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VOICES OF RURAL WOMEN IN NEPAL:
IMPACT OF LITERACY ON THE LIVES OF WOMEN

A Dissertation Presented

by

KESHAB DEEP THAPALIYA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2006

School of Education

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KESHAB DEEP THAPALIYA

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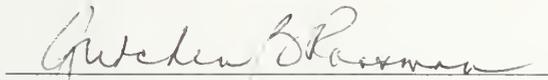
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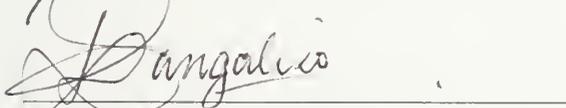
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LOVING DEDICATION

**I humbly dedicate this study to my departed parents,
Mr. Mani Deep Thapaliya and Mrs. Khem Kumari Thapaliya,
whose love for education and service to mankind
has been a source of inspiration for all of us.**

I fervently pray to the Lord to bestow His bounty upon their souls!

**Despite being barely literate, they nurtured and inspired
their children to adorn themselves with the light
of education for service to humanity.**

**Without their unselfish love and
unrelenting care it would have not been possible
for me to withstand the arduous and frustrating journey
I have embarked upon while pursuing a higher education.**

Truly, my words are inadequate to express how deeply I am obliged to them.

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I would acknowledge the care and love I received from my late Chair, Dr. David C. Kinsey, who lovingly nurtured me during my academic journey. I am truly indebted to him for his invaluable guidance.

As a foreign student struggling to survive in a different land and culture, I was fortunate enough to bask in the love and care of so many people without whose kind support my quest for a higher education would not have been possible. From the bottom of my heart I express my sincere gratitude to all of them.

Although it is not possible for me to mention the names of all my friends and well-wishers on this page due to the lack of space, Helen Sousa is one person whose name I cannot afford to leave out. She has been a constant source of inspiration and guidance to me. Her loving care and support has helped me get through this journey. I am really indebted to her and I ardently pray to the All-Mighty to bestow His loving bounty upon her. Also special thanks to Braulia Caban without whose assistance this project would not have been completed.

I wish to express my appreciation to all the women who volunteered their participation in this project. I take my hat off to them for their cooperation and kind hospitality, which made my fieldwork enjoyable and educational. They did not

hesitate for a moment to open up their hearts in responding to my queries. I am truly grateful to each one of them.

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Finally, I praise the Lord for having enabled me to get through it. I implore Him to assist me in using the knowledge and skills I have acquired for service to mankind.

ABSTRACT

VOICES OF RURAL WOMEN IN NEPAL:

IMPACT OF LITERACY ON THE LIVES OF WOMEN

MAY 2006

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The study explores the complexity of female literacy from the live experiences of women. The purpose of this qualitative research is to describe rural women's perceptions about literacy to assess how it impacts their lives.

Female literacy is exceptionally low in Nepal. In spite of the efforts to raise women's educational status through literacy programs, women have rarely benefited from them. Most literacy programs are top-down, short-term, often organized by outside literacy providers, usually males. These programs are resource intensive, keeping their services from reaching a multitude of illiterates. In addition, the teaching methods, materials and program strategies used in most adult literacy programs hardly reflect, in particular, the interest, needs and concerns of women. Since there are few studies describing women's perceptions about literacy, we have little understanding of the complexity of female literacy. What did literacy mean to rural women? What did the women perceive as benefits from literacy? What types of

literacy programs are beneficial to them? The study sheds light on these fundamental questions.

Using the participants' observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, this study collected qualitative data from 150 hours of observation, 15 individual in-depths interviews and six focus group discussions with 48 rural women. The data was collected from twelve sites across the country over a period of two years.

The study indicates that rural women need literacy skills for fulfilling their needs as expressed in social, cultural and economic practices. The need for literacy to actively participate in economic activities was, however, felt strongly by most of the rural women. Changes in women's lives were indicated by their increased knowledge, positive attitude and new behavior. Rural women's abilities to articulate their concerns, participate in decision-making, and to organize themselves for collective actions were some of the examples that entailed a change in their lives. Even for those who did not become fully literate, these experiences were empowering. The study also indicates that rural women benefited from literacy programs that focused on both functional and liberating elements.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This study looks at the relationship between literacy and rural women in Nepal. It explores how literacy has impacted the lives of Nepalese women. In this chapter, I briefly present the contexts in which this study took place. The need and significance of the study are also described. A set of research questions is given to inform the reader about the focus of the study. Included in the chapter are the definition of key terms and concepts and the description of how chapters are organized.

1.1 Background Information

Many people still do not know much about Nepal. Even though it came out of obscurity and became exposed to the international community in the early 1950's, Nepal is a land of mystery in the eyes of outsiders. For the benefit of readers who are less familiar with the development of literacy programs in Nepal, I present a brief description of Nepal and literacy programs as they are reflected in this study.

1.1.1 A Description of Nepal¹

At the heart of Southeast Asia, a landlocked country, Nepal is sandwiched between India and China. Nepal has an area of 147, 181 sq. km. stretching from East to West with a length of 885 km., and from North to South with a mean width of 193 km. Ecologically, Nepal is divided into three major regions, the Terai, middle Hills and

¹ All the statistical data presented in this section are from the "Statistical Pocket Book, Nepal, 2004", a census report based on data collected in 2001, published by His Majesty's Government National Planning Commission Secretariat, Central Bureau of Statistics, Kathmandu.

Mountain. The Terai region, a flat land bordering with India to the south, is referred to as the 'granary' because it accounts for a large portion of the total agricultural products. The middle Hills region consisting of foothills and several small valleys is relatively low in agricultural production due to its terrain topography. To the north, forming a formidable frontier with Tibet, China, is a range of snow-capped mountains, including Mt. Everest, the highest peak in the world. Politically and administratively, the country is divided into five development regions and seventy-five districts. The lower administrative units are Village Development Committees (VDC) and Municipalities. Currently, there are 3915 VDCs and 58 Municipalities in the country.

According to the census of 2001, the total population of Nepal is 23,151,423 of which there are 11,563,921 men and 11,587,502 women. The density of population in 2001 is estimated to be 157 persons per square kilometer. Comparatively, the Terai region is densely populated. In the rural areas population is high. The census shows that only 14 percent of the total population lives in the urban areas. Adults of age 15 and over are mainly concentrated in the rural areas.

Nepal is a predominantly agricultural country where almost 85 percent of the total population is dependent on agriculture for its livelihood. The contribution of the agricultural sector to GDP is not significantly high. One of the major reasons for its small share in the national economy is that only one-third of the total land devoted to agriculture is arable.

Several religious groups have coexisted peacefully in Nepal for ages. As much as 80.62 percent of the total population professes Hinduism. The second largest religious group practicing Buddhism accounts for 10.74 percent only. The other minority groups

such as Muslims, Christians, Baha'is, etc. constitute the rest of the total population. The subtle practices of age-old caste system within Hinduism are still found in rural areas even though the legislature prohibited them in the early 1960's². It is rather important to note that most people in Nepal believe that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purpose are one and the same, and that their teachings are but facets of one truth.

There are 101 ethnic groups in Nepal of which 61 are considered to be aboriginals. Nepali is the official language, which is spoken by 48.61 percent of the total population. The second largest group whose mother tongue is Maithili is counted at 12.30 percent. Bhojpuri, Tharu and Tamang stand at 7.53, 5.86 and 5.19 percent respectively. Newari, Rai, Magar, etc. constitute the rest of the languages spoken throughout the country. Maithili and Bhojpuri are spoken mainly in the Terai region. The Hill tribes such as Tamang, Rai, Magar, etc. have different mother tongues. Among these different language groups, various dialects are spoken within a two-mile radius. There are 92 languages and dialects spoken within Nepal. Even though Nepali is used as a medium of instruction in educational institutions, it is not commonly spoken in the rural areas.

² Although 'Muluki Ein', a legislation passed by the government of Nepal in 1964, prohibits all sorts of prejudices, caste discrimination is still practiced in communities where the majority of people are illiterate. Women, in particular, are affected by this tradition. Even today, women from remote areas, including the far western regions, are forced to isolate themselves during menstruation. Women spend days in a separate shed, usually a cowshed with animals, because they are considered untouchable. According to reports they often fall victims to fatal diseases due to unhygienic conditions.

1.1.2 Literacy Programs³

In Nepal organized literacy efforts began after the advent of democracy in the early 1950's. The overall literacy rate then was estimated at 2 percent, which has increased to 54.1 percent according to the 2001 census. The female literacy rate has also risen from almost zero to 42.8 percent. Apart from formal education, adult literacy programs, which have been organized by both the government and non-governmental organizations, have largely contributed to the rise of female literacy rate. Currently, there are many types of literacy programs in Nepal that vary in their uses of curricula, teaching methods and program strategy. The following are two types of literacy programs, which are the major sources of imparting literacy skills to the participants of this study.

Among the conventional literacy programs, a national program using the widely known Naya Goreto (New Trail) curriculum has been used throughout Nepal by both the government and non-governmental organizations. As a subsidized basic literacy program, it introduces a literacy curriculum that uses time-tested NFE techniques to increase the level of participation, and employs a key-word method derived from the Freirean approach to literacy as a core technique to impart literacy and numeracy skills to adults. The program also aims at increasing awareness around social, economic, cultural and political contexts with a purpose to improve the quality of life. Although the Naya Goreto curriculum was originally developed for illiterate adults, it has inspired many permutations, including curricula for the out-of-school population. However effective the Naya Goreto Literacy Program is, it is limited in coverage as it calls for a heavy subsidy and skilled facilitators.

³ An elaborated discussion on literacy development in Nepal is given in Chapter 3. In this section a short description of literacy programs is presented to reflect the contexts in which this study took place.

An alternative to this conventional literacy program is the Women's Empowerment Program that has adopted a curriculum, which combines basic literacy with post literacy programs. The curriculum is based on a "group-study"⁴ approach to post literacy training, which is organized by the participants themselves. The curriculum uses a set of materials that are essentially learner friendly and, to a large extent, "self-instructional"⁵. It is designed for the women who are learning to read and write. It has two parts; first, a literacy curriculum that is intended to serve as both the basic and refresher courses for rural women. The second part is a self-instructional curriculum focused on microfinance, including micro-enterprise development. This curriculum takes women step-by-step through the process of forming strong economic groups, mobilizing and keeping track of their savings, lending for short-term working capital loans, and building micro-enterprises.

1.2 Need for the Study

In light of the existing practices of literacy and in an effort to make literacy more meaningful to women, there is a need for a study to explore the life experiences of rural

⁴ The "group-study" approach to literacy refers to a self-help literacy program in which participants in a group help each other to go through self-instructional curricula. Education, Curriculum and Training Associates, a national NGO pioneered this approach, and later used for the Women's Empowerment Program, a project funded by USAID/Nepal and implemented by Pact. This program enrolled more than 120,000 women across the Terai region.

The group-study approach was first developed and piloted with 400 women in 1996 before it was adapted to the Women's Empowerment Program launched in 1998. This approach has wider implications for self-help basic and post-literacy programs. It combines basic and post-literacy training that women themselves can organize with minimal support from outside. Participants supply materials such as pencils, notebooks, kerosene, light, blackboards, etc. necessary for running the program.

⁵ Self-instructional curricula are a set of innovative materials developed to impart basic and post-literacy skills with minimal support from outsiders, i.e. facilitators and service providers. These materials combine instruction with texts to help neo-literates go through the curriculum themselves. Education, Curriculum and Training Associate pioneered these materials, which were adapted to the Women's Empowerment Program.

women. This study explores rural women's perceptions about the impacts of literacy on their lives. It describes the complexity of female literacy through the eyes of those who experience it.

In Nepal, women are marginalized in all areas, including education. The literacy rate among them is exceptionally low, standing at 42.8 percent as compared to 65.5 percent for males (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2004). However pervasive illiteracy among women is today, the female literacy rate has steadily increased from almost zero in the early 1950's to the current level. Yet, the gap between male and female literacy rate is significantly wide. In 1981, the discrepancy was 23.4 percent, which rose to 32.4 percent in 1993 (Shtrii Shakti, 1995). Although recent data show that the gap has been narrow, the state of women literacy is far from satisfactory.

Despite the government and non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) efforts to raise women's educational status by organizing literacy programs throughout the country, women seem to have benefited little from them. As a literacy practitioner, I have observed that most literacy programs are top-down, short spanned, often organized in a community by outside literacy providers, usually males (like me). These programs are resource intensive, both physical and human, keeping their services from reaching a multitude of illiterates. In addition, the teaching methods, materials and program strategies used in most adult literacy programs, in particular, hardly reflect the interest, needs and concerns of women (Chlebowska, 1990, Rogers, 1994). I have also noticed that literacy programs are often challenged by a high dropout rate, low retention of literacy skills, low motivation and no follow-up programs. For example, the current dropout rate among popular literacy programs stands at 20%. At the same time, the

retention of literacy skills is low. According to a study, about 50% of literacy graduates lose their literacy and numeracy skills in five years (Leve, Leslie, & Manandhar, 1997).

Over the years, efforts have been made worldwide to offer tailored made literacy programs to women. Even though the outcomes of these programs in terms of participation have been encouraging, their impact on the lives of women is minimal. One of the reasons for this is that generally female literacy programs are heavily influenced by male perspectives; women are looked at from outside and their interests, concerns, aspirations, resources, etc. are “generalized” (Rogers, 1994, p. 9). As a result, women’s literacy programs are more or less organized in the same way as programs for males.

Since there are few studies describing women’s perceptions about literacy, we have little understanding of the complexity of female literacy. What literacy means to women, what are the impacts of literacy on their lives, etc. are some of the fundamental questions that need to be examined on the basis of women’s experiences? In order to bring literacy closer to women’s lives the need to understand and explore their perspectives is greater than ever before.

More than anything else, this study is all the more needed for male literacy practitioners like me, who have worked in the field for a number of years wondering why literacy fails to impact significantly the lives of women living in rural areas. It is imperative for them to carefully listen to what rural women say about their struggle for literacy and incorporates the insights gained from their life experiences into the programs they are associated with. The study gives me an opportunity to personally observe and internalize what literacy really means to rural women.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe rural women's perceptions about literacy and its impact. It examines the role of literacy in the lives of rural women and how it is being used in rural environments.

The study explores rural women's interest, motivation, experiences, aspirations and accomplishments in relation to their efforts to learn to read and write. It looks into the socio-cultural and economic factors that inhibit or contribute to their struggle for literacy. It also explores how women use literacy in the Nepalese rural contexts where oral traditions are still in primacy. In other words, the study informs us of the literacy practices that are common among rural women.

Because in the available literature there are few studies exploring rural women's experiences about literacy, a study devoted to understanding Nepalese rural women's life experiences lends itself to examine the influence of literacy on women. In discovering the life experiences of rural women, the study helps us identify concrete issues and challenges women face while becoming literate. It also explores the extent of cooperation and networking among rural women that contribute to their struggle for education through literacy programs.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to our greater understanding of the role of literacy in rural women's lives. Its dissemination assists professionals; practitioners and policy makers to better acquaint themselves with the issues and challenges of female literacy.

This study can make a significant contribution to the field of education by helping professionals conceptualize literacy in a way that addresses the multi-dimensional aspects of female literacy. Rural women`s aspirations, motivation, efforts, social, cultural and economic uses of literacy, etc. can increase their understanding of the importance and relevance of literacy, in particular, female literacy. In order to appreciate and explore all the dimensions of female literacy a broader conceptual framework is necessary. The insights gained through this study can help professionals not only to expand the definition of literacy but also to view female literacy through the eyes of those who experience it.

Literacy practitioners can equally benefit from this research. Exploring the life experiences of rural women helps them identify ways in which they can bring literacy much closer to the lives of women. In other words, they can help make literacy experiences as meaningful as possible to rural women. Practitioners can also strategize literacy programs differently to avoid bottlenecks that keep women from realizing their full potential to become literate. In fact, discovering rural women`s perceptions about their uses of literacy can illuminate the ways in which literacy is delivered.

Among literacy practitioners, the majority are males. As a male practitioner, I feel that I am limited in knowledge and experience about female literacy. This study is immensely beneficial to practitioners like me who often wonder how best they can serve the female population.

The implications of this research are also significant to policy makers. The way rural women view and use literacy in their lives can inform policy makers of the best choices they can make in formulating policies regarding female literacy. In the absence

of such knowledge, policy makers can make decisions, which may have adverse effects on rural women's lives.

This study could also spark interest in conducting similar research with other population groups. Males, out-of-school youths, minorities, diverse language and ethnic groups are some examples of diverse groups whose perceptions about literacy could help enlighten those who are involved in the field of literacy education.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

The following are some limitations of the study.

1. The study did not take into account various kinds of literacy programs in Nepal. Nor did it pay close attention to a wide range of program strategies and teaching methods employed in them. All these factors would invariably determine the extent of literacy and numeracy skills women would acquire from literacy classes and the change they would undergo. Thus, this study needs to be viewed in relation to the experiences of rural women who were directly or indirectly involved in only two types of literacy programs, i.e. the Naya Goreto Literacy Program and the Women's Empowerment Program.
2. This study interviewed 15 women individually and 48 in six focus groups. It covered few geographical regions and ethnic, religious and language groups. However, the sample of participants and sites hardly represented the enormity and complexity of population make-up, language diversity, economic status and cultural variations in Nepal. Thus, caution needs to be taken to generalize its outcomes to women living in varied socio-economic, geographical and cultural contexts across the country.

3. I have worked for many years at the grassroots level and traveled throughout the country. However, my efficacy as a researcher largely depended on my ability to relate to women's issues and freely interact with them. The ease and comfort with which I was received and trusted by the women in the field also determined the level of my involvement in data collection. I, therefore, humbly admit the fact that my identity as an educated male from an urban middle class family invariably restricted, to some extent, the insights gained through this study. I would be greatly obliged if the reader, while going through this report, could kindly take this into account.

1.6 Research Questions

While collecting data in the field, the research questions outlined in the proposal changed following a major shift in the focus of this study. Before I present the new set of questions that form the basis of this research, I deem it necessary to explain why a change of focus was inevitable during the fieldwork.

Originally, this study was designed to examine the effectiveness of the Women in Business curriculum with a special focus on its group self-study approach to post literacy. It was also proposed to assess the extent to which the curriculum would help women perceive empowerment, and would lay a foundation of a low cost, self-help delivery program that would be applicable to a broader range of community development. In light of the above purposes, the study was designed to address the primary question of whether group self-study literacy approaches had the potential to increase successful outreach. But, soon after the fieldwork began, I encountered two major challenges that essentially changed the focus of the study.

First, in order to explore the potentiality of group self-study approaches, it was necessary to compare and contrast between the conventional Naya Goreto Literacy Program and the Women's Empowerment Program that have adopted the self-instructional Women in Business curriculum. Since the study was exploring the experiences of rural women, I had to locate women who had enrolled in both programs. But, in the field it was really hard to identify women who had participated in both types of literacy classes. Most of the women in rural areas were associated with either one or the other, but not both. This rendered it impossible to assess the effectiveness of the group self-study approaches, or to explore its implications for outreach.

The other challenge had to do with the interest of rural women who chose to talk about what they thought was important to them. In the initial phase of the fieldwork, the women, with whom in-depth interviews were conducted, preferred to talk about the benefits of literacy, changes they had experienced because of their participation in literacy programs, mastering literacy skills, their hopes and aspirations, struggles and achievements in relation to literacy, etc. Most of the responses were focused on their own lives rather than the nature of the programs in which they participated. These interviews were charged with passion and emotion. These rural women appeared to be anxious and willing to share what they thought was the impact of literacy on their lives.

Considering the interest of rural women and logistical difficulties in terms of locating appropriate individuals, I was forced to go along with the flow, letting rural women direct the process of interview, which was both animated and powerful. Drawing upon these early interviews, I compiled a list of guiding questions, which gave a new direction to the study. Instead of examining the effectiveness of group self-study

approaches to literacy, the study focused on literacy and its impact on women`s lives. With this new focus, the following set of questions was formulated, which formed the basis of this study.

1.6.1 Primary Research Question

The primary research question addressed by this study is - what is the impact of literacy on the lives of rural women in Nepal?

1.6.2 More Specific Research Questions

The following are the specific research questions.

- What are the general characteristics of rural women struggling for literacy?
- What role does literacy play in rural women`s lives?
- How does literacy impact the lives of rural women?
- How do women retain their literacy and numeracy skills?

1.6.3 Implementing Questions

The following are the implementing questions that were used to design the open-ended questionnaires, check lists and guidelines for in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observation.

- What are the characteristics of rural women who enroll in literacy programs?
- What factors impede or contribute to their struggle against illiteracy?
- Why do women want to become literate?
- What do women perceive as benefits from literacy?

- How are literacy skills being practiced on a daily basis?
- What is the next step the women take after becoming literate? Or what do women do after their participation in literacy classes?
- How do women perceive empowerment? How do they feel empowered? How does literacy enable women to assume a new role in the family and community in which they live?
- How do women retain their newly acquired literacy and numeracy skills?

1.7 Key Terms and Concepts

The terms and concepts used in the dissertation have the following definitions appropriate to the Nepalese context where this study was conducted.

1. Non-formal education (NFE): Organized outside the structure and curriculum of formal education, NFE encompasses those educational programs that impart literacy skills, practical knowledge and information to both illiterate and neo-literate adults and children who have neither completed nor ever got an opportunity to attend formal school.
2. Basic Literacy Programs: Through literacy programs adults and children are provided with literacy as well as numeracy skills equivalent to grade 3 with practical information to raise their awareness about agriculture, health, cottage industry, environmental protection and population that help them raise their productivity. The literacy rate in Nepal is calculated on the basis of this definition of basic literacy.
3. Post Literacy Programs: Programs that are offered with a special focus on functional or meaningful content to those who have received basic literacy training.

4. Illiterate, Semi-literate, Literate: These are people who have different levels of literacy competencies. Illiterate people do not possess the skills of reading, writing and doing simple calculations using numbers and signs. Semi-literate are the ones who can read words, phrases and even simple sentences without much comprehension. They cannot use their literacy skills effectively. Literate are those who have the literacy and numeracy skills equivalent to the third grade level as defined by the Ministry of Education in Nepal.
5. Group-Study Approach: It refers to a self-help literacy program in which participants in a group help each other to go through self-instructional curricula. The group-study approach that has wider implications for self-help basic and post-literacy programs combines basic and post-literacy training that women themselves can organize with minimal support from outside. Participants supply materials such as pencils, notebooks, kerosene, light, blackboards, etc. necessary for running the program.
6. Self-instructional Curriculum: It is a set of innovative materials developed to impart basic and post-literacy skills with minimal support from outsiders, i.e. facilitators and service providers. These curricula combine instruction with texts to help neo-literates go through the curriculum themselves.

1.8 Organization of the Study

This study is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 provides a brief description of Nepal and literacy programs to reflect the contexts in which the study was undertaken. The focus of the study and its significance are also described in this chapter. While collecting data in the field the focus and direction outlined in the proposal underwent a

substantial change, which steered the present study in a new direction. These changes that affected the primary and specific research questions are described in the Research Questions section. Also included in this chapter are both the limitations of the study and definitions of key terms and concepts used in the narratives.

Chapter 2 is devoted to literature review on historical perspective on literacy and literacy development as it relates to Nepalese women. Since there is no specific study geared toward exploring the experiences of Nepalese rural women in relation to literacy in the literature, the review of literature provided in this chapter serves as background information on the relationship between literacy and women.

In Chapter 3, the research design and methods used for the study are described. Using the framework of phenomenological research as one of the genres of qualitative research, the study used in-depth interviews, focus groups discussions and observation as sources of data to gather information over a period of two years, which is described in the data collection section. Given the enormity of data, the strategies to manage and analyze them in order to make sensible meanings are also described in the data management and analysis section of this chapter.

Chapter 4 presents demographic characteristics of interviewees and the factors that impact their efforts to become literate. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides both the characteristics and profiles of the women who participated in the study. The second section describes the factors that influence women's quest for literacy. The third section gives a glimpse of women's aspirations and struggles as expressed in terms of memorable events and daily work schedules.

Chapter 5 depicts emergent issues and themes surfaced from the study. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section describes the need of literacy for rural women. It also explores literacy practices at home and in the community. The question of what rural women want to do after becoming literate is also discussed. The second section focuses on the advantages of literacy for women. What changes rural women perceive through literacy are described in this section. The third section examines the issue of mastering and retaining of literacy skills.

In Chapter 6, a summary of the findings, conclusions, implications and recommendations are presented. The reflections on the findings are also included in this chapter.

1.9 Conclusion

This study explores rural women's perceptions about the impact of literacy on their lives. Over a period of two years, the research was conducted in Nepal with women who were directly or indirectly connected to either the Naya Goreto Literacy Program or the Women's Empowerment Program. The focus of the study originally proposed changed during the fieldwork. The insights gained through this phenomenological research are significant to academicians, literacy practitioners and policy makers.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a brief overview of literature on the development of literacy. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section gives a historical perspective on how literacy programs are developed around the world. It also describes popular trends in literacy. The second section explores women's literacy in general.

2.1. Development of Literacy

Literacy has become a powerful tool in transferring popular cultures and traditions to posterity in both the eastern and western hemispheres. Its transforming power is also felt in developing countries. This section therefore presents historical perspectives of literacy together with popular trends adopted in literacy programs around the world, including Nepal. The section is divided into the following headings.

2.1.1 Historical Perspectives of Literacy

Globally, literacy practices date back to ancient times. In ancient India the history of education goes back as early as the Vedic period (Altekar, 1934). The form of education, widely practiced throughout the Indian subcontinents, including Nepal, until medieval ages, is popularly known as "the 'Gurukul' tradition. It established a system under which the pupils spent quite some time as members of the tutor's (Guru's) household (Kul)" (National Education Commission, 1992, p. 87). Art, astrology, aurvedic medicine, warfare, etc. were some of the subjects pupils studied under the

supervision of a guru. Literacy practices then were widespread among the upper castes, Brahman and Kshetri (clergy and warrior classes respectively). In the Northern Hemisphere around the fifth and sixth centuries Greece was considered the first literate society where numerous accounts of book readers were found (Gough, 1988). However, in early days the right to use literacy was the prerogative of a special group of people in society.

Historically, literacy traces back to the origin of writing. In the beginning writing systems were complicated because everything had to be expressed in pictographic forms. Therefore the early writings were limited to religious, administrative or commercial purposes. It was much later that the invention of graphic symbols linking to the sounds of speech brought a great breakthrough in literacy, making it accessible to the common person. Using symbols every thought and idea could be written and shared. This led to the development of literate societies, preserving time-honored cultures and thoughts that were transmitted from one generation to another. For the first time, literacy also made it possible to separate myth from facts, dropping aspects that are no longer relevant and incorporating new and timely perspectives. Thus, literacy became a great tool to acquire an analytical approach to understanding the world. It was because of the widespread practice of literacy that in the eighth century, Greece saw the power of the rules of logic and reasoning first outlined by Plato, as well as the categories of science and knowledge formulated by Aristotle. In fact, the entire framework of Western intellectual and cultural traditions can be traced to the diffusion of alphabetic literature in Greece (Goody & Watt, 1963, p. 304-345 as cited by Walker, 1988, p. 2).

The introduction of paper coupled with the invention of the printing press brought to an end the domination of the Catholic priesthood over the written word. It opened up the possibilities of using literacy on a wider scale. However, it is interesting to note that before literacy became widespread, its practice was confined to priests or religious leaders who were predominantly male in both Western and Eastern cultures, in particular, excluding women from using it. In fact, the modern use of literacy can be attributed to the efforts of the Protestant churches that encouraged study of the Bible.

2.1.2 Literacy in Developing Countries

In their efforts to spread the teachings of Christ, missionaries promoted reading and writing activities in developing countries by translating the Bible into local languages. This endeavor gave a tremendous impetus to the development of literacy throughout the English colonies.

The systematic development of literacy education in the Third World began with the work of Dr. Frank C. Laubach (1884-1970), who started teaching literacy to poor farmers in the Philippines during the 1930's (Laubach, 1977). His work with illiterate adults evolved into a literacy movement popularly known as "each one teach one". This was probably the first effort to use a scientific and logical method to teach literacy. Frank Laubach pioneered a method through which alphabets are taught showing correspondence between sound, symbols and objects. Spanning over three decades, this method helped people develop listening, speaking, reading, writing and arithmetic skills to solve problems as they perceive them in their daily lives (Laubach, 1977). In many countries Laubach's approach influenced their literacy work for a long period of time.

The approach pioneered by Frank Laubach, however, paid little or no attention to the fact that adults learn differently because their needs and experiences are different from those of children (Knowles, 1973). In order for adults to learn effectively their experiences need to serve as a basis for learning. Motivation for learning is considerably high when adults realize that their newly acquired knowledge and skills not only are built upon their experiences but also enable them to cope with the harsh realities of their lives. As Alan Rogers puts it, adults “learn more easily in those areas where the ‘distance’ between their experience and the new material is not great” (Rogers, 1992, p. 17).

2.1.3 Literacy and Economic Development

After the Second World War, literacy was linked to development. The notion that literacy and economic development are interconnected was widely accepted. The basis of this widespread belief is the examination of the rise of literacy in the developed countries of the west. Indeed, the adult literacy rate in the American colonies and the entire Europe, including England, in mid eighteenth century was around 50 percent, which led C. Arnold Anderson to conclude that a 40 percent literacy level is a prerequisite for economic development (Harman, 1974). But a closer look at the historical development of literacy in these developed countries shows that the adult literacy rate was much higher in urban centers than rural areas, suggesting a weak relationship between these two variables.

However, the early views of UNESCO on literacy were sufficiently influenced by the contention that higher literacy rates lead to economic growth. The positive role of literacy in development provided an impetus to newly independent countries in the Third

World to integrate literacy into their nation building efforts. In 1947 UNESCO promoted the concept of fundamental education, which intended to provide basic knowledge and skills to people in developing countries who would participate in their development through locally managed self-help projects (Harman, 1974).

Later in 1965 UNESCO made an attempt to link literacy to economic development through the implementation of the Experimental World Literacy Program (EWLP). The goal of this program was to make a million adults literate. EWLP was conceived on the premise that increased knowledge and skills would lead to economic productivity. So, a concept of “functional literacy” was introduced, which focused on transferring skills and knowledge that would develop the capacity to produce more. In fact, this concept is based on the assumption that selected economic groups would enhance their productivity by applying literacy skills to their work (UNESCO, 1965).

The Experimental World Literacy Program was a big disappointment because only 120,000 adults became literate (UNDP, 1976, p. 11). The belief that literacy would eliminate hunger, disease and poverty from developing countries was once again questioned. The EWLP’s small achievement triggered endless debates and critical reflections on the assumption that national development depends, to a large extent, on a skilled work force. Based on a growth-oriented concept, the program placed a tremendous emphasis on economic productivity rather than on participation and social change. The pro-industrial bias built into EWLP failed to produce desirable results in developing countries (Bhola, 1988). On the whole, the program failed to underscore the relationship between literacy and economic development. Although some studies have shown a connection between literacy and individual income level in developing

countries, the contention that literacy is, “independently of other factors, a precondition” of economic development “would be grossly misleading and insubstantial” (Harman, 1974, p.10).

2.1.4 Critical or Participatory Literacy/Literacy Campaigns/Non-formal Education

Rather than focusing on economic development, adult educators began to shift their attention to using literacy as a vehicle to raise consciousness and change the structure of society. This concept was somewhat influenced by the Marxist philosophy that poverty resulted from social injustice and that restructuring the power relationships in society remedies the problem.

In the early 1960’s Brazilian educator Paulo Freire developed an approach to adult literacy based on the premise that education should be a means for people to question, analyze and transform the society in which they live (Freire, 1972). According to Freire, literacy should help the poor become subjects rather than mere objects of history.

Freire states that apart from the three R’s, literacy should raise people’s awareness to help them become capable of changing their own environment and lives. For him, literacy was a means to engage people in what he called a conscientization process through which people would be able to affirm their human dignity, see themselves as the possessors of a unique culture, and seize the initiative for shaping their individual and collective destinies. In fact, literacy was seen as a tool to create a critical consciousness for both understanding contradictions in society and transforming reality (Bataille, 1976).

Freire's approach to literacy exerted a big influence on literacy programs throughout the world. In the early 1970's UNESCO affirmed that Freire's vision of literacy training was a strategy for liberation and social change. Later in 1975 UNESCO adopted a manifesto in which literacy was viewed as contributing to the liberation of man and to his full development (Bhola, 1988). Thus, it is widely recognized that literacy acquisition is not only mechanical but it implies restructuring power relationships to transform both an individual and society.

A variety of participatory teaching methods as tools for empowerment have been used in literacy classes. Adults are encouraged to play an active role in designing and directing their own learning. This is a motivational developmental model that basically emphasizes individual motivation as the engine of development (Bhola, 1988)

In the developing countries literacy efforts were small and sporadic mostly organized by private and religious groups (Miller, 1985). While the impact of literacy programs is not significant, the campaign approach to literacy has played a big role in combating illiteracy in many countries. The first literacy campaign began in the Soviet Union in the midst of civil war and famine. In 1919 the attempt to develop the nation's economy began with literacy campaigns, mandating illiterates between the ages of eight and fifty to study. This work was pushed even further by the new Soviet government that was successful in raising the literacy rate from 28 percent to 87 percent in Russia (Eklof, 1987, p.123-139).

The most dramatic outcome was seen in the Cuban literacy campaign launched in 1961. While the Russian campaigns covered a period of ten years, the literacy campaign in Cuba achieved better results in just one year (Bhola, 1984). The government

mobilized students for teaching literacy, closing educational institutions for the entire year. Later in the 1970's some African countries adopted the campaign approach to literacy in their countries. In 1980 the Sandinista regime was also able to increase the level of literacy in Nicaragua through literacy campaigns.

The campaign approach is an effective strategy to raise literacy levels in a relatively short period of time. But the success of these campaigns is largely dependent on a political will. In all successful campaigns governments mobilize resources, human and physical, to wage war against illiteracy, showing strong commitments to literacy movements.

Because of social stagnation and poverty experienced in many developing countries, planners and educators were drawn to what was known as nonformal education as a strategy to contribute to economic development. Nonformal education encompassed a wider range of out-of-school activities including adult literacy, many of which had been going on for years. Development planners viewed it as a strategy to provide the rural

One of the reasons for nonformal education to gain popularity in the 1970's is that poor hands-on techniques that could be put to immediate use (Coombs, 1968).

Nonformal education did not rule out the value of literacy training. But its importance was enhanced by the use of literacy skills. In many countries literacy was used as a vehicle to provide vocational training on which nonformal education focused. motivation for literacy training was tapering off in the developing countries, as it did not lead to economic productivity. In order to increase motivation for literacy, educators have attempted to bring it closer to the lives of the poor by providing literacy training in their

socio-economic and cultural contexts. The notion is that if literacy skills can be used for meaningful purposes, its importance will be high among the poor.

In the early 1980's the concept of contextual literacy gave rise to programs such as intergenerational or family literacy and community literacy. The premises on which this concept was founded include the notions that multiple literacy practices exist in the communities and that they are socially embedded (Heath, 1983; Street, 1995). Using multiple methods and resources, these programs attempted to promote the development and practice of literacy in the family and community contexts.

2.1.5. Literacy Development in Nepal

For a long period of time, education was provided in the Gurukul tradition that was sustained mainly by donations and charities. Children were sent to the house of a teacher where they would spend considerable time learning art, science and especially memorizing scriptures.

The expansion of education in Nepal began in the early 1950's, after the advent of democracy. Before 1760, imparting religious knowledge was the main goal of education. This practice was mainly confined to the higher castes. Sanskrit, one of the ancient languages used in the Hindu scriptures, was the medium of instruction since times immemorial (National Education Commission, 1992).

In the modern age the Gurukul tradition has been replaced with community supported learning institutions. Before the advent of democracy, there were many community schools known as "Sanskrit Pathshala"⁶ throughout the country. These

⁶ Sanskrit Pathshala is a community school where the Sanskrit language, scriptures, etc. are taught.

institutions operated more or less like modern schools, enrolling children from the community. But with the passage of time its curriculum underwent a few changes and rote memorization was a common mode of learning (National Education Commission, 1992).

Despite the continuity of Sanskrit education, the country's literacy rate was insignificant until the early 1950's. The literacy rate among the marginalized groups such as women was almost zero. As in the ancient Greek, education or literacy training in Nepal was a prerogative of the upper caste.⁷ Usually only the male child from the higher caste would be included in the learning group, restricting women and the lower caste from joining. Moreover, the Sanskrit language was used in religious texts, making it inaccessible to both women and the lower caste.

But the irony was that the community largely supported Sanskrit Pathshalas, where women played a major role in raising money through charity. In those days communities would set up a charity popularly known as Dharmabhakari (religious storage) to which women would contribute regularly by saving a handful of grain each time they prepared a meal for their families. The primary purpose of the Dharmabhakari was to guard against emergencies and promote social work in the community. It was clear that women would play an active role in promoting education in the community, yet they were denied the right to acquire it. Female education was not considered as having high social and economic values at that time.

⁷ Even though the legislature, "Muluki Ein, 1964", abolished the caste system in Nepal, it is still widely practised in rural areas. According to the Hindu religion, there are four main castes – Brahman, Khetri, Baisya and Sudra. People from the higher castes had the right to education. The rest of the population was illiterate.

During the 1760's Prithvi Narayan Shah, the unifier of present Nepal, replaced the religious component with marital values in education, with the purpose to expand and strengthen his military might. As a result, education was made available not only to the socially high ranked, but to the children of his soldiers as well. Later in 1853, Jung Bahadur Rana, the first Rana Prime Minister of Nepal, introduced modern education modeled after the British system of education. During the Rana regime lasting for a period of 104 years, mainly the ruling family and those who were in the court had access to education. Only in the early 1950's when the country was open to the outside world did the Ministry of Education initiate an organized effort to promote both formal and nonformal educational systems. As a result, the country saw not only a tremendous increase in the number of formal schools but also a commitment to intensifying the literacy movement as part of nonformal education (National Education Commission, 1992).

In the late 1950's literacy programs were limited to adults only. Even though these programs encouraged women to enroll, their participation was low. The government and private organizations organized most of the programs.

Early efforts in motivating people to acquire literacy were not successful mainly because of the curriculum used in literacy programs. Since literacy training was limited only to imparting the three R's, the primary school primer was used in adult literacy classes. In fact, the primer hardly provided a meaningful context for adults to engage in reading and writing. Later, a team of specialists developed a curriculum that employed modern scientific methods to teach illiterate adults. The problem was solved to a greater extent.

The literacy movement in Nepal became sufficiently influenced by UNESCO's concept of literacy. Attempts to respond to concepts such as fundamental and functional literacy were reflected in the curricula, which underwent changes from time to time.

Since most of the literacy classes across the country were organized on an ad hoc basis, adult literacy programs were riddled with corruption and mismanagement. However, the evaluation reports of several programs showed that literacy classes were successful and that a large number of adults had become literate. In fact the progress was limited only to reports (Walker, 1988). In the rural areas there was a high dropout rate, and motivation for literacy was low. In the Rastriya Panchayat⁸ several parliamentarians raised this issue and demanded that the adult literacy program be suspended. They contended that these programs were not producing desirable results, and that they were a drain on scarce resources.

In the late 1970's the ministry of Education tried to regenerate adult literacy by introducing a nonformal education project in the country. The main purpose of this project was to underscore the importance of education by exposing participants to learn to read and write. This project attempted to raise the participants' awareness about health, hygiene, sanitation, nutrition, and family planning and child-care.

Within a short period of time the project produced some positive results. It motivated participants to undertake several community development activities. One of the most exciting outcomes of the project was that it created a demand for adult literacy. Consequently, over a period of seven years, the project developed and tested a basic literacy curriculum popularly known as the Naya Goreto Literacy Program. This

⁸ Rastriya Panchayat is the parliament of Panchayat, a one-party political system instituted in Nepal between 1960 and 1990.

curriculum has become a national basic literacy curriculum widely used by government and non-governmental organizations.

Although the Naya Goreto curriculum has been successful in reducing the dropout rate to 20 percent, its coverage is limited because of high program costs. Recently, attempts have been made to scale up the program, but their impacts are minimal.

The quality and interest of teachers were associated with the dropout rate. It was observed that the dropout rate is considerably low if teachers show up in class and treat people well (Comings, Shrestha, & Smith, 1992 as cited by Abadzi, 1994). But the Naya Goreto curriculum is heavily dependent on facilitators/teachers.

Another challenge with the Naya Goreto curriculum is that it is a stand-alone program that provides only basic literacy skills. After graduating from literacy programs, participants find no meaningful use for their literacy skills in their immediate surroundings. Reading materials are rarely found in rural settings. Although there are not many empirical studies on the literacy retention rate, a ten-year study commissioned by Save the Children USA found that about 50 percent lose their literacy and numeracy skills in a span of five years (Leve, Leslie, & Manandhar, 1997).

Considering the high dropout and low retention rates in basic literacy, literacy providers have attempted to combine both basic and post literacy training in a meaningful way. One such attempt was recently made by Pact through its Women's Empowerment Program (WEP). This program has introduced the Women in Business Curriculum, which not only combines both types of literacy but also employs a group self-study approach to post literacy focused on microfinance. Enrolling 120,000 women across the

Terai region. WEP has promoted a self-help literacy program that is organized by the women with minimal support from outside.

2.2 Women's Literacy

“Who says literacy can't make a difference! My confidence was soaring so high that nothing seemed impossible to me. I felt that literacy opened my eyes and helped me discern the wondrous world of opportunities stretching wide open before me.” says Jamuna Bhatta.⁹

“Thanks to literacy! It has given me a whole lot of confidence. Now I can go almost anywhere and voice our concerns”. Balkumari Acharya says in a soft voice.⁹

These testimonies made by rural women in Nepal underscore literacy as a viable means to develop the capacity of women in developing countries. But the scope and usefulness of literacy has long been debated. At the core of this parlance is the question of who needs literacy for what purpose. Both the academicians and practitioners are grappling with it to justify the need for adult literacy in developing countries. This debate becomes complex when in countries like Nepal literacy is brought within the reach of marginalized groups such as women who have historically been denied the right to education and whose immediate environments are still heavily influenced by oral traditions. In most cultures, literacy practices have largely been associated with men, assigning women to a different role in which the use of literacy is usually minimal. However, with the recognition of the equality of the sexes the need for women's education is acutely felt more than previously in developing countries including Nepal.

⁹ These were the voices of women who have become literate through literacy programs. In 1996, based on interviews with female literacy graduates in Banke, a district in the western region of Nepal, I compiled and wrote their stories for Pact, a US based INGO, which mounted a three-year project entitled ‘Women Reading for Development’, (WORD). During the project more than three hundred thousand women throughout the country became literate.

where half of the population is made up of women who are, to a large extent, illiterate, marginalized and underrepresented.

In this section I examine critical issues that contribute to our understanding of female literacy and its impact on the lives of rural women. These issues revolve around questions about why literacy is necessary for women and what it does for them, which essentially highlight the importance of female literacy and its transforming power. The section is divided into the following subheadings.

2.2.1 Importance of Women's Literacy

"Women have equal rights with men upon earth; in religion and society they are a very important element. As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness, which might be theirs.

(Abdu'l-Baha, 1995, p. 133)

"Woman's lack of progress and proficiency has been due to her need of equal education and opportunity. Had she been allowed this equality, there is no doubt she would be the counterpart of man in ability and capacity."

(MacNutt, 1982, p.182)

"One of the social principles to which Baha'u'llah attaches great importance is that women should be regarded as the equals of men and should enjoy equal rights and privileges, equal education and equal opportunities."

(Esslemont, 1950, p.146)

"Men and women should enjoy equal rights, privileges, education, and opportunities throughout the world."

(Sears, 1960, p. 212)

Historically, education has been the prerogative of men. In the developing countries, largely marginalized and exploited women in a patriarchal society have been denied the right to education. Religious traditions in many cultures have obstructed

women to acquire literacy (Ballara, 1991; Chlebowska, 1992). However, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Baha`u`llah, the founder of the Baha`i Faith, emphasized the need for educating women to attain equality between the sexes (Esslemont, 1950). Perhaps, this is the first time in religious annals that universal education for women and gender equality are recognized as essential elements for social transformation. Expounding his father`s principle, Abdu`l-Baha explained that the status of women could be raised through education. According to him, the advancement of women is essential for social progress. Highlighting the important role of women in society Abdu`l-Baha says, “The world of humanity has two wings, as it were: One is the female; the other is the male. If one wing be defective, the strong perfect wing will not be capable of flight” (MacNutt, 1982, p.174). Both Baha`u`llah and Abdu`l-Baha have maintained that women are endowed with capacities, and that education is a tool to develop their potentialities crucial to the advancement of mankind. Abdu`l-Baha even goes further to say that if the parents do not have enough resources to provide education to all of their children, they should at least educate their daughter, for she is a future mother whose educational influence on her children is more profound than that of her husband. Ruby Mankan, an Indian church leader in India, also underscores the importance of women`s education in these words: “If you educate a man you educate a person, but if you educate a woman you educate a family” (Wigg, 1994, p. iv).

More than ever, the need for women to develop their capacities is paramount to enable them to contribute socially, politically, economically on an equal footing with men. Highlighting the importance of women`s literacy Chlebowska refers to literacy training as the decisive stage in the process of helping women to acquire the knowledge,

know-how and life skills which give them confidence, independent outlook and self-reliance (Chlebowska, 1992).

However, not until a little over three decades has women's education captured the attention of the world community. The Jomtien conference has also given a boost to women's education. Many nations and organizations have now devoted their resources to promoting women's education (Chlebowska, 1992; Rogers, 1994). But the number of illiterate women is still considerably high. According to a report, out of 873.9 million illiterate adults in developing countries in 1990 as many as 567 million are women (UNESCO, 1998). Even though the most recent UNESCO statistics has confirmed that the world literate rate dropped over the last 20-30 years because of increased primary enrollments, the proportion of women in the world's total illiterate population is steadily growing. Of the estimated 887 million illiterates in 2000, the majority were women (Wagner, 2000). It shows that literacy is a woman's issue. The reason for a higher percentage of illiterate women in developing countries is because women are not aware of the important role of literacy in developing their potentialities and thereby raising their status in society. Chlebowska therefore states that the illiterate women, public and decision makers at all levels, should be well informed of the condition of women so that women's education becomes a reality (Chlebowska, 1992).

2.2.2 Causes of Illiteracy Among Women

One of the reasons for high illiteracy among women is the patriarchal society in which women are understood and treated differently. Presenting historical reasons Stromquist maintains that patriarchal ideology has declared women incompetent and kept

them in inferior positions (Stromquist, 1990). Some of the reasons related to the nature of physical labor, child-bearing responsibilities and the institutionalization of violence in the state have led men to develop and sustain an ideology of women's physical and mental inferiority. Pointing to the men's authority over the social construction of knowledge, Bhola states that in order to raise the status of women and change the social reality, the lives of illiterate and semi-literate women must be transformed (Bhola, 1994). The dominant ideology of a patriarchal society is thus seen as one of the obstacles to women's literacy.

Even though research has shown that women acquire knowledge differently than men, literacy training for women hardly reflects the interests and needs of women (Carmack, 1992; Chlebowska, 1992; Stromquist, 1990). Stromquist (1990) argues that the poor do not perceive literacy as important. Women in rural areas, in particular, seldom understand the implications of being literate, as their struggle for mere survival weighs heavy on them. While they are busy with their children, household chores, and farming, women have very little time to spare for education. Thus, the literacy programs that do not consider the constraints women face in terms of time, space and their aspirations are unlikely to make a dent on women's illiteracy.

For literacy programs to prove beneficial to women, gender differences need to be taken into account. Carmack (1992) states that community oriented literacy programs are more gender sensitive than individually oriented programs, which are often based on the deficit model, and therefore hold women in an inferior position. According to Carmack, they tend to devalue women's knowledge and experience, creating barriers to learning. But, community oriented programs promote collaborative learning which women

generally prefer. They come closer to meeting the needs of women within a specific community. It is clear that female literacy programs need to be gender sensitive. They ought to consider gender interests in terms of both immediate needs such as employment and family, and larger issues related to power and structure in society.

The “feminine dimension of illiteracy” (Chlebowska, 1992, p.9) is not addressed in literacy programs currently available for women in developing countries. The different methods adopted in literacy training generally do not address the differences in gender role and the inequalities to which they give rise. They do not help women become literate. Chlebowska (1992, p.11), therefore, suggests that female literacy programs include:

- “1. Learning reading, writing and arithmetic. This component is common to both men and women; it affords access to skills, enhances everyday activities and develops critical faculties...
2. Acquiring useful functional skills, with the aim of improving production capacities, increasing income and enabling people to live better or even just to survive...
3. Making women aware of their condition and of the rights, authority, responsibilities and power of which they have been generally deprived...”

Basic literacy skills, functional skills and awareness of rights and responsibilities are the essential elements of female literacy. The first two are necessary for women to have access to useful information and develop productive skills while the third component is instrumental in fostering their self-confidence and social status.

Apart from the nature of the program and its contents, female literacy programs face male domination in both policy-making and implementation levels (Ballara, 1991; Chlebowska, 1992; Ramdas, 1990; Stromquist, 1990). In a patriarchal society men have controlled women’s access to learning. The control is reflected in men dominating

policy-making positions (Ramdas, 1990). Naturally, most literacy programs fail to recognize the special needs of women and offer women training in traditional sex role positions, i.e. wife and mother. This hardly benefits women because they have diverse needs and want to develop their potentialities in a non-competitive environment, as women generally prefer collaborative learning (Carmack, 1992).

Male domination in female literacy is also seen in terms of having male instructors and mixed classrooms, which have posed a problem to women's literacy in most developing countries (Ballara, 1991). Male instructors are generally found to be at a loss to deal with female sensitive issues. They have less familiarity with women's literacy training methods. Women also lose motivation for literacy classes when their knowledge and experiences are not valued and related to by the tutor. Moreover, they feel more confident with female literacy instructors who are more patient and who display a greater sense of responsibility. Illiterate women also freely express themselves in the presence of female literacy personnel. Chlebowska (1992), thus, suggests women to come to the fore so that they can play an effective role in formulating relevant policies and strategies to promote female literacy. Their involvement in implementing female literacy also heightens the usefulness and relevancy of literacy among illiterate women.

2.2.3 Women's Empowerment Through Literacy

“As a neo-literate, Sunmaya Shrestha through a village newsletter sends a letter to her friends cautioning them not to avoid literacy. She powerfully expresses the consequences of illiteracy in the following words:

We must look for support when we're blind,
We must tolerate injustice when we're weak,
We must depend on others when we're devoid of skills.’

‘These women were so organized that they staged a sit-in in the middle of the road. They collected tires and lit them all day long. The police couldn’t even interfere with them. They finally got their demand fulfilled. These women were really courageous and self confident. Impressed by their action the community has also begun to respect them. What amazed me was that all of them were shy and timid before they became literate. Now they can stand for themselves. What could be more satisfying than this? Bhagirathi chuckles while relating an incident in which her friends protested against a hike in bus fare.’¹⁰

These voices testify the transforming power of literacy. Literacy indeed gives voice to women who are subordinated and exploited in a patriarchal society. It makes them aware of the environment in which they live. The knowledge of their world enables women to control their lives. Explaining the concept of self-empowerment through literacy Freire describes how his personal fear of the word diminished when he began to understand it and learned to read it. Words enabled him to describe his world and make it known to others, thereby becoming increasingly aware of it (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

In order to be able to change their lives and transform the society in which they live women need information to increase their awareness of oppression and exploitation. Stromquist (1990) argues that women need to acquire knowledge to be able to negotiate for legal, social and political rights. She maintains that the source of women’s subordination must be attacked before progress with literacy can be made.

It is important that empowerment of women should form the main focus of literacy programs. Women do not benefit unless literacy programs make them aware of their power, rights and responsibility. They feel empowered when literacy has liberating effects on them. To produce desirable effects of literacy on women Chlebowska (1992, p.29) maintains that literacy programs should strive:

¹⁰ These excerpts are taken from the stories I compiled and wrote in 1996, interviewing a few graduates of literacy classes organized for women in the Banke district of Nepal as part of a literacy program implemented by Pact, a US-based international organization.

“... not to arouse negative attitudes towards men, but to encourage women to give more critical thought to their own status, to help them ask – and ask themselves – questions, develop self confidence and self-esteem, take decisions, have more say in their own lives, acquire greater independence and exercise control over ways of improving their living conditions and position in society.”

It is clear that mere literacy skills, i.e. reading, writing and arithmetic skills, are not enough for women to experience a positive change in life. In addition to acquiring the mechanical skills of literacy, they need a set of skills that will enable them to critically understand their environments and find ways to improve their social, economic and political conditions. Thus, the approach to teaching methods used in women’s literacy program should reflect the aspirations of adult women, cater to ‘their demands for greater justice and for their need to play an active part’ in the family and society (Chlebowska, 1992, p.10).

Literacy materials also play a big role in encouraging women to question the oppressive environment in which they live and make necessary changes to elevate their status. For enabling women to take action for change, the contents of the literacy materials need to reflect women’s needs and concerns. Parajuli and Enslin found that the women in a literacy class organized in Chitwan, Nepal discovered "their social reality and develop confidence in their ability to both know and change the world" as they critically examined key words such as *tass* (card-playing) and *dauraa* (firewood) (Parajuli & Enslin, 1990, p.55). These words represented some of the difficulties in their lives. It is apparent that the literacy programs and materials intended for empowerment ought to reflect the contradictions and difficulties that women face in their immediate

environments. They should enable women to act on a decision they arrive at after critically reflecting on it.

2.3 Conclusion

There has been sufficient evidence that literacy has a positive impact on building a civilized nation. But, literacy for the sake of literacy (only reading, writing and numeracy skills) cannot bring relief to the poor in developing countries. The three R's should be combined with functional skills that help the poor raise their economic and social status. So, stand-alone basic literacy programs are of little value unless they are followed up with more skill-oriented post literacy programs.

Literacy programs are popular with women all over the world, including Nepal. It is true that educated mothers can contribute to create a literate society by educating their children. But, there are numerous obstacles to women's literacy in developing countries. Women have long been subordinated and victimized by the society in which they live. Thus, the literacy programs that do not reflect the needs and interests of women are unlikely to emancipate them. It is therefore apparent that women's literacy needs to use a feminist framework that focuses on enabling women to know their social realities and change them to improve their condition.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This chapter describes the overall approach to research. The design and implementation strategies of the study that I conducted in Nepal are explained. Also included is a description of how data was collected, managed and analyzed, as well as my role as a researcher and my observations about ethical considerations for the study.

3.1 Overall Approach

This study is a qualitative research, which brings a unique perspective to the questions posed by it. It encourages us to perceive reality through the eyes of those who have experienced it. Qualitative research allows us to “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Creswell, 1998, p.15).

The meanings construed on the basis of the perceptions and experiences of those who are directly affected by them are significant. Highlighting the importance of qualitative research, Merriam states that research focused on discovery, insight and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied has great potential to contribute to the knowledge base and practice of education (Merriam, 1988).

Qualitative research presents a complex, holistic picture allowing us to gain insights into the multiple dimensions of a problem or issue (Creswell, 1994). In contrast, quantitative research looks at the world objectively from a distance assuming that there is a single reality that can be measured to a greater degree of precision. Traditionally, the

assumption for quantitative research is that the world out there can be observed and measured objectively (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

But fact is never pure fact, or what seems to be ‘real’ or ‘objective’ or ‘factual’ may not be the complete truth. It is obvious that human beings do not live in a single, isolated world. To understand them would require understanding their multiple realities. Qualitative research allows us to achieve this goal as Burrell and Morgan put it in the following words.

“In contrast, qualitative research assumes that there are multiple realities – that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception. It is highly subjective phenomenon in need of interpretation rather than meaning. Belief rather than facts form the basis of perception.”

(Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p.17)

This study uses the genre of phenomenology with a purpose to understand the meaning of experiences (Creswell, 1998) of rural women attempting to better their lives through literacy. Since phenomenology is the study of participants’ lived experiences and worldviews, it provides a framework to explore and describe the meaning of a range of experiences and perceptions of individuals. Gaining insights into the worlds of individuals being studied not only helps us make meaning of their experiences but also provides meaningful solutions as it “leads to practical understanding of meaning and actions” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.8).

In order to understand the impacts of literacy on rural women’s lives, this study explores and examines the relationship between literacy and rural women to construct meanings from the experiences of those who participated in literacy programs. It also helps the researcher gain insights into issues commonly encountered in women’s literacy programs, and suggests practical solutions to address them for better results.

3.2 Research Sites and Participants

This study was conducted in fifteen sites in Nepal over a period of two years. The locations were scattered across six out of seventy-five districts, representing three development regions namely Eastern, Western and Far Western Development Regions as shown in the following table.

Table 1: Study Sites and Number of Participants

In-depth Interview: # of Participants	Focus Group Discussion: # of Participants	Districts	Development Regions	Terrain: Hills & Terai	Proximity to Markets and Town/City
2	8	Baglung	Western	2 Hills	Far
1	8	Doti	Far West	1 Hills	Far
2	8	Kailali	Far West	2 Terai	Far
1	8	Morang	Eastern	1 Terai	Near
2	8	Sunsari	Eastern	2 Terai	Near
7	8	Udayapur	Eastern	4 Hills 3 Terai	2 Far/2 Near Near

The study sites reflected a variety of ethnic groups, geographical terrain and population distribution. Half of the sites were in proximity to urban cities in the Terai and the rest were in the hills away from the nearest markets or district headquarters. The communities that are near urban cities or district headquarters bore a great influence of the literate culture. The women living in such proximity were more exposed to a variety of print materials and literacy related activities than those living in remote areas. In comparison with localities that are far from the nearest towns and cities, the communities that have easy access to market places created an environment in which women felt it necessary to learn to read and write, thus creating a demand for literacy. However, all of them constituted rural contexts in terms of their poor infrastructures and inadequate

service facilities. Illiteracy and employment rates were also high in most of the regions where the study was conducted.

A total of fifteen women between the ages of 18 and 54 were selected for in-depth interviews. The selection of interviewees was made on the basis of “criterion” sampling as suggested by Miles and Huberman in their “Typology of Sampling Strategies in Qualitative Inquiry” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28 as cited by Creswell, 1998, p. 119). The purpose of criterion sampling is to ensure quality by selecting individuals that have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 1998, p. 118). The selection of interviews was based on the following criteria set up for the study.

1. Women and girls above 15
2. Women and girls having experience with literacy directly or indirectly;
3. Women and girls having no exposure to formal education prior to joining literacy classes;
4. Women and girls representing diverse ethnic groups and geographical rural settings

In addition to 15 interviewees, a total of 48 participants were selected for 6 focus group discussions, each containing eight participants. The criteria for selecting focus group participants were the same as those of in-depth interviews. In each study site all potential focus group participants were gathered and the purpose of the study was explained to them. Then, as per the above criteria, eight participants who were willing to participate in the focus group discussion were selected. Two facilitators coordinated the focus group meeting that was usually held for approximately two hours. Together with

another researcher who was either from the same community or who spoke the same language as that of the participants, I facilitated the discussion in each of the sites.

3.3 Data Collection

The collection of information for the study covered a period of two years. The methods used to gather primary data were in-depth interviews, observation and focus group discussions. In addition, the relevant secondary data were collected from project reports, published materials, etc.

Data collection is viewed “as a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions” (Creswell, 1998, p. 110). It is a process that includes many activities ranging from finding people and places to collect good and reliable information. Researchers find some of these activities challenging, depending on their experience and interest. The challenge for me was not to take on face value what the interviewees thought I wanted to hear. For example, interviewees tried to portray their experiences in anticipation of programs where they viewed me as a literacy provider. It took me some time to establish myself as a researcher who was genuinely interested in knowing women’s perceptions about the impacts of literacy in their lives. This experience is described in the following paragraph.

Having worked in the field of community development in Nepal for a number of years, my identity as a literacy provider preceded my arrival at study sites. From experience I knew that I had to state clearly the purpose of my visit even before visiting a site. Otherwise, people would interpret my visits based on their previous experiences with outsiders, who would be, in most cases, an encounter with providers. In the best

interest of my research I went through the process of identifying people and sites and rapport building as thoroughly as possible. When I conducted the first interview with an interviewee I was rather disappointed to hear things that would contradict her behavior. She gave me a rosy picture of literacy practices, which I took with “a grain of salt” after observing her literacy practices at home; thanks to the multiple sources of information and the process of reflexivity and reflectivity to which I was clinging! This process gave me the awareness and opportunity to probe into it. I decided to spend considerable time in the village and interacted with others to learn more about literacy and its impact on women. It was not until later that I realized the reason why she painted a rosy picture of literacy was so that I would provide a literacy class in her community, and hire her as a facilitator. I went back to the village and made it clear to her that I had no intention of mounting a literacy program in the village. Then she realized that I was not planning to do what she thought. She realized what my intentions were through her interactions with others who talked about my purpose for being in the village. My prolonged stay on the site helped both of us to process the biases. The lesson I learned from this experience is that interviewees’ biases can affect the quality of information they provide the researcher. Researchers can minimize the damage caused by their biases by becoming aware of them. To avoid any damage caused by interviewees’ biases, the researcher needs to spend more time on the site interacting extensively with people to raise their awareness about the purpose of the study in which they are involved.

Because of the insight gained in the early phase of my study, I decided to spend more time on the study sites. As a result, I made several trips to the sites, met with the women at least twice before conducting a ninety-minute in-depth interview with each one

of them. I also conducted six focus group discussions and participated in at least 10 hours of observation with each interviewee, totaling 150 hours during the entire study. The way I collected information followed a pattern. I began with observations with a few objectives in mind and gathered cues for informal meetings with the women. These meetings, geared toward preparing for in-depth interviews, explored themes and issues on which the guiding questions for in-depth interviews were formulated. The insights gained through in-depth interviews guided the focus group discussions, which were organized after the in-depth interviews were completed. As a final step, I went back to the site with more insights gained from focus group discussions, and confirmed with the women the issues and meanings that emerged from their experiences.

The methods used to collect the data in the field were important to the women interviewed and the researcher. They largely determined the nature and the process of data collection. In the following sections I touch briefly upon the data collection tools used in this study.

In-depth Interview: Among the tools employed to gather information for the study, in-depth interviews carried weight in that they took longer than the other two, observation and focus group discussions. It was a major tool to generate relevant information in response to issues under study. Usually it was a dialogue between the researcher and women who were linked by a common interest. In-depth interviews followed the interview criteria outlined by Patton (Patton, 1980). An informal interview began with a checklist of guiding questions from which both the women and the researcher selected issues of interest for discussion. As the process developed, both took the responsibility to structure and restructure the interview.

The interview was conducted mainly in the Nepali language. A translator from the same community or who could speak the language of the participants assisted women who were not fluent in the Nepali language. A few interviews were conducted entirely in local languages when the participants did not feel comfortable speaking the second language, i.e. Nepali. In these cases research assistants from the same community were used to facilitate the interviews, which were taped. The tapes were then transcribed and translated into the Nepali language. Most of the research assistants were female.

Prior to the in-depth interviews, the dialogue between the researcher and women was guided by a list of open-ended questions to generate information regarding demographic characteristics of the participants under study. The women were also asked to sign a consent form before the interview.

Observation: In qualitative research “every little thing” can lead to a greater understanding of the subject under study. The assumption is that “nothing is trivial” and that the research setting should be approached in such a way that it explores many perspectives and opinions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 28). Observation is an effective technique to account for everything in the research setting. But one of the drawbacks of this technique is that the observer tends to color the information s/he collects with his/her own biases unless one is conscious enough to minimize them. To avoid this problem Wolcott offers the following four strategies as a guide for the observer (Wolcott, 1987).

1. Observe and record everything
2. Observe and look for nothing
3. Look for paradoxes
4. Look for the key problem confronting the group

Following Wolcott's guide, ten sessions of observation, each lasting one hour, were organized to observe each one of the fifteen women and their interactions with the family and community in which they lived. The focus of these observations was on "literacy event" (Heath, 1982, p. 50 as cited by Street, 2001, p. 10) and "literacy practices" (Street, 2001, p. 11). Out of ten observation sessions over half of them were conducted before the in-depth interview and the rest were in between the in-depth interview and follow-up meeting with the participant.

Focus Group: Focus group discussions not only provide insights into what is being studied but also verify information generated through individual interviews. They have the capacity to become more than the sum total of their participants, to exhibit a synergy that individuals alone cannot achieve. Six focus group discussions were organized throughout the entire period of the study. The questions to lead informal discussions were based on a list of guiding themes emerging from in-depth interviews conducted with each individual woman.

3.4 Data Management and Data Analysis

Qualitative research generates a mass of data that are hard to organize and analyze. As Marshall and Rossman rightly describe, data analysis is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative and fascinating process (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). It calls for a higher level of organization of data and well thought-out strategy.

While gathering data the focus and direction of research questions constantly change as the preliminary data analysis takes the researcher into deeper levels of understanding, altering his/her assumptions and perceptions about the phenomenon under

study. This is one of the reasons why data collection and data analysis go hand in hand (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were recorded on tape and later transcribed. Field notes were taken during all the observation sessions. All interview transcripts and field notes were coded and dated to differentiate interviews and observations undertaken in different settings for different individuals and groups. During interviews and discussions I wrote down words, phrases, metaphors, ideas and perceptions reflecting the themes of the discussions. I also wrote a memorandum to myself about what I was learning.

Since phenomenological data analysis proceeds through the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes entails a search for all possible meanings (Creswell, 1998). The data generated through several rounds of interviews, observation and focus group discussions were so vast that I was completely overwhelmed. What saved me was my persistent effort to search for similar and different ideas and statements to form categories, themes and patterns (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Merriam, 1988; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Patton, 1980). At the beginning, even the ideas and statements seemed numerous. But as I began to study them carefully in order to make meanings, I was able to group them into categories, themes and patterns. However, these early categories, themes and patterns were somehow influenced by the meanings perceived during data collection. For some reason, I could not work on the data for a considerable period of time. I went over the data to try to understand the meanings through categories, themes and patterns. At this point, I began to merge the data to form new categories, themes and patterns. To my surprise, a new understanding

and new meanings emerged. Of course, this was much more meaningful and deeper in terms of understanding the relationship between literacy and women.

“Data do merge and emerge. Try not to settle for the first explanation. You identify themes, but are willing to abandon them to create new ones when the originals no longer serve. Seek relationships but do not force fit anything.”

(Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 158)

In this process, my experience as a literacy practitioner also helped me to identify issues and challenges prevalent in women’s literacy, which provided me with lenses to sift through the maze of ideas and statements. I must admit that when I began to analyze the data, I thought I would never be able to get through it. But, it was exciting to see that in the end everything came together, providing new insights into the relationship between literacy and women. A happy end to a torturous journey!

3.5 Ethical Consideration

What is right or true? This is an ethical question that I confronted while doing this study. As participants’ realities began to unfold, the dilemma between right and wrong became acute. However, I took the position that whatever the participants told me was true, for it was their reality and this was what they experienced. It was as much a truth for them as what I believe was truth to me. I tried to present their realities as closely as possible. But there were times when my intuition and experience compelled me to question certain experiences of the participants. Even then, I did not dismiss them completely, but let my doubts force me to delve into their realities. I was able to do this consistently throughout the study.

The other ethical consideration of this study is the protection of participants' privacy and confidentiality. Most of the participants shared their personal experiences and expressed their emotions and frustrations in a way that they would not have done normally. I am really grateful to all of them and I also feel that it is my responsibility to protect confidentiality. I changed their names and did not mention their addresses in the study. I also did not force them to share their personal stories. In fact, I explained to them clearly the purpose of the study and what was expected of them before I conducted interviews. I even asked them to sign letters giving their consent. These are included in the appendix.

Ethics is also embedded in the issue of reliability and validity. The study is ethical when it is reliable and valid. Rossman and Rallis contend that in order for a study to be trustworthy, it must be more ethical than reliable and valid (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). The reliability and validity of the study is based on several standards that I upheld while undertaking this study. First, I tried to accommodate the multiple realities of both the participants and mine, creating a broad base of experiences and perspectives to construct meanings. Second, I gathered data over a period of two years, allowing enough time to not only collect a range of information but also to establish trust and respect with the participants. Third, I used multiple sources of data, which included in-depth interviews, observation and focus group discussions.

3.6 Role of Researcher

Because of the interpretive nature of qualitative research, the validity of a research report is enhanced if the researcher describes his/her values and biases.

Creswell (1998) states that openness on the part of researchers is considered to be useful and positive. As researchers, we need to be aware of how our biases slant and shape our understanding of the speaker's reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

My professional career and the values and biases it carries need to be stated clearly, as I am aware that they may color the findings of this study. As a practitioner, I have been working in the field of literacy and community development for a number of years. I have been actively involved in designing and developing both the conventional and self-instructional Women in Business literacy programs in Nepal. Through my organization, Education Curriculum and Training Associates (ECTA), I have provided services in the areas of curriculum and training to both illiterate and neo-literate adults and children. My involvement in several literacy programs, including the Women's Empowerment Programs (WEP), has helped me to become familiar with issues and challenges widely encountered in women's literacy. I have also traveled extensively throughout Nepal, including the regions where this study was conducted.

I believe that literacy does impact the lives of people. However, it is a means, not an end. I also believe that women have been marginalized in the Nepalese society and that literacy can help them realize their potential. I am a firm believer of equality between the sexes and an advocate of women's education.

Even though I have traveled and interacted with rural women extensively and have been associated with rural contexts through my grandparents, the values and practices in which I was raised do not reflect those of the rural areas of Nepal. However, having worked for many years at the grassroots level, I feel that I can identify, to some extent, with the people living in those contexts.

3.7 Conclusion

This study was designed as a qualitative research with a focus on phenomenological research practices. Information from 12 rural sites within Nepal was gathered over a period of two years. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 15 women, 6 focus group discussions and 150 hours of observation.

The duration of this study was longer than anticipated. Interacting with rural women has been thoroughly educational and enlightening to me. I must admit that I have learned a great deal more from the participants than from many years of experience. And, although at times the process was frustrating and tiring, I thoroughly enjoyed conducting the study.

CHAPTER 4

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND INFLUENCING FACTORS

In this chapter I take you along a journey that I undertook while trying to become better acquainted with the participants in this study and their world, as they perceived it. Most of the women in the study were expressive and articulated many facets of their lives that help us understand, to a larger extent, who they were, their values and beliefs, their attitude and behavior toward education, and what literacy training generally brought to them.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section presents characteristics as they emerge from interviews, focus group discussions and observation. These characteristics, although largely representative of most of the Nepalese women living in rural settings, they are “self-disclosed” images of the women who participated in the study. They also give a glimpse of their reality, hope and aspirations for the future. The second section describes the factors that influenced the journey these women embarked upon on their personal path of education. The third section gives a glimpse of women’s aspirations and struggles as expressed in terms of memorable events and daily work schedules.

While analyzing the data I have changed the names of the participants to protect and respect their confidentiality. Although the names used in the ensuing analysis are common female names, they are carefully selected to maintain the general features of the participants, as names generally represent women’s ethnicity and cultural backgrounds in the Nepalese culture.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

This section describes general features of the women who participated in the study. These characteristics are presented together with the statistical data that were collected during the course of the study. Interspersed with the data are stories, narratives and anecdotes that highlight pertinent features of the women's quest for education through literacy programs. I also describe the women's memorable events and typical day as lenses to view their world as closely as possible. This section is divided into the following subheadings.

4.1.1 Age and Marital Status

Adult literacy programs in Nepal enroll a majority of participants between ages of 15 and 45 years.¹¹ Since in most parts of the country literacy classes are the only viable alternative for those who want to become lettered, women are not barred from learning to read and write regardless of their advanced age. Literacy generally embraces all ages.

¹¹ Adult literacy programs, NFE council, Ministry of Education, Nepal.

Table 2: Age and Marital Status

Name	Age	Age at Marriage	Marital Status
1. Puran	18	-	Unmarried
2. Prava	19	-	Unmarried
3. Sita	25	15	Married
4. Shila	27	20	Married (Co-wife)
5. Mina	30	16	Married
6. Parbati	34	14	Married
7. Ghuran	36	15	Married
8. Ramkali	40	14	Married
9. Sarita	40	13	Married
10. Maya	42	18	Married
11. Radha	45	8	Widow
12. Mahili	48	10	Widow
13. Suntali	50	10	Widow
14. Saraswoti	52	18	Married
15. Sumitra	54	13	Separated (Co-wife)

The age of the fifteen women interviewed ranged between 18 and 54 as shown above. Their average age was 35. Out of them 74% was between the ages of 15 to 45; 26% was over 46 years.

Out of the fifteen women 87% was married and 13% unmarried. Of the thirteen married women 16% of them were widows and single mothers, 8% had co-wives and another 8% was separated because of the co-wife situation. The other 68% was living with their husbands.

While the legal marriageable age is 18, the average age at marriage for thirteen women was 12. Although child marriage was recently prohibited throughout the country, its occurrence was common at least among the older people who strictly observed the age-old tradition of marrying off their daughters before they menstruated. This was precisely why many older women were married at an early age. Among the thirteen

married women 23% of them was married under the age of 10, 46% under 15 and 31% under 20.

4.1.2 Educational Status

The educational status of the women interviewed spread across the continuum with literacy skills ranging from illiteracy to primary education, as shown below.

Table 3: Educational Status¹²

Name	Illiterate or Lapse into illiteracy*	Signature only*	Semi-literate*	Literate*	Primary Education and Above
1. Puran	-	-	-	X	-
2. Prava	-	-	-	X	-
3. Sita	-	-	-	X	-
4. Shila	-	X	-	-	-
5. Mina	-	-	-	-	X (5 th)
6. Parbati	-	-	-	X	-
7. Ghuran	-	-	-	X	-
8. Ramkali	-	-	X	-	-
9. Sarita	-	X	-	-	-
10. Maya	X (Relapse)	-	-	-	-
11. Radha	-	-	-	X	-
12. Mahili	-	-	-	X	-
13. Suntali	X	-	-	-	-
14. Saraswoti	-	-	-	X	-
15. Sumitra	-	-	-	-	X (8 th)

Except for Suntali, all of the women were exposed to literacy training. Out of them 7% relapsed into illiteracy after a while and 14% only learned to sign their names. Another 7% became semi-literate who could read a few words or phrases without a great deal of comprehension. The other 72% of the women was literate, of these only 20% enrolled in school and went up to the 5th and 8th grades.

¹² The terms 'illiterate', 'literate' and 'semi-literate' marked by asterisks are defined in Chapter 1 under 'Key Terms and Concepts'.

4.1.3 Ethnicity and Religion

The ethnic composition of the women interviewed represented a variety of groups. As shown in the following table, 33% of the women was Tharu, 20% Chettri, 13% Brahman, 7% Magar, 20% Untouchable Class and 7% Newar.

The Untouchable Class is made up of several ethnic groups from the bottom of the caste hierarchy within Hinduism. These groups consist of people whose traditional professions are tailors, sweepers, butchers, etc. These professions are generally considered unclean and impure acts in their society. This Class is therefore both an ethnicity and a caste. It is important to note that education in general has greatly dissipated the crippling effects of the caste system by questioning its validity and importance.

Brahmans and Chettris share almost the same culture. However, Brahmans belonging to a higher caste in the caste hierarchy are the clergy. Chettris are lower than Brahmans in caste and primarily belong to the warrior class. The Untouchables come from a lower caste. Tharus, Magars and Newars are aboriginal groups of Nepal. Tharus are from the plains, Terai, while Magars come from the hills. Newar are chiefly from the Kathmandu valley who have scattered across the country for trading.

Table 4: Ethnicity and Religion

Name	Ethnicity	Religion
1. Puran	Tharu	Baha`i
2. Prava	Tharu	Baha`i
3. Sita	Chettri	Hindu
4. Shila	Tharu	Hindu
5. Mina	Brahman	Hindu
6. Parbati	Untouchable Class	Hindu
7. Ghuran	Tharu	Baha`i
8. Ramkali	Newar	Hindu
9. Sarita	Chettri	Hindu
10. Maya	Untouchable Class	Hindu
11. Radha	Tharu	Hindu
12. Mahili	Brahman	Hindu
13. Suntali	Untouchable Class	Hindu
14. Saraswoti	Magar	Hindu
15. Sumitra	Chettri	Hindu

About 80% of the women interviewed are Hindus, while the other 20% professed the Baha`i Faith. In addition, there were Buddhists in the focus groups. It is interesting to note that all the religious groups in Nepal have co-existed peacefully for centuries.

4.1.4 Language

The following table indicates that the fifteen women interviewed represented four major language groups. As their mother tongue, referred to as the language of first hearing, 53% spoke the Nepali language, 33% Tharu, 7% Magar and 7% Newari.

Table 5: Language – Mother Tongue and Second Language

Name	Mother Tongue	Second Language
1. Parbati	Nepali	-
2. Mina	Nepali	-
3. Sarita	Nepali	-
4. Shila	Tharu	Nepali
5. Ramkali	Newari	Nepali
6. Radha	Tharu	Nepali
7. Sita	Nepali	-
8. Maya	Nepali	-
9. Mahili	Nepali	-
10. Saraswoti	Magar	Nepali
11. Sumitra	Nepali	-
12. Prava	Tharu	Nepali
13. Puran	Tharu	Nepali
14. Ghuran	Tharu	Nepali
15. Suntali	Nepali	-

Although Nepali is the official language used in Nepal, including educational institutions, 47% of the women used Nepali as a second language generally referred to as the language of first sight, which they encountered in their surroundings.

Women belonging to the other language groups such as Gurung, Tamang, Maithali and Bhojpuri were also present in the focus groups.

4.1.5 Number of Children and Their Educational Status

The following table indicates that out of the fifteen women interviewed twelve had 3 to 7 children. The average number of children per woman is five. About 58% of the women sent all of their children to school, while 25% sent only one or two; 25% of the women had illiterate children who either did not go to school or were too small to attend school. Another 25% had school dropouts.

Most of the children pursuing an education were in levels ranging from primary school to college. Women, whose children either dropped out of school or remained

illiterate, encountered economic hardship. For example, Maya's family was poor. Her husband had to support the family with the salary he earned as a daily laborer. They did not have sufficient land to support themselves all year round. As a result, and in spite of her longing for education, Maya was not able to send her five children to school.

Table 6: Number of Children and Children's Educational Status

Name	Number of Children	Number of School-goers	Illiterate	Literate	Primary Education and Above
1. Parbati	3 (1 daughter and 2 sons)	3	-	-	Primary & high school
2. Mina	5 (3 daughters and 2 sons)	5	-	-	Primary & high school
3. Sarita	6 (daughters)	3	-	-	Primary school
4. Shila	6 (5 daughters and 1 son)	5	1 daughter - not ready for school	-	Primary, high school & college
5. Ramkali	7 (4 daughters and 3 sons)	1 daughter	-	6 school dropouts	Primary school
6. Radha	6 (3 daughters and 3 sons)	6	-	-	Primary & high school
7. Sita	3 (sons)	-	Not ready for school	-	-
8. Maya	7 (2 sons and 5 daughters)	2 (1 son & 1 daughter)	5 - 1 son & 4 daughters	-	Primary school
9. Mahili	4 (3 daughters and 1 son)	4	-	-	High school & college
10. Saraswoti	5 (1 daughter and 4 sons)	1 son	-	4 school dropouts	High school
11. Sumitra	-	-	-	-	-
12. Prava	-	-	-	-	-
13. Puran	-	-	-	-	-
14. Ghuran	3 (1 daughter and 2 sons)	3	-	-	Primary & high school
15. Suntali	3 sons	-	-	3 school dropouts	Primary & high school

4.1.6 Family Size and Occupation

From the following table it is evident that most of the women interviewed have large families because they live in an extended family. The average family size for the fifteen women is 7.6, which is higher than the national average, which stands at 5.6 per household.

As high as 60% of the women called themselves housewives; 40% considered themselves breadwinners; 80% of them had farming as their families' primary source of livelihood. Most of these families were subsistence farmers; 20% relied mainly on traditional professions like blacksmith, business, or vendors. In addition to farming, 33% of the women's families had a subsidiary occupation. Some of their children were either working in India or doing business in the country. They would send money home to supplement their family income.

Table 7: Family Size and Occupation

Name	Number of Family Members	Occupation			
		Self	Head of Household	Family	
				Main	Subsidiary
1. Parbati	7	Housewife	Business (father-in-law)	Business blacksmith	Farming Service-India (husband)
2. Mina	10	Housewife	Farmer (father-in-law)	Farming	-
3. Sarita	8	Housewife	Farmer (husband)	Farming	-
4. Shila	9	Housewife	Teacher (husband)	Farming	-
5. Ramkali	9	Housewife	Farmer (husband)	Farming	
6. Radha	7	Farmer	Self	Farming	-
7. Sita	5	Housewife	Farmer (husband)	Farming	-
8. Maya	9	Housewife	Laborer (husband)	Labor	Farming
9. Mahili	5	Farmer	Self	Farming	Shop (son) Teaching (daughter)
10. Saraswoti	7	Housewife	Farmer (husband)	Farming	Army-India (son)
11. Sumitra	5	Social Worker	Contractor (brothers)	Business	Farming
12. Prava	10	Factory worker	Farmer (father)	Farming	Carpenter (father)
13. Puran	9	Office Assistant	Farmer (father)	Farming	-
14. Ghuran	5	Housewife	Farmer (husband)	Farming	-
15. Suntali	10	Farmer	Self	Farming	Service-India (sons)

4.1.7 Participants' Profile

The profile of the fifteen participants interviewed in the study is shown in the table below. Each one of the characteristics is described in the following subheadings.

Table 8: Participants' Profile

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Positive Attitude toward Literacy	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Positive Attitude toward Child's Education.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Goals in Life															
Social worker	X					X			X						
Teacher		X					X								
Business/Trade Service			X	X				X						X	
Respected Leader					X							X	X		X
Self concept															
Housewife	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		X				X	
Productive labor						X			X		X	X	X		X
Household Head						X			X						X
Mobility															
Within village		X	X	X		X	X	X	X						X
Outside village	X				X					X	X	X	X	X	
Decision Making															
Self	X				X	X		X	X			X	X		X
With husband/family		X	X	X			X			X	X			X	
Family Support	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Use of Literacy Skills	X	X			X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	

1.Parbati, 2. Mina, 3. Sarita, 4. Shila, 5. Ramkali, 6. Radha, 7. Sita, 8. Maya, 9. Mahili, 10. Saraswoti, 11. Sumitra, 12. Prava, 13. Puran, 14. Ghuran, 15. Suntali

4.1.7.1 Positive Attitude Toward Literacy

All of the fifteen women interviewed showed a positive attitude toward literacy.

Most of them wanted to attend school when they were young. But for one reason or another, they were not able to achieve their goal. Except for Suntali, all of them participated in literacy programs when offered in their communities.

The women in the focus groups also recognized the importance of literacy in their lives. Most of them benefited from literacy programs.

4.1.7.2 Positive Attitude Toward Children's Education

The women in the study unanimously stated that education was important to their children. Most of them sent all of their children to school. Many women made sure that their daughters were at least literate. The reason was that they wanted them to be different from themselves. So, most of the women provided time and resources for their daughters to attend school. Some of the women considered poverty and teen pregnancy barriers to promoting the education of girls.

4.1.7.3 Goals in Life

All the women interviewed had a goal in their lives. Out of the fifteen women 20% expressed their desire to become social workers helping with development work in their communities, 13% teachers and another 20% leaders. But 27% of the women wanted to become involved in some kind of business or trade, while 20% wanted to do jobs for wages.

It is clear from the data that, as opposed to 40% who wanted to do social work, 60% of the women preferred to do something that would help them bring a regular income to their families.

4.1.7.4 Self Concept

Sixty percent of the women who were living with their husbands either separately or in an extended family considered themselves housewives even though they contributed heavily to the main occupation of the family. Living in a large family with her in-laws, Mina commented, "I help my family with farming, but mainly I take care of my children

and home. I do see myself more as a housewife than a farmer.” Parbati usually spent a great deal of time every day helping her father-in-law in his blacksmith’s workshop. But she preferred to call herself a housewife whose contribution is generally not considered as economically productive.

In contrast, 40% of the women who were either single mothers, or not married, asserted their professions openly, implying that they were part of the productive labor force. Some of them were single mothers who were supporting the family economically, even though farming is their main occupation. Two of the interviewees were unmarried and held jobs in neighboring towns. Puran said, “We also work in the house and look after our siblings. But I have a job and bring money into the family every month. Actually, I am doing two jobs at the same time.” Prava laughed and said, “My mother does most of my work at home. That’s why I get more time to work in the factory. I am happy because I work less at home and bring money to the family which also makes them happy.”

To many women ‘productivity’ did not always mean the earning capacity of a person. It could mean providing support toward their capacity to earn more. For generations women in the rural areas of the country have been helping their male partners by relieving them from household chores and providing support in farming. But, unfortunately women’s subsidiary roles have not been considered productive. Most of the women in the study resented this. Sumitra was living with her brother’s family because she left her husband long ago. She was highly respected in the community because of her social work. She generally kept herself busy with meetings and counseling as she served on many local committees. On the question of being

economically productive. Sumitra commented, “Yes, I don’t earn money as I do a lot of voluntary work. But, look how much I am helping people do their jobs better. Besides, I also help my sisters-in-law with household chores and taking care of their children. I don’t think I am wasting my time and not being productive.”

4.1.7.5 Head of Household/Control Over Economic Resources

As heads of household, husbands, fathers, fathers-in-law, or brothers were the breadwinners of the family for 80% of the women interviewed. They were basically in control of almost all the economic resources of the family. In contrast, 20% of the women whose husbands died long ago were the head of their families. Mahili and Suntali managed all their property and the money their children would bring home. Mahili said, “I have been taking care of my family since my husband died. Now my sons and daughters have grown up and started earning. They like to help with family expenses, which are kind of expected of them. I handle the money very sensibly and nobody bothers how I spend it. They seem to have confidence in me.” Suntali’s son was working in India and sent money home regularly. Feeling a little bit overwhelmed she said, “I feel stupid when I can’t manage all the money I receive. I have a hell of time with it! I wish I could learn how to do simple calculations!”

4.1.7.6 Mobility

When the fifteen women were asked how frequently they traveled within and outside their villages with a certain degree of ease and comfort, 53% said they traveled a lot alone within their villages. They were confident and free to do it. This cohort also

said that they had traveled, on some occasions, a long distance for health and religious purposes. But, of course, someone always accompanied them.

The other 47% of the women had gone to several places with or without a friend. Most of them were confident and free to make such journeys alone. But sometimes some of them had to get permission either from their fathers or husbands to embark on long distance travel.

4.1.7.7 Decision-making

Out of the fifteen women 47% said they would make decisions alone, while 53% would consult with either their husbands or family members. But most of the women who preferred to make decisions themselves occasionally consulted with the male members of the family when confronted with issues of property, income and marriage of their children.

Conversely, most of the women who consulted with their families in making decisions acted alone when it came to managing the house and the education of children (refer to discussion in Chapter 5).

4.1.7.8 Family Support

About 87% of the women reported that they received support from their husbands and family members when they decided to join literacy programs. They were provided time in the evening to attend literacy classes. Their families also helped them to send their children to school.

The other 13% said their husbands were not particularly interested in education. As a result, they did not get help at home (refer to discussion in Chapter 5).

4.1.7.9 Use of Literacy Skills

As high as 73% of the women interviewed said they had been using literacy skills since they became literate. They found opportunities to use their literacy skills at home and in the community. The other 27% had some exposure to literacy programs, but they could not develop their literacy skills sufficiently (refer to discussion in Chapter 5).

4.2 Influencing Factors

Since the acquisition of literacy skills is a function of many elements, the following factors were perceived by the women in the study as having a strong influence in their quest for education. The ensuing subheadings give some insights into how different factors affect women who aspire to become literate.

4.2.1 Marriage

Marriage plays a big role in shaping women's attitudes toward life in the Nepalese culture, where no matter how old a woman is, she thinks that after bearing a child her life is over and her only concern now is the wellbeing of her family and children. Statements like "It's not for me because my days are over", "What is left now! All I have got to do is look after my family", "Home is everything for me and that's where I belong", "I am done", "I am too old to take on new responsibilities", "I am just like the sunshine on the other side of the hill", are indicative of women's confining roles

and limited aspirations in a patriarchal society. But interestingly enough, the quest for education seems to be one of the desires women have kept close to their hearts even though their goals in life may have been fulfilled through marriage.

All the women interviewed have said unequivocally that the desire for an education has become a cherished dream at various points in their lives. For some reason, however, all of them missed the opportunity to attend school in their early years. Some of them were married off in arranged marriages when they were as young as eight or ten. Mahili and Suntali were married at the age of ten, whereas Radha was married off when she was only eight. This factored into opportunities to access education.

Feeling sad, Parbati said, “Even today I do not understand why my parents gave me in somebody’s hand instead of sending me to school. I wished they had understood how much I loved education!” Sarita, who was married at the age of 13, pleaded to her parents saying, “Please do not make me leave this home. I don’t want to get married at this age. I like to go to school and get education.” But her plea fell on deaf ears. Suntali, who still cannot read or write, once stopped speaking to her parents for more than a month when her “... request to attend the school was blatantly refused” by them.

4.2.2 Challenges as Opportunities

The plight of broken marriages, widowhood and having co-wives have pushed women to work even harder on making their dreams come true. For Sumitra, her marriage turned out to be both a curse and boon at the same time. She was married at the age of 13 and went to her husband’s house two years later. The fact that she could not conceive in those tender years brought unimaginable misery upon her. She was harassed

and physically abused by her husband. It was difficult for Sumitra to put up with the hatred and neglect her in-laws would direct toward her. Yet she quietly tolerated it hoping that one day she would bear a child and everything would be fine. But that day never came in Sumitra's life. Instead, she had to suffer the pain of having a co-wife because her husband brought home a second wife. For Sumitra, it became unbearable and she finally left her husband for good when she was only eighteen years old.

Sumitra moved back to her parents' house and began to learn to read and write. The bitter experience of her marriage made Sumitra resolute about getting a higher education. She worked really hard in the adult literacy class improving her skills. She did not stop there. She enrolled in a formal school in spite of the fact that she was much older than her friends in the fourth grade. It did not matter much to her because she did not let age become a barrier in fulfilling her dreams. Bursting into laughter Sumitra said, "I would have gone much higher than the eighth grade had not my teacher one day whacked me in the class for missing homework. I took it as a big insult and stopped going to school because at that time I could not bear the pain of being humiliated by another man."

Losing a husband is the most devastating experience women ever go through in a patriarchal society. It not only traumatizes them but it also forces them to take on many challenges as they are suddenly thrust into a new role. Mahili became a widow when she was only twenty-four years old. Although it was difficult for her to alone support four small children financially and emotionally, she had to force herself to learn to read and write because, all of a sudden, literacy became a necessity in her life. She had to be able to read documents and pay land taxes in order to protect the property herself. Her

husband who was literate used to do all of that. In retrospect, Mahili said, "It was not easy for me in the beginning, but I had no choice. I worked hard. Thank God, now I can at least take care of my family and the property!" Radha also became a widow at the age of thirty-five and had to force herself to become literate. Although widowhood was difficult, it gave Radha a sense of independence, providing her with many opportunities to rise up to the challenges encountered in her new role as head of household. Learning to read and write was certainly a challenge for Radha.

However, in spite of their efforts some women have not been able to bring themselves up to fulfilling their cherished dreams. Among them is Shila, who was tricked into marrying a man who already had a wife and children. Compromising with her fate, Shila set out quietly to make herself literate. She felt education would elevate her status in the family where everybody, including her co-wife, is literate. She tried hard in the literacy class, but could not achieve much more than being able to sign her name. This was also true with Ramkali, who is now semi-literate, meaning that she can recognize the alphabet and read a few sentences haltingly without a great deal of comprehension. In fact, Ramkali could not put her literacy skills into any practical use.

4.2.3 Extended Family System

In rural settings the extended family structure usually consisting of parents and children with their immediate families is a common phenomenon in the lives of the women in the study. This intergenerational family tradition generally referred to as the 'extended family system' cuts across all ethnic groups that are dependent on agriculture as the primary source of livelihood, and the family breaks into several units after the

death of the father, the head of the family. Brahmans, Chhetris and Tharus, however, continued to observe this tradition more frequently than other ethnic groups. For example, apart from her own children and husband Mina was living together with her father-in-law, two mothers-in-law, brothers-in-law and four sisters-in-law. Unlike Brahman and Chhetri families, Magar and Newar nuclear families were more likely to live separately. The Untouchable Class consisting of the lower caste groups in the caste hierarchy such as Kami (blacksmith), Damai (tailor), Sarki (cobbler) etc. was also seen to have a nuclear family as soon as the children got married. But they tend to keep their parents with them and take good care of them. Parbati said, "We live separately. But my husband brought home his parents when he saw nobody was around to look after them."

Many women said that the extended family system lent itself to their quest for education. Family members helped out to free up time for the women to enroll in literacy programs, provided that they were supportive of their decision. There were some women who did not get as much support as they had expected. The decision to join literacy programs was not supported by their families, who basically undermined the value of literacy training. For these families, it was more important for women to attend the household chores than to learn to read and write.

4.2.4 Patriarchal Society

Throughout Nepal, parents become liabilities to their sons as dependents when they get older. It is precisely for this reason that the demand for a male child is so important in a patriarchal society. The price for not bearing a son is so high in this culture that women usually comply with social expectations to produce boys. Sarita said

feeling rather sad. “My health is not good because I have given birth to six daughters. Until the age of thirty-two I was conceiving because everybody, including my husband, expected a son. I got such pressure, that despite my declining health I could not stop. Still I don’t have a son and now I gave up. I don’t care what society or even my family says.”

The traditional profession of the Brahmans is priesthood, which requires one to be educated enough to comprehend the sacred writings. For many centuries Brahmans from even the remotest part of the country have been going to India to learn the ancient language, Sanskrit, which is used in scriptures. Since this profession is the prerogative of male members of the family, women, in spite of being born into the Brahmin families and being besieged by activities related to literacy as they grow up, are not allowed to acquire literacy skills. Mahili remembers vividly that her father sent her four brothers to school to become priests, while her sisters, including her, were kept at home.

4.2.5 Social Conditioning

Because of social conditioning, some of the women were oblivious to the importance of education while growing up. Mahili said, “I did not know it was good for me to go to school. In my neighborhood all my friends were staying home to help their mothers with household chores and looking after their siblings. I also did the same because I thought that was what a good girl was supposed to do.” Shila did not feel a burning desire to attend school as she was raised in an environment where education had little value. She said, “In retrospect why I did not go to school is because nobody in the family was particularly concerned about it and education had very little to do with our

day-to-day life.” Ramkali did not attend school due to her broken home. She said, “My mom walked off from us and father married another women. I was overwhelmed not only by the pain and grief of losing my mother but also the time and effort I had to put into looking after my siblings. Who thinks about going to school in such a terrible situation!” In the focus group discussions many middle-aged women attributed the deprivation of education in their early years to the absence of schools in the communities where they grew up. This was a common problem in the past. Even today with the expansion of schools throughout the country, hilly areas where roads and other means of transportation are not fully developed and there is limited access to schools especially for girls, parents tend to protect their daughters by not permitting them to travel long distances to attend school.

4.2.6 Caste System

Socialization across ethnic groups is largely subject to the caste system even though it was abolished in the early sixties.¹³ In the rural settings where most of the participants in the study lived, the remains of the traditional caste system is usually seen in subtle ways. In many communities it was observed that people of the lower caste were still not allowed to enter the house of the upper caste such as Brahmans and Chhetris, nor dared to sit together with others to drink a cup of tea in a village teashop. Recalling her experience, one middle-aged woman in a focus group said, “A few years ago, a literacy class was held in one of the Brahmans’ house of our community. I also joined the group. But I was kept from entering the house. I used to sit outside the door while the class

¹³ The government of Nepal passed a law, ‘Muluki Ein’, in 1964 abolishing the caste system. Muluki Ein prohibits all sorts of prejudices related to the age-old caste system in Nepal.

would be held inside the house. It went like this for the whole six months. Nobody cared, as though it were a normal practice.” Another women laughed and said, “These days everybody avoids talking about caste prejudices as if it were the evil things of the past. But even now meetings like this (referring to focus group discussions) are generally held either in porches, or in courtyards or in cowsheds if they were held in upper caste people’s houses. These people always find a way to avoid us.”

It seems as though the roots of the caste system have grown deep into the social fabric of the Nepalese society. But with the awareness created by education in general, school-going children from across the ethnic groups have enjoyed a sense of equality. With deep furrows on her forehead, Parbati commented on the caste system. “I think it is our fault to keep reminding us of these prejudices. Our kids do not seem to know about it. They go wherever they want to because they have been interacting with others in school regardless of their castes. It is only us who seem to have hung up on these differences.” This voice was echoed by one of the women from the focus group who is in her mid twenties and from an upper caste family. She said, “In the literacy class we never talked about our caste differences. We sat together and even eat together occasionally. We never felt we were polluted through our interactions with lower caste people as our family often talks about.” She added, “I found women from a lower caste are more experienced than most of us because they have been through so much in their lives. Besides, they have the same issues and challenges as all of us do.”

4.2.7 Mother Tongue vs. Second Language

In addition to discrimination resulting from either the caste system or cultural conditioning, women have to overcome the language barrier while making themselves literate. Even though all the women in the study have knowledge of the Nepali language and are using it to some extent in their day-to-day life, some of them have different mother tongues. For the Tharu women, Nepali is not the language they use at home; they feel more comfortable communicating in their mother tongue, the Tharu dialect. Magars and Newars also have their own languages, which are distinct from Nepali. Some of these languages have ancient scripts seldom used; the Devnagari script, which is the basis of Sanskrit, Hindi, Nepali and other regional language, is used instead.

Since Nepali is the official language used everywhere in Nepal, including educational institutions, most literacy curricula have been developed in Nepali. For groups whose mother tongue is other than Nepali, learning to read and write in the second language is rather challenging. Radha, whose mother tongue is Tharu, said, "In the literacy class we would read the book but we always had discussions in our local tongue. I felt good to have been able to contribute to the discussion usually conducted in our language." Shila, who failed to become fully literate, also experienced difficulty with the Nepali language. She said, "It was difficult for me to understand many words, as they are not used in our language. In the literacy class I always asked my teacher to translate them into our local tongue." When asked how she would have felt reading a literacy book developed in the Tharu language, she responded by saying, "I would have certainly felt better and confident in the class because at times I was embarrassed not being able to pronounce Nepali words correctly. I would have also learned more from the book."

Learning to read and write in one's mother tongue seems promising for adults. It may also help them function effectively in their immediate environment. But for some, it would limit their mobility and capacity to deal with a greater world around them. Prava, who wants to do more in her life, said, "I want to get more education and do much more than what I am doing now. Learning to read and write in the Tharu language will not help me achieve my goals." Ghuran is thankful that she can now read and write Nepali. It is the language she encounters wherever she goes. She said, "I don't find the Tharu language being used. The signboards in the market are written in Nepali. My kids do their homework in Nepali. If I go to the hospital, I have to know enough Nepali so that I can get help from doctors and nurses. What will I do learning to read and write only the Tharu language? This language is spoken only in Tharu communities like ours. But all of us have to invariably use Nepali while at work or visiting the government offices."

The impact of the dominant language was clearly seen in the immediate environment of the women interviewed. The minority language groups were expected to do better in Nepali. Ramkali is encouraging her kids to speak good Nepali without Newari accents. Laughing heartily she said, "I don't want my kids to be ridiculed and mocked by people as they do to me all the time. I don't seem to pronounce certain Nepali words correctly and people always make fun of me."

4.2.8 Family Occupation

Eighty percent of the women said that farming was their main family occupation. The other 20% belongs to families whose main occupation was either business or labor. All those who were dependent largely on agriculture were subsistence farmers. The

families living in the Terai, which is generally referred to as the 'granary' of the country, were relatively better off than those who resided in the middle hills. According to the census statistics of 2000, the average size of land holding in Terai is 1.26 hectares per family, which is higher than the national average of 0.96 hectares. The size of land holding in the middle hills is 0.77 hectares, which is way below the national average.

As high as 53% of the women whose families lived in the Terai did not encounter so much difficulty making their ends meet compared to that of 47% whose families lived in the hills. Parbati's family was from the hills and had very little land to support the family all year round. This was one of the reasons why her father-in-law was pursuing his traditional profession, that of a blacksmith. Parbati commented on her economic situation by saying, "The income from both the workshop and land are barely keeping us alive. We need extra money for kids' education and other stuff. This is why my husband is working in India. He sends home a little bit of money regularly. Without it we won't survive, let alone providing education to our children." The yield Maya's family would get from its small piece of land was not enough to last them six months. Her husband had no choice but to work as a laborer in the village for their mere survival. Prava's family did not possess enough land to support them all year round, even though they lived in the Terai. Her father worked as a carpenter to supplement the family income. Prava felt obligated to bring some income into the family. In the focus groups also many women attested to the fact that their families needed additional sources of income because farming was not sufficient to support their families.

4.2.9 Access to Economic Resources

The women who did not have access to money in the family managed to generate a little income to meet their personal expenses. They needed money, not only to buy cosmetics for themselves, but also to meet the demands of their children. Parbati said, “My husband is in India and I can’t ask my in-laws for money all the time. My kids are grown up and they have special demands. That’s why I have raised a few chickens that I sell when I need money.” Saraswoti said, “Once one of my sons was seriously ill and we did not have enough money to treat him. Since then, I have done everything to save money so that I don’t fail to meet such an eventuality.” Puran did not give all the money she earned. Rather, she kept some for herself and gave the rest to her father. With a dubious look on her face, she said, “You know we have to buy woman’s stuff and it is really embarrassing to ask for money to buy them. So, I secretly hide some money and buy whatever I need.” I have observed that it is customary for women to grow vegetables, raise animals, or sell their labor as a side business to build a ‘private purse’ for their personal use, which is generally referred to as ‘Pewa’ in the Nepali language.

Pewa is something that women usually bring from their parents’ home when they marry. In fact, parents encourage their daughters to build their Pewa before they get married. After marriage neither the husband nor the head of the family is allowed to interfere with the bride’s Pewa. But some women had difficulty keeping it from the prying eyes of their husbands. In the focus groups a number of women complained that they really had a hard time hiding their money from their husbands who had both drinking and gambling habits. One woman said, “I don’t keep a whole lot of money with me because I know it is very hard to protect it. So I lend it out to others, which means I

guard it against any eventualities and also earn interest on it.” Many women felt that they needed to have a source of regular income so that they could increase their Pewa substantially.

4.2.10 Physical Inability

In my observation of literacy classes across the country, I found that women of all ages, sometimes as old as 70 or over, have struggled to learn how to read and write. Although women’s desire to overcome illiteracy has not been dampened by their advanced age, aging has taken its toll on their physical ability to read and write. Women above forty often complain that they have trouble reading because of poor eyesight and they can’t walk at night by themselves to attend literacy classes.

Even though Maya struggled to learn how to read and write in her late thirties and eventually became successful, she has now lapsed into illiteracy. With an expression of sadness and remorse on her face Maya said, “After the literacy class my reading and writing activities stopped because I can’t read small print due to poor vision.” Sumitra, who has mastered her literacy skills, has also trouble reading small print. She said, “I used to help people with writing letters to their loved ones or reading holy writings to them at night. Now I can’t even do my work because of my eyes.” One of the reasons why Suntali remains illiterate is her poor health. She was not able to even walk for fifteen minutes to attend literacy classes that were held at night.

Many middle-aged women from the focus groups also expressed their concern that literacy curriculum and supplementary readers are usually printed in small fonts. They also commented that their memory was not as sharp as it used to be because they

were having difficulty remembering lessons taught in previous sessions. Realizing the problem, women under 40 wanted to advance their literacy skills while they were physically and mentally fit.

In the following section we will view these women's world through the events that occurred in their lives. These accounts disclose painful memories some women experienced. Reflecting upon their experiences, learning and inspirations, the women were able to make a difference in their lives as well as in the lives of their children.

4.3 Aspirations and Struggles

Generally, in a patriarchal society women struggle a great deal to achieve their goals. They have to be courageous and persistent enough to turn every obstacle to their advantage if they are resolute to accomplish something meaningful in life. In spite of having a long workday, the women depicted in the study have lived dramatic and eventful lives. Some of their experiences have influenced their attitude positively; others have helped shape their destiny. But these painful experiences have encouraged the women to work ceaselessly in order that they may realize their dreams.

In the following section women's aspirations and struggle to acquire an education are presented in terms of some memorable events in a typical workday.

4.3.1 Memorable Events

Most of the women in the study remembered vividly the events in their lives, which they said have been thoroughly educational. The events were powerful enough to

change their lives. The valiant efforts the women made in order to have access to education can be appreciated in the following vignettes.

Parbati: I wanted to go to school and get some education. Instead my parents arranged my marriage, which I protested with all my might. But, to no avail! They literally forced me to crawl on a sedan chair and sent me off to the groom's house. I cried for days. More than the pain of having to cope with marriage and a new family at the tender age of 14 was the feeling of remorse and helplessness. I will never ever let my daughters go through all of this.

Mina: Several years ago a tumor had grown in my arm, which took me to the hospital for surgery. One day my step mother-in-law who was illiterate at the time came to visit me. She wanted to use a restroom that was in the corridor. But she entered the one assigned for males because she could not read the sign. She was so embarrassed that she wanted to become literate. I helped her when I came back home. Now she can read and write.

Sarita: When I was thirteen my parents arranged my marriage. I begged them to send me to school instead. But they did not listen to me. I was miserable for many years agonizing over why my parents acted so cruelly. Now I completely realize that it was not their fault. They simply bought into the belief that education corrupts women. Actually they were protecting me, which I now think was completely wrong. I will never make the same mistake.

Shila: Seven years ago when I was newly married, I wanted not to get pregnant right away. So I thought I would use contraceptives. Without really knowing what the side effects of Depo Provera were I took a shot of it. Afterwards, I became seriously ill and my family had to spend a lot of money on me. Now I know that it is really bad to do something that you don't know much about it. If I were literate, I would have read more about Depo Provera before taking it.

Ramkali: When I was a little girl my mother eloped with a neighbor leaving all her seven small children behind. My father brought another wife immediately. I could not cope with the pain of losing my mother on one hand and having to deal with a stepmother on the other. I was very much traumatized as I wandered in the woods on an empty stomach because of my stepmother's violent opposition to our going to school.

Radha: Once I was gravely ill for six months. Nobody was around, not even my daughters. My sons were working outside Nepal. I could not write them because I was illiterate. I felt utterly lonely and miserable.

Sita: When I was small I requested my parents to send me to school. They admitted me together with my brother to a school in our village. Since I was the older daughter in the family I had to look after my younger siblings. Despite my efforts I would not get time to go to school.

Maya: When I was a small girl both of my parents died. I had to take care of my siblings, which kept me from going to school. This was the biggest tragedy I have ever faced in my life.

- Mahili: I got married at the age of 10 and lost my husband when I was only 24. As soon as I became a widow I was prohibited to attend any ceremonies or auspicious gatherings. My neighbors treated me as an untouchable. I was hurt beyond description. Now they don't do that. Thanks to the literacy class!
- Saraswoti: One of my sons whose kidneys were defective died because we did not have enough money for his treatment. This is the harsh reality of poverty that we face everyday. Since that day I have started to save so that I can help myself.
- Sumitra: I was much older than a normal eighth grader because I started school when I was eighteen. I would have gone much higher than the eighth grade had not one day my teacher whacked me in class for missing homework. I took it as a big insult and stopped going to school because at that time I could not bear the pain of being humiliated by a man.
- Prava: I was happy at school. One day our little house caught fire and everything went up in smoke. Our family became destitute and my father had difficulty arranging food for the family, let alone paying for my education. Consequently, I was forced to leave school and start working for others so that I could help my parents.
- Puran: Ever since I was a child, I have been very much motivated for education. But unfortunately I could not attend the school for various reasons. When I got an invitation to a literacy class in our community I jumped at it. I guess my inner feeling must have driven me to embark on this journey.

Ghuran: My parents kept me from going to school. They thought I would bring disgrace to the family once I learned reading and writing, implying that I would make boyfriends and have sex with them. Now I know this is not true. I will make sure that all my daughters go to school.

Suntali: I wanted to go to school. But my family kept me away from it because they feared that nobody would marry me. It hurts me even today.

One of the recurring themes emerging from the above anecdotes was that the women in the study struggled to have access to education. The social and cultural barriers were such that most of them failed to meet their goal when they were young. Poverty also got in their way. But, these bitter experiences inspired them to try to bring about change in their lives.

In an effort to understand how and why women take time out from their busy schedules to realize their dreams, I will take you along a journey to view some of the women's world through their daily lives. Two typical days in the lives of the women interviewed are described in the following sections.

4.3.2 A Typical Day

Generally, women worked more hours than men. They managed the entire household and contributed to their family occupation, farming or trading. Looking at their daily work schedule one would wonder how on earth women found time to pursue their quest for education through literacy programs.

Many of the women interviewed had a working day literally running from dawn to late at night. Saraswoti, whose family lives in the hills, described the following

schedule as a typical day in her life. She had difficulty following this schedule at first. Responding to the question of how she handled her schedule, Saraswoti said, “I literally tried to fit myself into it because all of this is expected of women in our society. Once you start doing it when you are quite young you get used to it.” Saraswoti explained why women generally become complacent with this life style. She said, “Nobody dares to defy it because if we do, we will be terribly persecuted by both the family we marry into and society. We have to develop a positive attitude toward it and real strengths to manage all of this in order to command respect in society.”

Table 9: Saraswoti's Daily Work Schedule

Time	Activities
05.00 a.m. – 05.30 a.m.	Wash face and hands, and light fire in stove
05.30 a.m. – 06.00 a.m.	Clean house and sweep courtyard
06.00 a.m. – 07.00 a.m.	Clean cowshed and milk the cows
07.30 a.m. – 08.00 a.m.	Prepare tea and breakfast, serve and eat
08.00 a.m. – 10.00 a.m.	Prepare lunch
10.00 a.m. – 10.30 a.m.	Feed the children
10.30 a.m. – 11.00 a.m.	Fetch fodder
11.00 a.m. – 11.30 a.m.	Serve lunch and eat
11.30 a.m. – 12.30 p.m.	Wash dishes
12.30 p.m. – 02.30 p.m.	Graze buffaloes
02.30 p.m. – 05.00 p.m.	Fetch firewood and fodder from woods
05.00 p.m. – 05.30 p.m.	Prepare snacks, serve and eat
05.30 p.m. – 07.00 p.m.	Prepare supper
07.00 p.m. – 08.00 p.m.	Serve supper and eat
08.00 p.m. – 09.00 p.m.	Wash dishes
09.00 p.m. – 05.00 a.m.	Retire

I observed that women were conditioned to behave in a certain way or fit into a role largely defined by the culture. No matter how financially better off they were and what their status in the family was, women always had to negotiate their daily work. Since her family lived in the Terai and both her son and daughter were employed, Mahili,

as the head of the household, was relatively better off and was working just like Saraswoti. Following is Mahili's daily work schedule.

Table 10: Mahili's Daily Work Schedule

Time	Activities
04.00 a.m. – 05.00 a.m.	Shower, brush teeth, broom, etc
05.00 a.m. – 06.00 a.m.	Pray and read holy scriptures
06.00 a.m. – 08.00 a.m.	Feed cattle
08.00 a.m. – 10.00 a.m.	Prepare lunch
10.00 a.m. – 01.00 p.m.	Fetch firewood and fodder from woods
01.00 p.m. – 02.00 p.m.	Serve lunch and eat
02.00 p.m. – 06.00 p.m.	Graze buffaloes and goats
06.00 p.m. – 08.00 p.m.	Prepare supper, serve and eat
08.00 p.m. – 09.00 p.m.	Wash dishes
09.00 p.m. – 05.00 a.m.	Retire

Mahili and Saraswoti were middle-aged women. However, Saraswoti was older than Mahili and was not the head of the house. But both were having almost the same kind of daily routine except that Mahili would get up one hour earlier and spend some of this time praying and reading the holy books. By contrast, their schedules were lighter than those of women who had to take care of small children. The question is, how did they manage to attend literacy classes in the first place? Both of them admitted that they had to reduce their sleep by two hours and attended class after finishing the house chores. Many women echoed this sentiment and said they were willing to do it because they wanted to become literate. They also said they could read or write while grazing the cattle or fetching firewood and fodder because these were times when they got together with their friends and shared their problems. These women were confident that they either convinced their families to allow them to attend the literacy class or managed to make time to learn to read and write when they would get together with other women in

the community. Despite heavy hours of labor at home, they were prepared to put in extra hours into literacy classes if they were offered in their villages.

Most of the women interviewed followed a similar, but lighter work schedule before they were married. They needed to help their mothers and were expected to get training at the parents' home. Besides, they were not going to school. Now things have changed. In fact, Saraswoti and Mahili were doing all the work because their daughters were not at home to help them. Saraswoti's daughters were in school and Mahili's daughters were working full time. Both were happy that their daughters did not have to live like them anymore.

The workload of women lessens over time as they get older and their children get married, especially the sons because they bring a wife who usually shares the household chores. Saraswoti could not wait to bring a daughter-in-law home. She said, "Once my sons get married I don't have to work hard. My daughter-in-laws will do the work I have been doing for the last 32 years." But Mahili really doubted that she would be completely relieved. She said, "Today's girls are different than many of us. Look at my daughters. Do you think they will ever enslave themselves to the family like many of us did? No way! And I don't like them to behave traditionally either. I want them to get higher education and go out and work in the real world. I really want an educated daughter-in-law and do not mind helping her with the household chores as long as I have the strength to do them." Many of the women in the study wanted to send their daughters to school so that they would not have to suffer the way they did.

4.4 Conclusion

The majority of the women interviewed either individually or in focus groups echoed, regardless of their age, their struggle for education. Despite their longing for education some of them did not get an opportunity to go to school. There were others who also missed school because of their marriage at an early age. But a few women expressed their ignorance about the importance of education while growing up because of socio-cultural conditioning. For many women, however, their experiences of a difficult childhood coupled with painful episodes of early marriage, broken marriage and widowhood, fueled their desire to have access to education. Later in their lives most of them had some exposure to literacy and managed to learn to read, write and obtain some basic numeracy skills. Their attitude toward education can probably be best captured in one woman's poignant reflection during the focus group discussions. She said, "Despite the time and efforts we put into becoming literate, we are really glad that we gave it a try and fulfilled our dreams."

It was clear from the interviews that the majority of the women lived in an extended family where their role was limited to household chores and the rearing of children. While women contributed to their family's occupations, farming or trading, their work was considered unproductive. Some women resented this notion because they thought they were helping others build the capacity to earn more. Subsistence farming, as most of their families were dependent on, posed a financial problem for many of the women interviewed. The caste system was also perceived as a problem. Some women felt that it was still practiced in a subtle form. However, education seemed to have eased up the caste system at least for the younger generation. Language was also an issue for

those whose mother tongue was different. Learning to read and write in the second language was rather difficult for some women. The use of a mother tongue in literacy programs was also perceived as inadequate. Religion was also connected to the act of learning. Many women felt that becoming literate enabled them to fulfill a religious obligation.

Most of the women worked harder and longer hours than their male counterparts. The women perceived this fact as the result of socio-cultural conditioning. They felt they were trapped. They also noticed that their daughters were not behaving the same way they did. The younger generation had access to education and the freedom to change their roles in the family. Most of the women celebrated the fact that they were part of this change because they provided a space and resources for their daughters to behave differently.

CHAPTER 5

EMERGENT ISSUES AND THEMES

In this chapter I take you farther along the journey to become familiar with women's perceptions of literacy as expressed in the contexts of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observation. The issues and themes that emerged from the field serve as a window to women's anger and challenges, frustrations, struggles and suffering, hope and aspirations, excitement and achievements while fighting illiteracy.

Why was literacy necessary for women? How did they benefit from it? How did they use it in their immediate environments? How did they retain their literacy skills? These questions allow us to get an insight into women's worlds as to how they viewed their lives in relation to literacy training. I present insights into the themes and issues raised by these questions through anecdotes, vignettes and narratives that were important to both the women in the study and to me as a literacy practitioner.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section revolves around the question of why women wanted to become literate. The second section explores the changes women had undergone because of literacy training. The third section examines closely the retention of literacy skills and sustainability of literacy programs.

5.1 Uses of Literacy

Over several years working as a literacy practitioner, I have observed that women in general make a compelling argument for their need for literacy. But most practitioners like me who are often outsiders have difficulty figuring out whether that is a perceived or

felt need. In other words, it is hard to determine whether women genuinely need literacy skills to function effectively in their immediate environment or if the need for literacy has simply been imposed on them. The use of literacy skills in the women's day-to-day life provides to some extent the answer to this question.

In this section the necessity of literacy is examined in relation to its uses. What did the women perceive as benefits from literacy? How were literacy skills being practiced on a daily basis? How did literacy help women interact in an environment where the needs for literacy skills were growing gradually? What was the next step the women took after becoming literate? Women's responses to these questions form the basis of this section, which will be discussed under the following subheadings.

5.1.1. Advantages of Literacy

Most of the women interviewed either individually or in focus groups expressed their desire to become literate. Many of them told moving stories about how their quest for education was obstructed while they were growing up. Much later in adult life, their passion for education eventually found its expression in their efforts to participate in literacy classes.

Struggling along the way, many women achieved their heart's desire. But realizing the power of literacy, some of them were not able to become literate (refer to unit 3 for an explanation as to why they could not succeed). Learning to read and write was like a divine experience for Parbati. She argued, "I felt as if I were born again when I became literate. All of a sudden, my eyes gained vision and I could see the world

around me much clearly.” I could sense the intensity of her longing for literacy as she expressed the following in a poetic language.

“Born with two eyes,
but remained blind!
God is merciful!
Vision was restored
with the gift of literacy!”

While describing the usefulness of literacy, many women in the focus group compared it to light, hope, support and a reliable friend. They praised literacy in such glowing terms as “a bright star in a dark night”, “a walking stick of a blind”, “a strand of straw for a drowning person”, “a ray of hope for the helpless” and “a friend that never betrays.”

5.1.2 Protection Against Fraud

For the majority of women, literacy was a shield against fraud. Recounting her story, one woman from the focus group said how she was badly cheated.

“Once I went to a market to sell two goats for five hundred rupees (approximately \$7) each. I was illiterate then. A person, whom I have never met in my life, bought both goats and gave me two currency notes. I knew that five hundred notes were lightly brownish. I looked at the color and thought I got what I asked for. Feeling happy, I came home thinking that I would give a big surprise to my husband. He had suggested to me earlier that I should not sell the goats because I could neither recognize money nor count them. When I saw my husband I proudly pulled out two currency notes and held them in front of his eyes. His eyes popped up. He asked in horror, ‘Is that all you got for two goats?’ ‘What do you mean this is all?’ I barked, ‘Can’t you see I got five hundred each for two goats?’ Holding his head with his two hands, my husband said in a weak voice, ‘They are two twenty-five-rupee notes. They just came out in the market.’ I had not seen the notes before. That horrible event brought me to the literacy class. I am happy that nobody can cheat me now.”

Several women also said that their husbands used to deceive them because they could not do simple calculations. Ghuran's husband used to give her less than what he would get from selling her chickens. He would also do the shopping for the family and would always claim he had spent more than what he actually spent. Ghuran was not aware of it until she became literate. Many stories from focus group discussions highlighted the fact that shopkeepers cheated the women, and that they could not locate shops because they were unable to read billboards. The majority of the women were happy and relieved that none of these practices would happen again because of their acquired literary skills.

5.1.3 Fulfilling Religious Duties

Historically, literacy is associated with religion. It has served a purpose for those who look for guidance and inspiration. Most of the women interviewed clearly mentioned that their ability to read and write helped them fulfill religious obligations. Of the fifteen women, 80% Hindus had the desire to read the holy books. After becoming literate, the majority of them took pride in reading stories from great epics like 'Ramayana and Mahabharata'¹⁴ that are translated in simple Nepali. Sita said with a sense of accomplishment, "Now I can at least read 'Swasthani'¹⁵ to my family. I am proud that being a woman I can do it and nobody objects. In the past only men used to read it because women were kept from doing it."

¹⁴ The 'Ramayana and Mahabharata' are two great epics/religious literature of the Hindu religion. Generally Hindus keep these books at home for daily reading as part of their religious tradition.

¹⁵ Swasthani is a collection of stories about Lord Shiva and His wife Parvati. Reading Swasthani in the month of Magh (December/January) is a religious tradition for most Hindus. Generally, people of the upper caste read the book to their family at night during the entire month.

The other 20% is Baha'i, who considers becoming literate the fulfillment of their desire to live a "Baha'i life". With a spark in her eyes Puran said, "I am really happy when I became literate because in our religion everyone is encouraged to get an education. I truly feel that I have fulfilled my responsibility." Ghuran echoed Puran's sentiment saying, "It is written in the holy book that women need education to develop their capacity. I also like the saying that an educated mother can help her children become good and wise because mothers are the first teachers of their children. Now I feel I can really help my children."

Apart from Hindus and Baha'is there were women in the focus groups who practiced Buddhism. They also attested to the fact that learning to read and write greatly enhanced their ability to perform religious duties. Distinction between religious identities is more fluid among the Hindu and Buddhist populations. People may identify with both.

5.1.4 Economic Purposes

Literacy also became a means of earning money for some women. Both Puran and Prava were doing jobs in their communities after they become literate. Puran was working as an office assistant. Commenting on how literacy helped her get the job, Puran said, "I have to file the records of all the people who visit the office. Without being literate I would not be able to do this job at all."

Some women were in the savings groups. They also benefited from becoming literate. One woman in the focus group said, "I have savings in my group for almost two years now. Before I was not quite sure how much I had saved. Now I can tell you exactly how much the group owes me because I am keeping a record of my savings."

Women were not only maintaining records of their savings but also using literacy skills to start income generating activities. Many women from the focus groups commented that after becoming literate they felt confident about starting micro-enterprises (refer to discussion of this particular issue in the latter part of this section).

5.1.5 Impact of Literacy

The majority of the women interviewed favored literacy because its positive impact on their lives was clearly visible. Some of the impacts that were mentioned on more than one occasion during the course of the interviews are listed below (refer to discussion of these themes in subsequent sections).

- Literacy raised women's awareness by providing access to information. Women became knowledgeable about reproductive health, family planning, children's health, sanitation and nutrition, improved farming, as well as their rights and responsibilities, etc.
- Literate people were generally perceived to be thoughtful, knowledgeable, wise and resourceful because of their education.
- Literacy was instrumental in building self-confidence and self-esteem in women who now became comfortable in pursuing their dreams.
- The women felt more respected by the family and the community because of their new identity as literate.
- The women participated more in the decision making process at the family and community levels.
- The women mobilized themselves collectively to fight against social evils.

5.1.6 Children's Education

Not only were the women who learned to read and write conscious about the education of their children; all of the women who had some exposure to literacy but were not able to become literate were conscious as well. They clearly understood what literacy could do for their children. Most of the women sent their children to school. Of the fifteen women interviewed individually, Sarita, Ramkali, Maya and Suntali, whose literacy skills were functionally inadequate, sent their children to school even though they could not fully experience the power of literacy themselves. Sarita, who could not become literate despite her participation in the literacy class, said with a firm conviction, "I will make sure that my children go to school. I won't let them suffer the way I did."

For girls, literacy training was a ticket for finding an educated husband. Both Prava and Puran hoped to find an educated and understanding husband. Prava said, "Education certainly makes people wise, capable and understanding. I hope my would-be husband will have more education than I do." Puran even went a step further explaining why a couple needed to be educated. Laughing heartily, she said, "Nowadays we can't depend on farming only. If both the husband and wife are not working, it will be hard for them to raise and support a family. Being educated is the only way out." Finding a good match for their daughters became as difficult for some mothers as landing a job without a proper education. In the focus groups, some women said that they had to pressure their daughters to attend literacy classes because their prospective matches were beginning to demand, if not highly educated, at least literate girls. One woman commented, "What an age we are living in! In our times, we were kept away from school because our parents thought we would never get married if we went. Now it

seems that we have no choice other than to send our daughters to school because their chances to get married into an educated and wealthy family are less likely if they are uneducated.”

5.1.7 Absence of Literacy

To hear women talk about the benefits they perceive from literacy makes one think that literacy training is essential for women to make a difference in their lives. But a closer look at how some women led their lives without literacy points out the fact that acquiring literacy skills was yet to become an integral part of the rural culture. Sarita, Ramkali, Maya and Suntali knew the importance of literacy, yet they were unable to use it. Sarita and Ramkali could only sign their names, while Maya and Suntali are illiterate. In fact, all of them were not in a position to avail themselves of literacy skills. Still, they were leading normal lives. It is not that they did not encounter situations that warranted the use of literacy skills. But they devised a way to get by without being literate. When asked how she managed her life without literacy skills, Sarita said, “Whenever I wanted to read holy books one of my sons would read them to me. He is doing all the work for the family. He goes to the market and government offices when necessary.”

Social networking is also important to illiterate people, whose lives are slowly coming under the grips of a literate culture. For Maya and Suntali, it was always the people from their communities who came to their aid. Whenever Suntali wanted to correspond with her sons, she would look for someone in the neighborhood to write a letter on her behalf. With a sigh of relief Suntali said, “In the past it was difficult to find people when I needed help because there were very few literate people around. But,

nowadays, since primary education is common among the youths, I can easily find someone who either correspond or pay land taxes for me. They are also willing to help people like me.” However, Maya did not have to worry about it. In fact, literacy was not as much a necessity in her daily work as it was with other women interviewed in the study. She would simply call on either her friends or husband who would in turn seek help for as little literacy-related-work as they would encounter during the entire year. Also in the focus group there were a few women who did not feel they were hindered by being illiterate. One middle-aged woman said in a rather complaining voice, “What would I do becoming literate. I neither hope to get a job nor need it (literacy) for what I do at home.”

In fact, the extent to which women are using literacy skills in their families and communities determines how much power literacy contributes to bringing about change in their lives. In the next unit I will take you on a visit to the women’s family and community where they said the use of literacy was increasing in their lives.

5.1.8 Literacy Uses in the Family and Community

The use of literacy in the family and community depends on how much literacy was required for people to function in those contexts. Generally, literacy practices seem to have multiplied over the years in Nepal. Several years ago, I undertook a study of a rural community using the case study method to explore the extent to which literacy had been used in the family and community contexts.¹⁶ One of the findings of the study was that multiple literacy practices existed in a seemingly oral culture where the majority of

¹⁶ ‘Use and Development of Literacy in the Family and Community Contexts’ – one of the comprehensive papers submitted to the University of Massachusetts as partial requirement of a doctoral degree.

the people were illiterate. The situation has changed. With the invasion of print and audio-visual materials and the expansion of nonformal and primary education throughout the country, the primacy of oral culture has slowly lost its grip in rural communities. Naturally, I expected that the families and communities where the fifteen women lived would have offered them more opportunities to practice their literacy skills. Following is a description of my observations about to what extent people used literacy in their immediate environments.

5.1.8.1 Literacy Practices at Home

Some of the women`s houses looked like billboards. `Parbati`s porch in her home was decorated with posters on safe motherhood, family planning, oral rehydration solution, etc. They were printed in multicolor drawings or pictures with texts around them. Up on the wall by the main entrance were hung pictures of her husband who was working in India. Among them were also the pictures of the family members.` Anyone with literacy skills could easily recognize them because below the pictures Parbati had written the names of the people; places and dates the pictures were taken. “An eleven-year old boy came by whom I called by his name. Parbati was surprised at my knowledge of his name. I pointed to the picture where his name was written. She laughed and said, `I like to do this and I learned to write captions from my husband. Whenever I get a new picture I frame it with a caption. My neighbors also like it. Most of them are not literate, so I write descriptions underneath the pictures for some of them`.”

Many house porches are decorated with at least a poster or a picture. Hanging pictures on the porch is a common practice of families whose members are away at work. Suntali's porch was also filled with pictures of her sons who were working in India. But attaching a description to the picture depended on the literacy status of the family. Some of the pictures in Suntali's porch had captions and the others did not. When asked why all of them did not have captions Suntali explained, "I am illiterate. My daughters used to write them. Now they are not here because all of them got married. Some of the pictures that did not have captions were hung up after the daughters were gone."

From some of the women's comments, it must be noted that pinning a caption on photographs is not as common as it sounds. In fact, I observed that only a few of the women had copied Parbati's idea.

Unlike in the hills, porch walls in the rural Terai are picturesque with colorful patterns and designs of flowers, birds and objects embossed in clay. Tharu women, in particular, make these kinds of beautiful designs and paint their houses once a year. "Prava's porch is decorated with flowers on each side of the main entrance, crowned with a pair of doves. She spent many days doing this work. Ghuran also has a beautiful design of lights and flowers." These designs usually carry important messages women want to express. Prava's design expresses a peaceful garden, while Ghuran's replaces darkness with light. For her, flowers are a symbol of a comfortable, secure future for the occupants of the house. In contrast, Puran's design has some captions below the objects. Explaining her design Puran said, "Now I can write. I also want to express my feelings in words." All of this is an amazing world about feelings and creativity women are expressing through patterns, designs and words.

Many women felt proud when they learned to write letters to their loved ones. 'Parbati's father-in-law gave her a letter that came in the previous day. Upon getting it her face beamed with joy because it was her husband's letter.' I asked her how she corresponded with her husband before she became literate. It was not easy because her father-in-law used to write the letters for her. She blushed and said, "At that time I could not express my intimate feelings in the letter, nor did my husband. I am so thankful to God that now I can pour my heart out and my husband also does the same. We have not met each other for over a year now. These letters are easing up our loneliness." But writing letters had not been possible for Suntali, whose sons were away. She still had to rely on others to correspond with her children on her behalf because she was illiterate.

Visiting Mahili's house gave the impression that books had found their way even into the rural areas of Nepal. In fact, some of the books were scriptures written in Sanskrit handed down through generations. Mahili inherited most of them from her husband's family. Since she became literate, she had been adding to her collection prayer books and scriptures translated into simple Nepali, which she could handle at her level of literacy skills. She had placed them neatly in a corner of her room where she spent an hour every morning saying prayers and reading some of them.

Keeping scriptures at home is a tradition of religious groups in Nepal. Brahmins, in particular, use religious books in their profession as priests. For others it is simply a religious obligation. Most of the women interviewed had some holy scriptures at home; this does not mean they were reading the books. Access to scriptures is a deeply felt desire, inspiring many women to seek literacy opportunities. For Sarita, Ramkali and

Suntali, it would have been their dream-come-true, had they succeeded at learning to read some of the holy books.

Many women were also able to help their children with their homework. ‘Mina had three girls and two boys. It was a Saturday morning. Mina was preparing lunch for her family. Two of the girls who were in high school went to fetch firewood and fodder. Her three small children, one girl and two boys who attended primary school were sitting on the porch with their books open in front of them. The morning sun was gentle enough to make them feel warm and comfortable. Mina was frequenting between the kitchen and the porch trying to help the kids with their homework.’

Helping children with their homework was not possible for some of the women interviewed. Ghuran had one daughter and two sons aged 15, 13 and 11, who were in the 8th, 5th and 4th grades, respectively. During one of the observations the youngest son asked Ghuran to help him solve a multiplication problem. Ghuran looked at the problem and shook her head implying that she was helpless. She suggested to him to ask his brother who was in the 8th grade. She looked at me and with a sad tone in her voice said, “I wish I had learned them myself. I want to be of some help to my kids, but my literacy skills do not go that far.” Sarita also wanted to help her children but she was illiterate. Shila, on the other hand, did not believe that her being illiterate got in the way of her children’s education. Her husband was a teacher with a college degree and the other family members were at least literate, if not educated. Her children got more help with their studies than they needed.

Literacy has slowly made its way into the daily intergenerational gathering, which has been the rural family tradition, particularly in the hills. Generally, this tradition has

been a popular means of transferring family values and beliefs through generations. “As usual, Saraswoti’s family sat around the ‘Agena’¹⁷, to talk about their day. On that day everybody was present. Instead of telling stories filled with values and morals, or focusing on local issues as was customary, Saraswoti’s husband pulled out a letter that he had received from one of his sons who was in the army in India. As he began to read the letter, everyone became silent and paid closer attention. Afterwards, they talked about how much they missed him since he had not visited in quite a while. They were also worried about the possibility that his battalion would be transferred to troubled areas in Kashmir. As soon as the word Kashmir was mentioned, Saraswoti’s eldest son pulled an old newspaper from his bag, which he had picked up at the nearby market that afternoon and which had news about the conflict in Kashmir. Everyone listened carefully to what he was reading. At the end Saraswoti’s husband commented that problems existed everywhere. He began to talk about the problem their community was facing because of conflicts between the political parties. There was more news in the newspaper about national politics and crises the country was facing. All of them took turns to read one or two items from the newspaper. Saraswoti also glanced at a couple of headlines and commented that the world was being torn by people’s greed and selfish actions. They continued to talk about how they should guard themselves against such animalistic behavior. In the end they felt tired and went to bed.”

¹⁷ The Agena is a hole in the middle of the ground floor where a fire is lighted for the purpose of cooking. It is also a place to entertain guests, parallel to a living room with a fireplace in modern houses. Neighbors and visitors sit around the Agena to keep warm, toss hot coals to prepare a smoking pipe and engage in animated discussions ranging from farming to community work, local politics and topics of national interest. In the evening after supper family members usually gather around the Agena to tell stories and discuss topics of mutual interest. With caste restrictions involving concepts of spiritual cleanliness, sitting around the Agena has a significant meaning of acceptance and social inclusion. An invitation is an important gesture of openness and social compatibility.

The rural areas still depend largely on word-of-mouth communication to transmit news or rumors even though occasionally local or national newspapers make their way into the hands of a few people. Radio and television, especially in a place where there is electricity, also plays, to some extent, a role in changing communication patterns in rural settings. However, villagers have a tendency to share what they hear or discuss in family gatherings when they get together.

5.1.8.2 Literacy Practices in the Community

I observed that storybooks, magazines, local or national daily newspapers were exchanged among literate people in the rural communities. Usually, these materials would find their way into the community through people who would make occasional visits to either markets, district headquarters or nearby cities in the Terai. Prava and Puran always wanted to become aware of what was going on around them. They were the ones who would literally go from house to house looking for newspapers and storybooks to read. During one of my observations, “Prava was relating to her neighbor how many people died in last week’s bus accident. She was giving her a full account of the accident that she read from a newspaper a week ago. In the meantime, an elderly man walked by. On seeing Prava he exclaimed, ‘Oh, here is the news-lady!’ He stopped and also joined the neighbor to listen to what Prava was recounting. Later, when asked why she was called a news-lady, Prava said with a big laugh, ‘Whatever interesting things I find in newspapers and books I share with my family, friends and neighbors. Everybody asks me about news whenever they see me.’ All of a sudden, she became serious and said with confidence, ‘This has encouraged me to read more because I feel I need to

update my knowledge of current events.’ Puran also enjoyed her new role in the community. ‘One of her neighbors came up looking for her. She grabbed Puran by the arm and pulled her away into a corner where she gave her a folded sheet of paper. Puran was seen reading it, and the neighbor was laughing hysterically. After the neighbor left, when asked what she was reading to her Puran said it was a letter from her husband. With a smile on her face she said, ‘All the women in the village would literally hunt me down not only for news or stories but also for corresponding letters to their beloved ones. The married women feel comfortable to share with me their intimate feelings that they wanted to convey to their husbands. I do this with utmost confidentiality. That’s why everybody wants me. I also love doing it.’”

Apart from writing letters on behalf of others, women were seen exchanging letters among themselves. This was a practice that most of the women started after they became literate. “Ghuran showed a few letters she received from her friends and relatives. These letters did not bare any postage. They were hand-carried letters. Ghuran said, ‘I like to share my problems with friends and seek their advice. I can’t always meet them even though our villages are fairly close. When I get bogged down with a problem and become terribly stressed out, I need to consult with them. I send them letters with people going to their houses. I get their reply with all kinds of advice fairly soon. This makes me feel better.’”

Some of the women in the study had also been filling out accounting forms of their saving groups. They showed saving passbooks filled out by themselves. Still for some, being able to sign their names on documents was close to a miracle. Some women from the focus groups revealed that, while getting training on family planning motivators,

their literacy skills helped them understand their responsibilities more clearly compared to those who could not read handouts.

The use of literacy in the immediate environment is much more pervasive in the Terai than in the hills. “Generally, fences on both sides of the road in Terai were painted with ads of soaps, tobacco, condoms, etc. Electric poles along the road were decorated with posters of Hindi and Nepali films. In the market all kinds of signboards hung over shops. One could hardly avoid stumbling on print while moving around in the community.” All of the literate women, Radha, Sita, Prava, Puran and Ghuran, did not seem to have difficulty functioning in the heavily literacy-influenced environments compared to Shila, Ramkali and Suntali, who were functionally illiterate. In contrast, while the influence of literacy on women’s daily lives in the hills was visibly minimal, Parbati, Mina, Mahili, Saraswoti and Sumitra found ways to put their newly acquired skills to use. However, Sarita and Maya, who were not confronted with literacy on a daily basis, did not appear to be hindered by lack of literacy skills.

It is obvious that women living in rural settings are conscious about the importance of literacy in their lives inasmuch as it invades their homes and communities. For them, learning to read and write is a stepping-stone to a greater future that would promise them much more than just mastering a set of literacy and numeracy skills. I will present what women aspire to do after becoming literate in the ensuing analysis.

5.1.9 Literacy and Beyond

Knowing about women’s aspirations allows us to get some insight into the role of literacy in their lives. One of the questions asked of the women in the study was what

they would like to become after learning to read and write. Less than half of the women said that their newly acquired literacy skills would help them become more effective in their social work, implying that they aspired to become respected social workers. Some of the women saw themselves as teachers helping children become better educated. But more than half of the women in the study stated that literacy would help them become economically productive, referring to their involvement in economic activities, which, according to them, was their next step after becoming literate. These emergent issues are discussed in the following subheadings.

5.1.9.1 Social Work

Access to literacy inspired some of the women to go into social work at a community level. It was a natural upward movement in their personal growth, as the majority of them had been playing a social role in their families. As mothers, wives, or daughters, the women had already developed social and communication skills, probably far greater than most of their male counterparts, who contributed largely to the harmony and collective welfare of their families. With the help of literacy they were now expanding their roles in the community.

Most of the women advocated children's education. They knew how education could positively impact the lives of their children. Mahili's son and daughters were educated and had a career. The son was running a shop, while the two daughters were working, one as a teacher and the other as a family planning motivator. All of them were bringing money into the family. It was a big challenge for Mahili, who as a single parent managed her family in such a way that not only did she become literate, but also helped

her children get as much education as they wanted. Inspired by the positive outcome of education, Mahili was now sharing her experiences with the community, advocating education for all. With a smile on her face, Mahili said, "I can't keep quiet. I usually call on people in the community and speak to them what education could do to all of us. I not only advise them, but also take their kids to school for admission if the parents are unable to do it because of lack of literacy skills. I love doing it." Radha sent her six children to school. She had been a role model for the entire community since she treated her sons and daughters equally by providing them an opportunity to attend school. Apart from sensitizing people about education, Radha helped them with her training weighing their babies to see if their growth was normal. She visited people in the community once a month sharing information about nutrition, and giving remedial help to parents if their babies were having health problems. Radha was thrilled to see a positive impact resulting from her work. Feeling happy, she said, "In the past I could not even communicate to my children because I was illiterate. Look, now people listen to me with respect and follow my advice carefully. I think my work has been extremely rewarding because now most mothers know how to raise their babies healthy. I wish I had more training on different things so that I could help them more."

Sumitra was respected in the community. Apart from serving on the Ward Committee, one of the smallest elected bodies of the multiparty system, she was championing the cause of women. She had firsthand experience as to how women were oppressed and marginalized in society. She was now working diligently to raise the status of women by making them aware of their rights and responsibilities. With firm determination and confidence in her voice Sumitra said, "Literacy is great. Now women

can use these skills to become better acquainted with their rights and responsibilities. It helps protect them against any kinds of domestic violence and oppression. All of us have to work together on this or we will never be able to eradicate social evils perpetrated against women for generations.” Her aspiration was to become a highly respected regional leader and set a good example for women who hoped to accomplish as much as men, if not more.

After learning to read and write, it made a lot of sense to Parbati to go into social work. She said, “In our community there are so many women who can’t read and write. Now it’s our duty to teach them. I really want to serve them by holding literacy classes in the community. This is the least we can do for them after availing ourselves of an opportunity to become literate.”

5.1.9.2 Economic Participation

More than half of the women interviewed invariably commented on their need to become involved in economic activities. Most of them wanted to bring some income into their families. For many women, the next step after literacy was economic participation since this was a stepping-stone to becoming more productive.

Some of the women wanted to work as teachers in either a school or in literacy classes. This was a way for them to earn money. When asked if their literacy skills were sufficient to become teachers, most of them stated with confidence that they could handle it if they had the opportunity. Sita admitted that she could not teach the higher classes. But her literacy skills would enable her to conduct pre-school classes. She said, “If I teach children’s classes, I will definitely develop my skills in no time. Then I will be

able to take on higher classes.” But Mina was confident because she had completed the 5th grade in school after graduating from a literacy class. She said, “I can easily handle both primary school and literacy classes. It will not only fulfill my dream but also help me bring some income into my family.”

For Ramkali, Prava and Puran, literacy was a vehicle to find work. For them, becoming literate meant being able to work for wages. Although Prava and Puran were already working in their communities, they wanted to move higher in their careers. Both of them aspired to become supervisors or officials. But they realized that their literacy skills had to be more developed. They were willing to do whatever it would take to upgrade their skills. In contrast, Ramkali would be content to do simple jobs that could help her earn a little bit of money. But she wondered if her literacy skills were adequate to work with children in nursery classes even though she wanted to be a teacher.

As high as 27% of the women interviewed said they wanted to set up a shop or business. This was echoed by a large number of women in the focus groups. The main reason for them to become literate was to be able to engage in micro enterprises so that they could earn money. They wanted to participate in microfinance programs immediately after they became literate. This was why most of them started accumulating savings in the group while participating in literacy classes. They also emphasized the need for extensive skills training such as knitting, sewing, etc.

Maya was interested in becoming literate because she believed her skills would help her supplement the meager income her husband was bringing home as a laborer. Her family did not have enough land to support them through the year. The desperate situation, triggered by economic hardship, drove Maya to succeed in her endeavor. But

the charm of her being literate was short lived because she could not use her skills for economic purposes. She was basically looking for participation in programs that would allow her to access credit to establish a business. Feeling sad, Maya said, “My whole purpose to become literate was to be able to help my family financially. When I saw no opportunity was forthcoming, literacy became trivial in my life.”

After becoming literate most of the young women like Shila hoped to enroll in skills training programs, which would eventually place them in a position to earn money. Shila had a specific purpose for becoming literate. Apart from feeling comfortable living in a family where everybody was at least literate, Shila wanted to enroll in a training program so that she could learn sewing skills and set up a tailor shop in her community. With firm determination she started literacy classes because she knew that one ought to have basic literacy skills in order to operate a tailor shop effectively. But she was disappointed when she learned that literacy classes were not followed up with skills programs. She said, “I thought at that time literacy could not deliver what I wanted.” Ghuran also expected to receive some business training after learning to read and write. She wanted to raise hundreds of chickens to make a large profit. She knew how to raise a few fowls at home and wanted to gain more knowledge in order to be able to raise large numbers of chickens. She was still hopeful of getting an opportunity to learn more about poultry and be able to earn money.

5.1.10 Conclusion

The act of learning to read and write has always been associated with a purpose, particularly among women who had been marginalized and whose potential was

undermined by the society where most of the women in the study lived. Literacy was a ray of hope for them. But it was always linked to activities meaningful to them. For many, the purpose for becoming literate was to be able to overcome difficulties in their lives, to realize their cherished dreams and to guide their children to lead a better and fuller life, much more satisfying than their own. Some of the women, however, did not avail themselves of the opportunities presented to them.

The majority of the women perceived literacy training as a light ushering them into a bright, new world. Their experience with literacy was like regaining their vision after having been blind for many years. For most of them, literacy could help them read signboards in markets, count money, write letters, fulfill their religious obligations, participate in useful programs and encourage their children to attend school. They also thought that literacy would help them become more knowledgeable and, consequently, command respect in their communities.

These were not just their perceived advantages of literacy. In fact, an observation of their home and community practices of literacy revealed that for the first time, most of the women found themselves more functional in their immediate environments, and could use literacy skills in a significant way. They were thrilled to be able to use literacy skills in making their family meetings more meaningful. As a result, many women could now express more freely their intimate feelings in letters to their loved ones. Also, a large number of women were able to help children with their education. Evidence of multiple literacy practices was obvious in their homes and communities.

Some of the women, however, never fully realized their literacy potential. For some reason, they could not bring literacy close to their lives and thus failed to make use

of it purposefully. Even though they were unsuccessful at equipping themselves with literacy skills, their world was, nevertheless, besieged by the literate culture. However limited the use of literacy in their lives was, they could not escape from its grip. As usual, they would rely on community resources to fulfill the demands dictated by the literate culture. Many admitted that finding a literate person to help them out was much easier now.

For most of the women interviewed, literacy was simply a vehicle to fulfill a higher purpose. In fact, literacy skills helped many of them come closer to fulfilling their dreams. Some of the women wanted to go into social work with the hope that some day they would emerge as respected leaders. They wanted to serve other women with the skills they had acquired. But the majority of them wanted to use literacy skills as a means to help them earn money. For them, acquiring literacy skills was an attempt to alleviate their dismal financial situation. As a result, some wanted to find jobs, while others looked forward to enrolling in training programs focusing on skill development, hoping be able to set up some kind of micro enterprise. Yet, for the majority, literacy had to open a door for seeking credit, which would provide them an opportunity to earn more money.

It is clear that literacy was a powerful tool for the women in the study to bring about change in their lives. The advantages of literacy perceived by the women were not just myths, but in fact, they were evident in their homes and in their communities. Most of the women benefited from learning to read and write. Although the majority of them equated the act of acquiring literacy skills with monetary gains, to a large extent, they were using their skills to fulfill their social obligations.

5.2 Empowerment Through Literacy

Empowerment is often a synonym for change. Both terms are used interchangeably to refer to a process through which one generates power to act. Among other terms, literacy training is identified as a major factor contributing to the process of empowerment among rural women. Its transforming power was clearly reflected in their behavior. Most of the women interviewed experienced a difference in their lives, perhaps a positive change they neither expected nor felt possible before. Inspired by these changes, many of them felt they had gained control over their lives.

In the process of becoming empowered one develops a complex set of attributes that generally characterize change in knowledge, attitude and behavior. The women in the study described their perception of empowerment in terms of positive changes they experienced through literacy training. All of them felt differently as they began to learn to read and write. Statements like “I am now more aware of what I can do”, “I truly believe I can improve myself”, “I became more knowledgeable”, “I have more information about lots of things”, “I know my rights and responsibilities”, “I don’t have to depend on others”, “For the first time in life I didn’t feel helpless”, “I became successful to command respect”, “I can help others”, “I can voice my concerns”, “We have the power to change ourselves” and “Working together we can protect us” are indicative of women’s positive experiences after they became literate.

While literacy intervention in women’s lives resulted in seemingly positive changes, it was hard to decipher what exactly contributed to this complex process of change. However, looking from the women’s perspective, some characteristics identified by analyzing the data collected during the course of the study shed some light as to how

literacy training contributed to the changes most of the women claimed to have experienced.

This section presents an analysis of how the women in the study perceived change or empowerment through participation in literacy programs. How did women perceive change? How did they feel empowered? How did literacy enable them to assume a new role in the family and the community? These questions were asked to examine the extent to which change was experienced. Women's responses shed light on several characteristics of empowerment as described below.

5.2.1 Access to Information

Knowledge or information meant power for most of the women in the study. After becoming literate they felt that they became more knowledgeable. Literacy skills were a blessing for them because now they were able to read printed materials. They had access to information on health, family planning, education, etc., things, which were related to their lives. With this knowledge they felt they could not only ameliorate their lives but also help others improve their situation. Prava was happy that she could share what she would usually find in printed materials available in her community. Prava said, "There are all sorts of things many of us don't know. But unfortunately, most of the women can't access them due to lack of literacy skills. I am glad that I could help them." Now the women who were literate seemed to have learned to make informed decisions. This was possible only because of the information they had access to in their communities. Failure to access information made them feel utterly helpless and dependent on fate. "If I had known more about Depo Provera, I would not have been so

severely ill because of its side effects,” Shila argued, “I would have avoided this tragedy and felt much happier.” Little did Saraswoti know that she could have joined a savings group and borrowed some money to help cure her son, who was gravely ill. Her son died because of lack of financial resources. With tears in her eyes, Saraswoti said in a sad voice, “Everybody says ignorance is a bliss. But it turned out to be a curse for me. I basically resigned to my fate when we could not arrange money for the treatment of our son. If I had known about savings groups, most probably my son would have been alive today.”

Some women said that knowledge or information helped one become reasonable and just. They thought educated people could think critically and act rationally. But Mahili pointed out the fact that there were a lot of educated people in society who were just as, if not more, corrupt, oppressive and irrational as any unlettered person. She said, “Knowing more does not always help us become honest and just. What essentially make us just and reasonable are the moral values we strive to put into action everyday. But knowledge certainly helps us make sensible decisions.” Sarita’s poignant remarks made it clear that information was only a tool. Unless it was put to meaningful use knowledge by itself would not result in change. Sarita argued, “We knew about family planning. But, as I said before, I was forced to conceive even after having five daughters. Nobody was concerned about my falling health; rather they were anxiously expecting a son. At that time, I didn’t see any use of our knowledge about family planning when we could not practice it to save my health, let alone improve our lives.”

Most of the women in the study were interested in information that addressed issues and challenges they encountered in their lives. Many of them had health concerns.

particularly reproductive health, pregnancy, child rearing and family planning.

Children's education was also a concern for most of them. Some of them were drawn to new ideas about sanitation, nutrition, etc. mainly introduced by development workers.

Apart from this, the issue of women's rights was also a topic of interest to most of the women in the study. With the growing awareness about their status in the family as well as in the community, the majority of them wanted to know about their legal rights and responsibilities. They wanted to protect themselves and also help others who were living in oppressive situations. Sumitra, who left her husband when she was eighteen, regretted the fact that she did not secure alimony at the time of separation. She said, "Had I known I was entitled to alimony, I would have claimed for it. This would have made me more independent financially. Well, I forfeited my rights due to ignorance! But now I am helping others who have fallen prey to this oppressive culture." Sumitra was passionately advocating for women's rights. She was making sure that women knew what they could do when they had concerns.

By far, the most important factor of the women interviewed was to be able to acquire information about improving their economic situation. The majority of the women said they would welcome anything that would help them bring income into their families. This was also echoed by a large number of women in the focus group discussions. Information on skill development, microfinance, micro-enterprise, etc. was a high priority for many of them.

Many women acknowledged that it was not necessary to become literate in order to access the information they needed. They believed that there were lots of literate people in their communities who could help them. All they needed was willingness and a

desire to inquire. However, for most of them, literacy skills proved to be a convenient tool that helped them become selective about the information they received from outside. Prava and Puran preferred to know more about current events as opposed to some of the married women who were generally interested in income-generating activities. Learning to read and write not only encouraged them to pursue their interests but also gave them a sense of power to make a difference in their lives.

5.2.2 Self-confidence, Self-esteem and Respect

Most of the women confirmed that, after becoming literate, their experiences, knowledge and skills were recognized and valued by both their families and the communities where they lived. This impacted their lives dramatically. For the first time, they developed a positive outlook on life. They became more confident. A new surge of positive energy made them feel that nothing was beyond their capacity.

Parbati was thrilled when she was first given her husband's letter to read. Describing her first experience of writing a letter to her husband, Parbati said, "I did not know where to begin. I wanted to write so much, but words were failing me. I was then just literate and could not even spell many words, let alone write long sentences. Somehow I poured my heart out with words and phrases I could write. The response from my husband was so moving that I literally cried. He was ecstatic at my effort and begged me to write more. This really made me feel that I could achieve anything I wanted." Parbati's father-in-law had since stopped corresponding on her behalf. Parbati found it even more encouraging when he asked her to read religious books. Sarita, who learned only to sign her name, was elated when her illiterate husband asked her to sign on

property documents. Her husband boasted that they did not have to use thumbprints anymore. Sarita said, "This has given me a sense of worth and confidence. I cannot imagine how he would treat me if I were fully literate." As a single parent Radha not only sent her children to school but also made herself literate. Her struggle bore fruit; most of her neighbors looked up to her as a role model. Her neighbors' attitude gave her immense satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment. Prava and Puran also enjoyed the respect of the community. They were highly regarded for their services. Prava said, "The care and respect I get from the people of my community has inspired me to work even harder for them. I am glad that I have been able to help them." Puran said with a touch of humor, "Everybody really praises and respects me. I don't know what makes them appreciative of me; is it because of the money I earn or literacy skills I learned? (Bursting into a gale of laughter) Most probably a little bit of both!"

Although the majority of the women in the study seemed to command a great deal of respect from their families and communities, some of them invariably experienced tension in their male counterparts. As they began to attract more attention because of their literacy skills, the resistance of the dominant patriarchal culture was clearly reflected in the men's efforts to control the women's destiny. Some of the women in the focus groups related that their husbands disapproved of their joining literacy classes. Others were severely ridiculed when they tried to voice their concerns. Most of the time they were silenced and humiliated with a comment like "a roosting hen is a sign of misfortune".¹⁸ When women became literate and started making use of their newly acquired literacy skills in ways they had never done before, all of a sudden, those who

¹⁸ The popular belief is that a roosting hen brings bad luck. A practice prevalent in rural areas is to immediately chop off the head of the roosting hen and throw it over the roof.

were previously supportive of women's education became terribly threatened and felt everything around them was going out of control. They blatantly protested against women becoming literate. This is exactly what I found when I was exploring the use and development of literacy practices in the family and community contexts several years ago.¹⁹ In one of the remote areas in Nepal, a respected community leader who had been advocating female literacy for a long time, helped to mount a few literacy classes in his village. He genuinely inspired all the women in his community to become literate, including his wife and two teenage daughters. Except for his wife, both daughters learned to read and write. They became very active helping people with literacy-related activities. They went above and beyond the call of duty doing all sorts of things, from writing letters for those who asked them, to reading religious books to those who came for help. It made them popular in the village and soon drew the crowd away from their father who used to bask in the glory of the attention people had been giving to him. Their popularity caused the father to feel bitter and terribly disappointed. The old man who thought he was the champion of women's cause regretted that he had brought literacy classes to his village.

Most of the women in the focus groups stated that literacy skills, which helped them function more effectively in their enterprises, boosted their confidence tremendously. Many of them were proud that they could keep track of their transactions in savings groups. They felt quite confident when they knew how much their groups owed them in terms of savings. This experience led a few of the women to start micro-enterprises. The others tapped into the opportunities presented. One woman said, "We

¹⁹ 'Use and Development of Literacy in the Family and Community Contexts' – one of the comprehensive papers submitted to the University of Massachusetts as partial requirement of the doctoral degree.

are the ones always referred to by the community when a project looks for literate women to enroll in training. Some of us have participated in more than one training program. I really feel that we are blessed.”

The process through which they learned to read and write was empowering for the women in the study. Most of the women enrolled in literacy programs that used participatory teaching methods. The class was structured in such a manner that participants were required to do most of the activities themselves, except for the tasks of introducing new syllables, words, math problems, etc., which were usually done by the facilitator. While in a literacy class, Maya, although relapsing into illiteracy later, enjoyed the learning process, which she found to be lots of fun and challenging. She was very active in terms of participating in small group activities. It helped her overcome her shyness to voice her concerns. Describing how a literacy class helps one develop skills other than just reading and writing, Maya said, “I often represented myself as a leader of our small group and presented group work in front of the class. In the beginning, I was nervous and felt I would collapse, for my knees were shaking terribly. But, over time I got confident and began to present myself naturally. This was a great experience of my life, which has given me courage and confidence to express myself properly.” Ghuran used to recede into the house when visitors called on her. Even though they pressed her to appear, she could not present herself without covering her face with her sari. She was shy and could not confront strangers. But the literacy class transformed her, giving her skills and courage to become expressive, articulate and persuasive. Commenting on how her experience of a literacy class changed her behavior, Ghuran said, “In the class I got a lot of opportunity to develop skills that gave me the courage to speak my mind and voice

our concerns. I value these skills more than becoming literate, for it changed my life altogether. Now, without hesitation I participate in all kinds of events in the village. On a few occasions, I have also spoken to a large crowd, which was unimaginable before I joined the literacy program.” All the women who participated in the literacy class developed many of these skills, which boosted their confidence.

5.2.3 Decision-Making

In a patriarchal society women are generally excluded from decision-making. Historically, men always unilaterally control the decision-making process regardless of its impact on women and children. But their experience with literacy programs brought home the idea that decisions were best made through a consultative process, in which anyone affected by the decision, was included. This realization led women to actively participate in the decision-making process, which helped them become empowered.

As high as 53% of the fifteen women in the study, reported that their male counterparts consulted with them to make decisions regarding major family issues. Prior to becoming literate they were not consulted. But now their husbands and fathers-in-law, who were heads household, were eager to find out their opinion before any decisions were made. Many women regarded this as the greatest change they had ever experienced in their lives. They also attributed this achievement to literacy. When asked how literacy programs helped them realize the importance of the consultative process, the women in the study stated that both men and women were encouraged to discuss and solve problems together in literacy classes. This experience eventually extended to their families. For example, Sita and her husband joined a literacy class at the same time.

Both of them became literate, and closer to each other. Sita felt that it was the best thing that had ever happened to her. The reason was that the literacy class gave them ample opportunities to communicate more and build trust with each other, which led to a positive change in their relationship. Reflecting on her experiences in literacy classes, Sita said, “The participatory methods of learning forced us to not only develop our communication skills but also identify our strengths and weaknesses. I guess this was the turning point for all of us to realize that we would make better decisions if we consulted among us. I am really glad that now we have been able to consult in the family when decisions are made. This has made all of us feel united and strong.”

Apart from developing communication skills and a willingness to consult, some women were successful in commanding respect and a higher status in the family by virtue of their literacy skills. This achievement encouraged them to participate actively in the decision-making process. Sarita was highly regarded by her illiterate husband. Although she could not learn more than to sign her name, her husband and the other family members consulted her frequently. Sarita chuckled and said, “Even though I failed to become literate, my family members, especially my husband thinks I know more than they do. In a way they are right. I learn more through my interactions with the group that I belong to and the other women in the community. Now my husband doesn’t do anything without consulting with me, which I enjoy very much. This new role has not only given me prestige in the family but also inspired me to do more.” Parbati enjoyed a similar status in her family. She noticed that her father-in-law now began to entrust her with the responsibility of making decisions for the family. She now felt that whatever decisions she made would be acceptable to the family even though they were made

without consultation. But she was inclined to consult with all the family members when decisions had larger implications for them.

Saraswoti was also thrilled to have been able to participate in decision-making. Her husband, a high school graduate, was conditioned to make decisions alone for many years until one day he faced a problem that utterly baffled him. He did not know what to do with it. Reluctantly, he approached Saraswoti with his predicament. He was looking for more of her sympathy rather than her advice to resolve the problem, for he thought that it was beyond Saraswoti's capacity to understand it, let alone solve it. But Saraswoti surprised him with a seemingly viable solution to the problem he had been wrestling with for weeks. Saraswoti took the problem to her group and consulted about it. The group came up with a solution, which proved to be effective. After that event Saraswoti's husband consulted with her in almost every decision they made. Celebrating her new role, Saraswoti said, "Before I thought I was not able to contribute to decision making. That's why I was dependent on my husband and never tried to interfere with his decisions. Now I know that I can offer my opinion and advice, which can be helpful in making better decisions. I really like it, for now I feel I have something to offer. This transformation I experienced was largely due to the literacy class I attended."

Out of seven women (47%) who made decisions alone most of the time, three of them were single parents who raised their families single-handedly after their husbands died. For them, decision-making was not a choice; rather it was part and parcel of the role they were suddenly thrust into. However, they had to grow into it over time, which was as traumatic an experience for all of them as losing their husbands. Some of them admitted that the exposure to literacy programs helped ease the uneasiness of decision-

making because, for the first time, they were able to encourage their children to participate in the process. Reflecting on her experience, Mahili said, "I am relieved from being entirely responsible for the consequences of every decision we make. My grown up children equally own it, for it's our decision inasmuch as we all try our best to offer better options."

For some women, contributing to the decision-making process meant providing more information. Both Prava and Puran were quick to offer their suggestions before decisions were made in the family. They forced everybody to consider things that could have potential implications in making decisions. It was really an empowering experience for them. Both acknowledged the fact that their literacy skills helped them acquire useful information for making better decisions.

However, there were a few women who did not want to be bothered with decision-making either for their families or for themselves. They seemed to be dependent on their families. They said that they neither had learned the skills to make decisions nor wanted to be burdened with them.

5.2.4 Collective Actions

Apart from learning to read and write, most of the women in the study shared their experiences with each other and worked together while participating in literacy programs. This was a time for them to not only learn but to socialize. This unique opportunity helped them build a strong bond, which extended beyond literacy classes. After the literacy program was over, they organized themselves to protect their rights and fight against injustice.

Parbati had been active in her community since she became literate. She encouraged all the women to fight the social evils that had plagued their lives. Describing what they could accomplish as a group, Parbati said, “We wanted to raise men’s awareness around adverse impacts of their gambling and drinking habits. They did not know how much we were affected by their reckless behavior. Some of my friends were even tortured by their husbands when they declined to part with their jewelry. More than the pain of suffering emotionally and financially was that these men were not setting good examples for their children. We decided to launch a campaign against gambling and drinking. As a group we went around and disrupted their gambling joints and dumped alcohol from shops. In the beginning they resisted a little bit and tried to intimidate us by threatening that they would report to the administration. But the local police supported our move and they retreated. Nowadays, drinking and gambling are not much of a problem in our community.”

Radha and her neighbors proved that women could not be undermined or neglected anymore. In her ethnic group a few people were still holding on to old traditions where girls would be married before puberty. But their grooms would not bring them home until the girls became of age. One of Radha’s neighbors, whose daughter was married to a boy at a very young age, approached Radha for help. Her daughter was ready to go to her groom’s house. But she said that her son-in-law’s family demanded a huge dowry to honor the marriage that had taken place several years before. But Radha’s neighbor was poor and not in a position to fulfill the demand. In fact, the neighbor was crying because she did not know what to do. Radha and all the neighbors got together and discussed the problem. They made a decision. Early in the morning of

the next day heading a group, Radha suddenly approached the groom's family, which was shocked at the sight of such a large number of women surrounding their house. Radha explained to them that the group would not leave until the family honored the marriage without a dowry. The women's bold move created such a commotion in the village that the family agreed to bring the bride to their home. Radha laughed and said, "We even told them that if they ever tried to persecute the girl, the consequences would be worse than they could ever think of. I later realized that our presence was so powerful that the family simply complied with us because they really got our message that we would no longer tolerate any nonsense. We are very much emboldened by the event. The group has since then decided to work for protecting women's rights."

Ramkali's story demonstrated the amazing power of a group of barely literate women. Ramkali was semi-literate and often shy to face outsiders. But the courage and wisdom she showed regarding an incident astounded those who knew her for a long time. A daughter of one of her neighbors had been impregnated by a social worker from the district headquarters. The social worker's refusal to marry the girl almost drove her mad. Ramkali was infuriated by the whole episode. She gathered a group of women and together they went to the district headquarters. They staged a sit-in in the office of the Chief District Officer. During the entire period Ramkali boldly demanded that the social worker marry the girl. Astounded by the move the women made, the officer interrogated the social worker who finally confessed his wrongdoing and married the girl. Ramkali's audacity paid off. Remembering the whole incident, Ramkali said, "I never thought that I would be able to face the officer, let alone make a demand. But the power and confidence we all experienced emanated from our unity and determination to seek a

resolution to the problem. It was an important lesson for all of us. From that day on we realize that women are neither inferior nor powerless, and that they should not resign to fate when injustice is inflicted upon them.”

As a social worker Sumitra had been working for the women of her village. She had firsthand experience about the abuse women would go through at the hands of their male counterparts, especially husbands. This was one of the reasons why she was helping women organize themselves as watchdog groups to be on their guard. Most of the women`s problems centered around property inheritance, girl trafficking, domestic violence, education, child marriage, dowry, health and economic hardships, etc. The watchdog groups were working hard to help themselves, feeling a sense of accomplishment and pride.

Many stories regarding women`s collective action surfaced in the focus group discussions. Most of the women interviewed individually and in the groups said that the process they went through in the literacy class inspired them to work collectively to safeguard their rights and remedy the social evils many of them endured. The outcome of their efforts reiterated their belief that they could move the world if they worked together with commitment and perseverance.

5.2.5 Conclusion

Learning to read and write helped most of the women in the study experience positive changes, which made them feel empowered. For the first time, many of them felt a difference in their lives. They expressed their power to control their destiny in

terms of access to information, self-confidence and self-esteem, decision-making and collective actions. All of them attributed the changes in their lives to literacy training.

Most of the women stated that knowledge was power. All of them benefited from information on reproductive health, family planning, rights and responsibilities, etc. The most important information to many women was about economic participation, for they wanted to improve their abysmal economic conditions. For some women, having access to knowledge or information would result in a rational and honest behavior. They believed that a lack of knowledge and the absence of information were barriers to improving their lives. Others commented that information was just a tool that would not do any good unless it was put to meaningful use. They emphasized that the application of knowledge or information would accelerate the process for change.

Many women acknowledged the fact that literacy skills helped raise their status in the family and the community. Their male counterparts, particularly, began to respect them more than previously. This new experience boosted their self-confidence and self-esteem. Some of the women interviewed also felt empowered when they learned to manage their transactions in the savings groups. Others learned to express themselves and to overcome their shyness. This was possible through the participatory methods of teaching literacy.

Another characteristic of empowerment the women in the study perceived was their role in decision-making. Many of them felt that they learned to consult among themselves while participating in a literacy class. This experience helped them to actively participate in the decision-making process in their families. All of them felt more empowered when their male counterparts started to consult with them. Even single

parents and widows who had been making decisions all by themselves learned to consult once they became literate. They recognized that the consultative process of decision-making empowered all those involved in the process.

The experience of literacy training led most of the women to collective actions. During the literacy classes they developed a sense of bonding among themselves, which helped them become organized. Many women fought against injustice and strove to remove social evils. Their collective actions brought them incredible experiences that made them feel they had power to control their destiny.

The act of learning was an empowering experience for most of the women interviewed. It not only equipped them with reading, writing and numeracy skills but also elevated their status in society. This experience was a turning point in the lives of all those who participated in the literacy programs.

5.3 Mastering or Retaining Literacy Skills

Technically, basic literacy programs impart literacy and numeracy skills equivalent to the third grade level of formal school. The duration of most of the programs is between three and six months. But the literacy program graduates fall across the continuum with a varying degree of literacy and numeracy skills. They range from recognizing a few letters to becoming literate. Even those who become fully literate find it difficult to retain their newly acquired skills if they do not use them regularly in a meaningful way.

The women interviewed individually and in focus groups universally experienced this problem. Some of them relapsed into illiteracy, while others discovered that their

literacy skills diminished considerably to the level of signing their names only. For most of the women, more than the anguish of remaining illiterate was the challenge in mastering literacy and numeracy skills. Pointing to some fundamental characteristics, the women in the study provided valuable insights into this problem.

This section presents the women's perception about retention of literacy and numeracy skills. Why did not all of those who participated in literacy classes become literate? What did they think were the reasons behind this? How could they remedy this problem? How could they retain their newly acquired literacy skills? The women's responses to these questions form the basis of this unit, which is described under the following headings.

5.3.1 Motivation and Commitment

Most of the women in the study identified a strong desire as a key to succeeding in literacy classes. For them, having a proper motivation was half the battle. Those who failed to commit to literacy classes experienced disappointment in terms of not having fulfilled their purpose. The impetus to a genuine motivation came from a number of sources, including a desire to learn to read and write.

Many women stated that a meaningful purpose gave them a strong motivation for acquiring literacy. It also helped them commit time and effort to literacy classes. Parbati wanted to be able to communicate her feelings to her beloved husband who was working in India. It was her deeply felt need that generated a genuine desire for becoming literate. For Radha and Mahili, the state of widowhood drove them to succeed in literacy classes. The role as heads of household into which they were suddenly thrust, forced them to

become literate. The need itself helped them generate a strong commitment to literacy. Not only did both succeed in learning to read and write; they also managed to retain their skills because they found a real need to use them. Prava and Puran wanted to support their families financially. For them, becoming literate meant nothing more than being able to find jobs. They discovered later that more than fulfilling their primary goals was the pleasure of serving in the community. They were constantly surrounded with people wanting to be helped. In fact, they eventually developed a reading habit, which helped them enhance their literacy skills. By far the most outstanding example of genuine motivation was manifested in Sumitra's experience. She was driven to become literate by her broken marriage at the age of eighteen. Sumitra's testimony vividly demonstrates how powerful a genuine motivation is to overcome barriers. Feeling sad, Sumitra said, "My world shattered when I left my husband. I had no hope to ever get married again, for our society would have never permitted it even if I had tried. I was worried about my future because I could not think of becoming a burden on my parents forever. I had to support myself. But, how could I do it? I had no real skills, nor education. This made me wanting to get education desperately. Look what I did! Not only did I become literate at the age of eighteen, but also moved up to the eighth grade in school. I did not let anything deter me; I mean nothing, even my age, which helped me focus on my task with a strong commitment. I guess if one puts heart and soul to what she wants to achieve, nothing is impossible for her." The proverb, "where there is a will there is a way," literally turned out to be true in Sumitra's life. For Sumitra, it was clear that a will had to be supported by a firm commitment. Only then would it become a strong desire that would perform a miracle without compromising under any circumstances.

Absence of a strong desire was a great challenge for some women. They were generally motivated for education, but they essentially lacked a strong commitment. Suntali never attended a literacy class. She knew the importance of literacy and wanted to learn to read and write. But somehow she could not commit herself to literacy classes when they were offered in her community. Explaining why she missed the opportunity to become literate, Suntali said, "I guess I don't see myself so much dependent on literacy. I have always managed to get help whenever I needed to use literacy. Now I keep saying that I am not strong enough to walk a distant to go to a literacy class. But, let me tell you, this is an excuse for not joining the class. If I were really committed I would have requested the people to run the literacy class in my house. But I essentially lack such a desire as has driven others to succeed."

Some women felt that they did not know the reason why they joined literacy classes. They neither had clear goals nor could perceive the need for literacy skills purposefully. Ramkali was never driven by a strong desire to become literate even though she knew how important literacy was. She joined a literacy class with others and learned a little without her effort. She could not really benefit from her skills because she was semi-literate. Reflecting on her experience, Ramkali said, "When a call for our participation in the literacy class was made, I sort of tagged along with others without really knowing what I was getting into. I thought to myself that it would be nice if I could learn to read and write. But I did not know what I would do with literacy skills. Little did I know that learning to read and write was not easy. I needed to devote a lot of time and efforts, which I could not do. Even these days I have very little time to read and write. I am slowly forgetting what I have learned in the literacy class."

Many women in the focus groups also felt that the success they had in literacy classes was largely due to their strong commitment. They also had a real purpose for becoming literate. One woman said, “I would have never bothered learning to read and write at this advanced age, hadn’t I had a compelling reason. I wanted to run a petty shop that my son has set up for me. Without literacy and numeracy skills I could not even think of it, let alone run it. Now I am really happy that I am not only using the skills I learned from the literacy class, but also improving them.”

Role models also inspired many women to generate a strong commitment to literacy. They served as a positive force for most of the women to sustain their interest and commitment while going through the long and arduous process of becoming literate. For Mahili, her mother was a role model. At an advanced age her mother made a valiant effort and learned to read and write, for she always wanted to become literate and believed strongly that education was important in alleviating women’s suffering. When Mahili was overwhelmed by the loss of her husband and had to support her family single-handedly, her mother’s belief and courage helped her go through the literacy program. Similarly, Sumitra always looked up to her father who was highly respected in the community for his social work. He was a self-taught, hard working person. He strongly believed that education would bring out the best in human beings. Her father’s vision fueled Sumitra’s desire to acquire education when all doors appeared to have closed for her. She was thankful to her father because he inspired her to embark on a journey, which was both empowering and enlightening. Teachers and social workers also inspired some women to become literate. And, for some, their husbands were the ideal role models who encouraged them to enroll in literacy classes.

5.3.2 Follow-up Program/Post Literacy Program

For most of the women interviewed in the study, learning to read and write was just a starting point on their journey to improve their quality of life. They wanted to engage in some meaningful activities by virtue of literacy skills. In other words, most of the women felt that the sole purpose of their becoming literate was to be able to participate in programs aimed at improving their lives. These programs could be focusing on health, agriculture, economic situation, etc. When such programs did not follow a basic literacy program, women were seen to have lost interest in acquiring literacy skills, let alone retaining them.

The absence of a follow-up or post literacy program dampened the enthusiasm of many women. They could hardly sustain their commitment to literacy classes, many of them dropping out. In the focus group discussions many related stories about having enrolled in literacy classes more than once only to encounter failure. Some of them said that they attended a couple of classes just to please their community leaders who would insist they join. For others, their presence in the class was a mere gesture of favoritism to the facilitator (literacy teacher) who had to maintain a certain number of participants to merit a salary for teaching the class. These women neither attended classes regularly nor finished the program. They would occasionally come to class, not to learn, but to socialize because for them this was the ideal time and place to interact and share their experiences. They essentially were not serious about learning even though they wanted to become literate. When asked why they could not commit themselves to literacy classes, almost all of them said that the literacy programs they attended did not allow them to move on to the next phase, which was what they were expecting. Most of them

wanted to engage in economic activities, skills development training, etc. after becoming literate. They could not commit their time and efforts to a stand-alone literacy program. When most literacy programs did not offer such an opportunity, the women's enthusiasm dwindled, resulting in either a high dropout rate or poor retention of literacy skills.

Maya's sole aim for becoming literate was to be able to help her family financially. The prospect of a post literacy program sustained her commitment to literacy classes. She made valiant efforts and became literate. But she could not retain her literacy skills very long. She attributed it to her failure to fulfill the goal of becoming economically productive. Maya said, "Yes, one of the reasons to lose my literacy skills is due to my poor eyesight. I would have bought a pair of glasses if I had got an opportunity to participate in a savings group. My whole purpose to become literate was to be able to help my family financially." When there were no follow-up programs for her to enroll she did not care to practice her literacy skills. She felt there was no point for her to struggle to retain the skills learned, as they did not help her do what she wanted to do. Similarly, Shila wanted to enroll in a skills development program after literacy. But, as soon as she found out that there would not be a follow-up program, she lost interest in literacy classes altogether. She failed to make herself literate. However, she did learn to sign her name. Ghuran was also dreaming about enrolling in a training program after a literacy class that would help her set up a poultry business. But it came to naught. It became a struggle for her to retain the literacy and numeracy skills she had learned in a literacy class.

A woman from the focus group discussion told a story about joining literacy classes several times. She had a really hard time learning the basic skills. She failed to

become literate, not because she did not try, but because apparently she had no reason to learn to read and write. At that time, she felt literacy was not necessary in her life. But later, when she participated in a literacy class followed by a savings program, she became animated and in no time succeeded in becoming literate. This victory surprised her husband who had long before given up on her. Reflecting on her experience, the woman said, "I always wanted to participate in a savings group. When I found out I could join one by becoming literate, I jumped at it. I worked really hard. It was like my dreams coming true. I shocked everybody when I learned to read and write in no time. I think the success I had was due to the fact that literacy was necessary for me to be able to participate in a savings group, which was my heart's desire. I guess nothing becomes impossible if one sees the prospect of fulfilling her dreams." In addition to having succeeded, the woman kept improving her literacy and numeracy skills because she had to use them in the savings groups regularly.

5.3.3 Reading Materials

Simple reading materials are effective means for reinforcing literacy skills. For the women interviewed in the study, the secret to remain literate was to keep practicing their newly acquired skills. What this meant was to read and write until they mastered the skills. This realization boosted literacy practices among neo-literates who reiterated their request for appropriate supplementary readers on topics of interest to women.

Reading was an exciting experience for the women in the study. Once they became literate, they wanted to have more experience with reading. Even though their reading skills were not fully developed, they expressed a desire to read a variety of

materials. That Sita could read and write was advantageous to the family. They would ask her to read to them from the holy books at night. At the beginning it was a challenge for Sita to read from the holy books. With a big smile on her face she said, "People do not understand that to become a fluent reader one needs to practice what they have learned in the literacy class. Simply by studying the literacy curriculum would hardly equip one with skills necessary to read difficult books like scriptures. My family expected me to read them right after the literacy class. I could not do it. But I struggled through them and became successful after a long time. It was a lesson for all of us who had unrealistic expectations of literacy programs." One woman from a focus group mentioned that she was able to read nothing else but the primer, which she had used in a literacy class for quite some time.

Comic books, storybooks, poems, religious stories, newspapers, magazines, etc. were some of the materials the women in the study wanted to read. But materials on health, sanitation, women's rights, savings programs, micro enterprises, etc. were issue-based books requested by those who wanted to either engage in economic activities or meet their specific needs. Most of the women over 30 gravitated toward reading religious books that were accessible in their communities. Mahili said, "The first book I struggled to read after becoming literate was a prayer book. I must say that I barely understood even one third of it. I could recognize alphabets and read words and sentences haltingly. But I could hardly comprehend what I read. It was not until much later that my persistent efforts bore fruits because I was motivated to read the holy books we have in our house." Many women in their early twenties developed an interest in

storybooks and comic books. They also wanted to read books printed with Nepali and local songs. Most of these materials were not readily available in their communities.

When asked how often they read, the majority of the women said they read whenever printed materials were available in their communities. Sometimes, most of the women would not have access to new reading materials for months, depriving themselves from practicing their newly acquired reading skills. To cope with this problem a few women started to exchange materials among themselves. Whatever they could lay their hands on, once they had finished reading the materials, they would share them with others. This practice was common among young ladies who were interested in reading newspapers, magazines, storybooks, etc. For example, Prava and Puran not only exchanged the material; they went from house to house looking for material to read because they were eager to learn.

By contrast, women living in the Terai had more exposure and more access to a variety of reading material than their contemporaries in the hills. This was due to the proximity to markets, to transport and communication facilities in the Terai. The status of reading among women who had recently graduated from literacy classes was almost the same whether they came from the Terai or the hills. In other words, they could but decipher the print with little comprehension. The availability of printed materials in the Terai had a marginal impact on the reading skills of the women in the study for a number of reasons. First, the materials were inappropriate for neo-literates because their own language was complex and the materials were generally intended for advanced readers. All the women in the study said that supplementary readers should use simple words and sentence structures, which could be handled with the level of competency they had

acquired from literacy classes. Some even suggested that materials be printed in a larger font. Secondly, most of the materials available in the market did not contain subjects of interest to the women. The women in the study were generally interested in reading something that would help them solve problems or at least give them concrete advice. Most of them wanted to read, for example, books on health, microfinance, business literacy, child-care, etc., which would directly affect their day-to-day lives. However, a few women expressed interest in reading books for fun although the concept of reading for pleasure is a phenomenon rarely found even among educated women. Last but not least, the materials sold in the market are not well illustrated, and the women interviewed prefer to read illustrated books and magazines. Pointing to the charm of such materials, Radha said, “I usually get discouraged to read a page full of print. If it is illustrated with lots of pictures, it not only captures my attention but also helps me understand considerably. Reading is fun if we comprehend what we read. Otherwise it is a torture.”

It was clear from the interviews and focus group discussions that the women developed their reading skills to the extent that they made an effort to practice them. For most of them it was not easy. This is one of the reasons why the purpose of learning to read and write has always been closely connected to something the women are genuinely interested in. Technically speaking, functional literacy is what most of them would opt for. However, those who consciously worked to master their newly acquired skills developed a ‘hunger for reading.’ On one of my observation trips I was approached by a group of women who asked me to provide them simple reading materials. The group leader said, “We are here to ask for neither money nor any favor from you. We will be much obliged if you provide us supplementary readers on a regular basis. We want to

read books on a variety of subjects.” It is extraordinary to observe what literacy can do for a motivated and committed learner.

5.3.4 Subsidy vs. Self-help

Traditional literacy programs²⁰ have been heavily subsidized. These programs offer literacy classes free of charge to adults who are willing to learn to read and write. An alternative to traditional literacy programs is the Women’s Empowerment Program (WEP)²¹ in which adults are encouraged to defray the costs of running a literacy class on their own. Most of the women interviewed individually and in focus groups participated in either one or both literacy programs. Their experience with these programs provided valuable insights into how self-help literacy programs inspired them to generate a strong commitment to literacy.

In spite of their repeated participation in literacy programs some of the women’s failure to become literate suggests that they were basically motivated for anything other than learning. Many women in the focus groups attended literacy classes several times without the intention of learning to read and write. They came to class for free materials. Their personal experiences underscored how subsidy, if not carefully planned, could

²⁰ Among the traditional literacy programs, the one that uses the Naya Goreto (New Trail) curriculum for teaching basic literacy to adults is widely adopted by both the government and non-governmental organizations in Nepal. In this program everything ranging from teaching aids to the salary of a facilitator is provided for. According to an estimate, the cost of each participant attending a six-month literacy class stands approximately at 15 dollars. This cost rises considerably when dropout rates shoot up as high as 20% per literacy class.

²¹ An innovative program entitled “Women’s Empowerment Program” (WEP) in which a three-month basic literacy is followed up with by a post literacy program focusing on village banking. This program, which was mounted in 20 districts of Nepal enrolling more than 120,000 women by Pact, a US based voluntary organization, provides no subsidy in both basic literacy and post literacy phases. The evaluation reports indicate a zero dropout rate during the basic literacy phase of the program.

defeat its purpose. Laughing heartily, one woman said, "I think I am most probably the one in this village who enrolled in literacy classes for numerous occasions. Every time I joined the literacy class I came only for free books, notebooks and pencils. I thought my children could use them. I dropped out of the class soon after I got those materials. Actually, I had no real purpose to become literate. Besides, I did not have time and patience to go through such a hard process. But the last program (WEP) that I attended changed my mind. I came to the literacy class expecting free materials. But, to my surprise, I was told that I would have to buy them if I were really committed to both becoming literate and participating in a village bank. I did not join the group on that day. I came home and thought about it. I could not come to terms with buying books, which I had been getting free of cost for so many years. I agonized over it for days. It was not that I could not afford them. But I felt I was being fooled and cheated."

However, the woman overcame the obstacle and felt empowered when she decided to buy books and contribute to marginal recurrent costs of the literacy class. She continued, "I really wanted to participate in a village bank. But, first I had to make myself literate and then only would I be able to participate in the follow-up program. For the first time, I wanted to do something worthwhile in my life. At the same time, it was a challenge for me to live up to the expectations of the program. I thought contributing to the program would give me an idea whether or not I was genuinely committed to it. I guess I needed to prove myself more than to anybody else that I really wanted to do this program. Finally, I did it. It has helped me develop a positive attitude toward doing things on our own. Now I know if we want to change, we have to act ourselves. We can't wait for others to come and help us."

Accepting the concept of self-help or “doing it ourselves” was more than overcoming a psychological obstacle for most of the women. It had serious financial implications. For women like Maya whose family was struggling to make ends meet, contributing to the costs of a program would seem utterly unaffordable. Maya did participate in a subsidized literacy program and became literate. But over time she relapsed into illiteracy mainly because she did not care to practice her literacy skills. She wanted to participate in a savings group, which she thought would follow the literacy class. But it was a stand-alone literacy program, which dampened her enthusiasm about practicing the newly acquired skills. It seemed that asking Maya to invest in her literacy program then would have most probably turned her away. But, however devoid of financial resources the women appeared to be, their enthusiasm to participate in a meaningful program seemed to have transcended all limitations, including the financial one. When asked if she would have shared the costs of a program that combined literacy and microfinance programs, Maya thought for a while and replied with confidence, “I would have certainly done it. It would have met my needs. Yes, contributing a large amount of money would be a problem. But if everybody chips in, I guess the contribution one has to make will not be much. I would have done everything to save money to contribute to the program. After all, it would have fulfilled my dreams.” Unfortunately, Maya belonged to a non-WEP district in the hills that did not offer savings programs. Consequently, she was not able to participate in one.

One of the WEP participants from a focus group said that running a program on their own was the most challenging and empowering experience she ever had. In fact, everyone in her class had similar experiences. Not only did they buy materials such as

books, notebooks, pencils, etc. for the class, but also managed to find a volunteer who could help them go through their first book, a basic literacy primer. The thought of running a program themselves was too frightening and challenging for all of them to face at the beginning. The woman said, "It appeared so intense and burdensome that at times we became disenchanted and even considered giving it up altogether. But what kept us together was the prospect of being able to set up a village bank to manage the money we deposited every week in the group fund once we became literate." Another woman from the focus group emphasized how empowering the experience had been to them when they managed to operate the program by offering whatever financial assistance they could. They even shared books with those who could not afford them. She said, "We were so encouraged by the idea that we were doing it without outside help that all of us contributed with open heart whatever we could - money or kind. One of our friends offered her house as a meeting place. She also would not charge for electricity if we had to run the class in the evening. The other friend volunteered to provide mats on which we sat during the class. There was a tremendous sense of cooperation and unity among us. It also helped us generate a strong commitment to the program. More than anything else was the feeling that if we work together, we can move the world."

When the women were asked how they would share the costs of a literacy class if they were absolutely poor, they responded enthusiastically. Sita said, "In fact, none of us are better off economically. Still we will pool resources from those who can afford to contribute more than we actually need and help those who can't do it. We can even ask the community to share the costs." Parbati said, "Look, how much we waste everyday on harmful stuff like alcohol, cigarettes, etc. We can always cut down our expenses and

save money. I don't think money is the problem. The problem is lack of a real commitment." One WEP participant from a focus group echoed the same sentiment, "If someone comes to the group and says she can't contribute, the group will find a way to accommodate her. In fact, the contribution we made boosted our commitment because we felt our investment in the program would be wasted if we were not serious about it."

However, some of the women in the study were skeptical about the self-help approach to literacy programs. Their main concern was that they were poor and did not have a regular source of income to be able to contribute. Little did they realize that their collective efforts were sufficient to overcome any obstacle they might face. Perhaps they did not share the same experience and confidence as the others in the study group who were moved by the power of genuine motivation and a strong commitment.

5.3.5 Group, Family and Community Support

For most of the women interviewed individually or in the focus groups, the assistance they enjoyed from their groups, families and communities was an additional source of motivation and commitment to literacy programs. The support helped them overcome obstacles inasmuch as it contributed positively to fulfilling their goals.

Many women belonged to a variety of groups, i.e. mothers' group, village bank, users' group, etc. Some of the groups evolved from literacy classes. Others were organized around specific issues that impacted women's lives. Those who worked in a group developed a strong sense of bonding and cooperation that helped them overcome difficulties and generate a strong commitment. The group that set out to make its members literate went out of its way to help each other. Mina volunteered to work as a

facilitator in one of the WEP groups in her community. She witnessed complete solidarity within the group. She said, “I can’t believe how united they were. They would not allow me to start a new lesson until everyone in the group learned the alphabets introduced in the previous lessons. Those who knew the lessons well would teach others who were far behind. They often said they would like to move together no matter how much time it would take them to finish the book, for they wanted to read the books on village banking without a facilitator. I did not have to do much work. They struggled through it.” Mina not only thoroughly enjoyed teaching a literacy class but was also amazed at how the women in the group studied the post literacy curriculum themselves after they became literate. She said, “I was happy to help them go through the post literacy curriculum. After the literacy class was over, the group started on a set of village banking books, which were self-instructional. Even though they said they would do it themselves, I went there anyway, for it was fun to be with them. It was amazing to see that everybody was struggling to read the book since not all of them were fully literate. They were helping each other to go through the books.”

One woman from a focus group commented on how her group helped her get through a class. She said, “My day is always full. During the literacy program I could never managed time to practice what we learned in the class. I mean going over exercises and lessons to make sure that we knew them well. But, to my relief I found out there were many like me in the class. Some of the smart members of the group bailed us out by working with us for extra time. We used to practice together after the class. It was really helpful. Without that kind of support from the group I would have never dreamt of completing the literacy class successfully.”

Many women credited the success they had in literacy classes to their families. Those who enjoyed family support not only got permission to enroll in a literacy class but also managed to take time out from their busy daily schedules to attend. Most of their families relieved them from household chores, especially in the evening when the majority of the literacy classes were held. Among the married women, many of them were encouraged by their husbands to participate in the literacy program. Even though Sarita only learned to sign her name, her husband, who was illiterate encouraged her to join literacy classes. Sarita said, "My husband used to escort me to the literacy class every day. He encouraged me not to miss a class. Literacy meant a lot to him. He did not get to participate in the class because it was only for women. I guess he wanted to have his dreams fulfilled through me." Sarita felt sorry that she could not live up to her husband's expectations. Shila's husband was well educated and supported her all along. He would even teach her at home. But, Shila did not succeed in becoming literate. Prava and Puran had the support of their parents. Their mothers would cover for them, relieving them from household chores. Both women felt they were fortunate because their families supported them whole-heartedly. For them, this support was a tremendous source of motivation for literacy.

In contrast, some women did not get any support from their families. Ramkali's husband did not want her to participate in literacy classes. He himself was illiterate and had very little to do with literacy. Consequently, he did not see any use for literacy in their lives. He even discouraged their children from going to school. Ramkali's persistent efforts enabled her children to go to school; she knew education would change their lives. But none of them could really take advantage of their mother's advise. Of the

seven children, six dropped out of school. Even for Ramkali, it was a struggle to sneak out of her house to attend a literacy class. It took several months for her husband to learn she had enrolled in a literacy class. He was not too happy when he found out. He would often say, “What a woman would do after becoming literate? It’s a waste of time. Rather they have important work at home. They should be taking care of their children and the family.” There were also some women in the focus groups, whose families shared the same attitude as that of Ramkali’s husband. According to the women, the uncooperative attitude of their families not only dampened their enthusiasm about literacy, but also hindered their children’s education. They believed that education was not valued in their families, and as a result, it was difficult for the children to appreciate the importance of an education.

Needless to say, many women who succeeded in learning to read and write were also appreciated and supported by their communities. Parbati said, “Acquiring literacy skills in our adult life is not easy. We need as much nurturing and caring from everybody around us as a baby needs while growing up. If the community does not value what we are doing, we will have a little chance to succeed, for it is one of the sources of strength for our accomplishments.” The acknowledgment of Prava and Puran’s services by their communities was inspiring to those seeking an opportunity to become literate. They were highly regarded. For both of them, this was what they called “an unexpected reward for what they enjoyed doing the most!”

5.3.6 Conclusion

Developing or mastering literacy skills to the extent that they could be easily retained was a real challenge for most of the women in the study. Many relapsed into illiteracy, for they generally lacked purpose for using the newly acquired skills meaningfully in their daily lives. However, those who were successful attributed their accomplishments to genuine motivation and a strong commitment they were able to generate, since literacy became necessary in their lives. In fact, the women's experiences of success and failure in literacy classes shed some light on the issue of retaining literacy skills.

To a large extent, success in becoming literate is attributed to having a strong motivation and commitment. Most of the women had a desire to learn to read and write. But the actual impetus for them to become literate came from either the suffering in their personal lives or from having a real purpose or a role model who inspired them. All of these factors helped them not only to generate as much commitment as they needed to go through the literacy program but to also find a meaningful purpose for using their skills. And by so doing they were able to raise their literacy and numeracy skills to a retention level. Role models inspired many women to commit themselves to literacy. Their husbands encouraged some of them to enroll in literacy classes.

Absence of a strong commitment to literacy was a challenge for many women in learning to read and write, let alone mastering literacy skills. This was usually the case when the women in the study reported they had no real purpose for becoming literate.

Some did not really understand why they were in a literacy class. Yet others went through class for no other purpose than to socialize with their peers.

For many women, literacy was a vehicle for fulfilling their goals. Usually, they expected to enroll in a follow-up or post literacy program of their interest. More than half of the women in the study were looking forward to participating in programs that would help them alleviate their abject poverty. Microfinance or skill development programs were what they opted for. But, their enthusiasm to become literate was considerably dampened when follow-up programs were not offered. This was clearly one of the major reasons for not making a strong commitment to literacy, which in fact adversely affected the women's efforts to learn and retain literacy and numeracy skills.

Adequate, simple reading materials are effective means to reinforcing literacy skills. In fact, those who continued to read and write after literacy classes developed not only their literacy skills but reading habits as well. The women in the study were generally interested in simple readers with contents related to their lives, as reading for pleasure was not common among them.

The women from the hills were less exposed to a variety of reading materials than those living in the Terai regions. But, the skills of literacy graduates from the hills or the Terai, were comparable. Having relatively more reading materials in the Terai seemed to have no visible impact on neo-literates, for these materials were intended for advanced readers. The literacy and numeracy skills of neo-literates were not developed enough for them to use the materials.

The women in the study seemed to have committed themselves strongly to self-help literacy programs rather than subsidized ones. The cost-sharing approach to literacy

evoked a genuine motivation among the women interviewed. For many of them it was also a source of empowerment and self-confidence. The financial burden of a self-help literacy program, however, was not something everyone could afford. There were some very poor women who could hardly afford the expense. But the group members were willing to help those who had difficulty sharing the costs of the literacy program.

Most of the women received support from their groups, their families and the communities where they lived. It was impossible for many of them to get through the literacy program without their support and encouragement. Those who did not receive such support had difficulty in becoming literate. They also encountered problems with regard to their children's education when their families undermined its importance.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, REFLECTIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS

This study gave an opportunity to a group of rural women residing in different parts of Nepal to share their experiences about literacy as a means of improving their lives. It also enabled them to not only reflect on their efforts but also learn objectively from their struggles against illiteracy. Their experiences, though filled with frustrations and excitement, failures and victories, constituted a perception of the world in which literacy was important in their lives.

Through the mechanism of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observation, the women were asked to articulate their perceptions about literacy and its impact on their lives. Expressed in the form of narratives, anecdotes and personal vignettes, their responses to the following set of questions help us gain insight into the importance of adult literacy in the lives of rural women.

- What are the characteristics of rural women who enroll in literacy programs?
What factors impede or contribute to their struggles against illiteracy?
- Why do women want to become literate? Why is literacy necessary for them?
What do women perceive as benefits from literacy? How are literacy skills being practiced on a daily basis? To what extent does literacy help women interact in an environment where the need for literacy is growing gradually?
Or how do women cope with literacy related activities? What is the next step the women take after becoming literate? Or what do women do after their participation in literacy classes?

- What changes do women undergo because of literacy training? How do women perceive empowerment? How do they feel empowered? How does literacy enable women to assume a new role in the family and the community in which they live?
- How do women retain their newly acquired literacy and numeracy skills? Why don't all of those who participate in a literacy program become literate? What are the reasons for this phenomenon? How can they remedy this problem?

6.1 Summary of Findings

The responses of the women interviewed both individually and in focus groups help us understand their socio-economic conditions, which shaped their attitude and behavior toward learning to read and write. The responses also make us aware of their cultural and religious beliefs that either hindered or contributed to their struggles for literacy. The study sheds light on issues and concerns prevalent in women's adult literacy programs. The findings of the study are summarized as follows.

- Literacy cuts across all ages. Women aged 15 and above participated in adult literacy programs. Their advanced age did not prevent them from enrolling in literacy classes. However, some women over 40 experienced difficulty learning to read and write due to their poor eyesight and health.
- Both married and single women attended literacy classes. Most of the married women over 40 were subject to the age-old tradition of child marriage that prevented many of them from going to school. However, this tradition was not practiced among

women belonging to the younger generation. Widowhood and broken marriages motivated some women to commit to literacy.

- Most of the women in the study had a positive attitude toward literacy. Many of them wanted to go to school when they were growing up, but were not successful, while some of them were oblivious to the importance of education because of social conditioning. However, when literacy programs were offered in their communities, the majority of them enrolled in classes. At the end of the literacy programs, their literacy and numeracy skills ranged from illiteracy to literacy. Many of them were able to read, write and do simple calculations, while others could read a few words and phrases. Yet, some only learned to sign their names, while others hardly recognized all the alphabets. Among the literacy graduates, few girls managed to enroll in formal school, as young girls were generally found to have been motivated for a higher education.
- The women in the study represented a mix of several ethnic and religious groups. The caste system that had been practiced by Hindus for centuries still kept people in the lower caste from mingling with others in the rural areas. Older women from the lower caste complained about subtle discrimination in literacy classes. However, women representing the younger generation found it outdated. They contended that school-going children were not even aware of the caste differences because school encouraged them to freely interact with each other by promoting equality. Among the old generation, Brahmans, a higher caste group whose traditional profession is priesthood, women were barred from having access to education, while its male members would even go to India for religious education.

- Even though most of the women in the study understood Nepali, an official language used in the majority of literacy curricula in a limited capacity, all of them did not speak it at home because some of them had different mother tongues. Learning to read and write in the second language was problematic for some women who reported to have difficulty not only participating actively in the group discussions, but also understanding the curriculum. They opted for literacy training in “the first language of hearing”, i.e. their mother tongue. However, some women argued for the national language to be used in literacy curricula, as they perceived that learning to read and write in local languages would limit their mobility and functionality as literates.
- Most of the women sent their children to school, including their daughters. Some of their children had a college education, while the majority of them were in school. However, few women had children who dropped out of school due to teen pregnancy and economic hardships. As a result, some had illiterate children.
- Except for widows and single parents, many of the women in the study were living in extended families whose heads were either their fathers-in-law or husbands. Most of these families were subsistence farmers. As their subsidiary occupations, some of them were involved in the traditional professions such as blacksmith, priesthood, while others were running a shop or had family members working as wage earners.
- The majority of the women considered themselves housewives even though they contributed considerably to their family enterprises, i.e. farming or traditional professions. But widows and single parents considered themselves heads of household. Yet, some women in the study identified themselves as social workers or wage earners.

- Except for widows, single parents and jobholders, most of the women did not have access to economic resources. However, for covering personal expenses they largely relied on their “Pewa”, a private purse that parents would encourage their daughters to build even before they were married. Most of the women, however, felt that they needed to have a regular source of income to maintain the Pewa.
- Most of the women reported that they literally worked at home from dawn to late at night. They, however, were willing to sacrifice hours of sleep in order to find time to enroll in literacy programs.
- Almost all the women in the study saw a great advantage in becoming literate. Their perceived benefits included guarding them against fraud, fulfilling religious obligations, becoming economically active, helping with their children’s education, having access to relevant information and attending to literacy related personal activities. However, It was clear from the study that many women were leading perfectly normal lives without possessing literacy and numeracy skills. Literacy played a minor role in their lives. They had devised a mechanism through which they would receive support and help with their literacy related activities they ever encountered in their lives.
- Most of the literacy graduates were observed to be using their newly acquired literacy and numeracy skills at home and in the communities where they lived. Their literacy practices at home included writing letters to their loved ones, decorating their homes with pictures and colorful symbols with words, reading storybooks, newspapers, holy books and helping their children with homework. The mode of communication in rural areas was still by word-of-mouth despite the use of TV monitors and radios

wherever electricity was available. The common literacy practices observed in the community included exchanging letters among literacy graduates, reading and writing letters on behalf of others, sharing events and stories with neighbors, and reading posters and signboards in the market place.

- For most of the women in the study, literacy was a stepping-stone to something they wanted to achieve. More than half of the women commented that literacy would help them become actively involved in economic activities because they wanted to bring a regular income to their families. However, some of them aspired to do social work, in the hope to serve their communities. From the study it was clear that those who became literate wanted to use literacy as a vehicle to achieve their goals. For them, literacy was just a beginning.
- The majority of the literacy graduates from the study opted for a difference in their lives as a result of literacy training. Many of them felt empowered. Learning to read and write helped them gain access to information that could potentially improve their lives. By virtue of their participation in a participatory learning process that most literacy programs adopted, the majority of the women felt self confident and commanded respect in their homes as well as in their communities. They also felt that they could not only speak up in front of strangers but also articulate their concerns. Most of the women discovered that their families, especially their male counterparts, valued and supported the changes they had experienced through literacy. This recognition and trust coupled with the consultative skills they developed during literacy classes led the women to participate in decision making at home. This was in itself an empowering experience for many women in the study.

- The literacy classes helped build a strong bond among the women. The experience led them to organize themselves to fight against social evils. As a result, many watchdog groups emerged. These groups organized collective actions in their communities. This was an amazing feat for most of the women who became empowered to work for their lots.
- Mastering and retaining literacy skills were a major concern for most of the literacy participants. The women in the study acquired a varying degree of literacy and numeracy skills from their participation in literacy classes. Their skills ranged from illiteracy to literacy. The women's perception about the retention of literacy skills shed light on many factors that largely determined their success in literacy classes. For most of them, a genuine motivation and strong commitment were necessary to become literate. They felt that having a clear purpose for acquiring literacy would help them generate the level of commitment they required to master literacy skills.
- The majority of the women in the study became discouraged when no follow up programs were offered. Their purpose for becoming literate was to be able to participate in skill development training, micro-finance programs, business literacy or health programs, etc. Once they discovered that these programs were not connected to the literacy program in which they enrolled, they were no longer enthusiastic about learning or retaining literacy and numeracy skills because they believed that they did not have any use for or a place to apply them.
- The availability of appropriate reading materials was also a factor that motivated women to seek literacy. Most of the women realized that they needed to practice reading and writing until they had mastered these skills. For them, there was no short

cut; mastering literacy and numeracy skills meant nothing other than practicing them until they acquired a level of competency. Otherwise they would not be able to retain their skills. A variety of simple, well illustrated print materials with contents relevant to women's issues and concerns would not only help them practice their newly acquired skills but also generate in some of them a "desire to read." However, most of the women discovered that the majority of print materials available in their surroundings were not suitable for them in terms of their contents and the level of complexity with which the words and sentence patterns were used.

- The women's experience with subsidized and self help literacy programs provided a valuable insight into how self help literacy programs could spark a genuine motivation for literacy. In subsidized literacy programs, many women were motivated for anything other than learning. The dropout rate in such programs was reported to be as high as 20%. However, an innovative literacy program entitled "Women's Empowerment Program" (WEP), in which participants were encouraged to bear the costs of both basic and post literacy phases, motivated women to stay in the program until the end. This program reported to have no dropouts, as was attested by some of the women in the study who were associated with it. One of the compelling reasons for a zero dropout rate was that the women's monetary investments in the program made them quite serious about their participation because they believed they were not wasting their time as with subsidized programs. The other reason was that the program met the needs of those who wanted to become involved in a microfinance program after learning to read and write. It was also clear from the study that the women who were struggling to make ends meet had difficulty

sharing the costs of the program. However, a lot of women in the study said that it was not the financial stress but the lack of a strong commitment what kept them away from obtaining literacy skills, since their groups, neighbors, or the community would assist a genuinely motivated participant. Those who participated in a self-help literacy program also experienced a sense of accomplishment and empowerment.

- Most of the women in the study garnered support from their groups, families and communities, which helped them to go through the arduous process of becoming literate. In the absence of support, women found it difficult to continue in the literacy program. It also had an adverse impact on the education of their children.

6.2 Conclusion

The study provides valuable insights into how literacy helps rural women improve their lives. It contends that by understanding the role of literacy in women's lives and the difficulties associated with its acquisition, the issues and challenges prevalent in women's literacy programs can be constructively addressed with innovative teaching methods and sustainable program strategies. The study can also help increase our understanding as to how literacy can be made meaningful to those whose lives have been marginally overshadowed by its influences.

The findings of the study increase our understanding about why rural women need literacy. In fact, what the women in the study perceived as benefits from literacy indicates that they needed literacy skills for fulfilling their needs as expressed in social, cultural and economic practices. The women's involvement in activities such as writing letters, reading holy books, participating in economic endeavors, etc. are some examples

of the different uses of literacy meaningful to rural women. The need for literacy to actively participate in economic activities was felt strongly, as most of the rural women were facing economic hardship.

It is also clear from the study that the use of literacy skills at home and in the community suggests the need for multiple literacy practices in rural areas. However scanty these literacy practices are at the moment, women in rural areas clearly see them as unavoidable. The fact that the majority of the women managed to lead successful lives without literacy indicates that their resourcefulness in circumventing the need for literacy is dependent on their wider social networking and interdependency. However, their needs for literacy are largely determined by the extent to which they interact with the literate world.

The study also addresses the relationship between literacy and a positive change in women's lives. It is clear that through a participatory process of learning to read and write women experienced a difference in their knowledge base, attitude and behavior. Having the ability to access relevant information, the rural women felt more knowledgeable. The fact that the women in rural areas were inspired to send their children, boys and girls, to school suggests that their attitude toward education has become positive. Their increased abilities to articulate their concerns, participate in decision making and organize themselves for collective actions are some of the examples that entail a change in behavior of the women who built self-confidence and self-esteem by virtue of their participation in literacy classes. Even for those who did not become fully literate, these experiences were empowering.

The experiences of the women shed some light on the issue of retention of literacy skills. The study points out the fact that literacy programs alone cannot help women become literate; they are just the exposures to the mechanics of literacy. But rural women themselves need to work hard to generate a genuine motivation and a strong commitment to not only go through the rigorous process of learning to read and write but also master the skills so that they do not lose them. Some of the factors that helped women generate and sustain their commitment include meaningful post literacy programs, appropriate reading materials, and group, family and community support. Also, self-help literacy programs organized on a cost-sharing basis encouraged women to commit strongly to literacy.

The absence of motivation and commitment to literacy on the part of women indicates a relationship between literacy and social practices. Rural women's motivation for literacy dwindles when they lack a real purpose to become literate. In other words, if they cannot transfer their literacy and numeracy skills to the practices that are meaningful in their lives, they are no longer committed to literacy. The study also points out the fact that there is no short cut to mastering literacy skills. The only way to master newly learned skills, is through continuous and persistent practice.

6.3 Reflections on Findings

Why do rural women want to learn to read and write? What kind of literacy is beneficial to them? These are difficult questions to answer, for there is little understanding as to why literacy is needed for women in rural communities where the oral culture is still in its primacy. However, the study indicates that rural women are

positive about literacy training if they think it contributes to improve the quality of their lives. It also sheds some light on the type of literacy that benefits rural women. A brief reflection on the findings is given under the following headings.

6.3.1 Obstacles to Women's Literacy

It is clear that most of the women in the study expressed a strong desire for education as they were growing up. But, for reasons beyond their control, their dreams were not realized. Even when offered an opportunity later on in their lives to become literate through literacy programs, some of them could not benefit from it. Stromquist's analysis of the nature of women's illiteracy points out the patriarchal ideology that basically devalues women's knowledge and experiences (Stromquist, 1990). According to her, the sexual division of labor and control over women's sexuality prevents women from becoming literate. This explanation relates to the experiences of the women in the study. Generally, women in rural areas work more hours than men. Their responsibilities as wives, mothers, caretakers, co-laborers in production, etc. fill up their day hardly leaving any time for other activities. The women's daily schedules collected during the study show that most of them worked from dawn to dusk. They not only managed their household chores but also contributed to farming. Some women stated that as small girls they were kept at home to take care of their younger siblings. The sexual division of labor is contributing to women's lack of time, which is a serious obstacle to female literacy. However, in the study women said that despite their long working hours, they would manage to participate in literacy classes. They would devise coping strategies to realize their dream of becoming literate. This response corresponds to one of the findings

of the Agency for International Development (USAID, 1998). When women were asked how they would participate in literacy classes, most of them said that they would work harder in order to be able to attend classes. Some even said that they would make specific efforts to please their husbands so that they would help them find time to participate. Chlebowska (1992) suggests that women be provided with means of assisting them with their domestic tasks so that they can be relieved from their busy schedules. Describing ways to lessen women's burden Chlebowska says that since most women in the rural areas are busy with their children, they should be allowed to come to the literacy class with their babies.

I agree with Chlebowska that women in rural areas need to be assisted with their busy schedules. Even though women say that they resort to coping strategies in order to be able to participate in literacy classes, it is a big burden for them. As they are basically driven by their dream of becoming literate and thereby improving their life, their participation in literacy classes is remarkably high, especially in the beginning of the program. However, their participation dwindles over time as women generally yield to their ever-increasing tasks at home. This is one of the reasons why most literacy programs intended for rural women face a high dropout rate. Thus, it is necessary that female literacy programs be connected to development activities to reduce the burden of the many tasks faced by most rural women. For example, establishing childcare centers, setting up drinking water taps in nearby areas, developing community forests, recruiting volunteers, etc. are some of the activities that help rural women save time for literacy training.

The belief that women's honor needs to be protected leads to men's control over women's sexuality. It is also being reinforced by religious practices that treat women as inferior and weak needing protection from men (Stromquist, 1990). The impact of religious traditions on literacy is seen as an obstacle women encounter in trying to attend literacy classes and become literate (Ballara, 1991). While traditional rituals in rural Nepal are strictly observed, the caste system and child marriage have prevented women from learning to read and write. The experience of older low caste women in the study showed that discrimination on the basis of caste differences made it difficult for them to fulfill their dream of becoming literate. Because of the caste system and lack of education women have low self-esteem and self-respect. Many participants in the study showed a low self-confidence when they were asked to articulate their needs and interests. While organizing a literacy class in Chitwan, one of the districts of Nepal, Parajuli and Enslin also discovered that women would become expressive but negate their authority by saying "... but I don't really know anything because I never went to school and am not smart" (Parajuli & Enslin, 1990, p.45). The erosion of self-confidence is a serious impediment to women's literacy, which the women in the study experienced.

With regard to child marriage most of the women who were in their forties also experienced the pain of early marriage, which prevented them from attending school. Despite intense longing for education and for protesting early marriage, they were married off even before menstruation as part of religious practices. Others were kept at home because of the belief that education corrupts women in general. I recall my mother's story that vividly illustrates how women are marginalized and controlled in a patriarchal society. With a desire to read prayer books, my mother made a valiant effort

to become literate much later in her adult life. Once I was watching TV with my mother who was attentively watching a show on the life of Indira Gandhi, India's former Prime Minister. Upon finding out the age of Indira Gandhi, all of a sudden, my mother commented in an exasperated voice that she was as old as Indira Gandhi and that she would have accomplished something like her, had she been permitted to attend school. I knew my mother grew up in a privileged, influential middle class family from the capital city where she could have access to school. In the early 1930's education was restricted to only the privileged groups of citizens in Nepal. I was taken aback by my mother's remarks and became curious to know why she had been barred from school. She told me that since she was very much interested in education, she begged her parents to enroll her in school. Her first day at school was both the beginning and the end of her formal education. Her uncle spotted her, and he immediately confronted her parents on grounds of risking her future by letting her go to school. He contended that education would corrupt her and, as a result, no one would want to marry her. Her parents reacted with apprehension, and prevented her from going to school. Soon after that my mother got married. She said that both her parents and her uncle were protecting her, but for the wrong reason. Such stories abound in rural areas where the influence of a patriarchal society defines the role and status of women thereby controlling their lives. This fact has raised a number of issues in female literacy. One of them is due to the physical distance of the literacy classes. This factor has kept many women from attending literacy classes in Nepal. Husbands, fathers and brothers are concerned about women and girls having to travel long distances to attend a literacy class. Many of them prefer closer places where they can keep an eye on their wives' and daughters' sexual behavior and safety. Over the

years I have observed that in the rural areas male members of the family, the father, the husband or a brother would escort women to a literacy class as a bodyguard to ensure their safety and for protecting their sexuality. Chlebowska (1992) gives a practical suggestion to engender men's support for encouraging women to participate in literacy classes. According to her, in consultation with men folk (husbands, fathers, brothers and chiefs) women need to decide on the timetable, length and frequency of the literacy classes, so that the men would not prevent women from attending classes.

I observed that rural women have fallen prey to the age-old caste system and men's domination in terms of their sexuality. Although the caste system is illegal within the country, its practice is deeply rooted in rural areas. One interesting change I noticed in recent years, however, is that due to the spread of primary education, the younger generation does not seem to be affected by this problem. Even adult literacy programs have raised people's awareness about the issue of caste discrimination and its negative effects on women. Similarly, the practice of early marriage is slowly becoming a thing of the past, particularly within the younger generation. Here, again, the credit goes to education! I therefore believe that raising awareness about these issues is the best way to remedy the situation. The negative influences of a patriarchal society can be substantially reduced when men and women consult on these issues regularly. Through consultation we can truly understand the important role of education in minimizing gender differences. In order to institute the process of consultation, women's literacy programs need to organize events on the side as part of its design to share their progress and challenges with the community. These events can be organized in the form of community gatherings, community fares, workshops, etc.

6.3.2 Women's Need for Literacy

While factors such as the tradition of early marriage, the need for labor, the limited value placed on the education of women and girls determine Nepalese women's status and freedom (USAID, 1998), most of the women in the study expressed their desire to participate in literacy programs. In fact, the ability to read and write is a fundamental need to effectively function in an increasingly technological society (Stromquist, 1990). The need to decipher print has been reflected in the growing influence of the literate culture on the lives of rural women as indicated in the study. The women needed to go to markets and cities where they would often stumble on the written word. They also felt a need to write letters and read the holy books. Assisting children with their homework required them to handle printed materials. For women running the family as heads of household, the ability to read and write was indispensable in order to protect their property and function effectively even in a rural environment (Chlebowska, 1990). New behavior among women that requires literacy skills seems to be emerging as more printed materials find their way into the oral culture. For example, literate women were showing interest in reading newspapers, magazines, storybooks, etc., as these became available in their communities.

However, there are a large number of rural women who do not know how to read and write. Also there are some women who never learned to read and write in spite of their valiant efforts made in literacy classes. According to a report, in 1990 out of 873.9 adult illiterates 567 million, or 64.9 percent are women and over 500 million of them from developing countries live in rural areas (UNESCO, 1998). Given the enormity of the number of illiterate women, one might argue that literacy is crucial to improving

women's lives. This argument is often made because of the assumption that illiteracy is usually associated with poverty, ignorance and the lack of intelligence. According to Bhasin, the sentiment that "illiteracy is an offence to mankind" was reflected in Indian literacy campaigns (Bhasin & Ellis, 1984, p.37). The fact that illiteracy is widespread among the poor does not mean that poor people are ignorant or lack intelligence. In fact, a closer look at their daily lives and the conditions in which most of them live show that they have survived and lived respectable lives without literacy. Most of the illiterate women in the rural areas are just as intelligent and worthy of respect. They do not have reading and writing skills, but possess a great deal of functional knowledge and skills to survive in a hostile environment. Wagner's (1993) example of Oum Fatima in a rural Moroccan village infers that illiteracy did not prevent Fatima from exercising her mental arithmetic and bargaining skills and thereby commanding a great respect in the community. This is echoed by the fact that illiterate women in the study were found to have been leading a life that is both meaningful and fulfilling by the standards shaped by their social, economic, cultural and political contexts. For example, Suntali, including others whose literacy skills were not as advanced, never felt handicapped due to a lack of sufficient literacy skills in performing duties as expected by their families and the communities where they lived. They were accepted socially, as the majority of them were illiterate and shared the same norms and values. The study also shows that the rural environment is still, to a large extent, dominated by the oral culture, which means that literacy needs are yet to become part and parcel of rural women's lives in the same way that they are in the lives of urban women. Does it essentially mean that literacy is not necessary for rural women? How does it bear on improving the quality of their lives?

The answers of these questions lie in the nature of the use of literacy in rural areas and the kind of literacy that allows women to promote their interests and aspirations.

In rural communities the use of literacy is growing. Even women who have lived a decent life without literacy have increasingly come under the influence of the literate culture. The question now is how they cope with it. It has been observed that in rural areas literacy does not have to be a skill possessed by every individual. Among illiterates literacy is usually a collaborative practice. Some provide technical expertise in terms of writing while others bring specialized knowledge and social meanings. The study also shows that illiterate women relied on community resources to attend to their literacy related activities such as writing letters, reading holy books, etc.

I do not have any doubt about the need of literacy training for rural women. Due to the primacy of the oral culture in the rural environment, the use of literacy does not seem as pervasive as it is in the literate culture. But a closer look at the lives of rural women reveals that illiterate women are besieged by literacy related activities and that literacy practices are community-shared activities. I have noticed that women's need for literacy is growing. Rural women's progress is retarded if they are denied the fundamental right to literacy. To make literacy a reality, rural women need to understand the importance of literacy in their lives. For this to happen, literacy awareness campaigns should be organized and launched as widely and frequently as possible in rural areas.

6.3.3 Changes Through Literacy

Whether rural women need literacy depends on the changes they experience from their participation in literacy classes. The women in the study reported that even though

all of them could not become fully literate, they felt better and different by virtue of their participation in literacy classes.

Indeed, literacy training provides unique experiences to women. It prepares them to experience changes in their lives. Their attitude and behavior change considerably. It has been found that literacy training has helped women to break away from their isolation, develop participatory skills and become more receptive to new ideas (USAID, 1998). The report also indicates that the participants' attitude changed positively. One of the examples is their positive attitude towards the education of children. Almost all of the participants confirmed that they became positive about sending their children to school after their participation in literacy classes. It was not that they were unaware of the importance of education for their children, but their participation in literacy classes made them work harder to enable them to send their children to school. Some of the women also began to tutor their school-going children. This positive attitude also coincides with the findings of empirical studies that have established a positive correlation between parents and their children's educational status. The study conducted by the Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development (CERID) concludes that the educational status of the adults in a family is the strongest predictor of rural children's educational participation (CERID, 1984). According to the study, one year's increase in the average educational status of the adults raises children's participation in school by 4.5 percent. Sticht and McDonald have also put an emphasis on women needing to develop literacy skills so that they can transfer their education to their children (Sticht & McDonald, 1990).

I have noticed that literacy training has benefited both mothers and their children. Having been exposed to literacy training, rural women are in a better position to encourage their children to get an education. Women's literacy has directly contributed to increasing enrollments in school. However, literacy training for women is sporadic and limited in number; its impact is obviously small due to the limited coverage. I therefore feel that it is necessary to promote women's literacy on a campaign scale with a strong political will and adequate resources. Then its impact can be easily discerned in rural areas.

Literacy training has also given women a sense of confidence and necessary knowledge to improve their lives. Kehrberg argues that literacy programs as part of nonformal education in Nepal help women gain life skills and control over their lives even if they do not retain their literacy skills in the long term (Kehrberg, 1996). According to her, through the process of discussion and group socialization adopted in literacy classes, women develop critical thinking and build self-esteem in a society where they have few or no legal rights. Recent studies in Nepal also find that because of ideas, confidence and information gained from literacy classes, women have slowly begun to assume greater autonomy and claim more authority in their lives (Burchfield, 1997; Leve, Leslie, & Manandhar, 1997). Many women in the study affirmed this. They reported that as they discussed and shared their experiences in literacy classes, not only had they become critically aware of the social, political and economic conditions in which they lived, but also they developed a sense of strong bonding among them. The sense of unity and sisterhood has helped women command respect from their family and community. For them, the literacy class turned into a support group or a think tank or an action group

that not only solved their problems but also protected their rights. It helped them build self-confidence and self-esteem.

Apart from building self-confidence and self-esteem, women have begun to participate in decision-making. Referring to many studies on women's literacy programs in Nepal, Agency for International Development (IDCA) concludes that in spite of most decisions still made by the traditional heads of households, women have increasingly taken part in joint decision-making (USAID, 1998). According to IDCA, this trend is found more in the households of literacy participants than that of non-participants. The women in the study also affirmed their increasing role in decision-making due to literacy classes. Some of them even reported that with regards to childcare, family planning and household chores they exercised their autonomy in making decisions. Other studies also find that those women who participated in literacy classes tend to make decisions on their own in matters concerning their children's health (Burchfield, 1997; Leve, Leslie, & Manandhar, 1997).

Literacy programs have also been a source of collective actions women are undertaking in rural areas. With a critical awareness of social evils, women have taken action to correct them. In rural areas, women's groups have waged campaigns against drugs and alcohol abuse, gambling, child marriage, etc. Women have also been involved in community development projects. Studies have documented that "women who have taken literacy classes participate more in collective community activities and social issues" (USAID, 1998, p.6). The women in the study reported that they undertook several collective actions. In literacy classes, the women worked as a group and, collectively began to take action against social evils, in particular, those social traditions

that had a negative impact on the wellbeing of women in the community. Many also reported that it was because of the bonding they attained during their participation in literacy classes that they learned to take actions, which would have been impossible for them otherwise

There is no doubt that literacy training, if conducted in the spirit of gender equality, helps rural women raise the quality of their lives. Women's knowledge, attitudes and behavior were positively affected through their participation in literacy programs. I have observed that women may not become fully literate from their brief exposure to literacy programs, but they demonstrate enormous power in terms of their knowledge and capacities to accept new ideas and act with confidence in the decision-making process aimed at improving their lives. However, I have also noticed that women sometimes face opposition from their male counterparts. The changes literacy training brings to rural women's lives pose a serious threat to the male dominated culture. I feel that this issue can be effectively addressed through literacy programs that are bent on sensitizing the male to gender differences and the need for equality between men and women.

6.3.4 Types of Women's Literacy

The women in the study said that one of their cherished dreams was to become literate. But not all the women who participated in literacy classes became literate. This fact raises the question about why some women failed literacy training. The answer to this question lies in whether literacy training met their needs and aspirations.

Women come to literacy classes for a variety of reasons. Some are looking for employment, some want to become more involved in their children's education while others desire literacy for their own growth and development. But literacy programs cannot meet all these needs. On top of that the way literacy programs are developed and organized around the world does not reflect the needs and interest of women (Carmack, 1992; Chlebowska, 1992). Usually, they do not take into account the gender-based needs of women. It is clear from the study that women came to literacy training for a variety of reasons. Even though some women set goals of becoming teachers, leaders or social workers, the majority of them aimed at getting into a business or employment so that they could bring some income to their families. Thus, it is possible that this could be one of the reasons why some of the women in the study failed to fulfill their varied needs through literacy programs and did not become literate.

It is interesting to note that most of the women in the study wanted to develop skills so that they could earn money and become financially better off. Literacy did not seem to be a priority for them. What the women thought was that literacy skills would help them achieve their goals. Describing what kinds of knowledge women need Stromquist (1990) explains that the poor do not consider literacy a top priority in their lives. They are so poor that they live day-to-day and try to survive with meager resources. In this context, rural women are not expected to commit themselves to literacy training unless they consider it beneficial. So, Ramdas (1990) explains that women want literacy, but on their terms. Basically, literacy programs need to be both practical and relevant to the lives and needs of women. It is for this reason Chlebowska (1992) describes that functional elements in literacy training are of prime importance to women.

Mere reading and writing activities do not meet the needs and aspirations of rural women who want to improve the quality of their lives. This explanation underscores the experiences of the women in the study who also stated that they wanted to go beyond literacy. What they meant was that they wanted to acquire such skills and knowledge that would help them become economically productive. Most of them were looking for an opportunity to engage in economic activities after becoming literate. That's why they opted for a microfinance program as a post literacy program. A study also indicates that literacy training followed by economic participation tops the list of needs articulated by women across the country (USAID, 1996).

Looking at the attitudinal and behavioral changes the rural women in the study experienced from literacy training, it is hard to say that functional elements of literacy programs were adequate to change both the social reality and gender inequality women encountered. Armed with knowledge, confidence and a sense of control over their lives, these women not only experienced positive changes but also initiated collective actions to change their reality. So, it is argued that women need knowledge not so much to read and understand the world but to read, understand and control their world (Bhasin & Ellis, 1984). Stromquist (1990) also states that literacy programs must balance the interests, skills and knowledge that women seek with that which women need. In fact, women growing up illiterate in a man-dominated environment would not know the power to control their own destiny. So, they need opportunities to build self-confidence and control their own environments. In order to achieve this, they need to be introduced to the liberating aspects of literacy training.

I have observed that literacy programs that focus mainly on reading, writing and arithmetic skills are not beneficial to rural women. Women cannot use the three R's meaningfully unless these are connected to functional skills that help them achieve their goal. If rural women are looking for the opportunity to increase their income, they should be given the knowledge and skills that would help them earn money. Even functional literacy programs are not adequate. In order for rural women to improve the quality of their lives, they need to change their conditions, which require a critical awareness of their reality and confidence to act on their own decisions. I therefore strongly believe that literacy programs intended for rural women should include both functional and liberating elements.

6.3.5 Conclusion

The analysis of the findings of the study clearly demonstrates the fact that in spite of the many obstacles posed by the patriarchal society, rural women have benefited from literacy training. They appeared to have benefited the most from literacy programs that focus on both liberating and functional elements. It is therefore necessary for women's literacy programs to provide rural women with surviving skills together with knowledge and power to change their social reality so that they can improve their lives.

6.4 Implications

This study has some implications for policy makers and practitioners of literacy, which are described as follows.

6.4.1 Literacy-An Alternative to Women's Education

One of the implications of this study is that adult literacy is an alternative to education for women. Most of the women knew the significance of education as they were growing up. Many of them expressed their desire to go to school. But for various reasons, they were not successful. Now in their adult life literacy programs gave them a chance to realize their dreams. For them, literacy was the only viable alternative to education. In the rural areas, women give priority to literacy over other needs showing their desire to become literate (USAID, 1996). The experiences that women acquire through the participatory learning process are crucial to improving their lives. Women's perceptions of positive changes also signify that apart from imparting reading, writing and numeracy skills, literacy can help them become empowered.

In a country like Nepal where women constitute more than half of the population, where the literacy rate among women is still standing at 25 percent compared to 55.5 percent for males, and where formal education has been over-stretched in terms of its costs and outreach, the significance of female literacy is exceptionally high. It is important that educational policy makers and voluntary organizations prioritize female literacy in their development agenda and commit more resources to it for a considerable period of time because, like any other educational program, the impact of literacy in the lives of rural women is not realized overnight.

6.4.2 Basic and Post Literacy

The study indicates that after basic literacy, rural women strongly opt for participation in post literacy programs to fulfill their goals. In fact, they do not seem to be

motivated to acquire reading, writing and numeracy skills only. Rather, they are interested in using the skills in a productive and meaningful way that would help them improve their lives. Stand-alone literacy programs with a focus on imparting the mechanics of literacy only, therefore, are not likely to be of help to most of the women in rural areas. However, literacy programs that not only impart technical skills but also help transfer these skills to different contexts are in great demand because such transfer is not automatic; it “needs to be assisted” (Rogers, 1994, p.13). In rural contexts, women need more time and support to make this transfer possible. Only then do meaningful post literacy programs provide them sustained support to actually both consolidate their literacy and numeracy skills and put them to meaningful use. In fact, women are generally found to be committed to programs that combine both basic and post literacy.

Responding to the immediate needs of women, post literacy programs are likely to provide them an opportunity to consolidate and improve their newly acquired literacy skills. This also helps them to achieve their purpose for becoming literate. Actually, this is probably one of the main reasons why rural women go through such an arduous process of learning to read and write. This has a strong strategic implication for developing literacy programs for rural women who benefit from long term literacy programs that are integrated into achieving specific goals such as economic participation, skill development, etc., for most of the rural women are inclined toward improving their poor economic conditions.

6.4.3 Transfer of Literacy Skills to Social, Cultural and Economic Practices

This study suggests that rural women are basically motivated for transferring literacy skills to social, cultural and economic practices. Unless their literacy skills are expressed in terms of different practices with which they are associated, they do not seem to benefit from literacy programs (Street, 2001, p. 13). The observation of ‘literacy events’ (Heath, 1982, p. 50) and ‘literacy practices’ (Street 1984, p. 1) in both homes and communities clearly points to a positive relationship between multiple literacy practices among women and their efforts to learn to read and write. Rural women’s efforts at becoming literate ultimately find their expressions in their ability to perform tasks that have social implications. For example, wanting to communicate with her husband, Parbati found literacy skills worthwhile when she actually learned to write letters to him. Most probably the very prospect of being able to pour her feelings on paper enabled her to commit to the process of becoming literate.

It has a strong implication for program development. In order to make literacy programs effective and meaningful to rural women, they need to be linked to women’s social, cultural and economic practices. What it suggests is that literacy programs be geared toward promoting literacy practices women are connected to. It also entails that program development strategies need to include an ongoing exploration and assessment of literacy practices that form the basis of effective literacy programs.

6.4.4 Mastering and Retaining Literacy Skills

Another implication of the study is that retention of literacy skills depends on how much they are used. The realization that there is no “short-cut” to retain literacy skills

except for practicing them until they are mastered suggests that rural women need to use them on a regular basis. Retaining literacy skills means nothing else, but “practice, practice and practice.”

It is obvious from the study that those who continued to use their literacy and numeracy skills not only acquired a level of competency but also developed a “hunger for reading.” So, it is necessary to provide a place and purpose to put newly acquired literacy skills to use. Practitioners and policy makers should give careful consideration to this issue before any literacy programs are developed and implemented for rural women.

6.5 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the following is recommended.

1. Women benefit from literacy programs that are geared toward meeting their immediate needs. Besides, literacy programs are the only viable alternative for them to fulfill their cherished dream of becoming literate. It is, therefore, recommended that women’s literacy be given priority, at least in the rural areas.
2. As most of the women enroll in literacy programs in anticipation of their participation in follow-up programs that normally help them earn money, basic literacy program should be combined with meaningful post literacy programs.
3. Since rural women enroll in literacy programs for the purpose of transferring their literacy skills to the social, cultural, religious and economic practices that they are meaningfully associated with, existing literacy practices should be explored, so that they become a basis of effective literacy programs for rural women. They also encourage women to practice their newly acquired skills in a meaningful way.

4. Simple, well-illustrated supplementary reading materials help rural women practice their literacy skills until they master them. But, rural areas are short of materials that are appropriate to neo-literates. It is, therefore, suggested that literacy programs ensure that the graduates have access to materials of interest to them to build on newly acquired skills. These materials should also be relevant to the needs of rural women.
5. Self-help literacy programs have become a source of motivation and strong commitment to literacy. Rural women should be encouraged to organize literacy programs themselves.

6.6 Recommendations for Future Studies

This study briefly describes women's experiences with self-help literacy programs. These programs have used self-instructional materials as a way to encourage rural women to organize their own literacy programs. The self-help programs have strong implications for sustainability and wider outreach. It is worth exploring how self-help programs work and to what extent self-instructional materials intended for new literates help rural women become self-sufficient in terms of organizing programs that are of interest to them. I strongly recommend conducting a study to look into the innovative aspects of the Women's Empowerment Program, which enrolled more than 120,000 women across the Terai region in Nepal.

In addition, similar studies can be conducted with population groups such as males, minorities, tribal groups, diverse language groups, etc. to explore what literacy

means to them and why they want to become literate. The insights gained through these studies will greatly enhance our ability to cater to the needs of specific groups.

APPENDIX

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

The consent letter was generated for each of the women who participated in the study. The letter was written in Nepali and signed by both the participants and the researcher. For reason of confidentiality, the actual written and signed letters during the course of the study are not included in this document. However, a sample letter translated into English is shown below.

Sample Consent Letter for Voluntary Participation

I volunteer to participate in this qualitative study that looks into literacy training and literacy practices within the family and community. It is clear to me that the primary purpose of this research is to identify activities that increase the effectiveness of women's literacy programs in rural areas.

I understand that Keshab Deep Thapaliya and his team will interview me using a guided interview format and tape record the interview. I am aware that I am free to express my views and issues related to women's literacy practices.

I also understand that my name and identity will not be disclosed in any way or at any time. It is clear to me that I may withdraw from part or all of this study at any time and that I have the right to review the material prior to the final oral exams or other publication. The researchers have explained to me that the final results of this survey will be included in Mr. Thapaliya's dissertation and may be submitted to professional journals for publication.

I understand that I am free to participate or not to participate in the survey. There is also the risk that I may be identified due to the small number of participants.

Researcher's signature and Date

Participant's signature and Date

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