

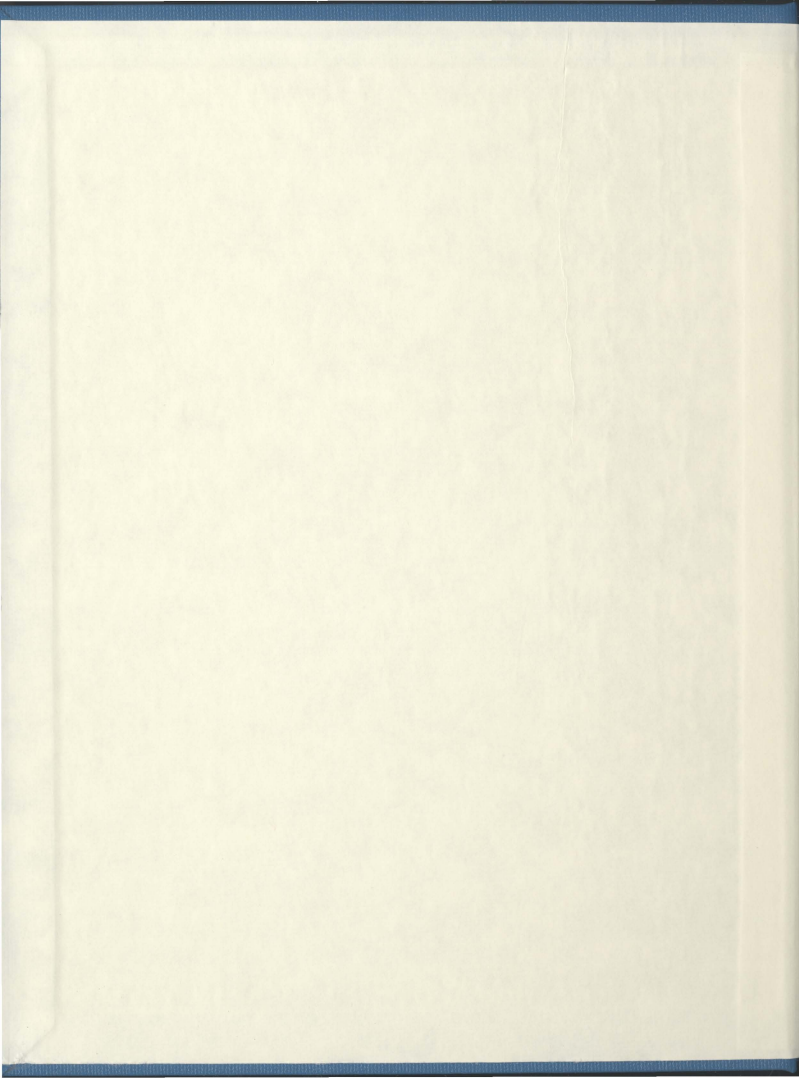
"TRAILBLAZING:
THE WOMEN OF NEPAL'S TREKKING INDUSTRY"

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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LISA HOFFE



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Master of Women's Studies Final Report

Video Project:

"Trailblazing: The Women of Nepal's Trekking Industry"



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I. Introduction

The field work required for the Master of Women's Studies project took me to Kathmandu and Pokhara, Nepal, where, I shot and produced the film: "Trailblazing: The Women of Nepal's Trekking Industry". The film profiles the fledgling few women working in the heavily male-dominated adventure tourism business in Nepal. It examines women in the business of guiding tourists, specifically women traveling solo, who come to Nepal to 'trek' the mountainous routes from village to village. Through the telling of their stories, the kinds of gender barriers they face within the conservative mountain culture as well as within the adventure tourism industry -- Nepal's economic lifeblood -- are seen. The film is 24-minutes long and it was completed in January 2005.

The story centers on the story of Lucky, 'Dicky' and Nicky Chhetri, who operate "3 Sisters Adventure" (www.3sistersadventure.com). It is the first and only female owned trekking agency in Nepal. The Chhetri sisters officially opened five years ago offering a female guide and porter service. The sisters saw a niche in the market when women who were staying at their guesthouse returned from treks complaining of inappropriate behaviour from their male guides. Their experiences ranged from general incompatibility because of differing fitness levels and attitudes to serious incidents of sexual harassment.

Since that time, the sisters, who are trained and experienced guides, now train approximately 20 to 25 young women twice a year to enter the industry. This is also a first. '3 Sisters' is a social enterprise; diverting 5% of the annual profit generated from their trekking company and guesthouse to a non-governmental organization they have created to train female guides and porters. The mandate of "Empowering the Women of

Nepal” or EWN is to provide a welcoming learning environment that builds capacity for women in the industry. They also receive a small annual stipend from the Nepal Tourism Board to help finance the training. Other donations of cash, equipment or proper trekking attire also arrive from satisfied customers who see the sisters’ cause as worthwhile.

The film showcases the spirit, drive and determination of the three sisters, the kind of gender barriers they faced during their start-up and training and the specific ways in which their entry into the field has changed the marketplace. The film also captures the determined spirit of several trainees, who, despite the strong prevailing gender programming and challenging social conditions of village life in the mountains of Nepal, buck the social order to enter an almost entirely male field and claim a stake for themselves in a lucrative industry. Visuals of the training course illustrate the kind of curriculum taught as well as the young women attracted to the field. Interwoven through the production are scenes of trekking excursions that show relationships formed between the Nepali women and the female tourists they guide. Through the telling of their experiences, it informs the uninitiated about the gender and social challenges faced by Nepali women. It provides those outside Nepal with a window on life for women there.

I was motivated to pursue a media project of this kind after several years of being disillusioned with my previous position as a television journalist under daily deadline. When I entered this field, my goal was to play an important communications link between the public and the events and layers of society that affect them. I was disappointed to find that I could effect very little change or create meaningful dialogue within the short formulaic stories I presented each evening. What is more, the kind of communication in which I was engaged began to have a feeling of inauthenticity that had

no name. Although I worked in public broadcasting rather than for a private news media outlet, I felt as powerless to affect change as those I often interviewed appealing for help through media attention. This MWS project, while small in scope, is a step toward communicating in different ways. Working in a collaborative grassroots way with a small group of women to communicate a message that falls outside of the interest or agenda of the mass media breaks the top down approach I had been working in. It brings the power of the medium to more accessible levels for all so that groups in society can be in dialogue with each other. According to Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative rationality, social progress can only take place when there is an open flow of communication and that communication is democratic and discursive. These are necessary preconditions to form a consensus. Societies must develop institutional and structural conditions that allow their members to discuss and exchange ideas and arguments in truly un-coerced ways." (Hess 1997, 88). While gender equality mostly continues in the margins of mass media debate, using small scale video technology to tell stories of women who are challenging existing gender barriers presents a different view for those within the conservative culture of Nepal. This prompts sectors of society to discuss the issue; a dialogue that was not initiated from the top down. This need for dialogue is something Habermas' theory shares with the ideas of Paulo Freire's concept of 'conscientisation'. Dialogue is needed to start this process and subvert what he defines as the 'Culture of Silence', created when those in poverty and exploitation lose the ability to understand and articulate their own oppression (Huber, 1998, 32). Conscientisation therefore is a process of 'learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (Ibid 32).

Both Freire and Habermas stress the importance of dialogue or communication for constructive problem-solving. Both also stress the importance of horizontal communications (Huber, 1998, 6). It is my hope that ‘Trailblazing: The Women of Nepal’s Trekking Industry’, a story of grassroots women who not only perceive but challenge the social and political contradictions of gender, will prompt others to perceive the same contradictions and/or lead them to act. It is a project that is horizontal in its approach and I hope that, in small ways, it will spark the kind of dialogue that contributes to social change for the better as it begins to find distribution to many different kinds of audiences in Nepal and beyond.

II. Goals and Objectives

The M.W.S. project was made possible by a research grant from the Canadian International Development Agency, which, in 2003, financed the fieldwork of 46 graduate students across Canada interested in international development as part of the ‘CIDA Awards for Canadians Program’. As per the requirements of the award, each graduate student sought and obtained the cooperation of a fitting host organization within the designated country. My host was Sancharika Samuha (SAS), a feminist non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to the promotion of gender equality of women through various media initiatives including ongoing advocacy campaigns, the television production of women-centered programs and gender awareness training for media professionals in Nepal. For more information on this organization, visit www.sancharika.org. My stated goal for the project was to consult with journalistic leaders within the host organization to explore topics of relevant and mutual interest and

then produce a communications tool that contributed to both the media advocacy objectives of the NGO and the degree requirement of the Master of Women's Studies. To that end, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was set down in writing describing, point by point, expectations and responsibilities of each party in the agreement as per the requirements of the CIDA contract. While negotiating the MOU was a worthwhile exercise that could have avoided much confusion, in reality, it was not a guideline of how the working relationship unfolded. This created a layer of complexity to the working conditions under which the film was conceived and produced that is not evident in the final product. As this was my first experience working in the developing world, the extra challenge created gave me a better sense of what to expect when accomplishing set goals within the international development context. A larger discussion of these themes follows in Section VI, "Personal Impressions".

III. Methodology and Implementation

Feminist Research Methodology

According to feminist scholar Maria Mies, the motivation behind feminist research is the desire to effect change in women's lives through activism and consciousness-raising (Porter and Judd, 1999, 30). Research toward the completion of a Master's degree in Women's Studies, if it is to be true feminist research then, should have in its methodology a component of activism. My project, using the methodology of **participatory action research**, aims to do this. Collaborating with a feminist organization that is committed to taking forward 'Section J – Women and the Media' of

the United Nations Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), namely the promotion of gender equality through a more balanced and non-stereotypical portrayal of women in the media, I used my skill set as a journalist and communicator to produce a media tool that raises consciousness about the struggle for gender equality in Nepal. The film also raises awareness among audiences about a service available to them as visitors to Nepal that not only provides a conscientious way to contribute to the economy as a tourist, but also contributes to the economic well-being and independence of women.

Much of the feminist criticism of mainstream international development, and even feminist research itself, cites the lack of involvement of the intended beneficiaries at the planning stages of a project. Consulting women, especially women at the grassroots, is often not considered. The answer, according to feminist activist Barbara Cottrell, is the inclusion of grassroots women in the research. "The research problem should be identified by the participants, and the participants should have a voice in the decisions about how the research is to be conducted, and in the analysis, interpretation and dissemination of results" (Porter and Judd, 1999, 91). Another helpful characterization of feminist action research comes from sociologist Francesca Cancian, who defines the process as "an approach to producing knowledge through democratic, interactive relationships. Researchers work with community members to resolve problems identified by the community, and the process of research is intended to empower participants...." (Reinharz, 1992, 182). While the women of Sancharika Samuha could not be categorized as the same grassroots women featured in 'Trailblazing', the NGO was very much a part of the decision making dialogue about a project addressing an identified area affecting grassroots women. I consulted with the Executive President on a number of topics that

would fulfill the mandate of Sancharika Samuha, my requirements under the CIDA Awards for Canadians contract and the MWS degree requirements at Memorial University. Over the span of two months, a number of topics were examined. However, for reasons ranging from safety and security to sensitivity and logistics, these ideas were dismissed in favour of the chosen topic.

Francesca Cancian's definition of feminist action research also includes the empowering of participants in the process of the research. I believe this research does that but not in the way that Cancian's definition intended. The trainees who consented to interviews were happy and proud to have done so. There was much anticipation among the women leading up to the day interviews were scheduled. There was also a sense of the importance attached to the exercise of speaking out about their pioneering experiences in the male dominated workforce. They wanted other women to hear. The opportunity reinforced a strong sense of identity as pioneering women in a male-dominated workforce. The head of Sancharika Samuha (SAS) also remarked about how rare it was in Nepal to see a woman operating the camera and audio equipment. My project also gave them an opportunity to see another woman in a non-traditional role mirrored back to them. The 'one on one' nature of the business relationship between the guides and female tourists allow Nepali women to experience the freedom and economic independence achieved in western society as a result of strides in the women's movement. Through the 'one on one' relationship, female tourists also gain, through the same method of experiential knowledge, a better cultural understanding of the political and social restraints for Nepali women in a more intimate and personalized way. Though they come as tourists, this can have the effect of 'conscientisation' of western women to

the struggle for increased gender equality for women in Nepal and the developing world. The process also helps tourists attune (if they are not already aware) to how women are breaking through restraints imposed on them by their participation in this kind of non-traditional work.

Though *research* is defined here as participatory, it prompts the question of whether the *film* can be defined as 'participatory'. Generally speaking 'participatory video' refers to the video making process rather than the final product. "In relation to video, the attribute 'participatory' refers to the idea that people should not only be receivers but also producers of messages" (Huber, 1998, 6). However the development field is blossoming with many views of the genre which, according to Bernhard Huber's in depth assessment, even blur the lines between documentary, the term I would use to define 'Trailblazing', and participatory video (Ibid, 6, 16).

According to Jackie Shaw and Clive Robertson, long time practitioners of this process in the development field, participatory video "develops a sense of identity within the group, provides opportunities for them to represent their views to others, including those in authority, builds confidence in their capacities and ideas and in their ability to express their opinions..." (1997, 13). The authors acknowledge that these objectives are not exclusive to participatory video and much development work shares the same goals. I would argue the same is true for the effects of my participatory research on the women featured in the film. However, under closer scrutiny, the film does not stand up to Shaw and Roberson's definition, which is described as "a group based activity that develops participants' abilities by involving them in using video equipment creatively, to record themselves in the world around them, and to produce their own videos" (Ibid, 1). While

the women of Sancharika Samuha were involved in the consultation and topic selection of the film and could be defined as producers of the message for other women in Nepal, they did not 'use the video equipment creatively', or at all, really. Neither did the women in 'Trailblazing'. This fact also excludes the production from Huber's more general definition of participatory video, where "people are involved in the video production process" (Huber, 1998, 6). According to Shaw and Robertson, the documentary format of 'Trailblazing: The Women of Nepal's Trekking Industry' better fits under the categorization as 'production for the community', a category of 'socially based' productions concerned with utilizing video as a tool for education and community action about social issues that do not receive mass media coverage. However, this kind of production is undertaken by a 'video production unit' (namely me in this case) that "makes a programme for and about the community" yet "operates within a traditional television model rather than teach production skills to the people concerned" (Ibid, 9).

Given that central to the project's methodology was the collaboration with a feminist non-governmental organization to produce an advocacy and educational tool, it is perhaps better to categorize the video not as participatory but as a method within the larger context of participatory communication. According to Sara Stuart and Renuka Bery, "participatory communication methods enhance the bottom-up strategies used by women's organizations around the world and aid their efforts to leverage their experiences to influence the mainstream"(Sarevaes et al., 1996, 199). The women's movement's focus on inclusivity, seeking out and embracing diversity, placing value on each woman's perspective and experience are all consonant with participatory communication (Ibid, 199). While I controlled the creative process in 'Trailblazing', the

women's voices are used to tell their own stories, rather than a script narrated by me. The story selection was directed by a women's organization rather than a television network or production company. In the topic choice value was placed on those who are actively challenging gender barriers in their daily work lives. The resulting stories told indeed leverage the experience of those pioneering women in the adventure tourism industry to influence the dissolution of barriers.

Ethical Considerations

I conducted interviews with informed, consenting participants, as directed by policy from the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR). Some special considerations were needed for conducting interviews in a foreign culture with women for whom English was a foreign language. As indicated in the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Human Subjects (TCPS), the policy governing all Canadian university research, participants may have "cultural values different from those of the researcher" and "researchers must clearly explain the nature and goals of the research and other essential information in a manner appropriate for the prospective subjects' cultural settings" (article 2.4 (e)). I worked with my hosts both at Sancharika Samuha and EWN to determine the most fitting process to introduce the project to prospective participants and engage willing interviewees. Formal introductions were the most socially accepted route to engaging in working relationships as well as an initial social visit, usually over tea. My project generally followed this pattern. Prior to the commencement of the project, the three Chhetri sisters were approached, first by my host organization, over the telephone from Kathmandu. Once my project was introduced

to them, I followed up by phone. Then I made the 8-hour drive to Pokhara to pay a personal visit to the Chhetri Sisters and stay at their guest house. I brought an introductory letter, pre-approved by ICEHR and translated into Nepali by my host organization, which fully explained my project and intentions. I explained the project I was undertaking in conjunction with the support of Sancharika Samuha to produce a video for potential broadcast.

Once I had gained the full participation from the three Chhetri Sisters, they assisted both formally and informally, in explaining the process to the trainees who had gathered for the course. Lucky Chhetri introduced me to the class on the first day of the course and I explained my project and asked for their assistance as participants in my film. Lucky acted as an interpreter where necessary to provide clarity for the trainees, since no representative from my host organization was available to come to Pokhara. I also recorded this discussion with my video camera and I have archived the tape. I believe this verbal description of my goals in both languages successfully bridged any communication gap experienced by any of the women who may have had lower literacy levels. Attached, as Appendix 1, is the 'Letter of Introduction' describing the process to prospective interviewees which I disseminated to the trainees. It clearly defines the project's dual purposes as a project that satisfies the degree requirement as well as a very public process that may be used for education, promotional and broadcast purposes in the future. Once the participants agreed to be interviewed and recorded in their surroundings, they were required to indicate their informed consent as well as their agreement to release any recorded information about them to a larger audience for the purposes stated, as per ICEHR's guidelines. For simplicity's sake in the field, this was combined into one

statement, a 'Consent and Release Form', attached as Appendix 2. Obtaining written consent or even the act of signing documents is a foreign practice for Nepali culture. For this reason, during the verbal presentations regarding my project and the solicitation of interest among the trainees, the option of recording a discussion and agreement of the participant on videotape was offered. However because of the high levels of literacy of all participants, all opted to grant written consent using their signature, which I will retain as the principal investigator as per ICEHR's ethical guidelines. A member of Sancharika Samuha also provided a translation of the Consent and Release Form in Nepali. Of all 14 interviewees, 13 relied on the Nepali version to grant their consent.

The Consent and Release form clearly details with what the participant is agreeing. The intention to use the video production for future broadcast is also clearly outlined in the same document. The accompanying 'Letter of Introduction' provides needed context and contact persons for assistance and follow-up. Because the film project took place in Pokhara, an 8-hour drive away from the capital of Kathmandu, the office of Sancharika Samuha was not able to provide an interpreter from the organization for interviews conducted in Nepali. I sought and commissioned the services of an independent translator/interpreter who was a contract employee of the Pokhara field office of the United Nations mission to Nepal. As part of the ethical guidelines governing university research, set down in the Tri-Council Policy Statement for Research involving Human Subjects (TCPS), I was aware that I was also responsible for the ethical conduct of this outside interpreter/translator acting for me. As such I ensured that she was informed about the TCPS guidelines for ethical conduct and complied with them before the start of the interview process.

Implementation of Work Plan

On reflection, the work plan I drafted as part of the CIDA contract did not represent the reality of my working life on the ground in Nepal. In fact, it was the resulting need to adjust pre-existing notions of accomplishing set goals and producing results in the international development context that contributed much to the experiential knowledge gained as a result of this, my first involvement in development. No doubt I will rely on heavily on the experience gained in any project of this kind in the future. The project suffered heavy delays as did my prior expectations of working relationships and parameters for the project. Accepting these setbacks as well as changing my perspective toward a more accurate understanding of the context in which the goals of project would achieved led to a positive shift in the situation. Not before I experienced a period of confusion and frustration and unexpected challenges outlined below, however. Additional analysis can be also found in Personal Impressions, Section VI.

Unexpected delays were encountered both before my departure for Nepal, during my time on the ground there and once I returned to Canada for the post-production phase. As a result, the expected completion date, set for August 25th, 2004 was eventually delayed until January 5th, 2005. My original departure date of mid-September 2003 had to be rescheduled to late October because of unforeseen personal delays at home. Then, upon arrival in Nepal in early November, the small staff at my host organization was heavily burdened with deadlines for proposals for funding for various initiatives and indicated that no one would be available to assist with my project until the following month. Even

after the month had passed, establishing a meaningful dialogue that would lead to agreement on a mutual topic for the film proved to be a challenge. The only qualified person to whom I had access, the Executive President of Sancharika Samuha, was rarely available to discuss potential topics. Even then our discussions were very brief. Several ideas were dismissed, after taking considerable time within an already tight timeframe to do initial research to determine their feasibility. I overcame these challenges by working largely on my own, consulting with those in the field that I met in my short time on the ground there. Instead of relying on human resources promised by my host, I consulted instead the information resources available in the reference library to eventually find a topic that was suitable for the project.

Once the topic was decided, and the agreement of the Chhetri Sisters solidified, the story itself dictated that I leave Kathmandu to take up temporary residence in Pokhara, the centre for tourism generated by the nearby Annapurna mountain range and its scenic trekking routes. The structure of the month-long training program, beginning on February 8 until March 8th, also delayed the start and conclusion of the fieldwork. There was considerable waiting until shooting could commence in conjunction with the beginning of the course. The nature of the visual storytelling method dictated that, even though much of the interviewing wrapped up well before the end of the month's training, pictures of the end stage of the process, namely the graduation ceremony, were still required to assist the film's narrative.

Another contributing factor to the overall delay was an unforeseen technical limitation that hampered the categorical archiving of interview clips and selection of scenes for the film. The editing software manufacturer recommends that the hard drive of

my laptop computer not be used as the default drive for the film's electronic files. Rather, it strongly recommended the use of a secondary drive for the huge amounts of downloaded data; otherwise the user runs the risk that data could be lost. I was unaware of this technical limitation until after my arrival in Nepal where I became better acquainted with the software. Since I was traveling with a laptop computer, a secondary external drive would be required and one equipped with a 'fire wire' port that could connect with my video camera. Though this generation of technology is widely available in Canada the same cannot be said for Nepal. I intended to download the images and interview clips from my camera using my computer's fire wire capability while in Nepal to speed the production process, yet I could not locate an external fire wire drive anywhere in Kathmandu or Pokhara. This meant that much of the 'capturing' of this material was done after my return to Canada where this latest transfer technology was available. Another contributing factor was the busy production schedule at the division of Memorial University, which donated an editor and an industry-standard editing suite for the final edit of my film. While the offer from Distance Education and Learning Technologies (DELT) was an invaluable contribution to the marketability of my film, not to mention a huge cost savings to the project's budget, this free service was only available during 'downtime' in a production studio that otherwise is very busy. Paying projects naturally were given priority, resulted in a four-month delay in the post-production phase and final completion of 'Trailblazing'.

IV. Results

Goals and Objectives Met

The most notable objective was the completion of the necessary requirements for a Master's Degree in Women's Studies. However, I also set out to use my technical storytelling ability to bring a greater degree of public awareness to the issues of gender equality, as a way to combine feminist theory with practice. I had a strong desire to make the academic research required for the MWS a direct and personal contribution to the larger global effort to improve the condition of women's lives everywhere. As well, my responsibilities to CIDA as an award recipient were to share my talents, knowledge and skill set with a relevant host organization and to find a mutually beneficial film topic that fed the organization's goal of promoting gender equality through the Nepali media. Our discussions lead to an empowering film that showcases strides being made by Nepali women in the trekking industry in the greater struggle for gender equality in that field. It contributes an empowering example in the ongoing struggle for change needed for all women to become 'full partners in the sustainable development of their country', a CIDA gender priority that crosscuts all of its initiatives in international development. 'Trailblazing' is a clear and relevant example of how the need for gender equality is linked to this CIDA priority.

The experience better informed my sense of working with non-governmental organizations and the larger challenges of the international development field. The experience expanded my knowledge, appreciation and understanding of women's issues in Nepal because of the opportunity to gain direct first-hand involvement with women on

the ground there and the issues they face. I expanded my knowledge base on the efforts of women's organizations like Sancharika Samuha and my secondary hosts at 'Empowering the Women of Nepal' to address issues for women there.

I accomplished professional goals as well. I expanded my experience as a television field producer into the international realm. I used my professional skills as a broadcast journalist to produce a television documentary suitable for relevant film festivals or broadcast on Canadian or Nepali television. This advances a career decision to move into independent film making, especially in the area of International Development and more particularly Women in Development. I also developed contacts for future opportunities, much of which are yet to be realized with the promotion and distribution of the 'Trailblazing'.

V. Impact

The outcome of the project cannot be fully measured until the film reaches public audiences. My goal in the coming months is to solicit the interest of relevant film festivals around the world as well as the interest of television networks, both in Nepal and in Canada. I also will seek distributors of educational media to assess the interest in using 'Trailblazing' as a classroom tool. If I am successful in these efforts, the film's message about pioneering women who are breaking down gender barriers will be heard by many.

The project directly benefits my host organization in Nepal. It contributes a finished product, for which it was part of the consultation, conceptualization and decision-making process, to the overall goals of Sancharika Samuha. Yet the costs to its current resources,

both human and monetary, in the completion of this task were zero. In this case my film contributes directly to their goal of taking forward 'Section J – Women and the Media' of the United Nations Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), namely the promotion of a balanced and non-stereotypical portrayal of women in the media. The film does not examine issues such as domestic abuse, illiteracy, poverty, discrimination and other challenges to women. Instead, it focuses on how a group of women get beyond these barriers to create greater freedom and economic independence for themselves. This film does not portray this group of women as victims of their economic circumstance or hold them captive in a negative snapshot of Nepali women that projects and perpetuates a 'victim' identity to audiences at home and abroad. It was this positive and empowering aspect of the film's storyline that most enthused my host organization.

Once final copies are sent to Sancharika Samuha for distribution, the organization is free to use the promotional and educational tool in appropriate ways that contribute to their overall advocacy goals. They may solicit the interest of television networks and relevant film festivals in the region or promote the film in other ways by unveiling it with their own news conference in Kathmandu. The details will be finalized once the film is ready for distribution. Once the film is shown to public audiences in Nepal, it will contribute, in a small way, to the overall breakdown of gender barriers for women in the society, not only by showcasing real examples of those in non-traditional fields of work but by giving voice to women who refuse to live their lives in the pre-programmed ways determined by the conservative patriarchal culture.

My secondary hosts, the Chhetri Sisters and their non-governmental organization 'Empowering the Women of Nepal' (EWN) can derive the same kind of benefit from this

film. It will strengthen EWN's capacity to better achieve what the Canadian International Development Agency's describes as 'results that contribute to an achievement of gender equality':

"Greater social, economic and political empowerment for women as measured through increased economic security, decision-making in the household, legal awareness, and collective action for self-determination. Strengthened capacity of partner organizations, institutions, governments, private sector organizations and firms to promote, design and implement policies, programs and projects which reflect the needs, priorities and interests of both women and men, and support gender equality." (CIDA Gender Equality Policy 2004, Section 5, <http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/>)

The porters and guides in the film openly discuss the positive impact of their ability to generate their own incomes from their work. It gives them more economic freedom as well as mobility to extend their experiences as women beyond the normal domestic sphere of influence within their families. Some families, first resistant to the idea of their daughters or wives working outside the home in non-traditional roles eventually welcome the women's financial contribution to the household. Women guides and porters are transformed as a result of being part of the larger collective movement started by the Chhetri Sisters to introduce women guides to the adventure tourism industry. Their sense of their own free will is heightened and strengthened as a result of the opportunity. The resulting sentiments of increased empowerment among these women are heard in 'Trailblazing', which I hope has impact as a promotional and educational tool to promote

the positive benefits of women's empowerment. It is my hope that the film enhances and strengthens EWN's capacity to create a female friendly learning environment to train greater and numbers of women in the adventure tourism industry. It also spreads the word about the availability of a female guiding service to potential trekking tourists who visit the Nepal Himalayas.

Partnering with Sancharika Samuha has also helped strengthen my host's capacity to increase the visibility and concerns of women through the media. According to CIDA, greater gender equality can be realized through "increased capacity of government agencies mandated to promote gender equality, women's organizations, and other organizations promoting gender equality, to monitor and influence government planning processes and public policy." Women centered productions that document women in non-stereotypical roles doing non-traditional work contribute to its message of the need for societal and cultural change to the ongoing media discourse. Adding the dimension of women's voices from 'Trailblazing' to the mainstream media plays an important role in influencing the formation of public policy.

My working relationship with female guides and porters also had more direct benefits for both the film's participants and for me. Through interviewing these women on the topic of their personal experience with gender barriers, I gained a more intimate knowledge of the challenges they face as workers in the tourism industry. I believe I also had an impact on the trainees I became acquainted with during my filming of the month-long training program. Many of the women were new to the tourism industry and therefore largely unfamiliar with western women, though others were there to take a refresher course and take advantage of improving their English speaking ability through

the daily English classes offered. The work helped sensitize us to the experiences of the other and to find commonalities to bridge the cultural divide. It allows trainees to gain a more intimate knowledge of women travelers to Nepal, which is so important to the improvement of their service delivery to the customers in adventure tourism.

VI. Personal Impressions

Living and working in Nepal for five months during the conceptualization and shooting of 'Trailblazing: The Women of Nepal's Trekking Industry' was my first experience in the field of international development. It was an incredible and rewarding experience and it has left an indelible impression. Most of it is positive, though not all. However, all impressions formed are tempered with the realization that systems in place both here in Canada and abroad are flawed. No one country, organization or individual is perfect. Perfection itself is illusory. Also flawed was my naïve approach to the field of international development and my own particular place in it, which perhaps will sound cliché. After a period of being 'dis-illusioned' about what I was experiencing as a lack of real meaning or higher importance in my professional life in Canada, I looked toward the field of international development to provide that sense for me. Embedded in that belief system was the idea that everyone in the field of international development had chosen the field for this same reason. Also, I would not encounter anyone subverting the spirit of international development for their own personal purposes. Just as the thinking is flawed, so are the many systems in place in the field of development.

I also brought to Nepal a general sense of wanting to contribute or 'give back' with the communications skills I have acquired in my 10 years as a journalist and communicator. That, at this stage in my life, I 'owe' it to the world to give back rather than simply earn and acquire more wealth and continue to live a comfortable life in the western developed world. This is especially true when considering my privileged position as a trained professional. This intention is built on higher goals. However, it is also packed with a compelling sense of guilt that arrived with me in the developing world. In my experience in the development field, there is a very pervasive practice of people or organizations playing on that guilt to get things done, sometimes beyond what is reasonably expected of an employee, consultant or volunteer. Exchanging experiences with other volunteers I met in country confirmed this. Looking back I can also speak to the divide that exists between the requirements set forth by far away governing aid institutions like CIDA in Ottawa and the reality of getting that work accomplished on the ground. In my personal experience, attempting to abide by the bureaucratic rules set out under a contract ran counter to the very goals of the project at times. I discuss this and other aspects of my particular experience below.

Assistance from My Host Organization

Some bureaucratic rules imposed by the funding agency were helpful for my first work experience in the developing world. The rules imposed a structure on the project and gave me guidelines and deadlines to meet. Upon arrival in Nepal, my first task under the contract was to discuss and formalize a memorandum of understanding (MOU)

between me, the CIDA awardee and my host organization and send this document, with signatures, back to Ottawa. The goal, which is not unreasonable, was to better define the working relationship with the host. I met with the Executive President of Sancharika Samuha to discuss the finer points of what I could expect in the way of the organization's assistance and also what they could expect from me. It was a helpful first step. However, problems arose when conditions set down in the MOU were not followed. Assistance that was agreed upon was not provided, other than the use of the limited office facilities and resource library. I had expectations that the MOU would lay the groundwork for our collaboration, but there seemed no will on the part of my host organization to follow it.

The only person with whom I had any on-going dialogue about my project was the Executive President. After I spent several months in the office getting to know three other staff members, they finally felt comfortable to ask me questions about why I was there and what kind of work I was doing. I was astonished. I realized that they had no prior knowledge of the nature of my project, which was a surprisingly helpful realization because previously I took their quiet demeanor as a lack of interest, rather than a lack of information. Once I had several brief discussions with the Executive President about our working relationship, I drafted in point form, an MOU that clearly reflected our conversation that defined the organization's commitment to me as a host and vice versa. She reviewed these and gave her signature. Yet, as the weeks went by, I realized that the MOU was not a document that would govern our working relationship, nor was it a document for which I could hold the organization accountable. Whether she thought this exercise was a technicality that had no weight or she misunderstood its importance in the relationship, I do not know. I did not have that kind of relationship or feel comfortable

having that kind of conversation with her. Access to the Executive President, the only person on staff qualified to assist with the project, was at a premium. When meetings occurred they were short and filled with my compulsion to use that limited time to gain meaningful direction from the one member of the organization who could assist in the discussion of a film topic so as to advance the project to the next stage. I have since realized that the organization, while well equipped to assist print journalists achieve their objectives, was not prepared to assist a broadcast journalist in the initial research phase. Nor had it any sense of how to assist in this process. This was surprising, given that the Executive President worked for the state run television news service and had worked on a documentary on women's issues before. I needed journalistic direction to help assess appropriate subjects and potential interviewees. Yet that line of communication was rarely open. Despite the fact that my host organization had 56 member journalists, none of them spent time in the office nor was there ever an opportunity arranged for me to meet any of them. This would have been helpful during times when the paid staff was overwhelmed with work deadlines.

If my first two months at the organization were indicative of the kind of assistance I would receive there, it was an easy decision to relocate to the city of Pokhara and pursue the story of female trekking guides alone. The first day I arrived in the office, a day after my arrival in the country, was an indicator of things to come. Though jetlagged, I was told that, as there were a number of deadlines pending for project funding, that no member of the staff could really assist with my project until the following month. I did build into the timeline of my project proposal a period of adjustment and settling into life in Nepal. However, I also experienced another setback. My initial contact person with

the organization while I was compiling the required documentation for the CIDA project proposal in Canada quit the organization two weeks after I arrived in Nepal. With his departure went any real obligation to assist me. It shook my confidence in the organization. I continued to make use of the resource library to begin initial research; however there continued to be no meaningful dialogue about selecting a topic once the middle of December arrived.

At times I felt I was on a 'goose chase' and I sensed no real intention from my host to truly collaborate on a project. I suggested several topics including the human trafficking of girls and women across the border to brothels in India. This was considered but only if I found a new focus on an old problem. Coincidentally, since I was interested in the topic, I was asked to attend a regional conference on human rights in the few days leading up to Christmas on behalf of the organization, as the staff was too busy to attend. I used the opportunity to learn and establish contacts and return to my host with new community solutions that were being implemented to tackle the problem. I had done what I was asked, yet it was still dismissed in the same off hand way it was initially discussed. This led me to question of why I was asked to attend the conference in the first place. For that, like so many other things, I still have no answer. A 'final straw' in this process for me was a chance meeting in the hallway with the Executive President as I was departing the office on Christmas Eve. This came after waiting days to report in on the results of my latest research for a film topic. I was met with the same a dismissive tone I had heard after previous discussions. I received a simple directive to "focus on any topic you wish, and just keep us informed". I felt alone and left to sort it out without the help of my host. I left to attend a Christmas dinner arranged by the host organization of the other CIDA

awardee in Nepal and was deeply saddened to see, upon my arrival there, the difference between her supportive and welcoming treatment there and mine at my organization.

After a break for the Christmas holidays, I resolved to move ahead with my own project idea without the collaboration I had expected from my host. Oddly enough, when I informed the Executive President about my chosen topic, she expressed support for the idea and gave it her full endorsement. This support came in name only as there was no satellite office in Pokhara to assist me. The only communication I had with my host during my time in Pokhara was over electronic mail. I initiated all correspondence.

Institutional Response

During this time of uncertainty in Kathmandu, there was also the added pressure of having to write a 'progress report' at the half-way point to the funding agency. With two months spent of what was to be a four-month in-country phase of the project with no topic selected, I delayed this exercise as long as possible until the agreement with the Chhetri Sisters in Pokhara was solidified. I was increasingly concerned with how much of my financial resources would be left at the rate I was moving through the established timeline for the project. As such, I discussed what I felt was a lack of support from my host organization with the award administrator. The Canadian Bureau of International Education (www.cbie.ca) was designated to manage the 'Awards for Canadians Program' for CIDA. All 43 winning graduate students were required to submit to the same reporting structure through a mutual contact at the CBIE. I advised her of the ineffectiveness I was experiencing with my hosting non-governmental organization and I

inquired whether I had the option to find a more supportive NGO who would perhaps be more accommodating to a qualified and skilled broadcast journalist wishing to document their efforts in a particular area at no cost to the organization. Since I had obtained the consent of the three Chhetri Sisters to conduct interviews and they had also granted full access to their NGO's month-long training program, the sisters seemed like an obvious choice.

The response of the CBIE was a key moment in my first experience in international development. Her reply was positive, indicating that the CBIE was supportive of the need to make the working situation more conducive to finishing the project. It would support my request to find a new host that would live up to the commitment. However, I would need to rewrite the initial proposal to include the new NGO as well as get a new memorandum of understanding drafted, signed and sent back to Ottawa before work could begin. This was a bad idea for many reasons, not the least of which there was little time and money left for a project that, on paper, was half over yet in reality only starting. Any new proposal would also require resubmission and re-approval through the Women's Studies and ICEHR channels at Memorial University. I clearly saw, during that time how different the reality was for me on the ground as a solo operant of a project with no facilities or office support in my new location, compared to the realities of administering the project in a far away office in Ottawa. Despite my correspondence, there was no sense from this directive that the administrator at the CBIE really understood or perhaps cared what it was like on the ground doing the fieldwork I was dispatched to do. There seemed no thought paid to the idea that CIBE/CIDA policy was in need of creative rethinking in this particular instance, let alone extremely time-

consuming in a country where time was experienced more slowly than in Canada. It was in fact completely counterproductive to completing the project in a timely fashion, something she and her organization ironically was designed to assist with. Stepping outside of a bureaucratic comfort zone to do something a little differently in this special instance seemed as though it was not conceivable. At the end of the day, the CBIE would have to answer for it, making it a very unattractive option. I learned in that moment about the nature of dealing with bureaucracy, which at times can assist in providing clarity, but now, in its unbending nature, had become completely unhelpful. It, in fact, stood in the way of good work getting done in a timely fashion. I also realized at that moment that if I was going to complete this project on time and on budget, I would have to continue with an ineffectual and now absentee host that seemed uninterested in my project. As such, I maintained email correspondence with Sancharika Samuha while I lived in Pokhara for the next month and a half, but received few responses. Later, I wrote back to the CBIE to say that I would not be changing my host organization, citing the good progress being made during the training program in Pokhara. Toward the end of the project, I tried to communicate honestly about this frustrating experience to the Executive President of the organization, as a way to improve conditions for the next individual they may host. The resulting dialogue, while at times unpleasant, served to uncover several misconceptions and misunderstandings that were flourishing in our working relationship on both sides. These were being fuelled by a lack of meaningful communication and perhaps differing perspectives. In retrospect, the experience provided an opportunity for learning and growth, adjustment and honest communication, all of which I am committed to, both professionally and personally. On reflection, and I am left with an expanded

understanding of the ever present challenges in the international development context, and more particularly, in the non-governmental sector where few people are over tasked with even fewer resources amid the burden of very heavy demands to produce results. Often people or projects get lost in the process or fall through the cracks of overstretched management.

VII. Conclusion

The long delays in at the beginning of the project proved frustrating. The lack of access to those within my host organization who could provide meaningful assistance with the film was disappointing. The lack of understanding or capacity of my host to properly assist me in my goal, despite initial assurances to the contrary was surprising. Regardless of these unexpected impediments, though, the film project I undertook was such a rewarding and productive phase of my fieldwork in Nepal that it made up for any setbacks. The connection I made with the Chhetri Sisters and the women who work and train with them created most of the positive residual feelings I am left with upon my return to Canada.

However, some residual negative impressions remain, most notably the difference between my prior expectations of the working relationship with my host organization, established through written contact and set down in the resulting CIDA Memorandum of Understanding, and the reality of my experience on the ground. As previously mentioned, I formed those expectations largely on the written correspondence I had with one contact and support person at the organization that left the organization two weeks after my arrival in Nepal. As previously stated, access to the kind of members of the organization

with the journalistic and/or communications experience that would be of benefit to me was an issue. My project seemed to be a low priority among the current objectives of a seemingly very busy organization with very few staff. In retrospect it seems there was a misunderstanding of what a grassroots media project of this kind would require. As a result, the organization seemed to lack the institutional capacity to assist me in meaningful ways during the course of my project.

The challenging circumstance I faced was as great as the opportunity for experiential learning. It was a huge confidence-building exercise for me personally, academically and professionally. Through the process I saw, in a very clear way, my strong ability to create and carry through with an idea. An inventory of my learned skills as a result of this project can be summarized in the following manner. I conceptualized creative project within given parameters and communicated that idea well. I successfully sought sources of funding and partners to collaborate with, and then initiated the process of moving the conceptual to the real. I also know more about my ability to work through obstacles using skills on many levels. My administrative and organizational skills allowed me to work through financial hurdles created because of unforeseen delays. My interpersonal skills allowed me to communicate respectfully, professionally and assertively to my host to address shortcomings in the lack of support and assistance and unnecessary delays.

Academically I am confident that I have acted in the spirit of true feminist research, using my skills to produce a communications and educational tool to raise consciousness about women's issues in Nepal to audiences both domestically and abroad. Grassroots women and their organizations of Sancharika Samuha and EWN were served by the project. It also expanded my awareness of issues of gender equality in the context of the

developing world, or at least one part of it. I feel confident that I have made a film that is true to the lives of the women guides and porters of Nepal and that it will have impact.

The experience of making the film has captured my imagination as a journalist interested in social justice and has whet my appetite to seek, armed with my experience of making 'Trailblazing', more opportunities of this kind. Just as there is one group of phenomenal women breaking through gender barriers in Nepal, there are thousands more stories of its kind throughout the developing world waiting to be told.

VIII. Bibliography of Existing Literature

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Appendices – 1 of 2

Master's of Women's Studies Video Project: Letter of Introduction

My name is Lisa Hoffe and I am a graduate student at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada. The purpose of my visit to Nepal is to complete a project required to obtain my Master's Degree in Women's Studies. While I am in Nepal, I am being hosted by Sancharika Samuha, a women's non-governmental organization committed to promoting gender equality through the media.

Because I have 10 years experience as a broadcast journalist in radio and television in Canada, my project is to produce a television documentary on one aspect of life for women in Nepal. It is for that purpose that I wish to conduct recorded interviews with women with a video camera and to also record them at certain times during certain tasks related to the story or even their daily routine. I will collect interviews and pictures for my project and then return to Canada to edit the production. Once my project is finished, my intention is to show the production to larger audiences either through public screenings, or soliciting the interest of television networks in Canada. Sancharika Samuha may also use some or all of this recorded material for their educational or promotional purposes here in Nepal.

I invite you to participate in a project that will contribute to informing the international public about life for women like you in Nepal. There are some things I would like you to consider as you make your decision to participate. First, if parts of your interview are chosen for the production, many people watching both in Canada or Nepal may hear and see what you have to say about the topics asked in a recorded interview. Your public comments have the ability to have a wide impact on educating the viewing audience about your experience. However, I encourage you to consider the impact the project may also have on your life. Before making a decision to participate consider the implications, both positive and negative, for you.

There is a 'Consent and Release Form' attached for you to review. This form will be used to gain your consent to participate in the project as an interviewee. Your signature is required or a representative from Sancharika Samuha can explain this Letter of Introduction and the 'Consent and Release Form' to you verbally. It indicates that I have properly informed you about the project and its possible outcomes and that you are participating of your own free will. At the same time you will be asked for permission to use your words and images for public consumption and/or broadcast.

Because this is a university project and it deals with research involving people, it was subject to a review for ethical considerations of the participants involved. The Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) at Memorial University of Newfoundland is responsible for this review. The ICEHR is part of a national body in Canada that oversees all university research. The project was approved

above from any claim related to these videotape recordings and my appearance in them. I also allow these recordings described above to be used for education and broadcast purposes.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Address: _____

Witness: _____

For more information, contact:

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Appendices – 2 of 2

Master's of Women's Studies Video Project: Consent and Release Form

I, _____, agree to have my image and voice recorded by Lisa Hoffé, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada for the purposes of her Master's project in Women's Studies. I understand that this project is a television documentary, currently given the working title of:

“Women in Nepal: Toward Gender Equality - A Video Production”.

This documentary will be completed for the purposes of the requirement of the Master's degree by August 2004. I understand that this television documentary may be seen by audiences at public screenings or may be broadcast on a television network in Canada. I also understand that Sancharika Samuha, the women's non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to 'promoting communication for equality' is hosting this university project in Nepal and this NGO may use some of the pictures or interviews collected to prepare separate productions such as promotional or education videos that may be shown in Nepal. I understand, then, the likelihood that many people watching the final product both in Canada and Nepal will hear and see what I say in a recorded interview. I have had time to think about the implications, both positive and negative, of this.

I also understand that as a graduate student of Memorial University of Newfoundland, Lisa Hoffé is governed in the conduct of her project by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR), part of a national body in Canada that oversees university research. According to these standards, I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this project at any time and in doing so any video recordings previously gathered by me would be withdrawn at that time. I understand the ICEHR reviewed this project proposal to ensure that appropriate ethical considerations for participants like you were made and that the Committee has approved the project. However, I understand that have the right to contact the ICEHR at any time during the project if I have ethical concerns. Inquiries should be directed to the committee by the e-mail at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 011-1-737-8368. Or more specifically, please contact Dr. Andrew Latus, Committee Member for the Faculty of Arts by email at: alatus@mun.ca. Please quote the reference number for this project, 2002/03-097-AR, in any correspondence.

Understanding all of the above, I hereby give my fully informed consent to participate in the project. I also release and discharge Lisa Hoffé, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Sancharika Samuha and any associates and/or clients of any of the

prior to my departure from Canada. According to these standards, you have the right to withdraw from this project at any time and in doing so any video recordings previously gathered of you will also be withdrawn. You may also contact the ICEHR at any time during the project if you have ethical concerns. Inquiries should be directed to the committee by the e-mail at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 011-1-737-8368. Or more specifically, please contact Dr. Andrew Latus, Committee Member for the Faculty of Arts by email at: alatus@mun.ca. Please quote the reference number for this project, 2002/03-097-AR, in any correspondence.

If you require assistance to do this, please contact Sancharika Samuha by telephone at 5538549 or 5546715, by fax at 5547291 or by email at sancharika@wlink.com.np. I hope you will take time to consider working with me on this very interesting and informative project. In the meantime, thank you very much for your time and interest.

Sincerely,

Lisa Hoffe,

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Memorial University of Newfoundland
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