

## A Study of Single Women's Empowerment Practice in Nepal

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Many societies have a word that indicates the state of having lost a spouse. In English "widow" and "widower" are such terms. In Japanese "Goke", "Miboujin" and "Kafu" are for widows, and "Yamoo" and "Kafu" are for widowers. In Nepali "bidhawa" "rãdi" are for widows and "bidhur" "rãdo" are for widowers. In Nepali "rãdi" is also a term for widow, but it has a derogatory meaning.

Each society not only distinguishes those who have lost their spouse from those whose spouse is alive, but also assigns some norms and roles to them. In Nepal society, especially Parbatia Society<sup>1</sup> it differentiates a widow from a married woman. Furthermore there are restriction on behavior and physical decorations such as jewelry, makeup, clothes and so on.

However the restrictions are not the same for men. Only for females are widows differentiated from married women, and discriminated as widows by being called "rãdi". Widowhood is given priority as a social category to identify personhood rather than motherhood or womanhood. Women are always forced to be conscious of their widowhood and prohibited from wearing accessories, bright color dresses, attending auspicious rituals etc. Furthermore they are scolded by their husband's parents and

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1 Parbatia comprises the majority of Nepali people and they speak Nepali language as their mother tongue.

relatives as being the cause of their husband's death.

On the other hand, the handling of widowers is extremely different. Although there are some words to indicate those who have lost their wife such as "bidhur" or "rādo", they are neither differentiated from others by appearance nor identified solely as widowers. Most widowers marry again soon because remarriage is not difficult. Therefore their status as widowers will be modified to "married" soon, and the period as widowers is very short.

Husbands are senior to their wives for most couples in Nepal. The age gap is 3-4 years on average, and because wives live longer than their husbands, husbands rarely become widowers. (Majupuria 2007:356)

My question then is how do women feel about their lives and how do they cope with everyday life after their husband's death in a society that has such forced strict norms on widows. This paper will demonstrate widows' strategies and practices to survive in Nepal. Furthermore, it also examines the process of their negotiation for widowhood within the society by using the theory of "Community of Practice"<sup>2</sup>.

## 1. Focus on widowhood

### 1.1 Precedent studies on widows

Cultural Anthropologists as well as Sociologists have focused on widows in the context of kinship relations. They have analyzed marriage as a socio-cultural functional union to connect between

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<sup>2</sup> "Community of Practice" theory is introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991).

kinship communities. In other words, they considered marriage as a social system to maintain relationships within communities and focused on marriage alliance as exchanges of women and properties<sup>3</sup>. They focus on contractual rights over a woman's sexuality.

Concerning divorce and bereavement, there are not so many articles compared to marriage. The reason for poor precedent studies is that widowhood is a minor topic and a non-attractive topic.

In most societies marriage involves various luxurious ceremonies with chanting, singing, and dancing. Some symbolic items are used in rituals, and they are very interesting for scholars. Furthermore a widow's position is recognized out of marital ties (Shino 2003). Divorce is simple and may not involve any rituals. Even though some rituals are performed to become a widow, they are performed inside family territory and so not attractive.

When women lose their spouse, she becomes a widow at once, and mourning rituals are performed. The ritual to become a widow is one part of a mourning process for the deceased person. As it is not the main purpose, it is not attractive for scholars coming from other cultures. Therefore the study of divorce and bereavement has not been given any significant attention.

However many societies have some social system to take in widows. For example, the dead husband's brother or some other close kinsman replaces him as the husband after the former husband's death. This is known as the "levirate" and described in a monograph about the Nuer people written by Evans-Prichard(1951). Levirate is

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3 E.g., Goodenough(1970), Evans-Prichard (1951), (Levi-Strauss 1966) etc.

the system to make sure not only the contract between husband's lineage and wife's lineage endures but the rights over her sexuality and future children remain in his lineage.

Widows have been depicted to be passive subject. Therefore the daily practices and the voices of widows have not been mentioned in monographs.

As the Feminism movement became popular in 1960's, studies on widows improved rapidly. Lopata and her colleagues (1987) published a collection of theses concerning widows all over the world.

## 1.2 Widows in South Asian context

A major topic of widowhood is a Sati<sup>4</sup> custom where a widow immolates herself at the funeral of her dead husband. After becoming known to people over the world, it became one of the most important global issues for human rights, and widows' situation is now being treated as a social problem. That is to say, the Sati custom has been a symbol to show the low and discriminated status of widows, the violation of their human rights and the existence of violence against women in South Asian Societies.

While a married woman whose husband is alive is identified as an auspicious woman in Hindu societies, a widow is recognized as an inauspicious woman. A married woman can wear a lot of ornaments such as a brilliant red sari, beadwork necklace, vermilion powder on a parting in the hair, etc. as a symbol of her husband's being alive.

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4 Sati had been performed in the upper class in Nepal since the Licchavi dynasty era, which is the oldest dynasty. (See Majupuria 1991)

A widow is prohibited from wearing symbolic decorations to show auspiciousness because it increases the widow's sexuality. Further more a widow is looked down upon because of inauspiciousness. Sati is explained as the only way for a widow to get a respected status. People used to respect a widow who chose to be burned and immolated together with her husband's corpse. They believed the woman burned for Sati becomes a Goddess (Tanaka 2002). However the Sati custom has caused a big dispute, because while some see it is a tradition, many see it as a violation of human rights<sup>5</sup>.

The situation of widows has been described in some ethnographic studies. Widowhood is a dreaded time of life (Lamb 2000), an asceticism period to live, and the situation is recognized as a situation of "Social Death" ( Chakravarti 1998:64-66 ). A widow is depicted as a dangerous subsistence for the community because of too much sexuality (Yagi 2007).

In Nepali society as well as other South Asian societies, a widow's sexuality is regarded as an extremely dangerous social anomaly due to the lack of a husband's control, and that she presents a potential problem to both her affine and consanguineal kin relationships. For the affine group she can never use her fertility. And yet they have an obligation to support her (Bennett 1983:243-244). Galvin(2003) has described widows who resist particular requirements, especially the state of high-caste widows facing the harshest proscriptions (Galvin 2003:82-83).

However the rigid requirements for a widow do not be applied

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5 The Roop Kunwar's Sati in Rajasthan state in 1987 is one of the most famous episodes because it causing a heated controversy in India. (See Sen 2001)

in every caste. "Unlike high-caste women, low-caste women do not follow the food proscriptions or wear white clothing for longer than a month. Widowed untouchables find it relatively easy to remarry with few social proscriptions. A widow of any caste is considered inauspicious, but the lower-caste widow can shed this state relatively quickly by remarrying" (Cameron 1998: 149-150).

People focus on the rigid behavioral requirements imposed on widows. We can only catch their images as subordinate subjects forced to follow norms. Conversely they live their actual lives supporting themselves, raising their children, and hewing out their own future. So they are not merely subordinate subjects.

In recent years articles written about widows' daily practice are increasing. Galvin(2003) wrote about widows' living strategy choosing their residences and religion. Yagi(2007) depicted that some widows move to urban areas, choosing the option to live with their lover. This paper will also describe widows' living strategy.

### 1.3 Widowhood and sociocultural restriction

It is easy to know who is a widow even now in Parbatia Society such as Bahun<sup>6</sup>, Chettri, and so on. Widows follow restrictions rigorously by wearing white dresses, and no bracelets which are a symbol of auspiciousness, as well as beadwork necklace which shows their husband is alive as well as other ornaments. They look strange in communities where most women wear red sari. Most widows are dressed in dark colors like blue, green, and so on.

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<sup>6</sup> Bahun and Chetri are vernacular forms of Brahman and Ksatriya castes, respectively.

Recently we can see married women wearing T-shirts and Jeans in the capital city, Kathmandu. However the trend is only urban areas. Married women in rural areas prefer to dress in red Saris.

Widows are prohibited from applying vermilion powder "sidūr" to the parting in their hair and "tika", a mark of blessing place on their forehead. They have to be careful of their behavior in some rituals as well as in their daily lives. Society forbids them from attending auspicious rituals like marriage, an initiation rite (Bartaman<sup>7</sup>). Nowadays they can, however, sometimes be present at these ceremonies. But a widow should not attend a wedding ceremony within one year after her husband's death even if it is for her daughters. To visit a temple and her own blood family is also prohibited for one year, and she lives purely by eating only pure foods like rice she cooked herself, milk, butter, and taking a bath every morning.

A widow is slandered because it is said she caused her husband's death. Her husband's mother may claim her son was killed by her daughter-in-law. A widow may even be called a whore. Sometimes she is sent away because people believe widows make their fortunes disappear in the time when they hope to get luck.

Furthermore a widow may be a victim of domestic violence. Societies accuse a widow of being a witch. One widow said, "Everyone in my community considers me as being inauspicious, even now."

Widows live cleverly not only by subordinating themselves to social norms but by adjusting to their situations conveniently.

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7 Bartaman is an initiation ritual of high- caste males to become adults wearing a sacred thread.

Therefore I will describe widows' practices for survival in a rigorous society in next chapter through my field data<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. Widow's daily practice

### 2.1 Resistance to force widowhood

As soon as a husband dies, his corpse is carried to a bank of a river to do cremation. The ritual of becoming a widow is carried out by having a bath, removing the red sari to don a new white one, wiping off the vermilion powder on her parting, breaking her bracelets, and taking away her beadwork necklace. A forty-three year old Dalit<sup>9</sup> widow expressed her feeling with sorrow, "I was very afraid that I would not be able to wear them again in my life." A thirty-nine year old Newar<sup>10</sup> woman stated in anger that "I got angry when I took off my bright color sari at the funeral ceremony. Why do only women have to change clothes? What's the meaning of this?" A Bahun woman in her sixties said that "Red thread is one kind of thread, so it is not different from other colors. We should change our society to one where a widow can wear the same colors as married women."

Most of the widows have a hatred of the classification from other women and their discrimination towards widows. They also have been taught that a widow is an inauspicious being, a despised being, and a discriminated category. Therefore they know they

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8 I carried out my research in 2006- 2007 in Surkhet, Kaski, and Lalitpur districts.

9 Dalit are people who are regarded as low castes, sometimes called Untouchables in South Asia.

10 Newar people, an ethnic group who speak Newari language, are an indigenous people of the Kathmandu Valley.



will be disliked in society as a widow. The worst term is "rādi" which also identifies them as prostitutes. They don't agree to distinguish widows from other women. Therefore sometimes complaints appear through their voices.

## 2.2 Interpreting rules for body appearance

Interpretation of body appearance differs from woman to woman. Some Bahun woman, for example, Sumitra in her forties and Jeni in her twenties, think it is okay to wear a nose ring, while Hira, a Bahun woman in her sixties, believes widowhood consists of no decorations such as nose rings or sidūr. Concerning the color of the sari, some women consider it to be okay to be dressed in orange, pink, and other bright colors. Others consider it to be limited to only dark colors like blue and green. Therefore the rule is vague even though it seems strict.

Some people blame a widow for her behavior, others do not. Sumitra wore a red sari to a wedding ceremony in her village. I have never seen someone wear red after becoming a widow. She told me that;

This sari was presented to me by my oldest daughter a few years ago. But I couldn't wear it. Do you know why? Everyone in the village knows I am a widow, and I was afraid to be blamed or have bad things said about me behind my back if I put on a red sari. One day my daughter got angry with me for not wearing the red sari sent by her, and she told me a widow also can wear it now. Then I put it on timidly today. But nobody has blamed me.

Kokila, a twenty-three year old Bahun woman, looks like an unmarried girl, because she puts red tika on her forehead and wears

a bright colored Kurta-Salwar, a popular set dress of long pants and a loose shirt falling either just above or somewhere below the knees for unmarried people in South Asia. She told me a Hindu priest put on the red tika. He told her that she was so young she could put on red tika, even if she was a widow. Her parents-in-law could not object to the Priest's deed.

A widow may worry most by herself. There are indeed some people that think a widow should not wear inauspicious symbols. So, needless to say, many people are forced to obey the socio-cultural norm of widows. However the cases outlined above show that widows choose their appearance themselves by interpreting the norms.

### 2.3 Finding partners and remarriage

Widows are not supposed to display any sexual attractive behavior, and they have to spend their lives suppressing their sexuality. Remarriage is prohibited for the highest caste Bahun women. Other castes can remarry but it is not so popular. However higher caste women do have some opportunities to find a partner and remarry in their individual lives.

A twenty-three-year-old Chettri woman said that "I have passed my time thinking never to remarry because I am a widow. I know there have been some opportunities to remarry in the past. When a man proposed to me through a mediator, I refused it. Because most of the men who propose to widows were widowers, they are old, or have children. Unmarried men do not want to marry us." But contrary to her expectation, she married again one year later to an unmarried young man.

There are some women who also have a boyfriend. Pramila, a thirty-nine-year-old, confessed about her boyfriend. She said that, "I have a boyfriend, who is unmarried, and advises me on everything. I think that to find a reliable boyfriend and to make love are important in my life"

There are some widows who have intimate boyfriends, and a few women live together with them. Some women wish to remarry. However, their children's existence is an obstacle to remarry in the society. Nevertheless there are some women with children who marry again.

Recently a number of young widows in their twenties or thirties have increased as a consequence of Maoist insurgency in Nepal.<sup>11</sup> Women, who have lost their husbands have a half hearted attitude about remarrying themselves. However opportunities to remarry are increasing.

Some women claim they have experienced sexual harassment. A Chetri woman in her twenties had the experience from an acquaintance, a respected school master.

One day he and his wife came to my house to encourage me, because I stayed indoors after my husband's death. They are kind and respected in society. He is also gentle and moderate to everyone. But an unbelievable incident occurred on that day. When his wife left, he came to sit next to me closely, told me that he loved me and touched my hips.

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11 The Civil War in Nepal , labeled the People's War by the Maoists, was a conflict between government forces and Maoist which lasted from 1996 until 2006. During the conflict More than 12,800 people were killed (4,500 by Maoists and 8,200 by the government). (National Geographic Magazine, p. 54, November 2005.)

I was very surprised and I could not give way to my anger.

We can understand that widows are distressed about lovers, sexual harassment, and remarriage. In a way the situation is the same as how unmarried women feel.

#### 2.4 Negotiating within families

Most widows face trouble in families. They resolve difficult family problems on all such occasions. A woman expressed her experience as "to make me clever." A twenty-nine Chetri woman had to negotiate with society as the deceased husband's younger brother insisted she was not his brother's wife. He plotted to get the pension of his dead brother from the Indian army. If she was not the wife, the right to get the pension would move to his parents. She asked the government office to issue a paper that confirmed her marital relation and succeeded to get proof from society by collecting neighbors' verbal evidence.

A Newari woman in her thirties transferred the name of a piece of land from her husband's name to her own name. Her husband's family opposed registering it in her name for the right of property, because there was a custom where sons inherit parents' property in the society. The relatives wanted the son to inherit the land, but she held onto her intention. She told me the reason why she registered the land in her own name, was because her son was so young that she would have to get out from the house if her son should die. At last she solved the problem by negotiating with the family.

There are many widows with property problems. Some women negotiate by themselves while others obey the opinions of relatives and have the property taken away from them.

## 2.5 Leaving the husband's family and building a house

Many widows go to urban areas after their husband's death. They act cleverly so that this does not lead to any friction. One of the ways they do this is by using the reason of education for their children.

Devi, a thirty-seven year old Chetri, came to Pokhara after persuading her mother-in-law. She had lived in her parent-in-law house for seven years. She has complaints about her father-in-law regarding money management. However to leave there for economical reasons is a bad reason. And it is possible that the in-laws might not agree to her leaving from the marital house for that reason. Therefore she chose to stay until her son was ready to go to school. At last she succeeded in being allowed to leave for the sake of her son's education. However, she had to wait for seven years to succeed in this.

Some women get a lot of money because of their husband's death. A widow who loses a husband working in police or army during a civil war is paid 750,000 Nepali Rupees as compensation from the government. Some women build new houses with this compensation.

A Chetri woman, Sushuma, in her twenties married four years ago<sup>12</sup>. Her husband worked in the police. He died at in the Gorkha district in 2002 after an attack from Maoists. When he died, she was in Surkhet where her blood family lived. After her husband's death she moved to Jhapa in eastern Nepal, to live with her parents-in-law. A problem as to the money paid as compensation occurred with her

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<sup>12</sup> The data was collected in 1996 in Surkhet, western Nepal.

parents-in-law. She built a new house to live in for her parents-in-law, but she had to get out from the house because they plotted to own the house. Therefore she left from there and built a small house again to live with her daughter in Surkhet, where she now lives.

A Chetri woman, Bhabana, in her thirties, and Nanda who is Bahun in her thirties built their own house using such compensation. Babana's husband worked in the Nepali Army, and Nanda's husband worked in police.

They have the right to get a pension for their lifetime and choose options to leave their husband's family. Another reason it is possible to be independent at their age is they are not old and their parents are still alive, therefore they can get support from their own parents.

## 2.6 Transforming adversity as a chance for empowerment

Some widows transform the adversity of husband's death to a chance for empowerment. One method is to study again. A young Chetri woman told me about her hope to go abroad. She had already started to go to school to get a bachelor degree. "My husband opposed my studying again, but now I am free to go to university. I have started to get computer knowledge for six months in a private school. And I hope to go to Korea or Israel. I will ask my mother to look after my son."

One woman got a driver's license and start working as a driver, another woman became a trekking guide after graduating from a guide-school, another woman became a beautician. They had not imagined working independently when their husbands were alive.

Bimala who is active in the local society to empower widows said

that "every widow should not be discriminated in the society. It depends on us. If we are afraid of the society, people may discriminate against us. But if we are successful, people in the society cannot look down on us."

How do widow get some power to act independently? By what are they empowered? In next chapter, I will analyze widow's practice and sources which empower them to become active subjects who can negotiate and resist the society.

### 3. Practices in single women's group

Ekal Mahila Samuha, means single women's group, is a group organized by widows. Recently they identify themselves as "Ekal Mahila", single women. They hope to wipe away the negative meaning from words pertaining to widow such as "bidhawa".

Ekal Mahila Samuha is organized by widows who belong to many ethnic groups and castes, generation, educational background, economic condition, and so on. Furthermore their motivations to attend the group vary. Some hope to do something for widows; others come to get some economic help. Some hope to be volunteers in the group; others don't want to do anything. So the group is not united strongly in that everyone has the same aim or need for it.

#### 3.1 Ekal Mahila movement and Ekal mahila samuha (single women's group)

Ekal Mahila movement means "single women's movement" to get human rights for widows. There are some active NGOs for widow's right in Nepal<sup>13</sup>. The most active NGOs is the "Women for Human Rights (WHR) led by Lily Thapa who is a widow herself. It was

established in 1994 and consists of networks of widow's group all over Nepal. The number of widows attending the movement was 14,000 in 36 districts out of 75 districts in Nepal in 2007. It is the largest organization for widows in Nepal.

Each widow belongs to one Ekal Mahila. Samuha means each group. Each member uses the word "Kendra (a centre)" for the head office of WHR, and "Samuha (a group)" for each group they belong to.

They recognize some issues concerning widowhood: 1) widowhood is not viewed as a natural period in the life of a woman. This period is marked with social and economic exclusion by society and family, 2) widowhood has its own moral dimensions such as behavior code, dietary restrictions, dress color-code and traditional practices, 3) the lack of support from males indicates multiple burdens such as child rearing, caring and earning, 4) most of the Ekal Mahila have a hard time meeting the basic necessities of life, 5) young Ekal Mahila are often ridiculed and made objects of sexual harassment, 6) Ekal Mahila are often ignorant of her rights related to inheritance and ownership. (Rights(WHR) n.d.)

The main objective is to strengthen the lives of Ekal Mahila, to raise their social and economic status, to mainstream the right of Ekkal Mahila, and to develop their confidence and their self-esteem.

The main actual activities to empower individual widows are: teaching widow's right, encouraging widows to wear red color sari and red tika, having them save small amounts of money for micro

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13 STEP Nepal, a group of NGOs, has also worked to organize single women's groups and to manage some programs for widows.



credit, encouraging them to get training for job such as making handcrafts, beautician training, driving training, and lobbying the government<sup>14</sup>.

They lobby not only the government but the regional administrative offices. Some group has succeeded to get a public space to build their office for free, to get resources in the regional budget, to get the help of regional leaders and authorities such as police, hospital, and political parties. Furthermore they got some donations from international NGOs and bilateral agencies.

Any widow can join the movement regardless of age, ethnicity, and castes. This organization is a women's group over relative and residential networks.

### 3.2 Making Ekal Mahila Samuha (single women's group)

Although the process to make each group varies, we can classify one as their being organized voluntarily, the other is made by the WHR. The former register to the WHR as an Ekal Mahila Samuha in that district, the latter is assembled through workshops the WHR performs or district offices. The WHR aims to establish at least one group in each district through performing workshops and giving training.

In the case of the Kaski district, the group is made by core members voluntarily. Pramila told me the process of making Ekal Mahila Samuha;

One day I listened to Lily talking about WHR and Ekal Mahila

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14 WHR passed a national declaration to use the word "Ekal Mahila" instead of using "bidhawa".

Samuha on radio broadcasting. I was very interested in the group. I wrote down the telephone number of WHR, and I called the office to make my own group in Kaski. When we established the group in 2005, many widows were only crying. We started focusing on their capacities, that is who can do what. And when we talked our troubles and suffering with each other, I understood other widows faced more difficult problems than mine, and I decided to work for widows.

### 3.3 Participating in Ekal Mahila Samuha

The most popular participating process in the group is through workshops. A widow is informed of some workshop and training by neighbors or officers working in the city hall. Not only they are pressed to attend them but they also think it is a good opportunity to get some knowledge or some job.

Juna, twenty-nine and a secretary in an office in Kaski, said that, "a teacher working at a neighboring school informed me about Ekal Mahila Samuha. He gave my name to the village office when he was asked if widows lived in our region. He notified my name to WHR, and suggested to me that I go to a meeting of WHR."

Some women get information about Ekal Mahila Samuha from blood relatives. As Devi was taught the curriculum WHR organized and was given a bright color sari to go outside from her own elder brother and his wife, she decided to attend the single women's group.

In the beginning, they study human rights and the civil law. Bisnu, a Dalit and thirty-nine-years-old, said that "I have changed my thinking after I knew many things from the curriculum. I never knew a widow could inherit her husband's property equally

nor inherit it by name. I underwent psychological trauma, was worried about it, and depressed until then. Nobody had taught me widow's rights concerning property until that time."

By attending Ekal Mahila Samuha, widows acquire the modern knowledge and become to use it practically.

### 3.4 Sharing social suffering

Radhika, a Bahun forty-year-old, said that "I know each of the widows' faces and their troublesome circumstance, and I can get power from my colleagues. Prabha, a Chetri and thirty-eight-year-old, considered fellow members to be colleagues that she can share social suffering on and with their strength realize situations. Members believe widows have the same social pain and can share it. Therefore they regard the group as the space to remember they are not different from other women whose husbands are alive, but the same as many women. Moreover, by participating in the groups, they are able to spend their lives not being reminded by their pain. Devi said that, " This space is to share my mind and to get new friends for me. If I was not here, I would pass my time watching TV, eating and sleeping inside my house all day long. I enjoy my daily life coming to the group. The sons and daughters of widows also recommend that their mothers go to the Ekal Mahila Samuha.

The place that they call the "office" is only a space to feel relieved from social constraint for widows, since widows face libelous statements from society regarding places where widows gather.

However they do not share similar experiences and do not always talk about their suffering to each other. It is common aspect that they are all widows, but their socio-cultural backgrounds, their

motivation and intention vary. In other words, they share a few facets only. Furthermore some know others individual life histories; others don't know them at all.

Therefore the space is a place where they imagine, or have hope by sharing similar suffering and talk about their experiences of being discriminated by their family, relatives, society.

### 3.5 Performing rituals

"Communities of Practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991) is practice communities sharing meaning in their deeds by utilizing common historical and social sources, and it accomplishes individual intention as well as intention of a community. Its theory is a model to understand the construction of something in the practice of a community (Tanabe 2003:137).

Ekal Mahila Samuha practices to negotiate with political authorities and influential people in society. They petition to get a portion of the regional budget, priority to attend job preparation training, and assistance from some public agencies, such as NGOs, associations, and political parties. The communities negotiate disputes between widows and families.

However although most of the activities are to settle actual problems, they sometimes perform rituals for the Ekal Mahila Samuha. The main ritual is "Tij." Tij is a popular festival and ritual for women, observed on the third day after new moon on the fifth month, Bhadau (mid-August to mid-September)<sup>15</sup>. Women perform rituals for long-life of husbands or future husbands and redemption

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15 Eg., Skinner, Holland, Adhikari 1994, Bennett 1976,

from the sin of menstruation in the day of Tij and Rsi Pancami, which is performed two days later. Women celebrate it by fasting for the entire day to become pure for the ritual. They also wear an auspicious bright red sari, put on vermilion powder and a luxurious beadwork necklace. After worshipping to the Siva temple, women start singing and dancing. Sometimes a woman becomes an improviser making original songs by beating her hands. She often puts irony and complaints to parents-in-law, or society in the song.<sup>16</sup>

Conversely Tij is not an enjoyable day for widows, because it reminds them that they are widows. They seldom observed dancing and singing on that day. Most widows stay in their own house quietly.

However widows of the Ekal Mahila Samuha celebrate their Tij on this day. They come to their office wearing red Sari and beadwork necklace, and put red Tika on the forehead of each other. They look the same those women whose husbands are alive. Some widows hesitate to put on red Tika, but their colleagues tell them that widows can celebrate Tika too, to encourage them. And then they perform chanting, dancing, crapping hands with the sound of Drums. The following is one of the songs which the group in Surkhet was chanting at the Tij in 2006. They improvised these songs.

It is raining strongly.

I could not go to mother's house today.

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16 Skinner, et al. focus on the Tij songs provided as a medium for women's social commentary.

I sing a lot of song, then my anxiety will be blown away.  
I am a widow. Now I wear red clothes.  
Let's sing a song.

In old times everyone despise me as a widow.  
They can not do so now.  
Please come together, Sisters.  
We are equal to other women.  
Let's talk to other widows

Let's talk and wear red ornaments  
Please understand about a widow's anxiety  
We are not alone now  
Widows' children could neither eat sufficiently, nor go to school.  
We can give them satisfactory meals now.

Widow have to wear white clothes, but,  
Let's enjoy wearing red clothes.

We have some hope of  
Sending our children to school  
To go to the Ekal Mahila movement  
We did not have anything, sisters.  
Most of us were crying, sisters

Everyone dies even if she has a lot of gems  
Everyone has to understand our anxiety  
Sisters, did you see that,

Every colleague is dancing wearing red clothes  
When I came here two years ago, the situation of widow was not changed

Even if we cry, widows in the next generation will not cry  
When a wife dies, her husband marries again  
When a husband dies, his wife wears white clothes  
My life was very hard.  
Please give me rice with batter, mother.

How will the Tij festival be next year?  
Let's dance in the Tij festival this year  
Change is coming.

The singing of songs at the Tij is not intended for political performance. They celebrate Tij as a practice for colleagues in their group. There are only widows in that space. In the beginning, after some practitioners sung, danced, and put on red Tika, every participant begun to do so. Through practices, such as gathering and celebrating Tij, widows confirmed that widows are also women who can celebrate Tij. They used the framework of a traditional Hindu ceremony, and show that they have changed from women always crying to being empowered women through their practices.

### 3.6 Resolving problems

Now I shall describe some cases where widows have resolved problems by themselves. First is the case of Shanti, who is in her thirties and a teacher in Surkhet. Shanti's husband who had been worked in the village office disappeared during the Civil war.

She heard from an influential person in society that her husband was killed by police because he was suspected to be a Maoist. The murder by police was also reported in the newspaper. But it was not confirmed because his corpse was not found. Then she visited the local police to know the truth, and requested the issuing of a certificate to show that he was dead. If he were killed by police, she should get some compensation from government, because the Nepal government reimbursed some money for bereaved families at that time even though the deceased was not a soldier or a policeman on duty. He was a civilian suspected to be a Maoist. She believed he was not a Maoist although he agreed to Maoist's arguments. She needed living expenses and educational expenses for her children, and went not only to the local police but to the police headquarters in Kathmandu. But she could not get the certificate. She complained to the widow's group, and appealed to WHR. At last she got the support of an international human rights organization who assured they would look for him as a missing person.

She claimed to authorities about her problem, and used as many resources to solve it as she could. All widows know about her efforts in the group. Society tends to not attach much importance to women in public area or to negotiate their problems, especially in cases of weak widows such as poor, illiterate, elderly, low caste, and provincial widows. They seldom make claims to authorities because they know the fact they are ignored. However some poor widows have started to claim their problems in public spaces like courts, village halls, and so on. So what makes it possible for widows to practice social negotiations?



### 3.7 Getting power (Shakti) not to be frightened by society

We can hear that widows have obtained a lot of power through their narratives. The following story is spoken by Junu;

I have changed after attending the Ekal Mahila Samuha. Before joining the group, I was fearful of society. Sometimes I heard a neighbor criticizing me while looking at my sari and red Tika. She would say, "Junu is walking wearing a bright colored sari and red Tika. What does she intend to do? It has been less than two years since her husband's death." But I continued wearing them. I could protest against her because I know every widow can wear any color of dress like any other women. I have my colleagues in the group of widows who also put on red Tika. I know it is not her own policy, society makes her blame me. After a while she stopped blaming me. Now I don't worry about her blaming me at all. I think we can change the recognition of widows in society, if we ourselves are changed."

There are many women who have stopped being fearful of society after participating in the group. Gita, a thirty-two-year-old Chetri woman, told that her dread had been blown away. "Now I can talk in front of many people, and don't dread society, because I have become empowered."

Bimala, a senior widow, said:

After joining the group many widows faces look different. They have turned their mind to the many things they are able to do by themselves. They know many widows' successes. I think their appearance influences their positive practice and give new hope. Now they must be empowered.

Widows show their practice to get power, ability and knowledge in the group. They learn not only knowledge but the behavior of

practicing social action from other widows. Now they understand they don't need to dread society through other widows' practices. The practices of widows who have change society aggressively.

#### 4. Ekal Maila Samuha as a socio-cultural community of practice

We understand widows carry out some social practice in the Ekal Mahila Samuha, by participating in performances, and learning socio-cultural living strategies. Through them they get capacity to be able to free from the discriminated social suffering, or try to free from the social burden. The appearance is just the subject to make life better, and to practice to create their own future.

Ekal Mahila Samuha is an assembled group from different backgrounds. Their common identity is not so obvious, and their common factors are few except being a single woman and a widow. They don't practice many activities such as sharing cooked rice with each other, living together. Perhaps they would not have much contact with each other if each woman was not a widow. To consider the group as a community is difficult because of this frail identity as a widow, poor common elements, and poor common experience.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) defined an assembly group as a community of practice, which does not grow a sense of belonging to the group, or construct a common tie between participants firmly, but makes it possible for them to find out various identity styles as subject of practitioners. The community of practice is a group from a mixture of backgrounds to accomplish each objective by acquiring methods of practices, even though their interest and background is deferent.

Ekhal Mahila Samuha is certainly the community of practice

where widows share a frail identity and practice learning strategy to survive in society. Wenger called the state of keeping activity mutually a "joint enterprise". The joint enterprise of the practice in the community is a source to negotiate to authorities and resist systems in society.

From a widow to Ekal Mahila, a single woman

While "Bidhawa (widow)" is a passive state of a woman who has lost her husband, "Ekal Mahila (single woman)" is an active state, a subject and agency partaking in society. To identify as an Ekal Mahila leads women to attend the community of practice, and make them become active and perform joint enterprise with other widows.

However the practice is not "trouble" which is not a subversive action that Butler (1990) call gender trouble. Ironically the practice confirms the hegemonic system to oppress widows through their practice of wearing red and to get the same rights as women who have husband do. In other words, they negotiate with the hegemonic social norm as a member of the community, but they do not fight it. The practice of widows may be a small strategy to survive in the society.

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