Article

White Sari—Transforming Widowhood in Nepal

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Abstract

Before the People's War (1996) in Nepal, widows were not allowed to wear anything other than the white sari, especially in Hindu families. It was a common practice even among highly educated women. Widows were considered impure and carriers of bad luck as a result of which they were excluded from public events, such as weddings and religious ceremonies. This belief system was deeply entrenched in the history of the country spanning thousands of years. However, when hundreds of women became widows during the People's War in Nepal, they started organizing themselves and resisting the discriminatory practice of the white sari. This article explores how widows of Nepal subverted thousands of years of this oppressive practice. It also examines the challenges that they faced in the era of the white sari and the citizenship benefits that they have achieved after liberating themselves from the shroud of widowhood.

Keywords

People's war, women, war widows of Nepal, white sari, social transformation

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Introduction

> While a wife is her husband's "half-body" (*ardhangini*), one can almost say that on his death she becomes "half-corpse." She must henceforth dress in a white shroud-like sari and is excluded from any significant ritual role… (Banerjee & Miller, 2003, p. 140)

The People's War in Nepal, which lasted for 10 years (1996–2006), led to an increasing number of young widows (WHR, 2010). There is no exact estimate of the total number of war widows in Nepal. However, the Nepal Demographic Health Survey shows that there are more widows than widowers in the country (NDHS, 2012, p. 65). These data are also supported by the recent census in 2011, which suggests that out of the 659,837 Nepalese who have been widowed, 75 percent are widows and only 25 percent are widowers. Similarly, a study carried out by the Women for Human Rights (WHR), one of the few organizations working closely with single women in Nepal, suggests that many households in rural areas, especially in western parts of Nepal, are headed by these women (WHR, 2010, p. 27).[1] Most of these single women are widows, while some are wives of missing persons (WHR, 2010, p. 27). Women for Human Rights also observes that more than half of these widows (52 percent) are young women below 40 years of age and the majority of the widows (77 percent) cannot read and write (WHR, 2010, pp. 30–31).

Widow is *bidhawa* in Nepali; the direct translation is "woman without a husband." Prior to the People's War (1996) in Nepal, widows were not allowed to wear anything other than a white sari, especially in Hindu families. It was a common practice even among highly educated women. Although there were variations in the number of days or years for which the widows were required to wear a white sari, this practice was widespread among all the castes/ethnic groups in Nepal.

There are various explanations for the *white sari* practice. The most common understanding of the white sari is that it signifies purity. Traditionally widows were expected to withdraw from normal life and live a life of celibacy, almost like a *sanyasi* (ascetic). This article seeks to examine and provide explanations of how widowhood works in practice in Nepal. Widows are, on the one hand, expected to be pure, to give up their family and social life, but on the other hand, they are also called *Randi* (also pronounced as *Radi*), which is a synonym for "prostitutes" (Bennett, 1976, p. 17; Doherty, 1974, p. 27). This contradiction reveals the precarious nature of "performing" widowhood in Nepal, which is also observed in other Hindu societies such as India (Lamb, 2000).

This article argues that traditionally the white sari operated as a powerful symbol in the Nepalese social discourse, one that was "socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). It served to reproduce, in public spaces, multiple forms of discrimination against widows—social, political, and economic. This article explores how the liberation of widows from the white sari is transforming the whole experience of widowhood while changing the "habitus" of the people as well as social behavior toward widows in Nepal.

This article considers the practice of the white sari from two different perspectives. First, it does not ignore the individualized experiences of widows (which were often mediated by complex social dynamics of caste, class, culture, religion, and so on), but projects these experiences onto a wider social canvas to visualize the collective suffering of widowhood imposed in the name of "religion," "tradition," or "honor (of the family, society, or the country)."[2] Second, it explores the transformative "preformative agency" through women's resistance, including the explicit resistance of widows to the white sari in the post-conflict Nepal.

The White Sari

A sari is commonly worn among married women in Nepal. Like other dresses, a sari comes in various colors, designs, and patterns. Women drape saris of different colors and patterns depending on their age and marital status. There are plenty of choices for young women but as they age or become more senior in the family (as mothers or grandmothers), their choices become limited (Banerjee & Miller, 2003). However, the notion of "choice" must be interpreted critically. In considering the implications for feminism of Foucauldian concepts of social structure, Carolyn Ells remarks, "[a] choice must be understood in explicitly relational terms that include social relationships. It is a decision or authorization situated within a set of practices" (2003, p. 224). In most cases, a woman's relationship with her husband exerts the primary influence over what color she wears (Banerjee & Miller, 2003, p. 140). A bride is supposed to be dressed in red, a color that indicates her connection to the world of desires, and symbolizes that she is sexually active. As women get older, they are supposed to wear "cooler" colors, which indicate that they are getting distant from such desires (Banerjee & Miller, 2003,

p. 139). Likewise, a woman's relationship with her children within the family cycle also influences her choice of color. For instance, an older woman with married children and grandchildren will begin to wear subdued colors, such as off-white, cream, and gray.

In widowhood, women are expected to completely abandon the color of desire (Banerjee & Miller, 2003, p. 140). Hence, color is very much linked to the sexual state of people in Hindu society. Beck argues that "[r]ed substances symbolize 'heated' states [sexually active] and white substances 'cooled' ones [sexually inactive]" (Beck, 1969, p. 553). Coolness signifies a state of sexual inactivity (Philips, 2004, p. 259). White is regarded as a "cool" (*thanda*) color, symbolic of infertility, asexuality, asceticism, old age, widowhood, and death (Lamb, 2000, p. 214). White is also a ritual color of mourning for both genders. White is therefore given to widows to mark the end of their sexual and social life.

When the White Sari Turns Red

In 2005, I attended an event organized by an international NGO in Nepal. This particular organization had been working in Nepal for several years and had various programs supporting women and discriminated groups. It was a district-level event where the Chief District Officer (CDO), district heads, and regional political figures were invited. The purpose of the event was to distribute red saris and red tikka (small red mark on forehead) among widows. The aim of the program was to create awareness about discrimination against widows, especially the stigma associated with wearing a white sari. Majority of the women who participated in the event were war widows below 30 years of age, and only a small percentage (around less than 5 percent) were around 50. The young widows wept when they received the red sari and tikka, which was overwhelming to watch, but the older widows looked embarrassed as if they were doing something "wrong."

According to the organizers, the event was very successful. However, as I left the hall, I saw most of the widows hiding the red saris they had received and wiping off their red tikka. I also observed some men outside the hall, standing on the sidelines and talking about the widows. They were criticizing both the NGO and the widows for attending such a program, which according to them was against the Nepalese culture. The widows were criticized. I overheard one man commenting that

"they were characterless women." In Nepal, character is associated with an individual's sexual behavior, and it determines whether a person is good or bad.

Culturally, for both men and women in Nepal, sexual expression is allowed only within marriage. In practice, however, these social mores are flexible for widowers, who are permitted to remarry within "socially-accepted circumstances." The program offering red saris and red tikka to widows challenged the status quo and led people to raise doubts about the character of the widows taking part in the program.

The following day, the NGO was criticized in the national and local media for hosting the program as it was perceived to be challenging the cultural values. There was also speculation about the widows who had received red saris. Because of this reaction at that time, the program was perceived to be a failure; however, in retrospect, it would not be wrong to say that it planted a seed for the transformation of widowhood in Nepal.

I left Nepal in May 2005 and returned in August 2007 to find that the practice of wearing a white sari had become less common among widows. I started to see women leaders, who were widows and had long been wearing a white sari, appearing on television and in public spaces wearing saris of all hues. It had only been about 3 years since I had attended the event, but now widows everywhere in Nepal appeared liberated from the confines of a social status inflicted on them through the white sari. It would have been unimaginable a few years ago but in 2012, on the occasion of International Women's Day, widows collectively celebrated Holi—a festival of colors.[3] This made me wonder how this social transformation or massive "step change" (Castles, 2010) had taken place in such a short time frame. To address this question, it is necessary to highlight the lived experiences of widows.

Research Methodology

This article is based on in-depth interviews with 17 women, 15 of whom were widows and 2 wives of missing men. In addition, a focus group discussion (FGD) with six widows and interviews with five key informants were carried out to explore the collective understanding of widowhood and their perception about the transformation of widowhood in Nepal. Among the 17 "single women," 8 were below 30 years of age, 6 were between 36 and 45, and 3 interviewees were 49 years or older.

Social organization in Nepal is highly influenced by caste/ethnicity. There are 125 castes/ethnic groups in Nepal (CBS, 2011). These castes/ethnic groups can be divided into four broad categories: higher caste (Brahmin/Chhetri), Janajati (Indigenous), Madhesi (people originated from and living in the plains of Nepal) and lower caste (Dalit). This article includes voices of the widows from all these categories outlined above. Out of the 17 women interviewed, 5 belonged to higher caste families (Brahmin/Chhetri), 2 were indigenous (Janajati), 1 was from lower caste, and 9 were from other Madhesi castes. A majority of the widows (15) came from Hindu families, 1 from a Muslim family, and 1 from a Buddhist family.

Experience of Widowhood in the Recent Past

Entering widowhood is painful and traumatic for most women, who simultaneously lose their husbands and are transformed into other, alien beings (Lamb, 2000, p. 217).

Losing her husband is a traumatic event in a woman's life, but the trauma can be heightened by the social and cultural restrictions placed on them afterwards. In Nepal, women have to follow some strict rituals upon the disclosure of their husbands' deaths.[4] For instance, neighbors or members of the family break the marriage bangles and wipe the red tikka from her forehead and the vermilion (*sindhur*) from the parting in her hair. This ritual removes all the signs of marriage immediately after the death of the husband and from that moment on, the widow avoids wearing red (Lamb, 2000, p. 214). Further, widows have to follow certain rules and regulations throughout their lives, which include restrictions on food, mobility, and participation in community activities. As widows are considered inauspicious, they are prohibited from attending any propitious events such as religious ceremonies or weddings. However, the experience of widows can differ depending on their personal circumstances.

Nisha,[5] the Chairperson of a district-level Single Women's Group in Rolpa, explained the problems faced by widows in the recent past:

> Women were blamed for their widowhood. They were not allowed to go to any of the ceremonies or celebrations, especially marriage ceremonies and religious *poojas*. No one wanted to start their day by seeing a widow. There was a fear that if they wore colorful dresses, or if they dressed like other normal women, bad desires [sexual desires] would come to their mind or men might be attracted to them ... In the case of young widows, there was a fear in

> the family that she might elope with someone or might re-marry. Therefore, the rules were even stricter for them.

This discriminatory culture associated with widowhood has a long history. The root of Hindu tradition comes from the Vedic period, which is believed to be between 1500 and 600 BC (Embree, 1966, p. 3). The *Manusmriti*, called "The Laws of Manu," was written during this period and includes laws or codes of conduct for every aspect of life and people's behavior (Doniger & Smith, 1991, p. xvii). Although the text was produced thousands of years ago, it nevertheless provides the basis of the "classic patriarchy" (Kandiyoti, 1988) practiced in Nepal today. According to *Manusmriti*, women should always obey their husband.

> When her father, or her brother with her father's permission, gives her to someone, she should obey that man while he is alive and not violate her vow to him when he is dead. (*Manusmriti*, Chapter 4, in Doniger & Smith, 1991, p. 115)

Marriage is still extremely important for Hindu families in Nepal, and everyone is expected to participate in this tradition when they reach a certain age (Allendorf & Ghimire, 2012; Bajracharya & Amin, 2010; Thapa, 1996). As described in the *Manusmriti*, giving away a daughter (Kanyadan) at the right age is still perceived as a significant religious event. What's more, marriage is considered a lifetime commitment (Allendorf & Ghimire, 2012) and divorce is still a taboo in Nepal. Embree suggests that although there have been some transformations within cultural practices, "there is an unquestionable continuity linking the remote past in an unbroken line with the present" (1966, p. 69). Many aspects of marriage still reveal the continuity of traditional patterns in Nepal (Choe, Thapa, & Mishra, 2005, p. 159).

Nepal has also witnessed the practice of *Sati* (WHR, 2010, p. 7). The word Sati means a "virtuous woman" (Embree, 1966, p. 98; Major, 2007, p. XV) or a "good wife" (Spivak, 1988) and the practice involves burning the widow alive on her husband's funeral pyre. The origin of the Sati system remains obscure. In AD 465, Lichchhavi King Mandev persuaded his mother not to end her own life when his father died, which was the first reference to Sati in any South Asian inscription (Whelpton, 2005, p. 19). Although the British government banned the Sati system in India in 1829 (Spivak, 1988, p. 93), it was practiced in Nepal well into the twentieth century. It is important to note that Sati was not observed among all castes and ethnic groups in Nepal. Even though Sati was

practiced predominantly among the upper caste (Mani, 1998, p. 1), it had a significant impact on the Nepalese society. While there has been some resistance against the practice in the past, it did not bring the level of transformation that we can observe at present.

Yogmaya Neupane (1860–1941), who was the first women's rights activist in Nepal, was married to a boy when she was between 5 and 9 years of age. Her husband died within 3 years of their wedding. She was considered inauspicious and faced extreme forms of discrimination. After a few years of struggle, she managed to flee from her in-laws to her family home. Later, she eloped with another man to Assam in India. She returned to Nepal in 1903 and got involved in religious activities. In 1906, she formed the first "Nari Samiti," the first women's committee. With her 2,000 followers, she started protesting against discriminatory practices, including polygamy and child marriage. She submitted 24 demands, which included abolition of the Sati system, to then prime minister Chandra Shamshar Rana (1901–1929) who formally abolished slavery and the Sati system in Nepal (Dhungana, 2014, p. 43; Sangraula, 2011; Whelpton, 2005, p. 64). After Chandra Shamshar Rana died, Yogmaya went to new Prime Minister Juddha Shamsher Rana with her remaining demands, but they were not accepted. Instead, she was jailed with her followers for 4 months. After her release, as a final rebellion, she committed suicide with 68 of her followers by leaping into the Arun River on July 14, 1941 (Sangraula, 2011; *The Kathmandu Post*, May 1, 2011). Though the work of the Women's Committee ceased with Yogmaya's death, her contributions are now being recognized by both activists and academics (Aziz, 2001; Dhungana, 2014; Freenepal News Network, n.d.; Sangraula, 2011). Women's rights activists are demanding that the government celebrate Yogmaya as a national luminary (Freenepal News Network, n.d.; Aankha.com, August 10, 2013).

Performance of Widowhood in the White Sari

Simone de Beauvoir argues that the "female body is marked within masculine discourse" (Beauvoir, as cited in Butler, 1990, p. 17); thus, the construction of widowhood is undoubtedly a masculine construction of femininity. Religion is used as a tool to discipline widows' sexual desires. Michel Foucault refers to this as the "disciplinary power" (Mills, 2003, p. 43). He says: "[d]isciplinary power is exercised on the body and soul of individuals" (Sawicki, 1986, p. 25). Discipline is an individual's

internalized behavior, a person's habitus that contains concern about control. It originates within society and aims to control each individual within a particular set of cultural norms (Mills, 2003, p. 43). An example of this phenomenon is widows internalizing the stigma associated with their social position and thus disciplining their own bodies or participating in their own suppression.

Rupa recounted how she felt awkward participating in wedding ceremonies as a widow as she was scared that something would happen to her family.

> I went to my husband's home when my youngest brother-in-law was getting married. I did all the preparations but I was afraid to go out when there was a pooja [worshipping ceremony] as we [widows] are thought to bring misfortune. I was scared that something might happen to the couple. I didn't want to see any bad things happening to my family, that's why I was hiding.

In the dominant religious and cultural narrative, widows were considered inauspicious and carriers of bad luck. It was believed that if widows participated in religious ceremonies, the ceremony would become impure. During a wedding ceremony, the presence of a widow was believed to bring bad luck to the new couple. This belief system is a manifestation of a gendered social discourse of suppression and domination. Bourdieu argues that when people's thoughts are structured by the dominant discourse, in this instance male domination, the act of cognition becomes an act of recognition or submission (Nice & Bourdieu, 2001, p. 13). This is evident in Rupa's story of not participating in the religious ceremony at a wedding. She was worried that if she participated in the ceremony, Gods will get angry and some harm would be fall her family.

Foucault argues that "all subjects are equally unfree," as their actions and choices are constructed by a particular discourse and thus their thoughts or decisions may not truly be their own (Foucault, as cited in Heller, 1996, p. 91). The discourse of widowhood, much like other discourses around moral values, is constructed around ideas and taboos concerning sexuality. Patton (1994) argues that an agent's capacity is constrained in two ways: external and internal limits. He suggests that the internal limits are created by agents themselves, in that they perceive themselves as incapable of performing a specific act or create internal restrictions in other ways (Patton, 1994, p. 352). External restrictions, on the other hand, may be created by family or society, and these influence the internal limits perceived by the individual. The internal limits are

also affected by a person's knowledge of his external reality. For example, women are often afraid to deviate from rules stipulated for religious ceremonies for the fear of inviting unpleasant repercussions.

The dominant religious narrative within Hindu ideology positions the husband as a god in relationship to his partner. The wife has to be devoted to her husband when he is alive and when he is dead. A widow's disciplined lifestyle shows her continued devotion to her husband. Girls are raised within this religious narrative. The religious narrative of widowhood has been adopted by illiterate women in rural villages as well as educated urban women. This does not mean that women do not have agency and that they only operate in conformity with a set of cultural diktats. The performance of widowhood varies among women from different educational and cultural backgrounds. However, there are certain core principles that are assumed to be obligatory for all women.

In this article, I am referring to the white sari as a signifier of widowhood. While, historically, not all widows had to wear a white sari, the option of rejecting the white sari was, in practice, only available to a few women. In the past, the link between the signifier (the white sari) and the signified (the widow) was so deeply entrenched in cultural, religious, and historical locations that until 2003, it was unimaginable that this performance of widowhood could change. I asked my respondents how they felt when they wore a white sari. The majority of them said they felt vulnerable and insecure in a white sari. In addition, they also experienced restrictions on their mobility, a symbolic as well as systematic denial from the public spaces besides vulnerability to increased level of violence. Sumedha shared her experience:

> I felt vulnerable when I was wearing a white sari. People could easily recognize…from [a] distance that I was a widow. We [widows] were often targeted by people with bad intentions.

Rusa, who is 29 years old, also had similar experiences. Widows, especially "young widows," felt vulnerable because a "woman in white sari" also meant a "woman without a man" and was therefore regarded as weak and vulnerable. The white sari did not only make women feel insecure but also exposed them to violence. Many widows feared stepping outside the home while were wearing the white sari. Sita shares her experience:

> We do not have a toilet in our house. I had to walk for a few minutes to go out to the field but I was scared to go out alone, especially in the evening. Either I had to go with someone or I had to wait until morning.

In 2011, only 62 percent of the Nepalese households had access to a toilet (CBS, 2011). In rural areas, that percentage is much lower (Bhattarai, 2013).

Widows in white sari also suffered emotionally. Sabina explained that the white sari served as a constant reminder of her tragic loss.

> I felt very bad about being in a white sari. I was suffering from my husband's sudden death and the white sari never let me forget the incident. It kept reminding me that I had lost my husband and that I was no longer like other women; which made me emotionally very weak. I didn't feel like I was part of the family or part of the community. I thought I was left alone in this world.

The white sari functioned as a symbolic denial of existence in both private and public spaces. While marriage makes women socially visible (Philips, 2004, p. 269), widowhood makes them invisible in social life. Nisha (28) and Rusa (29), two widows from Rolpa, said they had no role to play in social life when wearing a white sari.

> We were not allowed to participate in any public or community events. Our existence was not even recognized; as if we didn't exist. (Nisha)

> It was highly restricted for us to participate in any of the events, especially wedding ceremonies. (Rusa)

In theory, the symbolic meaning of a white sari is to "discipline" widows, to keep them "pure" in memory of the deceased husband. White is also considered a color of purity, spirituality and asceticism as well as a symbol of peace. However, by wearing a white sari, widows become targets of the unwanted advances of men, sometimes in their own family. This vulnerability is intensified by their financial dependence on the family. Kala, a 28-year-old mother of two children, stated:

> After my husband's death, I thought my family will support me but instead my brother-in-law wanted to take advantage of the situation. He wanted me to sleep with him. He threatened to kick me out of the house with my children, if I didn't sleep with him.

Women did not have any inheritance rights until the 12th Amendment of the National Law in 2005. In the past, only unmarried daughters above the age of 35 were able to claim ancestral property, which they had to return to their family if they decided to get married. The purpose of the

law was not to protect a daughter's right to her inheritance, but to provide her with some financial security if she decided not to get married. Before the amendment, a widow had to wait until the age of 35 to be able to claim property, even if she was widowed at the age of 16, and like all women, she had to return the property if she remarried. Widows did not have the right to property, except under special circumstances when they were provided with small parcels of land to ensure their survival if they remained widows for the rest of their lives.

A study on single women carried out by Linda Weiss in one of the villages of Nepal, shows that as women often lacked productive skills, the death of a husband doomed them to economic hardship. Since childhood, women are trained in domestic chores, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the house and family. Thus, their lives became difficult if their husband died (Weiss, 1999, pp. 253–254). Economic hardship, social restrictions, and personal loss were factors that affected the ways in which widows were able to interact in social spaces, where they were often perceived as "ghosts" or "invisibles" in their visually distinct white saris.

Unwearing White Saris

I asked the participants in this study, especially those who had lived under strict rules, how they felt when the white sari was no longer compulsory for them. They responded:

> After we [widows] started wearing other colours, we felt comfortable. We feel like we are part of the family and society. I feel comfortable talking with other people and other people also behave normally with me now. I can go anywhere now like other women. (Rusa)

> When I was wearing a white sari I was not invited to community meetings. I also excluded myself as I didn't feel part of them. But now I am welcomed as a member of society to participate in those kinds of forums. (Namita)

Through their collective struggle and resistance, which was supported by various NGOs and civil society organizations, widows have been able not only to change their own lives and experiences but also to influence key policy changes.

Since 2002, the Nepalese government has made some legislative changes, mostly through the 11th and 12th Amendment of Civil Code

(also known as the Gender Equality Bill). These changes specifically address the rights of widows. For example, a widow does not have to return the property of her deceased husband to his family if she decides to remarry. Widows also get a monthly allowance from the state. Further, widows no longer require the consent of a male family member to obtain a passport, nor do they need permission from their children (son or unmarried daughter) to sell or share their property (Gender Equality Act (2063), 2006; WHR, 2010, p. 23). The new Constitution, which was promulgated on September 20, 2015, also ensures the widows' rights to inheritance and their entitlement to social security (Constitution of Nepal, 2072/2015). Moreover, widows are now active in all sectors of society. Among the 197 women members of the first Constituent Assembly, 2008, 51 were widows (Thapa, 2010, p. 72). Nepalese widows are not only participating in politics on a national level but also taking part in international forums and have formed alliance with other groups globally. In the next section, I will demonstrate how these radical social transformations were made possible in a short period of time.

Key Reasons for Radical Social Transformation

> No one wears a white sari now and no one even questions this. (Sumedha)

There have been cases of resistance by widows (e.g., Yogmaya Neupane discussed above) to discriminatory practices in the past. However, the transformation of widowhood taking place now has a far more significant impact on the Nepalese society than any of the previous movements.

Nepal is not the only society where the impact of war on traditional social structures has prompted a transformation in the symbolic construction of gender roles. The Maoist People's War in Nepal opened up various, previously restricted avenues for women (Manchanda, 2004, p. 244). Along with the wartime experience itself, the intervention of NGOs is another factor I have identified as a source of influence that affected the radical transformation of gender roles and widowhood in Nepal. These influences can be divided into five primary categories—crisis tendencies, collective agency and changing performance, advocacy interventions and support from governments and I/NGOs, role models, and cultural limbo—that will each be discussed separately in the following sections.

Crisis Tendencies

Crisis is understood as a situation where the normal system is disrupted or destroyed as a result of a catastrophic event (Connell, 2003, p. 260). Raewyn Connell (1987, 2002, 2003) borrowed the term "crisis tendency" from Jürgen Habermas and applied this theory to gender. She argues that the analysis of crisis tendencies allows us to visualize the process of change (Connell, 2002, p. 71). According to her, there are two types of crisis tendencies that lead to social change: internal tendencies and external tendencies. A crisis can erupt internally or externally, impacting the whole social structure (Connell, 2002, p. 71). Connell argues that "the social forces can produce change in gender relations" (2002, p. 70). Internal tendencies toward change, when individuals themselves want change, are triggered by various factors, such as exposure to new ideas through education and travel (Connell, 2002, p. 70). However, change can also be affected by the need for survival.

Connell argues that gendered division of labor and gender roles become less rigid during a "crisis situation" (Connell, 2002, p. 71). This is relevant in the Nepalese context as the crisis following the Civil War influenced social changes. This was especially true for women who were forced to perform different duties traditionally associated with men in order to survive. When they stepped out of the traditionally defined gender relations, they did not just learn to cope with the new situation but also had time to reflect on their own social position in the past. When analyzing this particular set of circumstances, Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity can be fruitfully applied. For Bourdieu, reflexivity arises when there is a misfit between "field" and "habitus," "when synchronicity between subjective and objective structures is broken" (Adkins, 2003, p. 21). When women leave their usual fields or roles, they are distanced from their usual habitus or way of thinking. This gives them the space to reflect on their own positions which, in turn, leads to change.

Due to the dislocation of traditional, cultural, and religious narratives during the decade-long People's War in Nepal, new spaces for social interaction opened up. As people were generally sympathetic toward young widows, the social norms became less rigid for them.

In addition, due to the absence of male members of the family, women had to undertake men's jobs as well as their own, which disrupted the entire social structure. A woman's rights activist said:

> All of a sudden, the number of young widows increased during the People's War. People didn't know how to respond to this situation and how strict they

> could be with young widows. There was confusion but also sympathy for the widows. (Sabita)

Likewise, a widow shared her experience:

> It was very difficult during the heightened conflict. When the Maoists blasted the police beats in the villages, all the police started coming to the district headquarters. There were more police than the general population. We had a curfew every night. Most of the male members of the community had gone. They had either died, were displaced, had migrated, or had joined the Maoists, so mostly women were left in the villages. Since men were not there, women had to do everything, even the jobs they were not allowed to do in the past such as ploughing. (Nisha)

The changes in the performance of gender involved the complex dynamics of the disruption of "doxa" (norms taken for granted), and "habitus, the way of thinking" (Bourdieu, 1977, 1989, 1992). In certain situations, such as widows joining the police force, the widows were still expected to perform traditional rituals, but due to the nature of their professional roles, these expectations were much lower from them than in the past.

Moreover, some widows who were housewives started organizing and working together with other widows outside the home in order to eke out a living. Radhika, an FGD participant, pointed out how "widows are also working on construction sites." Women had never previously been seen at construction sites as laborers and it was unimaginable for widows to work there, but now it is seen as normal. Because of their increasing presence in the public sphere, widows are accepted as regular members of society. These widows described this social transformation as an internal experience.

> I had never imagined that I would be able to manage my family on my own but now I am confident that I can handle any situation, if I have to. (Kakulti)

María Villellas Ariño (2008) argues that armed conflict can transform the social structure as gender roles and norms are questioned during a crisis. Manchanda (2001) claims that while it is true that women face various hardships and dangers as a result of violent conflict, they can also benefit from the intended and unintended changes, which may open up possibilities for empowerment. Anderlini (2007), who agrees with Ariño (2008) and Manchanda (2001), also argues that conflict brings women to the fore in public life. When women are exposed to the public sphere, they are able to see how their roles in the family and society can

be different. She further argues that conflict may also increase men's reliance on women, causing them to respect women for their abilities to cope, survive, protect, and recover. Thus, conflict can be the seed to the plant of social transformation (Anderlini, 2007). The exposure of these widows to new roles was a starting point for the transformation of widowhood in Nepal.

Collective Agency and Changing Performance

Historically, discriminatory sociocultural norms have been effective because social institutions have actively worked to maintain them (Puigvert, 2001, p. 30). Puigvert (2001) uses the case of rural Spanish women, who have never attended university, to discuss how collective agency can bring transformation within a society. She argues that when these women, who had grown up within a patriarchal society, came together, they started questioning assumptions about their roles and developed alternative ways of dealing with oppression. She further argues:

> Together they reflected on the nature of their role, questioned their experiences, and planned strategies for change. They turned from being women without any alternatives or mere observers of change into active protagonists of social transformation with regard to gender relations. (Puigvert, 2001, p. 43)

Similarly, when widows in Nepal came together and shared their painful experiences, they stopped blaming themselves for not being able to perform according to the expectations of their families and society. Instead of blaming themselves or blaming their own fate, they started thinking critically about the social norms that affected them and consequently began questioning discriminatory practices and social expectations (Brooks, 2007, p. 61). As they realized these were common problems for all widows, the issues were no longer conceived as individual concerns. One widow explained:

> Our problems are similar. We have all been victims of the old traditions therefore we are always sympathetic to each other and we support each other in any way we can. Widow marriage was not even talked about in the past, but we talk about it openly in our group. (Mira)

If one widow had refused the white sari, it would have been unacceptable but since it was a collective resistance against discrimination, it did not take much time to transform the society.

When widows stopped wearing the white sari, they looked "normal" like other women, although they were still widows. Their changed appearance increased opportunities for widows to play a role in the public sphere and slowly the discriminatory practices against widows (such as restrictions on food and mobility) were questioned, challenged, and removed. This transformation in social attitude toward widows did not only benefit widows from higher castes or widows wearing the white sari but also liberated widows from other castes/ethnicity groups who might not have worn a white sari but had faced other kinds of discrimination due to their widowhood.

Support from Government and I/NGOs

Lily Thapa, who was herself widowed at a young age, established an organization, Women's Human Rights (WHR), for single women in 1994 (Thapa, 2010; WHR, 2010). Women's Human Rights struggled in the early years of its existence for want of funding. However, during the Civil War, a lot of international funding was forthcoming to support the victims of the conflict. Women's Human Right was thus able to secure some funding and expand its program to support widows. A Field Coordinator for WHR, Sarina, said:

> We started forming single women's groups in various districts of Nepal. Initially it started with a monthly meeting. The aim of that meeting was to provide a common forum for widows to come and share their problems. It took a while for them to open up but when they started sharing their problems, they realized that it was not only their problem, all the widows were going through similar pain. When they realized that, they stopped blaming their own fate and started getting together.

Sarina further shared her experience of working with widows:

> WHR organized the first national-level workshop for widows in 2001, which was part of the "Red Color Movement." We distributed red thread for the name tags. Widows were excited about the red thread but at the same time they were nervous because they were afraid of being questioned since "culturally" they were not supposed to wear anything red. They put their name tags on, but took them off when taking pictures as they did not want to be seen in the pictures with the red thread. Although it was a good initiative, the women were too scared.

Made wiser by this experience, WHR developed a new approach. They decided to step back and started creating awareness among widows by

involving their family members. They invited religious leaders to speak about the myths around widowhood and the white sari. Slowly, the movement grew with increased participation from widows and the general public started accepting widows in other colored dresses.

Today, there are many other organizations, including Department of International Development, UK, and Care Nepal, supporting widows. Women's Human Rights itself has expanded its scope and has various programs supporting widows and their children in Nepal.[6] Some of the widows have returned to education, some were able to start small businesses and most importantly, they continue to provide support to each other. Nisha said:

> We always thought that it was against the culture and that God will do something to us and our family if we wore any other color than white and did not follow the rituals, but now we are aware of our religious values. I can support myself. We support each in our group so no one dares to say anything against us.

Scholars have theorized and explained this phenomenon. Puigvert wrote: "[w]hen reason is applied to the past, tradition, and history, we begin to suspect that we do not necessarily need to be their victims, that we can modify our relation to them, and that social transformation is possible" (Puigvert, 2001, p. 35). Bourdieu argues that "awakening of consciousness" brings the possibility of transformation (Jenkins, 2002, pp. 82–83). When these women were educated about discriminatory practices, they were able to reflect on their past experiences and tradition. The intervention of various NGOs has contributed to raising awareness and supporting women through income-generating activities. Equipped with economic independence and increased knowledge, widows could increasingly resist discriminatory practices.

Role Model

> Personal agency has transformative possibilities. (Butler, 1986, p. 41)

Women's Human Rights has now formed single women's groups in 73 (out of 75) districts and 1,050 (out of 3,913) Village Development Committees (VDCs). Almost 98 percent of the members of this organization are widows. A field coordinator at WHR explained: "Widows who were members of the committee were criticized in the beginning for not

wearing white saris, but now they have become role models for others." Widows, who were members of the group, got the opportunity to learn new knowledge and their knowledge gave them the power to subvert the preexisting discrimination against widowhood. In other communities, where WHR did not have a program, women also learned from role models. Since there were no negative consequences for families or society, members of widows' families and the public gradually accepted the transformation of widowhood.

> Those were the same widows who were considered bad luck and were not allowed to attend weddings. They have now become beauticians, take part in weddings and do bridal makeup. (Sumedha)

The media has also played an important role in transforming the stigma of widowhood. In 2012, a famous comedian married a widow after his wife died. His marriage was covered by most of the print media (*eKantipur*, June 22, 2012; Gurung, 2012). The event was portrayed positively and people accepted the wedding as a welcome step toward transformation.

Cultural Limbo

One of my friends disappeared in 2003. He was allegedly picked up by the army and though it is claimed that he was killed within a few months of his arrest, his death has not been confirmed. His status and that of more than 1,200 other people still remains unknown.[7] His family believes he may come back one day. And his wife still dresses like a married woman.

Like my friend's wife, wives of missing people in Nepal live a dual life: the life of a married woman and the life of a widow. Rita Manchanda (2004) argues that wives of missing persons exist in a cultural limbo. They are stuck between the states of marriage and widowhood. They have not seen their husband's dead body and so, although their husbands are almost certainly dead, they still perform the roles of married women (Manchanda, 2004, p. 246). In such a situation, blurred boundaries are socially acceptable and the public is more tolerant of transgressive behavior. Thus, during the Civil War, even in cases when it was almost certain that the husband was dead, the wife was not forced to partake in any rituals associated with widowhood because they had not seen the dead body. This was a phenomenon that neither the individual nor the

society had control over, which, in turn, meant that both individuals and social groups were forced to adapt to the situation, inadvertently creating a safe space for widows.

Conclusion

> Whatever an agent does is reflexive of social structure. (Butler, 1986, p. 41)

The wearing of a white sari to denote or perform widowhood has a long history in Nepal. Originally, a 1,000-year-old doxic practice became the norm and was assumed as normal by the widows themselves.

During the decade-long People's War, when thousands of young women became widows, their presence in the public sphere particularly challenged the "doxic habitus," the way of thinking that was accepted as the normal behavior. As evidenced in the empirical data in this article, the unexpected, sudden, and profound social transformation of women's lived experiences as widows bears witness to Butler's quotation above, starting with the transformation of individual lives as women, collective lives as widows, and societal lives as equal human beings under policy and law.

These changes have not occurred in a linear manner nor are these all-encompassing. As circumstances, such as age, geographical location, economic and educational status, that affect the experience of widowhood vary, there may be some widows who still experience extreme discrimination within the family. However, the shift accounted for in this article reflects a dominant practice regarding widowhood in the Nepalese society. The current Nepalese society is much more flexible, considerate, and understanding toward widows than it was before the Civil War.

Notes

1. Widows are now called single women in Nepal. I will be using the terms single women and widows interchangeably in this article. However, the term single woman, in this article, refers to women with missing husbands and widows only and it does not include unmarried girls/women.
2. For the purpose of this article, widowhood refers to the experience of widows only.
3. A DFID-funded project "Enabling State Program (ESP)—Nepal" organized a Holi program for widows in Nepal on the occasion of International Women's Day in 2012. Photos of women celebrating Holi can be found here: http://www.edgroup.com.au/nepal-enabling-state-programme/

4. See Lamb (2000, p. 214) for more detailed explanation about rituals in India.
5. All my research participants have been given a pseudonym to maintain their confidentiality.
6. See details about WHR and its initiatives to support single women in Nepal: http://whr.org.np/our-pillars/pillar-i-opportunity-fund-2/#.U0ndlqIk75k
7. The details about disappearances in Nepal can be found here: http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/nepal-deliver-justice-disappeared-2014-08-29

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