GENDERED RELATIONAL RISK GEOGRAPHIES
A WORLD OF WOMEN VILLAGES

Ashley C. Thompson
Lalitpur, Nepal | Jan 2017

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Above all, the many nameless women featured both in narrative and in portrait throughout this report deserve to be recognized and credited in a manner far exceeding what any meager sentence might proffer here. As I continue to grapple with the challenges of feminist fieldwork, which certainly I am failing at in countless ways, I feel both honored and beholden to represent their stories, experiences, and lives in a way that they would approve of, but also in a manner which might lead to tangible gains in their lives and in the lives of many others like them. As this work continues, I aim to achieve much more authentic collaborations and partnerships with individuals of every background and affiliation, not only in Nepal but also around the world, as we collectively strive to advance women's rights and empowerment for the purpose of equitable inclusion for all.

Cover Photo: Shuttered Doorway in Patan Durbar Square, Lalitupur, Nepal by AThompson, Jan 2017

ACRONYMS

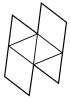FWLD   Forum for Women, Land and Development
GESI   Gender Equity and Social Inclusion
HLPE   Housing, Land, Property and Environment
(I)NGO   (International) Non-Governmental Organization
NLab   Nepal Innovation Lab (World Vision)
WVNR   World Vision Nepal Response

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research is the launch of an iterative exploration of the role and power of gender as embedded within legal, political, economic, cultural, and social power structures – in this first iteration as operationalized to institutionalize access to and control over land, and its denial – in order to build more resilient and equitable individuals, households, and communities that are better prepared to face an ever-increasingly turbulent and complex 21st century. The work is an expansion of a previously developed conceptual framework surrounding relational risk geographies[1] in order to recognize, incorporate, and speculate on feminine gender as a core driver and transfer agent of risk within extended urbanization[2], an emerging operational network of systems and processes that typify modern urbanization and globalization – and that we contend are fundamentally creating and restructuring patterns of risk in unprecedented ways, demanding our attention in both theory and practice.

As the social construct of womanhood continues to transform in manifold across a vast spectrum of roles and expectations (often incrementally, occasionally in leap-and-bounds, converging and diverging on past, present, and future expectations ranging from traditional to progressive to erasure), this fieldwork presents preliminary findings advocating that women's equity and inclusion must be unequivocally mainstreamed across humanitarian aid and development, reframed as a driver of innovation and resilience and thus demanding primacy in partnership models. Female-only issues and programs can no longer serve as proxy for women's issues at large, and in fact, to their detriment. Instead, conceptions of women's issues must expand both in theory and practice, and be integrated across every sector that touches women across the humanitarian and development agenda to include education, healthcare, land tenure and property ownership, citizenship and identify, livelihood… in fact, to include them all.

As human civilization's most elemental social arrangement – that of the two biological sexes with their respective socially constructed genders – the relational roles of men and women and the consequences of the uneven status conferred onto women must permeate every level, scale, and sector of aid and development, thus primed to be a self-sustaining and self-evident choice to expand women's role and build capacity at every opportunity, not least of which at opportunities known to catalyze change such as disasters.

Natural disasters do not affect people equally. In fact, a vulnerability approach to disasters would suggest that inequalities in exposure and sensitivity to risk as well as inequalities in access to resources, capabilities, and opportunities systematically disadvantage certain groups of people, rendering them more vulnerable to the impact of natural disasters.

Neumayer & Plümper, 2008

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1 Henceroth, J. & Thompson, A. *Innovation Lab.* 2015.

2 Brenner, Neil ed., *Implosions/Explosions*, (Berlin: Jovis Books, 2014).

INTRODUCTION

Conducting fieldwork nearly nine months after the 2015 Nepal Earthquakes, I visited one of Nepal's most affected districts, Sindhupalchok, and discovered an all-women community and the absolute destruction that can be imagined to follow two major and sequential earthquakes in the developing world. Their mostly mud-and-stone multistory homes destroyed in entirety, now salvaged rock piles at our feet; their temporary shelters hastily erected from salvaged wood framing, metal sheets, and thatch – not a man in sight. This encounter precipitated a dawning realization, after years of similar experiences of ever-more women dominated communities, of what is an increasingly global, undeniably socio-cultural phenomenon: boys and men departing their homes and families to seek better opportunities, while the girls and women stay behind. The resulting distortion of the gender demographic across geographies and cultures is startling – villages, towns, and camps everywhere seemingly inhabited only by women, children, and the elderly or impaired. All those who are en(able)d, leave. Throughout human history, men have been leaving: for foreign wars, for exploration and discovery – but the newest opportunity is the city – the urban center as a nexus of resources of all kinds.

Reconsidering notions of risk and resilience as systemic, not site-specific requires a new approach to risk vulnerability engaged with theories of extended urbanization: that events in one locale have direct implications and perhaps significant consequences to another locale that is network connected yet physically anywhere in the world. While disruptions at the network center are more catastrophic for the ecosystem, the effects are reciprocal. Gendered relational risk geographies then, particularly where gender demographics are concentrated in all-male and all-female populations, emerge through these patterns of extended urbanization linking gendered effects to systemic and supranational flows with impacts at the regional, community, and body-scale, particularly for the countless women left behind. While the scope of this report does not include the literal tracing of risk as trans-

mitted through these networks across scales and sectors, it recognizes that these affects are most likely to spatialize to the detriment of the most vulnerable peoples in the most precarious situs – gender is often at this confluence.

Increasingly expounded as the new normal, humanitarian and development organizations mandate policies and fund programs designed to advance protections and rights for traditionally repressed and/or marginalized groups, usually codified as Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI), where Gender Equity predominantly refers to women's rights. Although important and pressing issues of social inclusion extend to a vast array of discriminations, intolerances and injustices against all lesser-power or Other groups, in general, these same institutions tend to prioritize gender, e.g. women, as the representative group driving GESI according to the scope and magnitude of women's issues globally. This report will privilege the term women's equity and inclusion to gender equity and social inclusion in order to transparently emphasize the female sex and feminine gender that is the fieldwork's accurate focus. While this report features women, it should never be construed to imply the exclusion of any other group's rights and protections from the equity platform. Furthermore, if accepted as an archetypal social group, the majority of recommendations made on behalf of women might also serve to aid and reveal the criticality of integrating every other excluded social group into the innovation and resilience process.
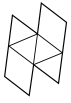
REFRAMING WOMEN'S RIGHTS THROUGH DISASTER
Gendered Impact

It is well accepted that natural disasters affect and disadvantage women more than men, an extension of the uneven cultural and social status that women face globally. These trends were also largely validated in post-earthquake Nepal, further exacerbated by discriminatory treatment towards women and other vulnerable groups as provisioned by the Government of Nepal's disaster management reconstruction policies, often implicating these groups' inability to procure and produce required documentation such as citizenship certificates, land and property registration, and on[1].

1. Women have more limited access to resources deemed essential for preparedness, relief, recovery, and rehabilitation.
> Including but not limited to social influence, transportation, education and literacy, information access, control over land and property, economic resources and opportunities (ranging from technical skills to liquid cash/liquefiable assets like jewelry, to market access), authority and decision-making.

2. Women-dominated livelihoods are likely to be severely impacted, such as small-scale agriculture and animal husbandry, self-employment and other more informal markets.
> Women experience limited formal job security resulting in a dearth of benefits and protections further compounded by the challenges of re-establishing these livelihoods after disaster (1, 4 & 5 in concert)

3. With the loss of livelihood, women are also more likely to experience an immediate loss of status within the household and family.
> Former leverage or influence achieved as an income-earner is obviated immediately. There also exists the potential and consequence of a worsened status, as a former-income earner who is no longer able to contribute and may be unable to do so for an extended timeframe (1, 4 & 5 in concert again)

4. Women experience greater restrictions on mobility to obtain resources, opportunities, or even seek redress (economic, social, cultural, political, legal, physiological, and so on).
> Social and cultural standards and norms relegate the female as responsible for and thus obliged to remain in the household.

5. Women's domestic responsibility increases dramatically where the home is damaged or destroyed.
> Basic household requirements such as sourcing food and water, cooking, laundry, safeguarding children, providing for livestock, caring for the injured and many other tasks become more difficult and time-consuming. Privacy, hygiene, and other female health issues also become more challenging.

6. Women experience a systemic increase in domestic and sexual violence.
> This includes human trafficking of girls and women, into the sex trade and other domestic work.

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1 FWLD.org. "Disaster – Rights Based Approach." Accessed 10 Jan 2017. http://fwld.org/core-areas/disaster-right-based-approach/2014.
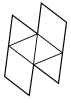
REFRAMING WOMEN'S RIGHTS THROUGH DISASTER
Housing, Land, Property, and Env**ironment**

How does the intersection of land and women's rights implicate disaster recovery and community resilience?

Around the globe the right to claim and control land and the resources land yields is one of the most fundamental aspects to physical, economic (and therefore social), as well as psychological security and well-being. Thus conceptions of land warrant being framed accordingly:

> First, land as the foundation to achieve any such security, particularly in the developing world where land ownership remains the most dominant form of wealth.

> Second, land – particularly valuable land as that value is contextually conferred (fertile, mineral or water-rich, proximity to infrastructure, culturally significant, etc.) – as a finite asset and object of competition, and thus at the center of contestation for that same value. Here, value in the land may be cast as a proxy of security in the land.
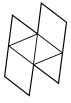
Therefore, the more valuable the land, the more likely and more severe the contestation - and any sudden upsets to the land, particularly ones which reveal the true scarcity of and need for that security (such as disasters), are more likely to devolve into conflict and humanitarian crisis. Competition for access and control of land therefore is at the center of, indeed shaping if not driving conflict and humanitarian crisis.

It is therefore evident that consideration for Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) – and Environment (E) – must also inform the process and outcome of long-term recovery particularly in these contested sites of crisis, disaster, and conflict where it was implicated in cause or correlation. As a rupture, durations of contestation also present the opportunity for seminal change – primarily through the recovery and rehabilitation process, which is often aided by international agencies when the magnitude

of the rupture is significant enough (offering more opportunity for change as discussed next). It is important to remark that environment has been amended to the standard HLP sector, as any housing, land, or property that is physically situated in or on a hazard-prone landscape should never be considered secure. Additionally, in crisis of all kinds, too often the fracture between short-term emergency response and long-term recovery reveals how individuals, families, and communities are steadily disassociated with and disenfranchised from their immediate environment and its (im)possibility as a landscape that may, or may not, sustain and secure them.

Where land may be understood as a baseline of security, we may also understand gender as a baseline of social security, i.e. across nearly every culture and society, women are regarded as inferior to men in countless ways formally inscribed such as in law, but also customary and acceptable in policy and practice, particularly in collusion with other discriminators that intersection with and stand independent of gender such as race, class, age, ability, and so on. Therefore, when considering who simultaneously suffers greatly from the absence of land and would in parallel benefit greatly through the acquisition of land – i.e. the ownership, tenure, and control of the land itself and those many advantages it yields – we might consider any traditionally underrepresented and marginalized group such as women. Promoting a livelihood model where sustained well-being and development requires stability and security, both the humanitarian aid and development sectors must operationalize the indivisibility of land with livelihood, and in doing so, confront the nature and politics of the socio-physical land and landscape itself – to include the exclusion of women.

REFRAMING WOMEN'S RIGHTS THROUGH DISASTER
Opportunities for Social Restructuring

If we understand crisis as an opportunity for social restructuring, what expanded roles are or might be achievable for women in post-earthquake Nepal?

With a remittance economy designed to privlege male labor migration[1] and today constituting nearly a quarter of the national GDP, Nepal serves as archetype and case study of distorted gender demographics within a relational risk geography. Traveling mostly to the Gulf States on 3-5 year construction contracts, women then, as presumptive head of households, are managing land, property, and finances, in addition to their traditional domestic responsibilities – in many cases, they are managing everything on their own. Typical to the larger Asian Region, Nepali family are often composed of many generations living together, either birth or in-lawed. In Kathmandu, women are more likely to have this support network available and present in their husband's absence and thus acting as head-of-household in his stead. However, in the rural areas that dominate Nepal as well as the rural household that send more men abroad, the marriage itself may have separated the woman farther from her birth-family, making it more common for her to assume control of the household.

In fact, not only is the wife behaving as head-of-household accepted, it is expected (note that this remains distinct from breadwinner which is enduringly, the husband). However in a departure from the previous living arrangement, it is now socially and culturally acceptable for the woman to serve and protect her family's well-being beyond the domestic, their homestead and assets, in the man's absence. In this increasingly prevalent and long-term circumstance, the expanded role and responsibility of women must be accompanied by the rights and customs she is afforded in order to guarantee her ability to perform this role. When the earthquakes struck, a disaster faced alone by many women not only through the immediate destruction and survival period, but through the weeks and months of relief, recovery, and reconstruction

that have and will continue to follow – the woman continues to find and place herself at the center of the rebuilding process both at the individual and community level. While many men were able to come back temporarily and may have assisted in the temporary shelter construction and immediate shoring up of the household, the man was inclined to depart again precisely so he could continue working to fund his family's recovery.

4. Women experience greater restrictions on mobility to obtain resources, opportunities, or even seek redress (economic, social, cultural, political, legal, physiological, and so on).
### Sociocultural norms relegate the female as responsible for and obliged to the household.

Disasters reveal virtual fractures in the underlying socio-spatial conditions and power structures that drive stability and contribute to the resilience of communities, particularly in high-risk and gender-distorted environments. Framing HLPE through the lens of gender has the potential to reshape norms and standards determining how individuals, households, communities, and ultimately the state operate across scales and sectors within the reality that is disaster and the major disruption it precipitates, but also which can be demanded of it – as a challenge and opportunity for adapting and reorganizing[1] equitably and inclusively, for women, and for the countless other groups who face discrimination within these systems.

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1 In 2012, Nepal's government banned women under 30 from working in Gulf countries due to concerns of abuse and exploitation (HRW 2013). Until 2010, women were restricted from migrating as laborers entirely.

2 Paralleling Reed et al.'s summary of resilience (Henceroth & Thompson, 2017; Reed et al. 2014).
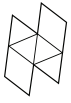
REFRAMING WOMEN'S RIGHTS THROUGH DISASTER
Opportunities for Social Restructuring Cont'd

The extreme mobility of men generally, but specifically experienced in Nepal as the main economic model supporting the nation's household-by-household recovery, may be recast as an opportunity to expand the social and culturally acceptable role and status of women with greater authority for decision-making. Both the humanitarian aid and development sector must be primed to take advantage of any such opportunity, and be prepared to insert capacity building for women and other marginalized groups embedded into the concept of operations from the very initial relief efforts.

It should be noted that in Nepal prior to the earthquakes, women's (and other marginalized groups) land tenure has achieved moderate gains over nearly 10 years of government policies specifically targeting and incentivizing female ownership or joint-ownership, primarily through tax-incentives. A recently released 2016 CARE Report on Housing, Land, and Property Issues in Nepal follows the summation of these statistical gains[1] with a potentially dismissive conclusion without elaboration:

> "Some interviewees observed that increased ownership in the name of women might represent a male strategy to take advantage of the reduced fees rather than real progress for women's empowerment."

As this comment alludes, there exists a significant distinction between ownership and control. In Nepal but in nearly every country worldwide, are gaps between law, policy, and practice. Therefore, the remittance economy - reliant on male labor migration - may be understood as an opportunity for women, particularly in a time of crisis, to establish more control as accepted practice.

Some interviewees observed that increased ownership in the name of women might represent a male strategy to take advantage of the reduced fees **rather than real progress for women's empowerment.**

CARE Report 2016[1]

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1 In 2004, 8% of land registry certificates were in women's names. 10 years of policy and legal intervention on the part of the Nepali government incentivizing land and property ownership for women and other marginalized groups has led to moderate gains – in 2014, 19% of Nepali women "own land or buildings" (CARE Report 2016).

2 CARE. *Housing, Land and Property Issues in Nepal and their consequences for the post-earthquake reconstruction process.* 2016.
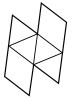
CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN'S EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Major challenges and barriers to achieving women's equity and inclusion, at times perhaps seeming insurmountable, are in no way unique to any one cross-section of the world or another – not to pre or post-disaster, not to Nepal, not to the Global South. These are global challenges, embedded within the socio-cultural structures of human history as well as of endless iteration and variation as manifested across scales from culture to culture and society to society. While the broad challenge may be similar (enabling women's representation and influence), implications or consequences for women in one culture may be vastly different than those in another, just as within one cultural context, the impact may vary greatly even between households (implicating social structures as well as scale). It is also important acknowledge that while basic human rights must be considered as just that, basic and thus inherent, describing how a culture or society might define or defend women's equity and inclusion is largely within the purview of that culture or society, predicated on the equitable inclusion of all those women.

Thus, the precise identification of these challenges – the myriad (and often obscured) ways in which women and girls are or may be disadvantaged relative to men, in fact in many ways construed only in relation to men – is neither possible nor useful to comprehensively capture. Yet a summary remains essentially, not only to validate overarching and common experiences of women's oppression but also to shine a light onto those realities that may be less evident, or simply less considered, by others who do not share this reality.
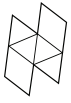
Gender Essentialist Sociocultural Customs and Norms
- Reinforced by Practice, Policy, and Law

The Portrayal of Women as Benefactor at All Levels
- Vulnerable at the Lowest Levels
- Tokenism at the Highest Levels

Structural Inequality across Scales and Sectors:
- Individual / Familial / Household / Community / National
- Economic / Education / Healthcare / Citizenship / and on

CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN'S EQUITY AND INCLUSION
Gender Essentialism and Portrayal

Gender Essentialist Sociocultural Customs and Norms

Nepali socio-cultural challenges implicated in delivering expanded equity and inclusion for girls and women, both in rural and urban contexts, are dually significant and complex. Essentialist gender roles are embedded within the system of patrilineal and patrilocal law and custom, derived from both Hindu law and English common law. While much work has been done to identify specific laws and policies responsible for direct discrimination against women and other low-power groups[1] and formal gains have and continue to be slowly made, many inscribed in the approved 2015 Constitutional Amendments, the reality is that these laws and policies lack acceptance and enforcement and more so, the standards, norms, and expectations that ascribe gender roles and status exist far outside the law. The social and cultural norm, the subordinate position of women and girls is constantly reinforced, both internally and externally, with broad impacts across every area of development personal, social, professional, educational, and on.

Additionally, the distinction between laws and systems intended to protect women versus those that lead to further discrimination is a fine one – not least of which because it presumes that women require special protection and further, usually offer solutions entailing restrictions on women, rather than on the external agent causing the harm. A well-known example is the 2012 ban on Nepali women under 30 years old to migrate to the Gulf States for work – designed to protect these women from rampantly reported exploitation and abuse. Prior to the ban, women had only been authorized to migrate as laborers to the Gulf States for two years, previously barred entirely. As is well-established criticism of this ban, the Nepali Government could have instead pursued immigration reform to include the adoption of more robust labor protections (with enforcement policies) against know recruiters, companies, and others complicit in the abuse. Such action would benefit all remittance workers both women and men, who certainly also suffer exploitation and abuse, while maintaining women's liberty to pursue income within these the lucrative overseas labor markets.
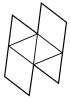
Instead, those women most desperate for income are driven to informal channels with no absolutely no oversight, also putting them outside the law and thus even less likely and able to seek redress from what will surely be a much more hostile work environment. Of course, women migrant workers, approximately 10% of Nepali migrant workers overall, are already likely to constitute a more vulnerable cross-section of Nepali households, as their departure from home represents a significant break from traditional gender roles in the first place.

The Portrayal of Women as Benefactor at All Levels

Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI), particularly in primary support of women as described, is a standing guiding principle of many organizations in Nepal, spanning International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), local NGOs, civil-society organizations and including the Nepali Government. However, in the same turn, these women are primarily perceived of as the end-of-line beneficiary, a recipient of special consideration or services, rather than a qualified member involved in the planning or implementation of women-oriented programs or within the leadership structure of these same bodies. When prompted, local partners articulate that if women were to be fully incorporated into the planning, management, or execution of these initiatives, then unacceptable exceptions would need to be made – i.e. standards would be lowered – which would undermine programs and thus serve no one. In Nepal, the portrayal of women as vulnerable and thus in need of special attention and assistance is prevalent across not only humanitarian and development programs, but even across women's empowerment platforms.

1 Forum for Women, Land and Development. *A Study on Discriminatory Laws Against Women Dalit Ethnic Community Religious Minority and Persons with Disabilities.* 2009.

CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN'S EQUITY AND INCLUSION
Structural and Intersectional Inequality

This attitude extends to women across all levels of society, to include very prestigious and historically groundbreaking women in Nepali society such as: the first female President of Nepal, the first female Chief Justice of Nepal's Supreme Court, the first female Speaker of the Nepali Parliament, the first Deputy Superintendent of Police, and on to include female athletes, aviators, chefs, engineers and more. Portrayed anecdotally to widespread consensus, often by men but also by women, these individuals are presumed to be less qualified for these positions. In most cases, the sentiment follows that these women have attained these positions only because they were enabled by a male benefactor or a quota system or a diversity initiative (this list of ulterior credit continues), that assisted them on their way to, or rather, delivered them to the top. In this way, the women themselves are not attributed with their success, rather than it is the man or the male system that is credited. Such framing also ensures that the perception of the status quo is maintained both by women and by men. In the increasingly likely case that a woman has more autonomy or authority, for instance in rural areas with a rising prevalence of women head-of-holds as well as in the more progressive urban centers, the woman is often unwilling to claim her expanded position publicly when it so clearly violates social norms and standards – a clash of realities – thus reinforcing the pretext that the status quo is being maintained, even when it is not, and signaling to all that the status-quo is indeed the preferred order.
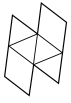
Structural Inequality across Scales & Sectors (Intersectionality)

Despite the increasing prominence in GESI initiatives within humanitarian aid and development, outcomes of these programs in many cases remain suppressed from full impact. In part, this could be attributed to the structural nature and extent of any one group's oppressions. For instance, an identified women's issue may hardly be isolated as just that, but in fact implicates functional program areas across the humanitarian and development agenda such as education, healthcare, citizenship and other legal designations, just to name a few. Thus, will the aim may be to advance women's rights, in order to do so, any intervention must in fact understand and target the various underlying issues, many of them obscured, that contribute to her marginal status. In addition, such a framing erodes the standardization of specific issues as 'women's issues,' where in fact women's issues do expand and should be a consideration across every humanitarian and development program. The GESI construct is too often limited to child-bearing, rearing, female healthcare and similarly female-only programs. Such programs are certainly important and surely, the scope of any program must be a focused allocation of capacity and support; however, GESI initiatives too often suffer from a much more malignant theoretical truncation, a limitation of the notion of what is or is not a women's program. The sole pursuit and primacy of only-female programs as a satisfactory proxy for women's issues more broadly is erroneous and obfuscates the critical nature of integrating women's issues in every area.

Intersectional Implications

To this end and by the nature of their extensive social fixedness, nearly all GESI issues demand innovation in order to make substantive progress and deliver significant gains. It is very unlikely for a first round intervention to succeed in laying bare the nuance and complexity of a structurally ingrained social issue; instead, these programs require dedication and commitment to be seen through adaptive iterations where the policy, process, or project may reflexively challenge it's own assumptions and thus move incrementally and deliberately towards the desired outcome – and in this way, is transformational. Instead, the frequent lapses or underperformance of actual GESI outcomes indicates such incremental and reflexive assessment within the GESI framework is absent, yet desperately needed. Additionally, such deliberate but incremental change – working with local partners within the innovation process previously outlined – also lends
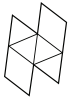
CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN'S EQUITY AND INCLUSION

towards a disruption of social hierarchies in non-disruptive ways where incremental gains are validated and accepted step by step both by the women themselves as well as their immediate families and communities, those who have a direct influence and control over their standing and privileges. In fact, within GESI mandates, community acceptance, understood as a proxy for the acceptance of the higher-power party, may be achieved through local partnership thus it becomes even more essential.

Lastly, it's important to realize that despite being a useful overarching grouping, women cannot be presumed or understood only as a monolithic social group. Indivisibility from their gender does not dismiss the intersection of many other demographic identifiers and backgrounds such as race and ethnicity, class, locale, and on. At the individual, household, and community level, strategies for resilience and innovation must be adapted relative to the group's varying demographics in order to tailor projects to the most relevant and appropriate cultural context. In no way is such a framing advocacy for separate but equal, rather it is an acknowledgment that any program should carefully consider and develop the capacity-building and innovation strategy based on any community's varying baselines across it's members. Developed as such a spectrum, individuals are liberated to insert themselves into the program as best suited to their needs and desired outcome, as well as to flexibly shift within the program as those needs evolve, which could constitute anything from accelerations, lateral shifts, reviews or sharing of foundational stages, and pauses which may be deep-dives or even sabbaticals. If genuinely designed to empower the individual, then these programs should be conceived in a way that acknowledges and affords that individual the autonomy and flexibility to make decisions for themselves as they deem in their best interest.

The primacy of only-female programs serves as an erroneous proxy for women's issues more broadly and obfuscates the criticality of integrating women's issues in every sector.

OPPORTUNTIIES FOR WOMEN'S EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Understanding these challenges, it is clear that a more deliberate framework to integrate and advocate for and with women is required in order to foster women's active participation, engagement, and leadership – thus mainstreaming and advancing women's rights across sectors in humanitarian aid and development. Substantive partnerships for and with women should proactively consider and pursue the following measures.

1. Recruitment and retention of women as partners throughout the project.

This includes every phase of the project from conception to execution and also extends to the various project roles from the leadership team to women in the community as key stakeholders. Incorporating women is frequently challenged, met with complicit claims that women are any combination of: not present, not available, not qualified, or even not interested. Any such claim should be vigorously substantiated and is likely to be determined as either unfounded or at the most, surmountable. Where metrics of qualification are embedded within the structural development of women relative to men, setting a threshold that woman must demonstrate or achieve in order to be considered qualified is fundamentally a discriminatory screening practice. Rather, to overcome such structural bias, a system must be developed based on possibility – that a woman is as capable as she is enabled to be. Such a process leads to self-actualization, that may then release her from dependence even on the group or body that initiated her transformation.

2. Dedication to decision-making and leadership development for all women.

In order to target the institutionalized context of women's position relative to men, priority should be dedicated to initiatives and projects that incorporate women as equal partners in the development and implementation of these efforts - regardless of the designation of a project - all projects are an opportunity. Women should no longer be viewed as the key benefactor, which is a reflexive labeling and accordingly subsumed into the psyche of the women, communities, and aid sector itself - women as victim. Rather, women should be incorporated into the full range of vision planning and project implementation and development. Women must be built-up as leaders, which will in-turn elicit or embolden these critical qualities, in order to overcome overwhelming essentialist bias. It is clear that women themselves are often equally, if not more so, convinced of their role and purpose within society as defined by their society. The stronger the social structure that dictates such roles, the more critical it is that any development program also work with the community in order to create space and acceptance for alternatives. A woman needs her family and her community – her support structure – in the same way that any human being does. Therefore, programs must also be in place to demonstrate the value of her development to, on behalf of, and at the scale of her family and her community. Thus in deconstructing and redefining the potential of women partners, one needs partners.

3. Research, identify, and work to counter-act if not eliminate intersectional systems that subvert or undermine opportunities for women both directly and indirectly.
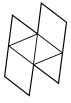
Recognizing the structural nature of women's oppression remains essential in understanding and thus navigating the ecosystem of women's development, partnership, and leadership within the humanitarian and development sectors. Countless laws, policies, and standards delineating a citizens' right to and access for education, healthcare, economic opportunities, even the legal regime itself ascribing not only land and property rights but also delineating citizenship itself – and these are only a few examples – have a massive impact on women. Regardless if the affect is intentional or unintentional, its purported second-order-affect should in fact be reframed as a direct affect. The seemingly indirect nature of such mandates are easily deployed to obfuscate the disadvantaged outcome
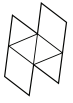
OPPORTUNTIIES FOR WOMEN'S EQUITY AND INCLUSION

delivered to women and thus are essential components of the status quo that must be first revealed, and then challenged. Such ecosystem awareness also effectively maps the field of laws or policies that may coalesce as primary obstacles or blocks (independently or even more hidden, in synthesis) with extensive consequences for women that should be targeted as priorities. As a complex and structurally integrated issue, any conceptual or operating model for women's rights that lacks such field view, are essentially blind. The status quo that must be first revealed, and then challenged. Such ecosystem awareness also effectively maps the field of laws or policies that may coalesce as primary obstacles or blocks (independently or even more hidden, in synthesis) with extensive consequences for women that should be targeted as priorities. As a complex and structurally integrated issue, any conceptual or operating model for women's rights that lacks such field view, are essentially blind.

OPPORTUNTIIES FOR WOMEN'S EQUITY AND INCLUSION
Implications for NLab and Partners

The World Vision Nepal Innovaiton Lab and the many international and national partners working in humanitarian aid and development across Nepal have both the privlege (e.g. status and authority) as well as the responsibility to demonstrate a greater committment to Gender Equity and Social Inclusion. Assessed no longer by intention but instead by outcome, all organizations should be striving for the full inclusion and integration of women across their operations and programs in the near-term, and building human capital pipelines where this seems an impossible ask.

1. Eliminate theoretical limitations
- Expand a working definition of "women's issues, programs, sectors, and roles" in order to concurrently extend the horizon of potential for women deliberately beyond the status quo.

2. Minimize operational limitations
- Evaluate and address internal bias, program bias, outcomes and assessment bias.
- Innovate and reframe metrics and assessment across all programming, development, and implementation that counter-acts historic structural discrimination against women and other low-power groups.

3. Partner, partner, partner - in tandem with capacity building
- First and always with women as key stakeholders;
- Also with key influencers, i.e. their family members, in order to gain social traction.

4. Accept the responsibility to understand and navigate the structural and intersectional land-scapes impacting women, women's rights, and women's equity and inclusion.
- Be an unwavering advocate for monitoring and assessment of formal and informal barriers to women – both legal and political in design, and socio-cultural in implementation and en forcement.

5. Be more proactive and accountable to gender equity and social inclusion (GESI)
- Refuse to approach GESI as "checking the box" and challenge anyone who either proffers or accepts this approach.
- Be self critical, deliberately aim to improve programs (through every phase) through iteration and variation, both in the short and long term.
- Document not only successes but also the larger majority of partial successes and failures.

A Majhi Woman in Bhimtar
Sindhupalchok, Nepal | Jan 2017
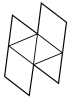
NOTES ON METHODOLOGY
Feminist Fieldwork

Increasingly, I view myself as a feminist researcher. While various definitions of feminist methods exist and continue to be developed within social science, for me, such positionality connotes my accountability to power structures – both those that I am subject to as well as those within which I operate; a dedication to pursue and advance social justice on behalf of all, particularly to individuals and groups who have been historically (and more often then not, continue to be) marginalized; and lastly, in establishing both the purpose of social justice and for whom that justice serves, a commitment to working collaboratively in order to co-create where possible, but validate and seek feedback always. The ethical commitments and responsibilities required to operationalize such a theoretical framework into practice is, in my experience, a near endless exercise of constant exchange and evolution. Echoing the sentiment of many feminist researcher predecessors: "my hope is that I will get it more right than the last time…" (Thompson, 2015; Reid and Frisby, 2008: 203; Chrisp, 2004: 92).

Fieldwork poses particular dilemmas for feminists because of the **power relations inherent in the process** of gathering data and implicit in the process of representation. **Inevitably, there is inequality.**

Wolf, 1996

Ashley C. Thompson
Master in Design Studies, Risk and Resilience Candidate 2017 at the Harvard Univeristy Graduate School of Design

Ashley received her professional Bachelor of Architecture from Rice University in Houston, Texas, and is currently a second-year Master in Design Studies Candidate in Risk and Resilience at the the Harvard Graduate School of Design in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her ongoing research builds on fieldwork conducted with colleage Justin Henceroth from January 2016 on strategies for innovation and resilience through local partnership engagement and gender equity and social inclusion. Hosted by the Nepal Innovation Lab's Explore Ideas Program, she is a Harvard Asia Center and Harvard South Asia Institute Research Associate. Her photography exhibition, *A World of Women Villages*, a curated portrait collection of girls and women in rural villages as taken over more then 25 years of global travel is coming to the Harvard Graduate School of Design this February, 2017.

RESOURCES

Stakeholder Meetings with Daayitwa, Forum for Women, Law and Development, and WomenLEAD Nepal.

Field Visits to Gairathok and Bhimtar, Sindhupalchok, Nepal.
Semi-structured survey with 15 women total, support from World Vision Nepal Response Dolalghat Field Office Community Outreach Coordinators.

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