution, which was one of the stipulations of the CPA. The country's first Constituent Assembly (CA), which was elected in 2008, was dissolved in 2012 after failing to come to an agreement on a new constitution. New elections were held in 2013, and, similar to the elections of 2008, they were considered to have been "well-conducted" by international election observers.[3] A new CA was seated in 2014, and their primary mandate remains the drafting of a permanent constitution for the country.

A host of social problems still exists in the country. Women and indigenous people made up a significant proportion of Maoist fighters — it is estimated that one out of every three Maoist rebels was a woman, and that approximately 70 percent of women Maoist fighters were from indigenous ethnic communities — although their situations remain challenging following the conflict.[4]

Patriarchy is deeply rooted and continues to jeopardize the position of women in society, with women remaining in inferior positions at home and in the workplace. Women are also victimized by several norms and traditions. *Chhauppadi* — a tradition in the western part of Nepal for Hindu women that prohibits a woman from participating in normal family activities during menstruation — subjects women and girls to isolation, dangerous living conditions and sometimes death. Caste, class and gender discrimination are all still practiced, making marginalized citizens vulnerable to frequent abuse.

Sexual harassment also remains a challenge for women in some parts of Nepal. Women accosted on public transportation and in schools are not in the minority, although they appear to have little space or platform by which to raise their voices. "Nepali women say they face constant sexual harassment on public buses, their main means of transportation to get to work and school. Double victimization deters them from reporting incidents, as society often blames the victims of sexual abuse here and evidence and witnesses are difficult to secure. Laws are in place to protect women from abuse, but reports and enforcement of penalties are rare." [5]

The Far-Western and Mid-Western regions of Nepal were heavily impacted by the conflict and remain the least developed parts of the country. Located in the Mid-Western Region, the Karnali Zone — where Radha works — is considered by the World Food Programme to be the poorest region in Nepal. Comprised of five districts — Jumla, Humla, Mugu, Kalikot and Dolpa — the Karnali Zone is located in extremely hilly and mountainous terrain, with 45 percent of the zone located above 4,500 meters and covered in snow most of the year.

The region is large and extremely isolated, with an average population density of 14.5 people per square kilometer, compared to 157.3 people per square kilometer in the country as a whole. Roads are nearly non-existent, and many villages and communities in the zone are only reachable by walking for several days. The isolation and poor infrastructure means that many of the zone's 400,000 residents lack access to basic amenities such as food, education, electricity and healthcare.

Over 42 percent of Karnali residents live below the poverty line and all five districts within the zone rank among the lowest on the Human Development Index.[6] One third of the population in the zone lives in "severe food insecurity," and this chronic malnutrition means that nearly two-thirds of children in Karnali under the age of five have stunted growth and low height for their age.[7] Food prices in the region can run as much as three times higher than costs in Kathmandu due to the high cost of transporting goods into the area.

INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in Nepal and
Personal History of Radha Paudel

1768 Prithvi Narayan Shah conquers and unites various kingdoms in the territory.

1814-16 Anglo-Nepalese War results in a treaty establishing Nepal's current boundaries.

1846 The Rana dynasty isolates Nepal from the outside world.

1923 The Nepal-Britain Treaty is signed, recognizing Nepal as an independent country.

1951 The rule of the Ranas ends and the sovereign monarchy is restored.

1959 A multiparty constitution is adopted.

1960 The Nepali Congress Party (NCP) wins elections and B.P. Koirala becomes prime minister. King Mahendra suspends Parliament, the constitution and party politics.

1972 King Mahendra dies and is succeeded by Birendra.

1973 ***Radha is born in the Chitwan region of Nepal.***

1980 The king allows for direct elections to the national assembly, but without political parties.

1985 The NCP seeks to restore the multiparty system, and launches a civil disobedience campaign.

1986 The NCP boycotts elections.

1990 *Jana Andolan I*, a people's movement for democracy, organized by the NCP and leftist groups, are violently suppressed by security forces, leading to mass arrests and some deaths. King Birendra agrees to a new constitution.

Radha begins training as a nurse in Pokhara.

1991 G.P. Koirala becomes prime minister when the NCP wins democratic elections.

1994 Koirala's government is defeated when a vote of no-confidence takes place. A communist government takes over.

Radha graduates from nurses training school. She begins working as an anesthetic nurse in Bharatpur Hospital in Chitwan.

1996 The Maoist People's Liberation Army (PLA) is formed and begins a revolutionary struggle against the government.

1997 A period of increased political instability begins, with frequent changes of prime minister for several years.

2000 ***Radha graduates with a bachelor's degree in community nursing.***

2001 Crown Prince Dipendra kills nine members of his family, including King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya, in a shooting spree at the royal palace. He then kills himself. Prince Gyanendra is named king.

Radha graduates with a master's degree in health education and enrolls in a master's program of sociology.

Radha takes a job in Jumla as a women's resource development officer.

Radha encounters and is threatened by Maoist guerillas repeatedly while working in Karnali District.

November — Maoists declare that peace talks have failed, and begin stepping up attacks on army and police posts, leading to a state of emergency in the country. King Gyanendra tells the military to destroy the rebels. Hundreds of people are killed in rebel and government operations in the following months.

2002 ***November 14 — In Jumla, Radha survives being in the crossfire of a 13-hour battle between Maoists and the government.***

2003 January — A ceasefire is declared.

May — Radha establishes a blood bank and initiates and leads a team that performs C-sections in Jumla.

August — Maoists pull out of peace talks and back out of ceasefire.

Radha graduates with a master's degree in sociology.

2004 ***June to November — Radha, independently, lobbies the government in Kathmandu for the rights of Karnali citizens.***

February — King Gyanendra dismisses the government and declares a state of emergency.

April — Facing international pressure, the king ends the state of emergency.

Radha becomes program manager for Nepal's chapter of the Center for Development and Population Activities.

2006 April — Jana Andolan II, the second people's movement, forces King Gyanendra to reinstate Parliament. Maoists call a three-month ceasefire.

May — Parliament votes to restrict the king's powers. The government and Maoists start peace talks.

November — The Comprehensive Peace Agreement is signed between the government and Maoists, ending the decade-long civil war.

2007 ***Radha becomes program manager for CARE-Nepal.***

Maoists join the interim government. Parliament abolishes the monarchy.

2008 January — Unrest in the southern Terai plains, where activists demand regional autonomy, leads to several dead and dozens injured in a series of bomb blasts.

April — Constituent Assembly (CA) elections are held. Former Maoist rebels fail to win an outright majority, but do obtain the largest bloc of seats in the CA.

August — Prachanda, the Maoist leader, also known as Pushpa Kamal Dahal, forms a coalition government.

2009 ***Radha's mother dies. Radha performs the funeral rites, rather than her brother, as would be tradition.***

Prachanda resigns and Maoists leave the government over disputes on the integration of former fighters into the national army.

2010 ***Radha graduates with a master's degree of development management from a university in the Philippines.***

Radha establishes Action Works Nepal (AWON).

2011 The CA is unable to draft a new constitution within the deadline.

August — Through AWON, Radha launches the SHARP campaign (Sexual Harassment Response and Prevention) and assists 28 female and four male college students to bring a case of sexual harassment to court. It is the first time in Nepal's history that such a case has been brought to court, and Radha is threatened and harassed because of her involvement.

2012 ***August — Radha is recognized as a "Role Model for Peace" by the N-Peace Network.***

September — Radha travels to the United States to participate in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice.

NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF RADHA PAUDEL

Prologue

A son is very important for any Brahman or Chhetri, not only economically and socially, but also from the point of view of his parents' next lives after death. … a son is not only important as insurance for the parents in their old age, but he is also necessary for conducting their funeral rites and important for taking the deceased across the land of preta *(the spirit of the dead), to* swarga *or to* narka *(hell), as the case may be. Without funeral rites the decedent is condemned to hover around in mid-air in the form of an evil spirit which causes trouble for the surviving folk.*

A son, therefore, is highly gratifying merely because he is a son.

~ Dor Bahadur Bista, "People of Nepal"

April 2009

"Your mother is very sick, Radha," her father said as he opened the door to their home in Chitwan, greeting her with a hug before stepping aside to make room for her to rush through the door to the bed where her mother lay, skin ashen, breaths labored, droplets of sweat on her face. Radha moved the oxygen tube away from her mother's cheek and kissed her before administering the injection. The hot, humid air of Radha's hometown both comforted and suffocated her after the cooler climate of Kathmandu. *So many memories — my mother, so strong and clever.*

Radha swallowed her tears and gave her mother the injection, intended to bring the fever under control, but it wasn't long before she realized it would do no good. Radha — a surgical nurse who had provided anesthesia for thousands of operations, a community nurse who had taught women pride in their bodies' rhythms, a community activist who had challenged a culture that turned the other way while women were accosted on public transportation — stood helpless.

"I remember everything, Mother," Radha whispered as her mother lay still except for the rising and falling of her chest. "I remember your stories. We will not cover your face. We will not bind your body with bamboo bark."

The priest was already there, chanting the mantras. Radha called to her brother and the two began *Baitarnee*, the ritual that prepares the dying to cross to the other side. They dug a canal outside their mother's bedroom window and filled it with water. They brought a calf and tied one end of a thread to its tail, the other to their mother's finger. They coaxed the calf across the handmade river to bring their mother's spirit to the other side. The river crossed, Radha's mother was prepared to die, though that would not happen until the next day.

But Radha wondered, *when my dear mother dies, will I be allowed to take part in her funeral rites? Will I be excluded because I am a woman?* The love Radha felt for her mother was both a comfort and a weight on her chest. And though Radha's mother could not speak, her death instructions were fresh in Radha's mind. Had her mother not told her over and over — when the two collected firewood in the forest, watched funeral processions pass them on the way to the river, harvested rice in the field?

"Radha, do not let them tie my body. I do not want to be bound. Do not let them cover my face. Those who want to come and see me at the end, why should they not see me? If you cover me, how will they see me?"

From My Father, Vision

Five-year-old barefoot Radha walked into the hut after bringing water to the cattle — just in time to overhear her uncle's comments and watch her mother's face grow red as she handed him a bowl of sticky rice with *ghee*, the clarified butter that purified food so it can be shared between castes.

"Five children and they are all girls, Ganga. You had better have a boy this time — or you will go to hell." The man sat on the hard-packed dirt floor with his feet flat in front of him, knees bent, and ate the rice in two bites. Radha waited for her mother to challenge the man. But she stood in front of him and said nothing.

Radha felt her own face fill with color. Why would her mother have to go to hell? Why would the uncle say such a thing, especially to the woman who had just given him the family's last bit of good food? Radha's hollow stomach contracted at the sight, and she could feel the toothy resistance of the aromatic rice as it fed both her taste buds and the emptiness of her belly.

The two did not seem to notice Radha's tiny presence standing in the doorway facing the dark corner that served as a kitchen. Her oversized shirt that hung mid-thigh was dotted with water splashed from the pail she used to carry water to the cattle.

"When you die, you will not have a boy to perform the funeral activities and you will go to hell." Radha's mother turned away from the man even as he spoke, leaning back slightly from the weight of her growing belly and breathing in with the loud, labor-filled hiss that Radha would later recognize as asthma.

Radha turned and walked back outside, propelled by questions. *Why is it only a boy who can save our mother? Who decides that she will go to hell? What will she do if the baby growing in her belly is another girl?* She wanted to run to her family's farm that bordered the forest, where she could disappear between the stalks of maize to think and sleep beneath their tall protection, but the boiling sun was hovering midway in the sky, her sisters were returning from school and she had still to bring straw to the cattle.

Before moving toward the shed that protected the livestock from the forest's jackals and thieves, Radha looked up to see her father riding his bicycle up the dirt path**.** Flanked by the *dabdabe* bottle-brush shrubs that served as fodder for cattle, the path was their connection to the town's center, a 45-minute bike ride away — two hours when her father stopped to deliver milk. The milk pails that had been full with cows' milk when he left this morning now dangled from the front handles and spanned the cycle's back tire — empty. The largest pail rested behind the seat and was now filled with rice he had purchased with money from selling the precious milk at market. It was not a full bag of rice but it would be enough for a few meals.

Young as she was, Radha did not yet have words for the rush of love and admiration she felt for the tall, lanky man who was her father. He rode toward her with his stylish *Dhaka topi* — the traditional Nepali hat — proudly perched atop his thick black hair. The man who had been orphaned at 4 years old and could not read, but listened in silence to the BBC and All India on the family's radio. The man who talked to her of education and honesty and compassion.

Small Radha shivered with anticipation, thinking already of the day's end when she would sleep beside her father on the family's only bed. One of her favorite times of day, she would often lay tucked in beside him as he told her stories or sang addition tables to her. "Two and two make four. Two and four make six." She would feel the safety of his warm body next to hers and repeat the sing-song words as her eyes fluttered closed. "Two and two make four. Two and four …". Today she looked forward to the closeness of her father even more — the thought of her mother going to hell was a weight pressing down on her.

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That night, after Radha and her siblings had argued over who would get to eat the last bits of lentil *dhal* their father had left on his plate for them, and her sisters had cleaned the dishes, she could hear her mother who was already laying on the floor atop her *thagna* — lengths of cloth that at times served as a mattress — coughing. Her father picked Radha up as if she weighed nothing — and indeed, she weighed very little — and tossed her up to the place where the family slept. She felt her stomach drop a bit as her body lofted over the edge to land softly on the mud floor. Then she crawled up onto the low wooden bed, and since the day's heat lingered, she settled herself on top of the single blanket to wait for her father.

In minutes he had climbed the precarious ladder that was a single length of board, with small "steps" nailed in uneven increments, to the hut's second floor, where he lay down beside Radha. "Radha, have I told you the story of my travels to far western Nepal?"

"No, Father. Tell me. I want to hear. Is it very far?" Radha had heard the story many times before but it was one of her favorites, and she liked pretending it was new.

"Yes, very far. Well, Radha, it was a long, long time ago — before I met your mother."

"Aha?" Radha said, inhaling the word in amazement that her father had had a life that did not include her mother.

"Yes. I was a young man — maybe I was 15 years old when I traveled with a man who worked for the government."

"The what?"

"The government. It is a group of powerful men who make rules for all the people of our country. We traveled for months at a time and I was his cook."

"You?" Despite the story's familiarity, she could hardly believe it. "You were the cook?"

"Yes, Radha. I was the cook. We would go to a place where the people were in some kind of dispute and we would stay there for six months — sometimes a year — until things settled down. And then we would move to another place."

"Aha? You saw many things?"

"Yes, many things. And if you are quiet and listen I will tell you about a place called Jumla where the people are very, very poor. We are poor, yes. But we are not so poor as they."

By now Radha was wide awake. She knew what it was like to go to bed hungry. She knew what it was like to work hard while other children played. She knew what it was like to not have shoes to wear. She wondered what this Jumla was like where the people had less than she did.

"As I said, I was a young man when we set out for Jumla. There were no roads for us to get to that place so we walked for 15 days until we reached the village high in the mountains. And, Radha, it was so cold. Even the water of the river was frozen. To drink, you took ice from the river — it is called the Tila River — and made a fire to melt it. Can you imagine?"

Radha thought about how she could fetch water from the hand pump her father had put on their property, and what it would be like to fetch ice from the river and have to melt it. "It must have been very hard."

"Very hard, indeed. Especially for the women and children. The women — Radha, the women had very dark skin, dark as wood. But it was not their skin indeed that made the color."

"No? What was it, Father?"

"It was dirt. Their skin was covered with a very thick layer of dirt. And their clothes too — though they did not have many clothes — but those they had were soooo dirty. Each day I would fetch water at the river, and I would talk to the women. That is how we came to know each other — as we performed our duties of getting water. One day, I gave one of the women a small chunk of soap and showed her how to use it. She tried to wash her hands but the dirt was so deep in her skin, it could not be washed off."

"Can it really be?" Radha could not imagine.

"Yes, Radha. That is the way it was in Jumla. But listen — this is why I am telling you this story. You must study very, very hard so you can earn money, and when you are grown, you and your sisters must go to that place. You must go to Jumla and serve the people. You are so lucky, and it is your duty to serve the people in that place. It is my dream for you. Now, go to sleep, dear Radha."

Radha tried but she did not sleep for a long time that night, thinking about the cold people in the far western mountains, while she was warm in her father's bed. She thought about her own hunger and the hunger of those people. And in her young heart she placed love for the people she had not yet met next to the burden she carried for her mother.

From My Mother, Strength

Radha awoke, unsure of where she was. Though the dark room was silent, she thought it had been a cry for help that had wakened her. The sounds came again. A baby's wail. A cough. Her mother's voice. "Shhhh, Kishor." Then Radha heard the wet muffled sounds of her brother finding comfort at their mother's breast.

Ganga had given birth to a boy, so the threat of being cast into hell had disappeared — but Radha still wondered why it would matter whether her mother had given birth to a boy or a girl. It made no sense to her 6-year-old mind. Boy or girl? Girl or boy? No matter how much she thought about it, she couldn't see how it would make a difference. For Radha, the only difference since his birth was that her younger sister Samjana now slept with Father in the bed, and Radha and baby Kishor slept on the floor with Mother.

The baby was quieted but Ganga's coughing began again, her legs spasming with each cough, displacing Radha sleeping at her mother's feet. It seemed to go on forever, her mother's whole body shaking as she choked and gasped her way through the violent bout. Radha held her own breath, hoping her mother would soon find relief and wishing she could do something to help. *Why does Father not take Mother to the hospital? She is so sick, and every night it is the same.* Radha did not yet know that a trip to the hospital would have cost money.

How long she lay there before the coughing stopped, Radha could not be sure. But eventually sleep found her again and it seemed only a moment had passed when she felt her mother tapping her shoulder. "Get up, Radha. It is time to get up." Radha sat still for a moment. Her eyes felt scratchy and she could see the outline of her sisters beginning to move in the darkness toward the ladder. One by one the girls descended, silent in the grogginess of first waking.

Last one down the ladder, Radha watched her mother, who bent over, secured Kishor to her back with a thin thagna, and lit a fire under the clay pot to heat before measuring enough corn to roast for the family's breakfast. Radha retrieved her reader from the corner where she had tossed her books after school the day before, and again stopped to watch her mother. The dried corn kernels sounded like small rocks as they hit the bottom of the pot, and her mother placed four thin sticks into the vessel, stirring the corn with them so it wouldn't burn. The kernels made a popping noise as they expanded from the heat, and before long the smell of roasting corn filled the small room as saliva filled Radha's mouth.

"Radha, come," said Binu, the eldest sister, as she placed a homemade lantern on the floor. The lantern was a kerosene-filled ink bottle with a rag torn from the hem of Mother's old sari to act as a wick, and Binu found a level spot on the hard-packed mud floor so it would not tip. She struck a match, lit the lamp and motioned for Radha to come join the three sisters. Each girl took a small bit of wood to protect them from the damp ground, and sat in a circle. Sharing light from the small lamp, they all began to read—aloud. The stillness of predawn was replaced with a storm of small female voices reading words of economics, literature and history.

Aja hami dherai sana chhau, voli thula hunechhau. "Today we are small, but we will be big by tomorrow." Radha read as fast as she could from the first grade Nepali reader, stumbling over some

of the words, but making sure her voice was loud enough to prove to her parents that she was working hard.

"According to the Malthus, the production of meat, milk and fruit has improved the economics of Nepal," read Binu. From the youngest student to the oldest, the sound of four sisters reading from their own books expanded the walls of the small hut.

To Radha, the sound was freedom. The only rule was that each girl must read with a strong voice — it didn't matter that the individual words merged in the midst of their competing voices. If the noise ebbed, their father's voice would rain down on them from above as he was lying in his bed, waiting for the day to begin. "Have you fallen asleep down there? I want to hear reading."

The four would renew their efforts, and Radha imagined her father smiling at the noisy energy they put toward their education in the dark hours before morning.

As the sun's light began to creep in the window, bathing the earthen room in soft yellows and pinks, the four sisters stopped reading. They put down their books and lined up to receive a handful of corn from their mother, which they put in their pockets, and filed outside for chores. Today was Radha's turn to clean the livestock shed. She wished it were her day to fetch water or straw for the cattle, lighthearted and easy work compared to cleaning the shed.

Still, it was her turn and everyone must take a turn. So, one stall at a time, Radha let the animals out — first goats, then buffalo, ox and cattle — and then she walked inside to the far side of each partition, bent in half and, with her hands as tools, began to scoop the manure toward her feet. As she backed herself to the door, she rolled the pile of manure and bits of straw back onto itself, bit by bit toward the door, then into the nearby ditch her father had dug for compost. Today the manure was not so solid as she would have liked, and it coated her hands. She knew she would smell remnants of the job as she sat in school that day, no matter how well she washed.

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"Did you study hard at school today, Radha?" Radha's mother bent to gather seed-filled pods that had fallen from the tall sal trees in the national forest. It was mid-May, shortly after noon, and already the temperature felt as if it had climbed to more than 40 degrees Celsius. The two worked to fill their empty rice bags with seed pods they would burn in preparation to sell at market. Radha did not know for sure what the seeds were used for — maybe to make soap, she thought — but what she did know was that they would help earn money to buy her mother's medicine.

"Aya. Yes, I studied very hard." Radha hoped her hard work at school and at home would help improve her mother's mood — Mother had been well enough to cook meals for the family lately instead of lying in bed, but she had done so in silence. It was a dark silence that made Radha unhappy.

"I hope you did. You are lucky, Radha. You are so lucky. When I was a girl I was not allowed to go to school. Indeed, I was not allowed to even look at the boys gathered under the tree for learning."

"Under a tree"? Radha stopped picking up the pods and looked at her mother, wondering why they would have school under a tree instead of in a building.

It did not seem that her mother had even looked at her to know she had stopped working. "Keep gathering, Radha."

"Yes, Mom. You couldn't even look at the boys?

"Well, we weren't supposed to see them when they were in school, but I did. I hid." Radha's mother's breath became quicker and she picked up pods faster as she spoke. "I hid behind a tree and listened to what they were being taught. I could not always hear but I learned some things. And they never knew I was there." Radha's mother threw another handful of pods into her bag, stood up straight and rubbed the small of her back with her hands. "I think we have enough."

Radha helped her mother spread the pods into a single layer on the ground, and watched her strike a match, hold it to the pods, then light a cigarette and fall into silence as she inhaled the smoke. It was a silence that told Radha not to ask any more questions. Radha watched the pods burn until only the seeds were left, her mother poking them with a stick to be sure the fingers of the pods burned but that the seeds remained uncharred. The merchants at market would only pay a few rupees for the seeds that were left after burning, but if the seeds themselves were burned they would pay even less.

As Radha watched her mother push the seeds here and there with a stick, skillfully burning this and not that, she thought about how her mother hid as a small child behind a tree, straining to pick up bits of school not meant for girls.

One Day a Child, the Next a Woman

As she walked in the blue and purple twilight toward the neighbor's livestock shed, 7-year-old Radha held the now-cold bowl of *makai ko bhat*, corn and rice, in front of her. She could hear the cattle moan as they bumped against the fenced walls of the thatch-roofed shed.

Just above the cattle was the room where her sister Bindu was forced to sleep. Remnant scents of the neighbors' rich meal of dhal, curry, rice and selroti hung in the air, seeming to taunt the bare bowl of food she carried — hours after mealtime, and food only the very poorest would eat — to her sister who was banished from the family's home because she was guilty of becoming a woman.

Radha knew it was the practice of her people that when a woman began to bleed, her life would change. During the time she had her period, for the rest of her life until she was beyond menstruating age, she would not be allowed to see the roof of her home. She would not be allowed to see any men. She would not be allowed to touch living plants. She would not be allowed to eat meat or milk or vegetables. She would not be allowed to enter the kitchen. She would not be allowed to use the tap to get water. She would not be allowed to touch small children. It was as if people thought she would contaminate anything she came in contact with. *How could that be so? One day a girl would be laughing and working with her family and the next she had to be kept away from everyone she loved and everything that was familiar.* It made no sense to Radha.

But, whether it made sense or not, Radha's sisters did what they were told. And Bindu would have to be separate during the time she bled, and because it was her first time, several days after as well. For Radha's family that meant borrowing space from the only neighbor who belonged to the same caste, though they were rich and Radha's family was poor — and that translated into a kind of servitude.

Now it was Bindu's turn in the neighbor's shed, and Radha could hardly bear the impact of her exile. Bindu, who — for reasons Radha suspected had to do with being the second girl of what had been at that time a boy-less family — had been sent to live at her uncle's home and had only just returned. Bindu, who held herself apart from her siblings even after her return. Bindu, whom Radha loved but for whom separateness was a weight she did not quite understand. Of all her sisters it seemed the most unjust that Bindu would have to endure more isolation.

As Radha walked toward Bindu's prison, she let her mind wander to earlier that year. It was August when she had accompanied her mother and her mother's friends to the river for *Teej* — the annual Hindu ritual for menstruating women. Radha walked with the women for two hours to the Narani River. Women dressed in bright red saris that matched the tikas they wore stamped on their foreheads, and danced and sang before fasting and performing the ritual cleansing rites that were attached to women.

Radha, too young to take part, guarded the women's clothes on the east side of the river as they fasted and waded into the river to wash their private parts 365 times, and brush their teeth with 365 green sticks from the *datiwan* bush. From the banks of the river, Radha could hear the stories the women elevated in song — how women could be saved through finding a good husband, how

women could be saved through having many sons, how women could demonstrate purity through their devotion to men. Radha could not help but recognize the thread that held a woman's goodness together was men.

And it was nonsense to her.

As Radha approached the neighbors' shed she could hear Bindu's muffled sobs.

"Bindu, I am here. I have brought food," Radha said. She climbed the ladder to the room above the cattle, balancing the bowl in one hand while holding the ladder with the other. When she saw Bindu sitting in the corner of the room with her head in her hands, Radha ran to put down the bowl of corn-rice porridge, and put her arms around her sister.

"Shhhh, dear. Are you hurt?"

"I'm hungry, Radha. And I can smell the good food our neighbor makes for her own family while I have to wait to eat this … this … ." She gestured to the bowl Radha brought her. "She makes me dig in her garden and pick silk from the corn. I'm tired. I'm lonely." The words spilled out of Bindu's mouth in between sobs. "And I'm scared."

Radha listened and rubbed her sister's back until the sobs turned to sniffles and she could eat. Between bites of food she continued to spill out her suffering.

"Last night there was a snake right next to me when I woke up. I sat so still, waiting for it to slither away. I thought it would bite me and I would die."

"Bindu, I am so sorry." Radha didn't know what else to say. She knew it must be terrible for Bindu. And she knew things would not be much better when her sister could finally rejoin the family. Radha had watched it happen with Binu. Their father acted differently toward her after her time away. He wouldn't hug her like before and avoided her. And the boys at school knew why she was missing for so long and teased her about how they could now marry her. And the worst of it was that Binu herself changed. She seemed ashamed.

"I am sorry, my dear." Radha repeated, as she gave her sister one more hug, picked up the empty bowl and left her sister sitting in the dark room, alone.

As Radha descended the ladder and began the short walk home, she could hear Bindu begin to cry again, and Radha's chest ached with a pressure that felt as if it would crush her. *It is so unjust.* She thought about the rituals she had watched her mother perform at the river a few months before. She thought about her sisters' isolation and fear at being forced to sleep in a shed above the neighbors' livestock. As she walked, step by heavy step toward home, she made a decision: When I begin to bleed, I am not going to do this thing.

And more than that, though she was only seven, she determined to break the practice. Somehow, she knew she would change it.

Apart, to Learn

Radha, 15 years old, looked out the window of the bus as she sat next to Binu's husband Umakanta, who had been assigned to be her escort. She watched the rising sun reflect purple on the Seti River flowing south as the bus moved north, the river that connected her childhood home of Chitwan to the nursing school in Pokhara. She stared at the river, with its bank of sharp-edged rocks, desperate for it to anchor her as it flowed past.

Before she left, Usha had taken her hands and drew her just outside the hut, whispering out of earshot of their parents. "Be careful, Radha, in Pokhara. It is a dangerous, violent place for women.

"Don't go outside. Don't walk late in the evening or early morning. It is not safe."

Radha held her sister's hands and smiled. "I am fine."

Usha squeezed her hands tighter. "Listen to me, Radha. Recently two girls were raped in Pokhara and thrown in the Seti River. Please. Be careful."

Now, as she thought about how much she would miss her family, and how unfamiliar the new city would be to her, tears escaped before she could call them back. *I am 15 and I am a girl. Father has let me go to school.*

Father has let me go.

For the last few years, when he was angry her father would threaten to marry her off, as most other fathers did with their daughters — as young as 12 sometimes. She knew he wanted her to go to school, but still she had worried he would follow through with his threats.

Perhaps for the first time Radha realized the depth of her father's commitment to educating her and the sacrifice he was making. Still, she could not help but worry about what her absence would mean for her family. Binu was already married, as was Bindu. Father was still paying the sizeable loan he had taken out to pay for Bindu's marriage. Now Radha was leaving for school, as was her sister Usha. *Only the youngest two are left, and they do not yet know how to work.* She thought about how she sometimes used to harvest rice by moonlight alongside her older sisters. Now they would not be there, and every day her mother grew more sick and frail. *How will my parents manage now that we're gone?*

She swallowed hard, reigning in a fresh round of tears, as she forced the questions to quiet themselves. But as soon as they began to fade, they were replaced with new ones. *Will the other students like me? Will they dress like me? Will they discount me because I am so tiny? Will they tease me because my English is not good? Will I pass my classes?* For all of Radha's school years she knew what it was like to be oppressed. She was not of the higher caste, like Upadhaya. She walked two hours to school while her classmates rode their bikes. No shoes, wearing the same clothes every day, she had to return home to work at the farm while her classmates played soccer or met friends for play. She felt her

classmates' disapproval in the way they ignored her, and fought the discrimination by earning good marks. *Will it be the same at this new school?*

Radha had wanted to study forestry, not nursing. Since she was a small child, she had watched, awestruck, the family of the forester who lived in the village. Their house was big; the children did not have to work; the family had a motor bike. From what Radha could tell, they lived a luxurious life. And though she had little idea of what foresters actually did, Radha wanted to own a motor bike, to speed through the mountains and forests with freedom on her way to work. She wanted to earn enough so she could send her mother to the hospital when she was sick, and buy food for her family so they would not have to work so hard. But when her father returned from Pokhara, where he had traveled to enroll her, he told her that plans had changed.

The men who worked in forestry told him that forestry was not work a woman could do: Radha would not be strong enough to climb the mountains. Radha would not be secure in the forest. Radha could not do it.

Couldn't she? She did not know, and now she would never find out. Without any consultation, her father enrolled her in nursing school.

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It was Friday afternoon, nearing the end of the fourth session of integrated science, and Radha was sitting on her bed in the hostel, studying for the next week's assessment, when her knowledge of biology, pharmacology and microbiology would be tested. Her classmates were changing from their plain-red school saris to *kurta salwars* — the more fashionable loose collarless shirts with pajama-like pants. Friends and relatives of her classmates who lived in Pokhara waited for them to visit over weekend. Radha wondered what it would be like to have so many clothes, and nearby relatives to welcome her.

"What will you do this weekend, Radha?" A friend stopped for a moment in the doorway, the silver threads of her deep blue kurta reflecting light.

"Study, my dear. I have so much to learn before exams."

Radha felt like all she did was study. The teachers taught in English, instead of in Nepali as she had been used to. For every class lecture she wrote notes first in English, then translated them into Nepali to make sure she understood the content. She had never worked so hard at school. So what if she did not have time to go visiting? She didn't have any relatives in Pokhara or the money to go out, so even if she did not need to study, where would she go?

But it bothered her that it seemed so easy for her classmates to connect with each other—most had attended English-speaking schools, some even went to school in Hong Kong. Indeed, many of them had already worked as midwives and they were being paid a salary to attend nurses training. Not only was Radha the youngest and smallest in her class, it seemed to her that her poverty was a kind of repellant to her richer classmates. They did not seek to talk to her, and she was hesitant to talk to them.

It is fine. I am here to study. She consoled herself with her commitment to earning good marks. But as her friends left for the weekend and the hostel halls grew quiet, she couldn't help but feel the ache of loneliness and isolation.

During the week, however, there wasn't time to feel lonely. On days when there weren't classes, she was assigned a shift at the hospital. The hospital was almost always full, and though she liked helping people, the poverty and illness broke Radha's heart — and reminded her of home. A woman came in with chronic asthma, and Radha imagined her mother. She was assigned to a patient with tuberculosis, and thought of her father. When a girl was brought in with tetanus, delirious and fevered, she remembered how her father brought her to the hospital with the cut on her leg only last year — and how she had no memory of the four days in the hospital as her body fought the infection.

Radha dressed in the white sari that was her uniform and walked across the campus to the hospital, arriving early. The third-year students who had been on night duty were finishing their last rounds, and Radha checked the clipboard to see what her assignment for the day would be. She was happy that the teachers always paired her with Smita. Also petite, Smita had smooth skin and was so beautiful. Everyone liked her. And though she was rich, she didn't flaunt it. But what Radha liked most about her was her compassion for the patients.

Today the two were assigned to the six-bed surgical ward, as they had been the day before. As she waited, Radha looked around the room, recognizing some of the patients. There was the woman with the head injury, who had been unconscious for almost two months; the girl with the ruptured appendicitis; the man with the obstructed bowel. Bed two, which had been empty yesterday, was now occupied by a child, the head bandaged and eyes swollen shut and purple. She could not tell if it was a boy or a girl. *That one must have come in during the night.*

Smita walked into the ward just as it turned 8 o'clock.

"Namaste, Smita. Good morning." Radha grabbed her friend by the arm and led the way to where the night nurses were standing, waiting to give report.

"We have one new admission since yesterday," the third-year student said. "An 11-year-old boy was just brought in from Banglung who fell from the mountains while grazing his cattle and collecting firewood. One of the Chinese road engineers found him unconscious and contacted his family.

"His right leg is broken. We casted it a few hours ago. He's still unconscious so you'll need to do vitals and the Glasgow Coma Scale every hour to assess neurological status. He has a catheter so you'll need to monitor his intake and output …"

She went on to talk about the rest of the patients but Radha only heard part of what she said. As soon as the report was finished she walked over to the boy and laid her hand on his arm. His skin was hot. She took his temperature and his blood pressure while Smita counted his pulse and respirations. Radha then grabbed a basin and filled it with warm water, collected some soap, gauze and a towel and began to wash the dried blood that had escaped from his ear. Gently she washed his

face, dabbing the area around his swollen eye lids. The two girls looked at each other for a moment, over the young boy's still body. Radha knew he would not live. *The worst cases always come from the rural, mountainous areas.*

Radha and Smita worked their way around the ward, changing dressings, bathing patients and taking vitals. Radha thought about how much her world had changed. In Chitwan, she had been surrounded by her family, working on the farm, gathering firewood, studying. Now, far away from her family, she still studied — harder than ever — and then practiced what she learned in the hospital.

At the end of the first year, Radha had earned the highest marks in her class.

Such a Small Thing, Pride

At some point, though Radha did not remember when, she began to love nursing school. And because of her good marks, her classmates began to seek her out for companionship. She still studied during her free time, but she did not feel so lonely, and friends would stop into her room to chat with her about their class work or clinicals.

She laughed now, thinking about her desire to become a forester. *As a nurse, I can really serve my mother. I can really help people — like Florence Nightingale did.* Radha thought about her often after she had learned about her in school. She thought about how the woman's work in the 1800s sparked worldwide healthcare reform, and imagined that if she really tried, she might make some small difference to people's lives as well.

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It was the night shift, and Radha was caring for women and babies on the maternity ward. Though the night work made the second year of training even more demanding than the first, Radha did not mind.

She had been so excited the night she helped with her first delivery — and scared. *What if the baby is too slippery and I can't hold it? What if I do something wrong?* She followed the steps that she had been taught in class: checking the effectiveness of the contractions, checking to see when the cervix was dilated to 10, telling the patient when to push and when to rest. The senior students had delivered many babies and coached her through the process.

The baby emerged, and Radha held it close as it cried and pumped its hands and legs in what seemed like both a battle and a celebration. Radha laughed, and looked at her watch to record the time of birth.

"You, little girl, will know you're birthday."

And for a moment Radha felt a prick of envy since she did not know the exact date of her own birth.

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The classes she took in biology and sex education in school in Chitwan had made her feel ashamed to be a woman. Remembering how the subjects were taught made Radha's face burn. The teacher talked about how menstruation was a misfortune, but never explained the biology behind it. "You all noticed how Shreeya was gone for two weeks. She had her menstruation."

The girls looked down and the boys laughed and yelled, "Yes. We can marry her now." "She is ready for us."

The boys cat-called and leered and Radha had fought to push down the vague shame she felt but did not understand. It was the only time Radha could remember when the teacher lost control of the boys.

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Radha cleaned the baby with some gauze and wrapped it in a blanket, lost in wonder. She thought about her sisters confined to the neighbor's house during their periods. And all the ways women were treated as if they were dirty. And then in nurses training when she had learned about the role of hormones, ovulation, the sloughing of the uterine lining — and how all of it is essential to the woman's ability to have a child. *Look at this baby — here because of a woman.* Radha, still smiling, handed the baby to its mother. *Having a period is not shameful. It is wonderful.* For the first time in her life, Radha was proud that she was a woman.

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Tonight she had just finished rocking one of the newborns so the mother could get some sleep. She whispered to the baby girl that she was beautiful and strong, and as the child's eyes began to close, she placed her back into the bed next to the mother. The student she was assigned to work with came into the ward after her break.

"Radha," she whispered. "I just heard. They are preparing for a C-section in the OT. You should watch."

"No. It should be you. You are in your third year and I am only in my second. I will stay. Please, you go."

Her co-worker shook her head. "You go, Radha."

Spending time in the operation theater was reserved for third-year students, but ever since Radha had earned first in class, the seniors often gave her extra opportunities and responsibilities. She was not sure why the other nurse on duty did not want to go but since she did not seem interested, Radha took the chance to learn something new. She rushed to the theater, put on a gown and scrubbed her hands.

"The mother says she has been in labor for 32 hours," the assisting nurse explained as they entered the theater. "She is from Synja. She probably walked for more than an hour to get to the bus, then another three. Poor woman."

The nurse grabbed a gown for the doctor off the shelf as she continued to fill Radha in. "The traditional birth attendant tried everything she could think of to move the labor along. She massaged the mother's abdomen with hot oil, she tried to manually pull the baby out, she had the mother hang from the roof of the cow shed, she had her run during contractions, but nothing worked. The baby is stuck in the birth canal."

The doctor stood with her arms out, waiting for the assistant to help her put on the gown. *The doctor is as tiny as me. How can she reach to pull the baby out?* Radha laughed at herself when she saw the assistant pull a kind of step from the corner of the room, and place it by the delivery table for the doctor to stand on. *Of course.* But it gave Radha confidence to think such a small woman could do such things.

Radha poured Betadine into the basin so the doctor could clean the woman's abdomen before making the incision. It was the only thing she could think to do. She wanted so much to help but had no idea how. *It was only pouring from a bottle into a basin. Such a small thing, but I am in an operating theater and only in my second year.*

The doctor made the incision and pulled the baby from the womb, handed it the assisting nurse and began to close the incision as the baby began to cry. The infant's head was long and pointed, having had to conform to the shape of the birth canal. Strange as it looked, Radha knew it would not stay that way. But she worried that the baby had been too long without oxygen and the trauma to the head had likely damaged the brain.

If the woman had known to come sooner, and had had a better way to get here, her baby would have been fine. Still, at least she came. Most women from the villages with prolonged labor stay — and die.

A Risk, to be Seen

The three-year nursing course took three-and-a-half because of *Jana Andolan I*, the People's Movement that eventually brought an end to the constitutional monarchy and introduced multi-party politics to Nepal. At the end of the first year of Radha's training in 1990, riots caused the school to close for several months.

Though Radha missed being in school, the forced break allowed her to spend time at home, planting rice and working in the family farm. It soothed a bit of her guilt about her family's need to increase their agricultural efforts in her absence. But she was glad when things settled down after a few months and she could return to school. What did politics have to do with her and her family? She knew only that the riots were standing in the way of her education.

In 1994 Radha graduated — at the top of her class. She had gained such confidence at school. She was no longer ashamed of being a woman. She was beginning to understand the power she had to help the rural women of her country. She packed her few belongings in her satchel and two small plastic shopping bags as she prepared to leave — happy and proud that she was a nurse. She said goodbye to her friends, and walked to the bus park to board the bus for Chitwan, imagining how she would put her nursing skills into action.

The early morning air was cool as Radha entered the bus park, but she hardly noticed. She was, in her mind, already back home. She could see her father riding his bike home from market, with milk pails dangling from the handlebars and back seat. She could see her mother struggling to bring water to cook the rice, coughing with each determined step. She looked down as she managed her bags, lost in anticipation as she found the place to purchase her ticket — a table, just outside the shops selling pastries, coffees, teas and candies. There, several men sat drinking tea and spitting arguments at each other.

Radha noticed the receipt book sitting in front of the man in the center of the group, a man with the look of young, self-proclaimed power — and arrogance. Long hair beneath an olive drab military cap, cargo pants with pockets down the sides, a triumphant face printed on the t-shirt's front. *Who is the man on his shirt who looks so sure?* Radha approached and bowed her head.

"Namaste. I would like a ticket for Chitwan, please."

The man smiled at his friend as he kept talking, revealing red-stained teeth from chewing *paan*, the heady tobacco of crushed betel nut and nicotine, laced with chemicals. Radha cleared her throat and waited for a moment before waving the handful of rupees in front of him. He looked briefly at her face before his eyes traveled down her small frame. He took her money and pushed the receipt toward her and gestured toward the periphery of the lot where buses and buses and buses sat idling, as he resumed his conversation.

Radha wrapped her shawl around her tighter, letting the snow-topped Himalayas comfort her as she walked toward the waiting vehicles, her muscles tight. She took her time walking past the row of buses, looking for one with a sign for Chitwan.

Midway down the row, Radha found her bus. The Chitwan sign taped to its window, the dirty red, white and blue bus was already stacked with bags and men on its roof. Sitting with their legs draped over the small rail, ready to ride the mountainous roads atop the vehicle, the men nudged each other. Radha approached, looking like a child.

"I love her. But she ran away with another guy." Words painted in large white letters on the back of the bus served as a warning about the unreliability of women.

She hugged her bags and waited in a line of men to board. *You will be fine. You can move seats. You can use your bags as a barrier. You can pretend it doesn't bother you. It is just the way it is.*

It had been almost four years since that first bus ride with her brother-in-law. Then, she had resented that he had to watch over her as she traveled to school, as if she were a child. She had been 15. Now, after many bus rides alone, she felt grateful to him.

Every school vacation she had ridden the bus alone to return home and then back to school. Always there were two men to manage the passengers and the route: the driver who steered the bus around narrow, winding mountain roads, and the conductor who took the tickets. Always there were the men passengers splayed on top of the bus as if they were ornaments and men who would sit next to her within. And always there were the stares and vulgar comments and misplaced hands.

As small Radha stepped up into the bus, the conductor reached out to help her, his hand missing the bags and connecting with her breast. The driver smirked as she maneuvered her back to the conductor, refusing, too late, his offer for help.

Holding the large bag at her side in one hand, the small shopping bags in front of her in the other, she made her way down the aisle to find a place to sit for the six-hour ride. Two-thirds of the way down, she came upon an open row of seats. Not tall enough to reach the overhead shelves, she stowed her large bag beneath the seat in front of her, wedged herself against the window and placed her small bags at her side. She looked again at the mountains and their immovability. She loved the mountains. Strong and constant and beautiful. The man who had boarded behind her claimed the aisle seat next to her, as she knew he would.

How long was it before he made his move? Had they pulled out of the bus park? Had they been on the road for one hour? Two? Radha didn't remember. What she remembered was how he spread his legs so that Radha's legs were forced to angle toward the window in an effort to create a buffer. How he worked his hand around the wall of bags she had created, to touch her leg. At the moment his body leaned into hers, she picked up her bags to find another place to sit.

He followed her and sat beside her in her new seat. She felt like she should be used to this. Shouldn't she?

She was 12 again, in a moment of rebellion against her poverty, trading her family's metal hoe for *baraph,* the sweetened ice that was sold to children. Sometimes, she had heard that the vendor would take a trade instead of cash. She had never dared do it before but today no one was home. She heard the vendor's whistle, then his voice singing "Baraph! Baraph!" So she found her

family's hoe, chipped and waiting for repair, and ran to meet him. She held it out to the man standing beside his bike.

"Here, dear. You can choose. Come and see what kind you want."

It felt like a moment of power and freedom. Normally the man would hand the treat to the buyer. But he wanted her to choose. She was so lucky. Radha positioned her body over the box of frozen treats on the back of the man's cycle. Tip-toed, she peered into the cool tin of wonders, next to the vendor. She reached inside, picked out a flavor, as the man's hand reached for her young breast. Shocked, she threw the sweetened ice with all her strength back into the box, and ran.

The conductor began to play a locally made cassette — a slow rhythm, and loud, but not loud enough to cover the words: *Hot Nepali woman, she will undress, she wants* ... Radha could see how the words roused the men and gave them courage. The driver held his hand on the brake. "What is as firm as this, my friends? A penis?" The conductor and passengers laughed, and Radha wished there were other women on the bus so she could at least draw some strength from unspoken understanding. Back and forth, the men tossed words — more body parts and bedroom scenes. And Radha tried to be invisible as her seatmate began to pinch her leg and lean against her.

It had happened when she was a young student as well — was she 14? — riding to the speech competition. "Come sit on my lap." Her teacher patted his legs with his hands as an invitation. Twenty minutes of rocky roads, she sat on his lap. Teachers were the same as gods. She could not say no. She sweated through her clothes during the short trip, though the evening wasn't hot.

She couldn't think of a single girl she knew who hadn't been abused at school, though it was typically the older students and not the teachers who abused them. The men and boys all thought they had the right. Indeed, according to the culture, they did.

Radha made herself as small as she could. She hunched her shoulders in, and turned her body toward the window. The vulgar music blared. The men talked about what they had done before, what they would do to her. And her seatmate insinuated his body into her space. She pretended she wasn't there, and thought about home.

Help One, or Help Many?

After months of looking for work in Kathmandu, Radha had finally landed a job at the government hospital in Chitwan. She walked with her friend Shanta to the Kathmandu bus park at 4 in the morning. Friends since they were in class 9 in Chitwan, Shanta had invited Radha to share the small room she rented in Kathmandu while she looked for work. Radha could never find a way to express to her friend how dear she was to her. Some days, when they were young, Shanta would pick Radha up at her home, letting her sit on the back of her bike as she pedaled them both to school. She would share class notes with Radha, when other students would not. In the past weeks, Shanta shared the little food she had, and the two slept on the mat on the floor of the home that was owned by Dalits, though Shanta was even a higher caste than Radha.

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Radha had been working at the small hospital for a little more than two years now. It seemed a lifetime ago since she walked in for her first day of work. All 15 beds had been filled with patients, and another 15 lay on bedding on the floor. The place was dark, and smelled of urine and old wounds. The craggy cement walls looked like they had been soaking up dirt since the building was built, which was probably about 20 years before Radha had been born. She watched one nurse finish bathing a patient, rinse the cloth in a basin of cloudy water and hand it to another nurse, who used it to begin bathing the next patient. Neither of them spoke — to each other or the patients they were caring for. Radha's mind filled with questions. *How can they do their jobs without the proper resources? How can morale be maintained in these circumstances? My goodness, there are not even enough beds for the patients. How can they serve the people like this?*

A voice cleared behind her, startling her from the criticisms that were already turning into goals. Radha turned to see the matron — the nurse in charge whose gaze began at the top of her head and down to her shoes. Radha waited for her to speak. But instead of addressing her, the charge nurse spoke to the nurse standing nearby. "Keep this tiny lady in the operation theater." And she pushed Radha toward the theater. Radha felt like she was a spare part — though, indeed, it did not seem as if they had parts to spare in this place.

When Radha started working in the operation theater, she didn't know anything about anesthesia. It was not a part of her training. But she watched the anesthetic doctor, asked questions and studied in her time off. A few months into the job she went to Kathmandu for three months of anesthesia training, and returned with more confidence than she knew she could possess. Now two years later, she had independently given anesthesia to how many patients? 2,000? 3,000? And the anesthetic doctor trusted her enough that he had started taking vacations and part-time assignments.

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It was early in the afternoon. Radha had just finished her shift and was reading when she heard a rap on the door and the voice of one of the men who escorted her from time to time when she was needed for an emergency surgery.

"*Radhadidi* — Radha sister?" She opened the door, and hoped he wasn't drunk. "Radhadidi, you are needed in surgery right away. The patient has lost a lot of blood."

As they walked, in an effort to ready her mind for the different scenarios, Radha silently considered what might have caused the bleeding. The woman might have bleeding due to a pregnancy, maybe from attempted abortion or retained placenta; it may be an injury from a fall; it might be the result of sexual violence. Once she knew the condition, she would know which anesthetic to use, how long the surgery might be and how she might assist the surgeon once the anesthetic had been given.

It had already been a difficult week. Just that morning she had discharged a woman who had been in the hospital for two months. She had come to them, pregnant, after hours of labor. The baby had been transverse, its hand presenting, and as the uterus contracted to try to push the child out, it had ruptured. By the time she came to the hospital, she had lost so much blood. They did surgery despite the woman's low hemoglobin, and she ended up with gangrene. Another surgery and weeks of care. This too, could have been prevented.

Radha walked faster, thinking of how much difference just a few minutes can make in a person's chance at recovery. But when moments turned to days to weeks to years?

The day before, Radha had given anesthesia to an elder woman from the hill country who needed a prolapsed uterus repaired. Had she come in when the problem first presented itself — 18 years ago — the surgery would have been simple. Or better yet, the problem could have been prevented by a little education. She could have been taught that hanging from the cowshed during labor and letting the birth attendant try to pull the baby out vaginally damaged the uterus. She could have been taught that the intense kneading of the uterus after delivery, using the handle of a hoe or whatever hard instrument they could find, weakened the uterus. But the woman had not known, and in addition to the unsafe birthing practices, had carried heavy things too soon after birth. She ended up with the prolapsed uterus that is so common among women in the hill country who have had children.

Too poor to go to the hospital, the woman tried to treat the problem herself by inserting the metal end of a flashlight wrapped in plastic to hold the uterus inside—and it had been inside her for 18 years. She still did not have the money, but she was friends with Radha's family and asked Radha to find a way to do the surgery for less money or in exchange for grains. Radha told her to come. Somehow they would manage.

Complicated by the muscles that had grown around the homemade treatment devices, the surgery took three hours. And though it was a success, Radha was distraught by the knowledge that this type of issue is preventable. *How had the woman tolerated the pain for all those years?*

And now another woman, bleeding from what? *Something preventable. What do you bet that this is something preventable?* Radha hurried in the staff entrance, changed into her gown, and went to check on the patient who was laying on a gurney in the dark corridor outside the operation theater. The patient hardly took up any space on the gurney, she was so small. As Radha came closer she realized it was a child — maybe 7 or 8 years old, unconscious, blood staining the sheet covering her lower

body. Radha felt the sick realization of what would make her bleed like this, and brushed the girl's forehead with one gentle stroke before walking into the theater to speak to the surgeon.

Radha could feel the doctor's anxiety as soon as she entered. The sun provided much of the light in the room, shining through the once-white opaque glass walls and illuminating the cracks in the plaster. He was standing in front of the surgical equipment tray, his back to her, his head down.

"Doctor?" Radha moved to the far side of the operating table next to the anesthetic tray that held IV equipment, syringes, blood pressure cuff and intubation equipment.

"She was raped. Her cousin. I suspect a ruptured uterus, certainly vaginal bleeding."

They stood in silence, the surgeon on his side of the table, Radha on hers.

"We won't know what else until we begin," he said.

The aide wheeled the girl in and, together with the assisting nurse, the two transferred the girl to the operating table.

At that moment it was like everything around Radha turned dark and the light from the inadequate surgical lamp that was spotlighting the patient grew brighter. Radha had no family, no past life, no home and no aspirations. Only the girl existed. It was always like this for Radha in the operating theater. Only the patient.

Radha started the IV and delivered the sedative and anesthesia. She had to guess at the measurements because the syringe was calibrated for an adult and not a child. She put the oxygen mask over the small face. Since there was no pulse oximeter, she would assess the girl's oxygen levels by observing the color of the blood. And she would use the *ambu bag* to hand-pump oxygen to the mask. She knew at times her hand would tire from pumping the bulb, so much larger than her tiny hand, but she would keep pumping. And she would determine how well the anesthesia was working by whether the girl's muscles tensed or were relaxed, and if her skin was sweaty or dry.

For the duration of the surgery, Radha was terrified. *Have I given too much anesthetic? Have I given enough? How will we stop all this bleeding? The doctor is only a general surgeon. He is not a pediatric surgeon. And the child is so delicate.*

Ruptured uterus, vaginal bleeding, ruptured bladder. The surgeon closed the wound, looping stitches with needle and catgut. Two hours of surgery. The child would have months of recovery after that, but the doctor thought she would be OK. *Would she? Would she ever be able to have children? Would she ever recover emotionally from the brutality? Would she ever feel safe in her home, where the rape occurred? And perhaps worst of all, she would be blamed. How could she recover from the social stigma of rape that would follow her and rape her spirit again and again?*

Radha left the hospital, exhausted. She walked back to her residence and thought about the mother who had the ruptured uterus from waiting too long to go the hospital; the elder woman with the prolapsed uterus who waited 18 years; and the girl who had been raped in her own home by a

cousin. It was as if the light that had been focused on the patient a few moments ago was expanding. And as the circle of light broadened, ideas for ways to address the issues of poverty, violence and ignorance began to take shape.

I have to go outside the four walls of this hospital. These things can be prevented.

Finally, Jumla

The helicopter's propeller began a slow *shwoosh, shwoosh* — gaining momentum as it grew louder. *SHWOOSH, SHWOOSH, SHWOOSH, SHWOOSH*. Faster … louder … faster … louder. Sitting in the back of the cargo helicopter with its one other passenger, Radha covered her ears. The pilot looked back at them and swirled his hand, pointing up, just before the helicopter lifted off the ground. She lowered her hands and braced them on the floor, forgetting about the noise for a moment and feeling the press of a quick assent and then the weightless wonder of flying in a helicopter for the first time. As soon as she began to give in to the sensation of flying, she started to worry that the barrels filled with asphalt sealant for Jumla's under-construction landing strip would tip over as the helicopter maneuvered its way through the mountains to its destination.

But Radha soon forgot about the barrels and became used to the resounding roar of the propeller and the vibration that is its cousin, allowing in the worries her family and friends voiced before she left to return.

"Radha, the Karnali zone is where the Maoist insurgency is the worst. You could be killed."

"Radha, there is no electricity there. No telephone. No health service. No motor roads. It is too remote."

"Radha, you are only one person. What difference can you make?"

"Radha, it is too dangerous."

Radha had dismissed each concern with: "I will be fine." But the "no's" were having an effect on her spirit. Her friends and family were right. The bloody Maoist insurgency was the worst in Karnali — the region in which Jumla is located — where she knew she would likely be exposed to danger every day because of it. She was terrified. But when she thought about the people who lived there who had no choice in the matter, and all the NGOs that refused to work in the region, her fear gave way to compassion, and compassion gave way to anger. *Are the people of Jumla not just as valuable as everyone else?*

The flight took about a half an hour, and with each minute that passed, Radha's excitement to see the people grew. They flew over the mountains and in the un-insulated shell of the helicopter, Radha felt the temperature plummet. The pilot turned, looked back at the two passengers, and pointed down. Radha tried to rise to a kneeling position but her legs were prickling with the sensation of restricted blood flow after sitting in such a crowded space. She kneaded her thighs with her fists and rose again to kneel in front of the helicopter's window, keen to get a look at Jumla.

"Oh." The breathless word escaped Radha's mouth without thought. *I am finally here.* The snow-covered Himalayas pointed to the bluest sky, ethereal white layers of clouds bumped up against their peaks. Black juniper trees dotted the mountainside, while geometric patches of farmland sat between the trees and the village. As the helicopter flew closer, Radha could see a long dark wall hugging the periphery of what she thought must be the airport, though it was still under construction and difficult to make out. *How strange. Why would they build a wall before they build a runway?*

The helicopter landed and the sudden void of the stilled propellers left Radha's ears ringing. She hurried to the door and climbed down the steps before the other passenger had a chance to stand. As her feet touched the ground she looked up to see that the wall was moving. It was not a wall at all. One by one, Radha saw women and children and disabled adults, wrapped in dirty lengths of cloth, run toward her. What had appeared to be a wall of stone was, instead, a wall of people — some Dalit, some not, but all poor — waiting to be chosen to carry her bags, and earn a few rupees for food.

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Radha was about to be the only woman working among 35 men. Though her position as human resource development officer was not a government position, she would be working to support the government health system in Jumla, and it was important that they take her seriously.

The first day of work Radha rose before the sun and dressed in her best green sari with red embroidery. In traditional communities like this one, she knew only married women dressed in saris, and though she was not married, she would attract less attention if people thought she were. She painted a *tika* — the Hindu blessing paste most often made from red dye — on her forehead. She added an additional dot of yellow in the center. The red symbolized marriage. The yellow, purity. Radha knew that people often made the mistake of assuming her tiny size reflected a meek, childish manner, and hoped the sari and tika would also communicate maturity to the people — and confuse them a little. It could be an advantage to instill a bit of uncertainty into her status. Still, she knew there was no way to get around the fact that she was a woman. To boost her confidence, she rehearsed her credentials in her mind. *I am educated — I have one bachelor's degree and two master's degrees. I have worked as an anesthetic nurse, attending thousands of surgeries, and at times, even the doctors followed my directions. Why should this place be any different?*

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Three days into her job, Radha was sitting at the wooden table that served as a desk in her new office. The sunlight streaming in from the window behind her did little to dispel the room's darkness. She had just returned from meeting the district health officer, who had the responsibility of maintaining quality health services for the district. He had only been in Jumla for four months, but was already looking for a way to be transferred. From what she had heard, people in his position never lasted long in this place. It was a stepping stone to a more lucrative and secure position — in Kathmandu if they were lucky.

Still, he had seemed genuinely concerned for Radha.

"They do not want you here, you know." He had leaned on his desk as Radha had stood in the doorway of his office.

"Who?" Radha asked, though she felt sure she knew the answer.

"The Maoists. They'll find a way to get rid of you." He had leaned toward her, and frowned.

Radha had heard the rumors on her first day. The Maoists wanted her out, though she did not know why. She had not yet even begun to work in the community. What possible threat could she be?

Now, back in her office, Radha stared with unfocused eyes at the two empty chairs sitting opposite her — mismatched plastic lawn chairs, one ivory, one green, as if they could tell her how to begin educating the staff and community about maternal and child health.

A woman knocked on her door, out of breath.

"Sister. Sister. There is a patient suffering from diarrhea. Please come."

Radha recognized the woman from the hospital located less than a kilometer up the hill. Radha had toured the hospital on her first day, and remembered seeing the woman sweeping the floors and cleaning the toilet, and had been impressed with how hard she worked. Radha thought the woman's name — Tare Nepali — represented the contradictions of the caste system. *Tare* meant "star," speaking to beauty and unreachable light. *Nepali* indicated that she was Dalit — untouchable.

Radha had been shocked at how ineffectual and ill-equipped the hospital was. The structure looked like it was built for a warm climate like southern Nepal, instead of cold, mountainous Jumla.

Its stone and cement walls radiated cold and the thin aluminum roof did little more than keep the rain and snow out. She had walked past the shop where the paramedics were drinking tea, and past the entrance to the hospital where patients laid outside to soak up warmth from the sun. Inside the hospital was separated into two large rooms, the emergency room and the patient care ward. Both were dirty, and Radha could see no medical supplies or much of a record-keeping system. And it seemed the only person doing any real work in the hospital was Tare, who now stood at her door, asking her to go with her.

"Why do you need me for a case of diarrhea? Go tell the other nurses." Radha tried to sound stern. She knew that she could not set a precedent of working in a direct patient care capacity. Once that expectation was set, she would once again be confined to treating the individual and not the community. It was not her job to do direct patient care. She was hired to educate the community and the staff.

"*Gally. Gally.* Please. Please."

Tare looked as if she were going to cry. "This is serious."

As soon as Radha stood up, Tare began to run toward the hospital, Radha close behind her. There, lying on a stretcher on the emergency room floor was a woman, bright red blood staining the lower half of her sari.

"Very bad diarrhea," Tare said.

"Diarrhea," Radha repeated, now understanding that in the local language the word meant bleeding. She knelt beside the woman and examined her. She could see that she had lost much blood already from a retained placenta. The woman's skin was pale, and she was barely breathing.

"She needs an injection of oxytocin." Radha directed her request to the paramedic who was sitting just inside the door, watching. Oxytocin would help the uterus contract and loosen the placenta so Radha could remove it, and the bleeding would subside.

He shook his head.

"Then give me haemaccel to treat her shock."

He just looked at Radha.

"We need blood." Even as Radha said the words she knew there was no blood for a transfusion at this hospital. *A three-minute procedure would save her. Three minutes maximum. If I had the right medicine I could give it to her and pull out the placenta.* Radha had done the procedure many times as a student. It was not difficult. But without the medicine to stop the bleeding, or blood for a transfusion …

Radha decided the only hope for the woman was to transfer her to Surkhet or Nepalgung, where they would have the blood and equipment needed to transfuse her, but the woman did not have money to buy a place on the helicopter. It took Radha three hours to gather enough money for the flight. As the paramedic took them to the airport, Radha hoped the flight had not already left.

Within the hour Tare came again to Radha's office. This time to tell her the woman had died while waiting for the flight.

That night, Radha could not eat. She lay in bed, eyes open. She could hear the nightly bombings begin in the mountains. The acrid smell of smoke told her the bombing was concentrated in the near mountains tonight.

It was only a three-minute procedure. If I had had the right medicine and blood for a transfusion. If we had had the money to pay to transport her right away. If, if, if … she would not have died.

Radha could not sleep. She thought about the job she was expected to do in Jumla: to train the staff on health principles and procedures. But she knew the problems of the poor and marginalized people of Jumla would not be addressed by the kinds of trainings she was expected to do.

The next morning, Radha formed a plan to begin addressing the needs of the community. The hospital in Jumla was not a hospital indeed. She would find a way to set up an operation theater, establish a blood bank and an emergency obstetric fund. And she would start training the staff and community.

The Enemy, Desperation

Radha had so many ideas for improving the hospital she had started in Jumla only a few months earlier. When she arrived, it had been little more than a few dirty rooms with beds. And though there was a long way to go, the place now had an operating room, a blood bank and improved procedures. She was proud of her accomplishments, but also frustrated. She stood in the doorway of her office and sighed, considering the meeting she just left with hospital staff. For some, her ideas had been met with silence and eyes turned downward. But there were others who were aggressive.

One hospital worker had jumped from her seat and began shouting at her when she began outlining her plans for requiring more stringent protocols for timeliness, for cleanliness and for general patient care. She had moved toward Radha, fists clenched. The workers who sat on either side of the woman had nodded and smiled as they watched her challenge Radha's ideas.

Resting one hand on the door frame, Radha stared, unfocused, at her desk. *Why must every idea I bring to the table be met with resistance and suspicion? The hospital staff resists improvements. The Maoists think I am a spy for the government. The government officers think I am a spy for the Maoists.* To get permission from the district health officer to bring safe delivery kits to the birth attendants required her to beg and persuade until she finally wore him down and convinced him she was not running supplies to the Maoists. She knew it was a temporary victory. She would have to convince him all over again the next time. Radha was tired. So tired.

The ache that had started between her shoulder blades inched its way up to the base of her neck as she fought against the current of apathy, fear and desperation she kept encountering. The issues the people faced were so complex. Radha ticked them off in her mind. *Gender discrimination. Poverty. The caste system. Inaccessible healthcare. Harmful social practices.* She stopped her mental listing of problems and refocused her thoughts on what the next day would bring, and the warmth of the thought made her smile. The next day she would leave for one of the outlying villages. It was the thing that gave her strength — meeting with the poorest of the poor, the people she loved.

She would need three days to make the visit: one day walking, one day in the village, one day to return. She had decided to take a friend with her this time but that would be all. It was too dangerous to travel alone and too dangerous to travel with more than one other person. Sometimes even a group of three people gathered in one spot provoked suspicion, and in turn would be a target for bombing and gunfire.

Still standing in the doorway, shafts of hesitant light from the window scattered shadows in the small room, bringing her back to the moment and reminding her that it was almost curfew. She must leave soon if she wanted to reach her residence instead of sleeping at the hospital as she had for the last two nights. It was safer if she didn't sleep in the same place for more than a couple of nights in a row anyway.

As she entered the room, she noticed a sheet of notebook paper on top of the desk that she was sure had not been there before. It could have been a note from one of her staff or a note from the district health officer, but she knew it was neither of those things. Her hand began to shake even

before she'd lifted it from its resting place. Radha picked it up, straining to read the words written in large, uneven letters down its center:

You are helping the hospital so you are working for the government and supporting the government. But WE are the true government that serves the PEOPLE and you are our ENEMY.

You have seen what we do to enemies of the people.

If you do not leave this place in 24 hours

We will kill you.

It was signed "Maoists." Radha looked around the room as if the authors would somehow appear now that she'd read it. But she was alone. Her chest felt tight and her breath came, shallow and rapid. The frequency of the phone calls and notes had been increasing in the past weeks. She closed her eyes for a moment, forcing herself to control her breathing, then crumpled the note in her hand. *I have already lived longer than most of the women from Jumla. And I have work to do. So, let them threaten me.* And Radha put the crumpled note in her pocket and went to look for an escort to walk her home.

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Despite the threats, she slept well. The predawn promise of light nudged her awake, and in one movement she tossed the thin blanket off to the side and swung her feet over the edge of the bed. She didn't have to dress because she had never undressed. Since her first week in Jumla, Radha had begun the practice of sleeping fully clothed, with the exception of her shoes which she placed next to the door. It was not unusual for people in the district headquarters to be visited in the middle of the night by soldiers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) — the Maoists — and taken away to one of their camps in the mountains. Radha knew if they came to take her she would not be given time to dress, or even find shoes to wear. That morning, as she left her room to climb down the exterior ladder to use the bathroom, she practiced slipping her shoes on quickly, hoping that if she was ever taken she could manage the movement quickly enough to escape notice, and at least she would have shoes.

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Radha met the friend who would accompany her in the hospital, where the two packed the small maternal and child health kits into their backpacks. The kits contained small supplies to be used for delivering babies — some plastic, a razor blade to cut the umbilical cord, a cord clamp, thread and a piece of soap. They could only bring a few. The more supplies they brought, the greater the danger they would be detained by the government or the Maoists.

It was still early morning when the friends crossed the footbridge suspended low over the Tila River, which was not yet frozen, though would be soon enough. A cold wind followed its path, serpentining under their shawls as if trying to take hold and drag them into the river, to add to its collection of spirits.

"I hate crossing," her friend said. "I can feel the spirits' breath."

"No, my dear," Radha said. "It is only a river. No spirits."

Her friend did not look convinced. To the people of the area, the body of water was haunted — one of the many reasons pregnant women refused to come to the hospital or health post if they were at risk for an unsafe delivery. Crossing any of the many rivers and streams while pregnant invited the spirits to harm the unborn child.

Crossing the river is not the problem, Radha thought. *Too far to travel. No good way to carry a woman in labor down the mountain. And who would dare? It is considered impure to touch a woman in labor. Waiting too long to identify potential delivery problems. Bathing the child right away after birth with no way to keep it warm.*

Radha reviewed the obstacles to maternal and child health and the ways she would help the people make an action plan to address the issues. Preparation was key. She would assign them the task of preparing a *doko* — a large basket, cut in half to be secured over the back of anyone willing to carry the mother, who would sit in it like a chair for the trip to the health post or hospital. And the whole village would be informed where the doko would be kept so that not a moment would be lost, when moments mattered. She would teach the traditional birth attendants the dangers of waiting too long to make the trip if the labor was not progressing, and the dangers of some of the birth practices. She would talk to them about waiting to bathe the baby until it was a few days old and was not as likely to die from exposure.

But there was also a new thought that had been forming in the back of her mind. At night, when her duties were finished, she lay in her bed and studied social structures and how the members of a community are interwoven. She did not have time to attend school at this time, and studied on her own. For Radha, the studies were inspiration, hope — and tools for change.

The quiet of the early morning, combined with the coursing of her blood as she walked, helped her focus. Suddenly, Radha's body straightened and energized, and she laughed out loud.

"What?" Her friend stopped.

Radha turned, not wanting to talk about the thought that had caused her to laugh. Not yet. And besides, they had far to walk and it was best if they kept up a good pace. "Nothing, my dear. I am just thinking."

But the thought that was taking shape in Radha had a new energy: *Women are not the only ones held hostage by the practice of chhaupadi.*[8] *True, it is hardest on the women. But is it not also true that the husbands' hands are tied by the practice? Men suffer as well.* It was true, and it was a new realization for Radha, to think of a man lacking power. Even a husband did not have the option of acting on his wife's behalf should he care to do so. He would have to defer to the mother-in-law and the traditional healers. And if he showed concern and spoke about his wife's safety during pregnancy and childbirth, he would be seen as being dominated by his wife and would end up being isolated from his peers. He would lose respect and be treated as less than a man.

The weight and importance of the realization was like a strong engine, pulling Radha up the mountain.

I could talk with the teachers and leaders about the power men have to help change. That it is a powerful thing for a man to risk caring for his wife.

Radha and her friend had not walked far when they reached a place where two paths intersected. As they approached, they could see several government soldiers dressed in woodland camouflage uniforms, AK-47s slung across their chests.

"Stop. Papers." Two soldiers advanced toward them, raising their weapons.

"Namaste." The two touched the palms of their hands together and brought them up to their foreheads, bowing slightly.

"Papers." It was the taller of the two who spoke, though it seemed he only knew two words.

Radha shrugged off the large black backpack that was filled with the kits and one small package of biscuits. She pulled the travel document the district health officer had given her from the inside pocket and handed it to the soldier.

"What's in the bag? Supplies for Maoists?" *So he does know more than two words.* The way the soldier looked at her made Radha step back a bit. He angled his weapon toward her backpack.

"No, no, no, no." Radha smiled and let her words tumble out in the lyrical rise and fall of persuasion. She pulled her nursing license out of her pocket and handed it to the soldier. "I am a nurse, and only bring supplies for the moms and their babies. Only the women and children."

"Open it."

Radha unzipped it further and held it open for him to see. The kits were on the top. The biscuits were underneath, out of view. If he decided to search the bag he would accuse her of taking food to the Maoists. *I should not have brought the biscuits.*

He glanced in the bag and then at the two women, and spit on the ground.

"Go."

Radha exhaled, only now realizing that she had been holding her breath. The last time she'd been stopped by the government soldiers they detained her for two hours, accusing her of being a Maoist.

Before he could change his mind, the two resumed climbing the steep, dirt footpath — their steps faster than before.

The friends were accustomed to climbing in the high elevation and made good time: it was only two in the afternoon when they approached the outskirts of the village. It could have been any village, they all looked so similar. Stone and dirt steps climbing up and leading travelers between small homes gray and desolate. In open doorways children stared — barefoot, pantless, dirty, quietly watching the visitors.

Wherever Radha went children gravitated to her, small and smiling as she was. Her voice was higher pitched than most adults — gentle and inviting. From the doorway of one house Radha could smell rice cooking, and recognized a sober-faced girl holding her baby brother.

"Namaste, my dear," Radha smiled.

A smile transformed the girl's face.

"I will come to see you tomorrow, dear. Take care of your brother."

The girl waved and ran back in her house, and Radha and her friend walked on. Radha could see the school ahead, a small hut of a building surrounded by men and women. Most were men. Some were women. Clothes hung loose on their bodies, and their dirty faces told Radha painful stories of survival. Some wore the red band with a star on their foreheads; others wore it on their arms. And each carried a weapon.

Without a word, the friends stopped walking as the Maoist soldiers moved toward them and used their weapons to point the travelers toward the school's entrance.

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This was not the first time Radha had been surrounded and detained. They had always released her after hours of questioning, without injury, but she knew she had been lucky.

As she entered the front room of the school it was as if all those times converged. And it was as if she was watching the scene from a distant place instead of experiencing it. Was it an older soldier who smiled at them and motioned for them to sit on the floor? Or was it one of the young ones? The older ones would usually start the inquiry with a handshake. They would extend a hand and ask her about her health. Invite her expertise. And when that failed, they would threaten her and ask her for money. They would demand her help and remind her of what happened to the people who had refused them. And then the cycle would begin again.

The younger soldiers tended to start with aggression. First they would shout at her. Accuse her of spying and working against them. When it seemed the anger held no power over her, they would soften. They would flatter her and appeal to her desire to help the people. "Will you not join us?" "Will you not give us money?" And on and on.

Radha learned quickly to pretend she didn't understand the words. Not to make eye contact. To look confused. But she was not confused. She understood their accusations and threats, and she understood the desperation behind their actions. The Dalit and poor and women were desperate for

change. The Maoists understood that desperation and opportunity equaled revolution. As frightened as Radha was, she understood that at the heart of the movement were people who just wanted food and warmth and power.

Radha lifted her head, trying to focus on the man in front of her — awakening herself from the memories of the many times she'd been detained.

"You are a spy." It was not a question. "You work for the government."

Radha shook her head.

His voice kept getting louder and his speech faster as he paced in front of her. "You say you are a nurse but you bring no medicine. You bring no bandages. Nurse? No. Spy."

"I am a nurse."

"Then you have seen the people whose heads are severed from their bodies. Who do you think did that? Think about that."

He turned and walked out the door, presumably leaving Radha to think about what he had said. What she thought about was how her legs used to shake when she was interrogated. How afraid she'd been. She knew she was still in danger but somehow she'd become used to the dance of verbal persuasion and abuse. And she knew that at the core of the disputes was dissatisfaction with injustice and poverty.

When he returned, he did not speak. He just looked at Radha, his arms crossed in front of his body.

It was usually at this point that Radha would choose to speak. "For you to be successful, you need many young people to join your army." She forced herself to speak slowly and rationally, without emotion.

The soldier nodded.

"I am here to be sure that women give birth to strong, healthy babies. Girl children and boy children who can further your cause."

Even as she was speaking, trying to get them to release her and her friend, she was thinking of all the children who were forced into service in the PLA. It was not a choice. Each family was required to enlist someone into service. If there was no youth, the husband or wife would go. There was no choice for the people.

She shook off the thought and tried to focus on her mission to bring health and opportunity to the poor and marginalized people, and she wouldn't be able to do that sitting in the school—or worse.

"Thank you for fighting for the poor, the Dalit, the women. It is the same thing I am doing," she said.

The soldier looked at her for a moment. "You should go now," he said.

Radha picked up her pack, secured it on her back, and walked out of the building, her friend following her.

"Shall we go back to Jumla?" her friend asked as soon as they had put a bit of distance between them and the school.

"Of course not," Radha said. "Can we not still talk to the people and make our visits? Can we not still make a difference?"

Radha's pace quickened and her mind raced toward the goals she had for the people she was about to visit.

Caught, in Crossfire

"Curfew is coming," the chief district officer said. "We should disperse now."

It was almost 5 p.m. and Radha and 24 other community leaders had spent the day planning how to improve hospital service to the community. Usually planning meetings for the hospital took place in one of the hospital's offices, but this gathering was so large they had secured use of the building across the road from where Radha was staying. Radha looked outside, already dark. Sunset was a sudden thing in the mountains, and especially early this time of year.

The chief district officer, the district health officer, deputy police officer and Red Cross and hospital staff had all been able to attend, and Radha was pleased. *It has been a good meeting. Every day, we move a little closer toward having a hospital we can be proud of.* They had discussed many things, including raising funds for the blood bank, how they might build a visitors' house next to the hospital so guests wouldn't be sleeping on the floor next to the patients' beds, and how to divert the road that now passed directly through the middle of the hospital building. *Imagine, a road that runs directly through a hospital. We will soon be able to remedy that.*

But Damodar Pant, the chief district officer was not as engaged as Radha would have liked. He had participated in Radha's small break-out session to brainstorm how they might achieve their goals, and though the meeting had gone well, she was disappointed with his lack of focus. He walked beside her to the door as all the participants hurried toward the door.

"You will see, Damodar, this is a good plan. If we improve cleanliness, we will minimize infection for the patients."

"How can I focus on community development when we know the Maoists will attack? Radha, this is just not a big deal for me. How can I be concerned with development activities when we don't know from moment to moment when we will die? We have word that they will try to take the District Headquarters tonight. What's the point of planning for the future?" His shoulders slumped as he walked beside her.

"Are you sure? Tonight?" Radha asked the question as if she was surprised, but she too had heard that tonight was the night the Maoists would attack. It was not unusual to go to sleep to the sound of bombs and gunfire but she had been told tonight's fighting was to be a more massive attack.

"Radha, let me walk you to your residence."

"No need. It is only across the road. And I need to go to the hospital to check in with the nurse on evening shift before I go. You go. I will be fine."

"Radha, it's curfew. Let me …"

Radha rushed out the door, waving her hand at Damodar and ran across the military training field that lay between her and the hospital up the mountain.

Radha entered the hospital. She planned to leave for Surkhet the next day to get supplies and take part in meetings, and she would be gone for a week. Roshana — the nurse on duty tonight — was from Surkhet and would likely want to send a message to her mother. The room was chilly, and the dim light from a single solar lamp on the nurse's desk cast shadows around the room. Roshana was making notes in one of the patient's charts as Radha entered.

"Radha, I am glad to see you. I have money for you to take to my mother tomorrow."

Radha was proud of the way Roshana had taken to nursing. She was young and suffered from asthma but she was conscientious and worked hard. Radha did not like to think of her alone at the hospital when the fighting started — especially since Radha felt responsible for convincing her to practice nursing in Jumla.

"Roshana, I think tonight you should give the patients' medicines early and come with me to my residence. There is talk of a major attack tonight and I do not like that you should stay here."

"Radha, my shift is not over until 8."

Radha was surprised with herself, encouraging the girl to break the very rules she herself had put into place.

"Please, come. I do not think you should be alone at the hospital."

"No, Radha. I will finish my shift. Why should I leave and subject the hospital to criticism? You know there are many who already do not support putting resources into this effort. Go. I am fine. Have a good trip to Surkhet tomorrow and tell my mom I am well."

She would not come, so Radha gave up trying to persuade her and left for her residence. Snow had come early that year and was covering the ground, and Radha began to run through the snow across the open space. Police stood around the periphery of the yard, holding their weapons at the ready.

"Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. I was at the hospital," she shouted as she ran toward them with her hands raised up in the air. This was not the first time Radha stayed in the hospital after curfew. The police lowered their weapons and escorted her to her residence.

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Radha was in the kitchen with the family she rented a room from when the bombing started shortly after 9 p.m. Though she knew the rumors, she hoped it was no more than the nightly bombings she had grown used to.

"We should go to our rooms," Radha said and left the kitchen.

The cold air pricked her skin and made her hands slow and clumsy as she climbed the ladder to her room on the second floor of the residence. Once inside the room she felt the momentary

safety of the thin pine walls around her, though she knew it was not safety indeed but only a thin barrier.

Still, she enjoyed the feeling. She put her shoes by the door, crawled into bed, turned on the solar lamp that sat next to it, and picked up her book, *Models of Society*. Studying for her master's degree in sociology was how she spent most evenings. Though she had no time to attend classes, she could study on her own and take the exam later. As she read about how power systems work in families and how rules and values guide behavior, she could hear the sounds of bombs exploding and guns firing. She jumped each time the weapons shattered the night's stillness. She could hardly remember what it was like to go through the routines of the day without the war.

She let herself be transported into the pages of the book, imagining how she could take the strategies and implement them in Jumla. She closed her eyes and rested the book, still open, on her lap.

The sound of bullets shattering the window of her room and puncturing the roof above her made her cover her head with her hands, and the sound of several bombs exploding at once pierced her eardrums. It was not the occasional nightly blasts that she was used to hearing. It was as if the bombs were inside her — in her head, her chest — paralyzing her as they exploded. Bullets from both sides crossed paths over the residence and embedded themselves in the walls of her room. She knew not to look out the window and that she should find some protection, maybe under the bed — but why? There was no safe place. *If death wants to find me, it will find me. How can I hide from it here?* And though every cell in her body felt as if it were on fire, Radha put the book beside the bed, turned off the light and pulled the blanket up over her head.

Just outside her window she could hear the voices of Maoists yelling, hoarse and livid, *"Arun! Arun! Arun!"* It must have been the command for fighting because it was followed by multiple bombs exploding and automatic weapons discharging. Huddled under the thin blanket, her mind raced back and forth — from considering escape routes to the more stoic approach of staying put. As she thought about staying in her room, under the covers, she remembered how her office had told her shortly after she arrived that this residence was not a safe location, positioned only 50 meters from the police station, on the periphery of the district headquarters.

Again and again, she had been ordered by the leadership in Kathmandu to leave the residence for her own safety but she had refused. It was a part of her strategy to live here. Sunil, the man who rented to her, was powerful in the community and her presence in his house gave her credibility as she brought money and activity into the house. She also knew that some of the hospital employees who resisted her changes and threatened her were friends of this man, and that she was safer within the district having made him her ally. But the main office did not understand the politics. When she would not leave, they sent a letter informing her that if she stayed and was killed in an attack, that they would not pay the insurance money to her parents. It felt like a betrayal of her commitment to the work.

Even as the bombs burst outside her room and she was facing the possibility of death that they had predicted, she burned with anger at the memory. *Cruelty in the name of policy.*

There was a break in the firing.

"Radhadidi! Radha Sister!" Bhanu, the building's owner, cried out Radha's name from his room next to hers.

Sunil appeared in her doorway, motioning. "Radha! Come with me."

A new round of bombs exploded and he crouched down. "Come!!"

He began to run back across the hall that separated their rooms, Radha and Bhanu following. The hall between their rooms was more like a patio. They could see sky above them and Maoists lined up around the house and in the field below. The small group running for Sunil's room could see the Maoists and the Maoists could see them.

"Arun! Arun! Arun!" She heard the order again. As they entered Sunil's room, the firing and bombing began again.

Inside the dark room, Bhanu crawled under the bed, took a blanket with him and cowered there, shaking and groaning. Radha could tell his mouth had gone dry by the sounds he made, as if the insides of his mouth clung to moaning as it escaped him. Sunil's wife and two children shivered on the floor next to an interior corner, and were bathed for an instant in glowing red light from a nearby bomb's explosion. The entire house shook with the explosion. Radha grabbed a blanket off the bed and fell beside them. She pulled the children into her lap, wrapped them in a blanket and tried to will the warmth from her own body into theirs.

"Shhhhh, my dears. Try to sleep now."

She gave them sips of water, rocked them back and forth as their mother hid money in pockets of her clothing. Sunil lit a cigarette and paced from the door to where the family was sitting. To the door. To the family. To the door. To the family. Light a cigarette. To the door. To the family. Look at the watch. To the door. To the family. Light a cigarette. Look at the watch.

"Radha, you have 32 teeth … a sign of goodness." It was a Nepali belief that people with a full set of teeth were blessed and that their wishes would come true. "Please tell me, will we live? Will we survive?" Sunil asked her the question over and over as he paced.

The sound of a helicopter's giant propellers took the place of bombs blasting for a moment. Light from its spotlight illuminated the yard and spilled in through the window. A bomb fell on the house next to them, again causing their home to shake. Then one hit the edge of the residence and they could hear the stone wall crack. Radha peeked out the window to see the neighbors' house burning, as was their own roof. Bullet holes in the roof provided a pathway for smoke to pour into the tiny room.

How can I sit here and let these children burn to death? Or die from smoke? We cannot go down the ladder. We are trapped and if we do nothing we will all die.

Radha and Sunil took turns peeking out the window and trying to block the smoke from coming in the roof.

"The chief district's officer's home is gone," Radha said. *Hours ago I stood planning for the hospital's future with him. Now I wonder if he is alive.*

One moment the little group that was huddled in the room surrendered themselves to the thought of dying, the next they tried to take action. Sunil kept checking his watch to announce the time but it seemed as if it hardly moved. As the hours stretched on, the barriers of propriety between them disappeared. When they needed to relieve themselves, they used a broken plastic pot.

Radha watched the fear of the adults in the room transfer itself to the children, who cried soft gulps of tears, without understanding. She wished she could shield them from such insecurity.

"Let us make a hole," Radha said to Sunil. She tapped the mud floor. "Here. We can dig through the mud floor. I'll wrap the children in blankets and toss them down to you. You are tall — you can go down first and catch them."

He nodded and handed her a small knife that he usually used to cut apples. And Radha felt the glimmer of hope that comes with a plan. She began to tear at the hardened mud with the blade — small bits of floor chipped off but before long the blade broke. The smoke thickened, descending from the holes in the roof. Radha threw the blade against the unyielding floor and slumped forward, her head in her hands.

Sunil came near and knelt next to his wife and children. "So, let us die together then," he said.

Shivering from cold and fear, the group left the corner of the room and crawled into the bed. Radha cradled one child. The mother held the other. The children fell asleep again and the small group sat together in the bed and waited for death to release them from the fighting.

Explosions. Shots. "Arun! Arun! Arun!" Silence. Every few hours, helicopters flew over, flooding the room with light — and giving the group hope that the fighting was over. But then more bombs exploded and gunshots sliced through the night.

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Morning finally came, and the sun sent rays of light in the window. Fewer bombs exploded. Rounds of gunfire slowed. But the group did not move. They waited for another hour until it seemed the fighting had truly stopped, and Radha volunteered to go outside to see what was left of the village.

The police tried to stop her as she climbed down the ladder.

"No. Why should I stay inside? I have survived the night. I am alive. And I need to see the hospital."

Radha stepped off the last rung and stumbled around the village on her way to the hospital, her legs resistant after so many hours crouched in the corner and on the bed. She felt as if she were walking in a dream. Smoke billowed from holes in the ground where the homes and offices that had made up the heart of the place had been the day before. Bodies lay like scars on the snowy ground, still-bright red rivers that had hours before been life, surrounded them. The sky was filled with smoke so thick she could barely see. Homes, offices, the bank, police station, the district development office, the public service office — all had been bombed and their remains still burned and smoldered. Charred pages from books and papers floated through the smoke-filled sky like vultures.

There was no way to escape the bodies as she made her way to the hospital. Everywhere she looked were those of friends and coworkers. Two polices officers' bodies hung from a balcony, their heads severed from their torsos. Radha closed her eyes too late. Numbness held her up. Surviving soldiers piled up bodies of the dead, tying ropes around the bodies' feet and dragging them to a pile in the army's training field in front of Radha's home. The severed body parts they collected in army blankets.

The police tried to identify all the dead but many were beyond recognition, and Radha watched as they searched for the missing deputy police officer, Bijaya Ghimire. A charred bone found near his shoes was all that was left of his body. *Every day he came to my residence to drink beer with the manager. He carried such stress for this place.*

Government helicopters arrived to take the bodies of some of the officers, including that of chief district officer Damodar Pant. Radha stopped beside his body, her face wet with tears. He had been shot through the temple. *Thirteen hours ago all these people — my friends, my colleagues — were alive.*

When Radha reached the hospital, the doctor ran to her and began to cry.

"We are lucky we survived," he said.

Radha was relieved to find that Roshana survived the attack. She and other workers and villagers gathered around her and they shared their stories of the night before. How the Maoists used the hospital to treat their victims, including the surgical room Radha had founded. How some of the people's quarters had been commandeered and used as additional treatment centers. How some people climbed trees and spent the entire night there, observing the atrocities.

When Radha left the hospital, she went to the army office, then the airport and finally the agricultural office — seeing who was still alive, assessing the damage and planning for dealing with looting, rebuilding infrastructure, and how to contact families outside the village to let them know if their loved ones were alive or dead.

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Though the Maoists had eventually retreated from their attack on the district headquarters, the devastation and loss felt like more than Radha could bear. She would later know that 28 out of

the 35 offices were destroyed. Countless homes of her neighbors had been bombed and burned. Forty-seven people — police, Maoists, government officers and neighbors — had been killed.

Among the dead were all the men she had met with the day before.

Bureaucracy, Another Kind of Mire

It was the weekend, and Radha was preparing to travel from Kathmandu to Chitwan to see her parents, glad for the break from her work frustrations with an international NGO, but worried about her mother, whose illness continued to progress.

The sun had long since set, and darkness of the April evening in Kathmandu made her shiver as much as the cool temperature. She boarded the bus and found an empty seat, settling in to think about how she might be able to persuade her colleagues to make working in Jumla a priority. Four hours later the bus lurched to a stop and Radha stepped off with the other passengers — several kilometers from her parents' home. It was 2 in the morning and without a phone to call someone to pick her up, she would have to wait until daylight to make the rest of the trip.

One by one, the men stepped off the bus. Some were picked up by friends. Others walked down the street, presumably to their homes. Some lingered nearby in clusters, talking. Radha approached a vendor who was selling tea. She bought a cup and began to sip, focusing her attention on the cup in her hands.

"Look at the little lady alone. We should keep her company," one man said, laughing.

"Would you like company?" Though he directed his question to Radha, she knew he posed it for the benefit of the other men. She edged closer to the vendor and bought another cup of tea. "Sometimes women are bought. Other times just rented," the vendor said, and Radha's heart sank a bit more.

She drank tea — and then more tea, holding on to the cup as if it was her only protection, ignoring the comments and looking away from the men. When night gave way to day, gratitude for the light filled Radha, and she started to walk to her parents' home. She was not harmed physically, though the fear and humiliation left its mark.

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Radha returned to work that Monday, and brought up the topic of sexual harassment to her colleagues. Her whole life she and the other women she knew had been exposed to harassment — in school, walking in the village, on buses, on bikes — and she knew it was time for policies to protect women and children, though she wasn't yet sure how to go about it.

"It is not right that we should have to be afraid when we travel," Radha said to her colleagues.

"Is it really such a problem?" one said.

For a moment Radha was silent, wondering how women who worked for human rights could look the other way.

"There are so many other things we need to work on," another said.

"Of course you say that. You have money and haven't had to worry about it for your whole life. But I have," Radha said. Her voice reached a higher pitch and the words came faster. "And what about the poor women who leave their homes at 4 in the morning to go sell vegetables in the market, and they can't return home until night? What about them? Don't we represent all the women? Isn't that why we're here?"

Silence was her answer, and Radha turned and left the room. Her hands were shaking and her head began to throb. It was clear to her that there was no interest in pursuing it, just as there was no interest in finding help for the people of Jumla. It felt as if all her arguments evaporated as soon as she spoke them. She knew why she was invisible to the power holders despite her master's degrees and years of work in the field. She knew she was not connected enough — with money or power or position — to be taken seriously. And though the knowledge did nothing to assuage her frustration, at least she knew the reason.

So. They refuse to help. Someday I will start my own organization and work for the people of Jumla and the poor and marginalized of the whole country. Someday, when the time is right.

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As often as she could manage, Radha would go to her parents' home, or they would come to Kathmandu when they needed to be near the hospital. In April 2009, Radha returned home to Chitwan for a visit.

Radha kissed her father goodbye.

"Don't go, Radha," her father said. "I don't have hope for your mother. Please."

"But I have a commitment," Radha said. "It's a budget meeting for the organization and if I do not attend, I will not get the funds I need for my initiative. I will be back soon, Father."

Exhausted and sick, Radha flew back to Kathmandu for her meeting. But the way her father asked her to stay weighed heavy. The negotiations for funding were critical to the work she wanted to do. *But what if my mom dies while I am away?*

Three days of meetings, and as Radha negotiated she thought about her mother. She called home to check on her status and though her father answered the phone, he would not say much.

"Is Mom very badly sick?" Radha asked.

"Um hmmm," her father said. He was never in such a bad mood, saying so little, and Radha's stomach tightened with fear.

"I will come tonight."

But the negotiations were not over and Radha was determined to secure the funding she needed.

"Please, sign the papers and I can return home to my dying mother," Radha said to the country director. "If you don't sign, I don't go."

Radha felt dizzy from fever. All the traveling back and forth to her parents' home while working in Kathmandu was taking its toll. She was afraid that her mother would die before she could return home, but she did not want to let go of securing the budget.

Eventually the country director signed, and Radha breathed relief and called her sister to arrange a car to Chitwan.

Radha arrived at her parents' home at one in the morning.

That was the day she gave her mother the injection. That was the day she and her brother walked the calf over the river they dug, preparing the way for their mother's spirit. That was the day Radha again promised to make sure her mother's death wishes would be honored.

In Fire, Freedom

Relatives and neighbors filled the house, but emptiness hovered at the edges. The day after Radha and her brother had led the calf over the canal they dug to guide their mother's spirit, their mother gained strength. It was Nepali New Year and that meant cleaning the house, ritual bathing, and preparing rice, dhal and ghee. The familiar smells of soap and water, open windows and sweet rice buoyed the family.

"I want to bathe," Radha's mother said to her daughters, who stood alongside her bed. "I want you to cook and clean so we can celebrate the goodness of the New Year. And I want you to bring me outside."

According to Nepali custom it is not good to die under the roof of a house, so Radha and her sisters helped their mother bathe and brought her outdoors. The flat-roofed house cast shadows on the patio where Radha and her sisters laid a mat with blankets for their mother. From the place where their mother rested they could see the road: flat, broken shards of stone mixed with gravel. A green hue reflected from the home's stucco walls onto the family. Radha's mother waved her children inside and put her fingers to her mouth to indicate that they should eat.

"But, Radha, please stay."

Radha swallowed tears. Her chest felt like it would explode as she knelt and held her mother's hand, the day's heat radiating up from the cement beneath them. Her mother's skin was a blue-grey from lack of oxygen, despite the tank that delivered it to her mask.

"Take care of the young children. Make sure they are safe."

Radha nodded, thinking of her niece who had meningitis at 7 years old, and who was now mentally disabled. If they had taken her to the hospital sooner, maybe ….

"And your father. Do not disrespect him. Let him smoke. It gives him pleasure."

Again Radha nodded, unable to speak. Her mother squeezed her hand tighter. Her mother's raspy, constricted breaths between words, muffled by the mask.

"Make sure your young sister marries. Promise me."

"Yes," Radha managed, barely audible. Her mother did not say Radha should marry, and Radha was not surprised. She had heard her mother say it was an individual's right to decide. That she would not have married if she had been born in another time — although she loved Radha's father. Her reasons for wanting Samjhana to marry were her own, though Radha guessed what they might be. To be a woman alone was a challenge, and Radha's mother was protective of her youngest girl.

It was the last conversation they would have, and Radha felt her mother's regrets placed on her own heart — a whisper of expectation, and Radha understood. Her mother was so strong and smart, and harbored dreams in her heart that she now willed to Radha.

"Thank you, Radha. Bring Samjhana." One last pressure on Radha's hand.

Radha did as she was told. She brought her youngest sister to their mother.

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As the sun rose on the day Radha and her family would see their mother's spirit to the other side, firing the body and offering it to the river, Radha prepared herself to honor the woman who had given birth to her. She chose casual clothes for preparing the body, donning a Snoopy t-shirt and slacks, covering her head with a scarf. Outside, the sky was clear and heat began to assault the ground, radiating from above and below.

Radha and her sisters Samjhana and Usha, and their brother Kishor prepared their mother's body. They bathed her and painted sandalwood paste on her face and hair. They gilded her body with garlands of fresh flowers, and placed her on a litter so they could transport her to the river. Once she was ready, they waited for the priest.

The priest arrived and, ignoring Radha, addressed her brother.

"You shall cover her face. And bind her body with bamboo."

They all knew that was what tradition ordered, but they also knew their mother's wishes.

Radha and Samjhana moved to the head of the litter that bore their mother, ignoring the priest's directions. Their brother and relatives and neighbors stood behind them. Radha began to lift the weight of her mother's body, and the others followed. They took her to the van the family had hired to transport the body and mourners to the river.

It was traditional for mourners to walk to the river but Radha's mother had not wanted that. She did not want her death to cause hardship for those who came to see her, and so they had hired a van and a bus.

Once they arrived at the river, Radha and Samjhana wrapped themselves in lengths of red-and-white cotton cloth, their hair hanging loose, framing their faces. Their brother wrapped cloths of white around his waist, as was the tradition for mourning sons.

The priest approached Radha, who stood at her mother's head.

"Your brother will do this."

"I will do as my mother wished," Radha said. "It is nonsense that a daughter cannot perform the funeral rites."

"It must be the son."

"Nonsense," Radha said. "I will do it, as my mother instructed."

Radha knew that women were not allowed to view the funeral rites, let alone be the one to lead them. She felt as if she had been preparing for this moment since she was a child and heard her mother's fear about only giving birth to daughters. That only a son could guide a person across to heaven. When she worked as a nurse and saw the men bearing the bodies to the river, Radha would follow — from enough distance so she wouldn't be noticed — so she would know what she should do when the time came. The divisions between men and women were vast, and there were so many human rights Radha had fought for — and would fight for in the future. But being denied access to death rites: It was the most basic of rights. She, of all people, should be able to see her mother from life to death.

For almost an hour Radha argued with the priest.

"Fine," he said. "If your father will allow it, I will not stand in your way." The way he offered the option to Radha made her think of one who was tired of sparring, and knew his way would be upheld by the judge.

Radha watched the priest talk to her father. Her father's head bowed as he listened to the respected priest. Finally, her father spoke.

"Son or daughter? Daughter or son? To me, both are equal."

Radha's heart constricted with respect and admiration of both her father and mother. It was she who stood at her mother's head, ready to light the funeral pyre, though she was a woman. It was she who stood in opposition, flame in hand. But it was her parents who put her in this place. They instilled in her the desire and the courage to do what they could not do themselves.

They held her up.

The morning sun warmed Radha's back as she and her family stood before the river. She looked at her mother's face, not covered. Her body, not bound. Her mother's act of independence even in death.

Radha lit the fire beneath her mother's body. The flame began to take hold, slowly, emitting sparks and smoke. But soon it erupted and engulfed the dead, and ashes sprinkled the river.

Epilogue

During the first days of the mourning period Radha went through the motions of the rituals, numb. Normally the mourning sons and daughters were segregated but Radha insisted that they be allowed to be together for the 13-day period. Why should they not be able to share their grief? Her brother, the only son, would otherwise have had to bear his grief alone.

The mourning family members were not allowed to bathe in the bathroom. It was a requirement of the rituals, though usually observed only by men, that they would bathe in front of the priest. Radha tried to change from one sari to the next without exposing herself, while the priest watched her.

"If you carefully wrap the clean sari around thoroughly before taking off the old one, you can remain covered," he said. "It is so much easier for men. Your breasts make it so much more difficult."

She wanted to slap him. She was a grown woman and knew how to dress. To have him watch her as she did what was required was an insult.

Later, the group began the three hours of rituals, performed each day. Rituals that were connected to property rights. If you did not participate, you would not inherit. Radha thought about how property rights were tied to death rituals, and it woke her from the stupor of her grief.

"Radha, are you with me?" The priest interrupted his chanting.

No, I am not with you, Radha thought.

Radha succumbed to the rituals for six days, crying. She would pull herself together enough to bathe and participate, but for those days, tears were her master. On the seventh day she woke, thinking about her mother and how much she loved her. "Crying is not the solution." Her mother had said it to her again and again. *If I love her so much, why don't I start thinking about my studies and what I can do?* On that seventh day, Radha set her mind.

After the 13 days of mourning, Radha went back to work in Kathmandu. It was 2009. Her mother had died in April. By September Radha was in the Philippines studying for her master's degree in development management.

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In 2010, Radha launched Action Works Nepal (AWON), the organization that embodies her campaign "Let's Live Together", or *Miteri Gaun.*

Within the organization, Radha works to elevate the rights of the marginalized. As a part of her work, she launched SHARP — the Sexual Harassment Response and Prevention campaign — to build peaceful and secure environments in educational institutions and public transport. And she

continues to work in remote rural areas where poverty and marginalization are at their most extreme.

"This is critical," Radha says. "Do people have a choice as to where they are born? Of course not. We are all human. And we all have rights. This is a movement that can live in Nepal and throughout the world. As long as I'm alive, I will be working to make the invisible seen and valued. It is right, and it is possible. We can live together. Miteri Gaun."

A CONVERSATION WITH RADHA PAUDEL

The following is an edited compilation of select interviews conducted by Sigrid Tornquist in September and October of 2012, and an interview by IPJ Deputy Director Dee Aker on Oct. 11, 2012, in the Peace & Justice Theatre of the IPJ.

Q: What was life like for you when you were a young child in Chitwan?

A: It is really very hard to describe. I am the fourth child out of six; there were five girls and one boy. Every day our mom would wake us at about 4 in the morning. We read until sunrise, ate a little roasted corn, did chores and then walked to school. After school we did more chores — feeding the cattle, cleaning their stalls, gathering firewood — what we did depended on the time of year. Women and girls really were not valued much in the community, and there were always household duties for the girls as well. We all went to school but many girls did not attend past the early years.

Q: How did it happen that you were encouraged to go to school?

A: My mom and my dad really had a passion for education. They were poor but had that passion. My dad was an orphan and had to work to survive so he never learned to read. And my mom never had the opportunity to go to school. When her brothers were studying under the tree where their classes took place, she would hide nearby and try to hear what the boys were being taught. It was hard for us to buy books and supplies so we would pass them down to the younger ones. When I was in class one, I had my first pencil — a very tiny pencil that was passed down to me from my elder sisters. I did not have shoes so I went to school without them.

Q: That gives an image of how difficult life was, but as girls aged and came to puberty life got more difficult for them. What happened when a girl would hit puberty?

A: Yes, you are right. I started to understand more about that when I was about 7 years old and my second sister began to menstruate. During the time she menstruated she was kept in the neighbor's shed in a room above the cattle, as our older sister had been when she menstruated. According to the culture they had to sleep there for 21 days the first time, 14 days the second time, nine days the third time, and then each month for the number of days they menstruated.

When my second sister began to menstruate I was the one who brought rice to her, and I saw the pain she was in. She felt scared and lonely. During the day, she had to work for the neighbors in their main house as a kind of payment for using their shed. During that time, she wasn't allowed to see the sun nor men, nor was she allowed to touch fruits or vegetables. And at night, she slept alone in the shed. She was so afraid.

When my sister came home, we had a kind of celebration. Our dad put a tika — the mixture of rice and red dye — on her forehead. Though it was a celebration, it really symbolized a kind of stigma and degradation of women. From that day on a woman is looked upon differently in the community and in the family. She is isolated and treated as filthy because she menstruates.

It wasn't until I was in nurse's training that I understood what the purpose of menstruation is, and I realized it is a boon to be a woman. Because we menstruate, we are able to bear children. That is all

it means, and it is a thing to be proud of. So everywhere I go I try to find opportunities to explain it to the people and abolish the practice. It is not practiced in all of Nepal anymore, but it is still practiced in many rural areas. In Jumla where I do much of my work, they still practice chhaupadi, requiring women to be isolated in a cow shed when they give birth as well as when they menstruate. During their forced time away from the family, many girls are raped and some die from snake bites.

Q: Besides the practice of chhaupadi, what is life like now for women and girls in Jumla?

A: First, children are not valued — particularly girl children. No matter what the religion or caste the child is born into, Nepali culture dictates that there be a birth ceremony. But in Jumla, if the child is a girl they don't have a birth ceremony. And girls are discriminated against even by their mothers. Girls are not given good food, and they are trained that they are born for others. They take care of the younger children — even bringing them to school with them. How can they learn if they're taking care of babies and young children? Many are not allowed to go to school at all; they are too busy collecting produce, taking care of cattle and cooking for the family.

As soon as girls are born their parents and grandparents start to prepare them to be pushed out of the house at a young age. Nepali law says that a girl has to wait until she's 20 years old to get married, but in Jumla they are often made to marry at 12 or 13 years old.

Q: During the Maoist conflict you were working and living in the Karnali region, specifically in Jumla. How did you come to work in that region and how did you manage to work between the two groups — the government and the Maoists (People's Liberation Army)?

A: By education I am a nurse, and that gives me strength in both groups. Because of the conflict with the parallel government — that is what the Maoists called themselves — it was difficult to travel between the field and the district headquarters. Both sides considered me to be a spy because of my work with people from both groups, and my access to both. My degree and nursing skills were my gateway to connect the people.

The government officials said the medicine I brought to people in the field was for the Maoists: for caring for their wounded, and in that way they thought I was supporting the Maoists. When they would accuse me, I would challenge their thinking. I would say, "In Jumla, every 30 minutes a woman is dying because of a lack of maternal health services. They are dying — and you guys are using your authority to abuse me instead of supporting me." They knew they needed me to continue my work in the field and in the hospital so they would back off, but it was difficult to be accused always.

And the Maoists would send letters to me that said, "Get out of this place within 24 hours or we will kill you," or "When you did the field visit last week you were passing information. If you come again we will kill you." Sometimes I was detained and they would ask me to join the PLA. I would not speak for a while and when I did, I spoke quietly and talked about work with the women and children. I would keep advocating for maternal and child health and the hospital.

Q: What inspired you to create AWON, Action Works Nepal?

A: I quit my permanent job with the government due to being unhappy with all the lip service. Later I joined bilateral organizations and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) where I also wasn't satisfied. I saw so much corruption and lip service there as well. Each project and organization said they worked for poverty alleviation and social justice but many of them actually created poverty and social injustice. I really felt isolated and alone. In the meantime, I realized that it is possible to work for social justice but the people I had been working with did not have a mind set for taking action.

When I came back from Manila after finishing my master's degree in development management in 2010, I could have again joined one of the NGOs. Already in Nepal there are 70,000 NGOs registered but most are inactive and a few are corrupt. There is a perception there that NGOs are formed to make money, so at first I did not want to start another one. I thought I should just work within an existing NGO to fulfill my dream of creating peace, justice and eliminating poverty. But I was not able to find one that would focus efforts in the Karnali region, where poverty is at its worst. So in 2010, some friends and I formalized our activities under the name Action Works Nepal.

Q: The Miteri Gaun — "Let us Live Together" — campaign is at the heart of AWON. What is the focus of the campaign?

A: In 2001, when I arrived in Jumla, I was looking for a porter and encountered two children. Later, I came to know they were from a Dalit family. They were poor and orphaned and were portering to take care of their grandparents. That day, I realized that the birthplace of an individual is not their choice at all. I could have been born in Jumla because my dad was there while he worked as a cook for a government employee.

Even before starting AWON, while doing coursework in the Philippines for my master's, almost every day I kept thinking about Karnali. Even in school I felt discriminated against because of the way I dressed, because of the way I spoke. And the first statement in each class, in each subject, was to eliminate poverty. But I kept thinking that even though that was the mission, many people were getting their advanced degree to get paid a high salary — and not to work for the poorest of the poor. They forget about the people who are at the bottom of the pyramid. And they considered my view to be irrelevant in the international arena.

But every day I kept on thinking: How can we live together? These people are supposed to be leaders. At least 50 percent of them will get a good job and work in a powerful organization but will they think about the poor people? All these organizations — the United Nations, World Bank, all of them — are supposed to serve the poor people.

And I also thought about the place where I work, the western part of Nepal. I thought about why there is so much poverty there. There are many contributing factors — the politics, geopolitics — I understand. But no matter whether we understand the factors or not, we know that the area of western Nepal is failing to get rid of poverty. And so I kept thinking: How can we live together?

And I started to work on the "Let us Live Together" campaign. It is a way of thinking about people and poverty. Is the place of birth the choice of a person? Of course not. If it was, wouldn't people choose to be born in a rich country and region? Based on this philosophy I determined that no one

has the right to discriminate, and everyone is obligated to contribute no matter who they are, where they are from and what they do for a living. So I started to write about the social and economic reasons behind poverty, discrimination and injustice and how we might eradicate it through a holistic approach.

Q: What is the main focus of your work in Jumla currently?

A: Through my years of experience, I realized that if we really want the transformation for a more equal society, we have to use a holistic approach. There are NGOs working in Nepal but there is a disconnection between the organizations and the most marginalized people, especially in the rural setting. Nowadays, after the signing of the peace accord, there are a few organizations that have started to work in the rural areas, but still they are not working in the worst areas.

Specifically, we work in four thematic areas: women's empowerment, education support, economic empowerment and humanitarian assistance.

Women's empowerment: We organize and mobilize women, men and traditional healers on civil and political rights, gender-based violence prevention and response and traditional harmful practices. There are many causal factors behind caste, class and gender discrimination. We have to address those causal factors to really transform the people of Nepal. We are working for equal empowerment for women. We particularly want to help empower the Dalit — the poorest of the poor women.

Education support: Education is the foundation of this empowerment. Without education we can't achieve equality and empowerment. Key activities include providing scholarships, teacher support, capacity building of school management committees, parent mobilization, etc. We provide scholarships for poor and marginalized girls. We also support teachers, facilitate community development through the schools, and try to create an environment within the schools that mobilizes parents to create a learning environment to study at home. I found that in Jumla, the parents never realized that education is a kind of weapon. They never saw the value of school because they think their children's future is only to marry and have children.

Economic empowerment: We mobilize groups using a saving credit scheme, linking people with vocational training and identifying local resources and making use of them.

Humanitarian support: We provide medical and legal support during manmade and natural calamities. For example, we are still trying to address the effects of the bomb blasts from the Maoist insurgency. We provide resources for people, including clothes and books.

Q: In the area in which you work or grew up, have you experienced any effects of human trafficking? And if so, how does your organization address the problem?

A: In Nepal, human trafficking still happens a lot. I am aware of girls who have been trafficked for slavery — both sexual slavery and slave labor. Wherever there is a border, there is trafficking. The government is struggling with managing the poor and is not giving much attention to trafficking. Some NGOs are working on it but are mostly focused on Kathmandu and southern Nepal. People don't realize that women and children are trafficked from Jumla, but they are. Their vulnerability is increasing due to the area becoming more accessible with new roads and more vehicles.

Q: Now that the Maoist conflict has quieted down, what has happened to the former combatants? Are they reintegrating into the community?

A: There are different strategies to reintegrate the combatants according to the peace accord, depending on the position they held. For those who don't qualify for reintegration they are really having a hard time. The government provides a small package to provide some food and vocational training but it is not enough. And psychologically, when people joined the PLA, they did so to try to get freedom from caste, class and gender discrimination. And now they are stigmatized because of their participation with the PLA. To be honest, I am not very optimistic that they are going to turn it around. We have a long way to go to really reintegrate the people. There is a kind of fear — can we have peace? Is peace only the absence of war? No. I am not working for the absence of war only.

Q: In 2011 you spearheaded the country's first case to publicly address sexual harassment at educational institutions, in terms of the level of study and the number of the people affected. What happened and how did you help the women involved?

A: The harassment took place at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu. Twenty-eight young women were sexually and physically abused by the supervisors while they were sitting for their master's degree exams. Days after the event, some of the women came to my office and told me what had happened and asked for my help. They knew no one would consider it a serious issue, not even their families. I started to organize a series of security meetings with parliamentarians and they were shocked that I would dare talk about sexual harassment. No one talks about it because it is considered a stigma, and my organization was stigmatized because we dared talk about it.

So we started to work to raise awareness through the SHARP radio program. In the name of the radio program we had a chance to interview stakeholders: drivers of the buses and passengers. Once we finished the research it was easier to talk about the research findings, and the parliamentarians realized it is really a huge issue and the only policy is a small code of conduct that is incomplete and not implemented at all. It took us 21 days to register the case. We went to the human rights commission, police station, bar association, other activist associations before we were successful in registering it. The government did not want to recognize it as a human rights violation.

And because of my work on this case, I became a target of harassment. The media targeted me and printed and aired many stories misrepresenting the case and my part in it. I was also threatened. People made threatening phone calls, left voice messages and posted YouTube videos. I was also surrounded by a group of men when I was leaving a guest lecturing opportunity at the university. The gang of men threatened me and took photographs of me that they posted in the media. Several times I was followed and eventually I went to live with my sister, feeling my flat was no longer safe. The case is ongoing and I have still not returned to my flat because I receive threatening phone calls in the middle of the night.

I was also physically and verbally abused when riding a public bus (by the driver and conductor). It is really tough for women in Kathmandu to use the public bus.

Q: What is your connection to the government? How do you try to influence the government, such as it is with all of its complications right now?

A: We have done work with the national level and international level on women's rights' issues. For example, through Action Works Nepal we contributed to the Women's Campaign for Peace and Constitution, which is aimed at formulating a gender-responsive constitution and peacebuilding process in Nepal. We also created the Sexual Harassment Response and Prevention campaign (SHARP), which addresses harassment on public transportation and in educational institutions through conducting a series of consultation meetings with lawmakers at various levels and sectors.

Now the country is in the process of drafting a constitution. Representatives from AWON — sometimes me, sometimes my colleagues — have dialogued with the president of the country and the prime minister to raise their awareness of the caste, class and gender discrimination issues, especially in Karnali, and now we have included issues concerning the Karnali region in the draft. There were already some good policies and international declarations addressing the issues but they are not applied, so including the issues in the constitution is only part of the answer. We have to apply the strategies. There's still a lot of work to do.

BEST PRACTICES IN PEACEBUILDING

Social Justice Strategy	Implementation Description	Examples
Maintain a low profile as opposed to creating a hierarchical structure.	The strategy is an extension of the goal to empower marginalized people. All activities and surroundings reflect respect for the local people and their culture. Making use of local foods, language and customs equalizes the power structure and fosters an immediate connection and level of trust.	• Share office space with community members. Uses simple office furnishings. • Share duties with people when possible, including cleaning and administrative duties. • Dress in an unassuming manner. • Use body language that communicates shared power and respect. If guests or co-workers are sitting on the floor, sit on the floor with them rather than take the only chair in the room.
Become a "connector" between groups and individuals.	Using nursing skills to serve the whole community—in their homes, the hospital and village—builds a bridge between the organization and oppositional entities.	• Though her primary role was to work as a human resource development officer in Jumla, Radha also provided nursing treatment to whoever needed it, from local government officials, to women and children, to recognized and non-recognized combatants
Make optimum use of local resources.	Including the community and its resources in the work enables and environment for developing social capital.	• Purchased materials at the local market, when possible. • Trained local people and incorporate their skill sets into serving the community.
Demonstrate respect to all people.	The place a person is born is not a matter choice. Treating people equally, despite their caste, class or gender, creates a foundation for social justice. The outgrowth of the practice is that all are obligated to contribute to equality rather than discriminate, by virtue of their status as human beings.	• Used language that reflects equality and respect. For example, used "sister" or "brother," instead of "madam" or "sir." • Kept in mind the rights of the person we are working with and for. • Demonstrated empathy, not sympathy.

Capitalize on challenges by turning them into opportunities.	Conflict and challenges provide an opportunity to review the work done by civil societies and governments, and create action plans based on failures and successes.	• Requirements for hiring and mobilizing community health workers included having a high school equivalent of grade 12. Many villages had no one who qualified, which meant those villages were not able to meet their own health criteria within their communities. Changed requirements to having a grade 10 equivalent and provided training so needs could be addressed within their own communities.
Start small.	Grass roots initiatives that are small, spontaneous and sustainable have a greater possibility for success and growth. People are encouraged to contribute even small amounts of time and/or money.	• Created the blood bank funds for Miteri Gaun—Let us Live Together Campaign— by asking people to give as little a single rupee, or a day's equivalent to purchasing a snack. • Collected 10 rupees per person from airport passengers for emergency obstetric fund. • Today, this strategy is replicated to mobilize people across globe in "Miteri Gau-Let's Live Together Campaign."
Make use of indigenous knowledge and skills.	Learning from marginalized people and maximizing their knowledge and skills contributes to their empowerment.	• Trained traditional birth attendance for maternal services. • Worked with traditional/faith healers to work toward abolishing Chhaupadi (menstrual taboo).

Reach out to the poorest of the poor household groups and individuals.	Use of 12 various participatory tools, such as Power Mapping, identifies the power centers and most marginalized people in the community. Use of the tools engages stakeholders in the self-empowerment process.	• Divided women into groups during community meetings and facilitated discussion to identify poverty pockets and power centers. Created maps (using whatever materials were available, including drawings, stones or pine cones) to identify how the women moved within their communities, how power and wealth were distributed, and how gaps could be addressed. The group created action plans based on their findings.
Organize and mobilize the poorest groups.	Self-identifying and prioritizing issues through a series of community mobilization, networking and advocacy activities, leads to creating solutions that work for and can be implemented by the community.	• The women themselves identified issues of unequal wages, resulting in solutions including re-enrollment in school and self-advocacy strategies.
Partner with representative groups.	Including stakeholders in the NGO-selection process fosters transparency and people- and needs-centered operations.	• NGO selection committee was composed of government officials and community members. Selection process was based on a point system—assigning more points to groups with marginalized members (i.e., Dalit women) in positions of leadership.
Engage men in fight for women's rights.	Including men in the process of fighting for women's rights facilitates real and lasting change for communities.	• Engaged men through training, orientation and discussion of women's rights and how addressing gaps benefits the whole community. • Encouraged men to be part of action plans to stand with women in the fight against gender-based violence.

Foster environment in which marginalized people can practice autonomy by allowing mistakes/failure.	Allowing for failed endeavors empowers marginalized community members to take action and develops leadership at the local level.	• Taught principles such as money management to marginalized women and then encouraged then to make decisions within their communities regarding how funds are managed. • Encouraged those people who are more passive to speak to the media regarding human rights' initiatives.
Make use of existing individuals' resources.	Constructing human rights' movements using whatever individuals have fosters empowerment. While financial contributions are important, it is not the only concern. Internalizing an inclusive way of thinking is critical.	• Engaged in conversations with individuals to explain that Miteri Gau—Let us Live Together Campaign—means taking every opportunity to talk about and explain the movement.
Engage most resistant individuals and groups in discussions.	Educating and including power holders in process facilitates change.	• Networked with political leaders to develop relationships and trust and invited them to training sessions. • Planned training sessions at distant locations to eliminate the tendency of power holders to come late and leave early. • Used games and team-building exercises to equalize power differentials.
Network and partner with like-minded people and organizations.	Forming and joining networks and alliances raises awareness of issues and strengthens the initiatives.	• Created network of 15 organizations to address women's rights issues on local and national level. • Organized informational meetings and peaceful protests to include women's rights in constitution.
Lobby and advocate for initiatives and constitutional change.	Lobbying at local level raises awareness, and at the national level	• To establish the blood bank, created a partnership with the Red Cross and hospital by

	forms and enforces policy. implementation	first lobbying individuals. Explained need to chief district officer, hospital director and other key leaders. Later, organized formal meetings, created an action plan and had stakeholders sign initiative document. • Organized series of activities, including dramas, sit-in protests and interactive educational seminars.

BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER — Sigrid Tornquist

A freelance writer and editor, Sigrid Tornquist believes that putting words to an experience can be a catalyst for change. Most of her varied work experiences have been focused on respecting and elevating the opportunities and rights of people whose value is often not recognized by society at large. She has worked with children with disabilities, senior citizens in a resident setting and in the community, and for an elementary school with a high at-risk student population. Tornquist has a BA in writing from Metro State University and is currently pursuing her MFA in writing from Hamline University, both in St. Paul, Minn. She spent several weeks in Cameroon writing about the Birth Attendant Training Program class offered annually by the Life Abundant Program, which seeks to empower people in the community to combat the high mortality rates of women and children. In 2010, Tornquist's column "Perspective," in the magazine *Specialty Fabrics Review*, was awarded Gold in the category Best Regular Column, given by the Minnesota Magazine & Publishers Association. That same year she worked as a peace writer with Woman PeaceMaker Sarah Akoru Lochodo of Kenya and wrote the narrative "Empowered to Hope."

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE
at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ), based at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies, is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the university to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice.

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives in places like Nepal and Kenya, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute is home to the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series and WorldLink Program, and produces several publications in the fields of peace and justice.

ENDNOTES

[1] A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article "'Women Cannot Cry Anymore': Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict," by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

[2] IPJ Intern Jini Agrawal contributed to the Conflict History section.

[3] "Observing Nepal's 2013 Constituent Assembly Election – Final Report," The Carter Center, May 2014.

[4] "Social Change in Conflict-Affected Areas of Nepal," The World Bank, Social Development Notes – Conflict Prevention & Reconstruction, January 2004

[5] "Nepali women break silence about sexual harassment on buses," UPI, 17 October 2012

[6] "Human Development Index," United Nations Development Programme Human Development Reports, http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi

[7] "Analysis: Rethinking food insecurity in Nepal's Karnali region," IRIN, 21 March 2013

[8] The practice of forcing women into isolation during menstruation and childbirth, described in more depth in the earlier story "One Day a Child, the Next a Woman."