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# The Women of Helamb: Life After the 2015 Earthquake

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# The Women of Helambu: Life After the 2015 Earthquake



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Sociology

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Photograph by Emma Squier. Prayer flags fly above a destroyed home in Ghangyul.

## ABSTRACT

Disasters exacerbate inequalities that are already present in society, and put particular groups of individuals at risk, specifically women. The vulnerabilities of women shape the way they experience disasters as well as their ability to recover from them. Although it has now been over a year since the earthquake that occurred in Nepal on April 25, 2015, the recovery has been slow, and the destruction that it has caused is still greatly visible. For this project, women in the Helambu region of Nepal were interviewed to learn about how their lives were affected by the earthquake and the challenges that they faced over the past year.

As time passes, society tends to forget about disasters and the people they greatly affect, but individuals are still struggling from last year's earthquake and it is important that they not be forgotten. As is the case with other disasters, the experiences of women during and after the earthquake in Nepal have been different from those of men. The women of Helambu opened up to me about the obstacles they faced after the earthquake, the troubles they are still facing now, and the issues in their communities that have been present long before the earthquake. By understanding some of the specific difficulties faced by these women after the earthquake, we can gain a better understanding of their needs during the recovery process and learn about better ways in which to assist them in future disasters.

## METHODOLOGY

Research for this project was conducted during the month of April 2016 in the Sindhupalchok district of Nepal. Concentrating on the Helambu region within Sindhupalchok, I spent the first week of my research in the village of Parangang and the second week of my research in a village called Ghangyul. The majority of my interviews were conducted in these two villages, but during my time in Parangang I was able to walk to the nearby village of Sathil and talk to the women there as well. Focusing on these three villages, I was able to talk to a total of forty-five women, their ages ranging from nineteen to seventy-three. Some interviews were more in-depth than others and at times I was able to talk to some of the women more than once. A majority of the time the women in these villages welcomed me into their homes to talk with them, often offering me food and tea. Other times, the women would be hard at work in the fields and I would go to them and ask them questions while they were farming. In both cases, the interviews were never scheduled ahead of time. Every interview was recorded with an audio device in addition to being written down in a field notebook, and then later transcribed onto the computer. All of the women who I interviewed and photographed gave their permission beforehand for me to use the information that I obtained in our conversations for the purpose of my project.

I stayed with host families during my time in Parangang and Ghangyul, which I feel allowed me to become more familiar with the villages, the women there, and different aspects of their everyday lives. In Parangang I stayed with the grandmother of my translator, while in Ghangyul I stayed with my translator's own family. Having two translators who were familiar with the villages and their people, enabled me to talk to as many women as I did. In addition, both of my translators informed me that if I neglected to talk to some of the women in these villages, they would wonder why and might possibly be offended. Therefore, with great encouragement and help from my translators, I talked to a woman from every household in Parangang, Sathil, and Ghangyul. If a woman from the household was not present, we would return to interview her at a later time.

## BACKGROUND

On Saturday, April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015 at 11:56 am local time, a 7.6 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal. Its epicenter was in the village of Barpak in the Gorkha district, about 76 kilometers<sup>1</sup> northwest of Kathmandu. Nepal had not faced a natural disaster of comparable size for over 80 years. The catastrophic earthquake that impacted nearly one-third of Nepal's population, was followed by over 300 aftershocks that had magnitudes greater than 4.0<sup>2</sup>. Four of the aftershocks had magnitudes greater than 6.0, including one measuring 7.3 which struck just 17 days after the earthquake. Almost 9,000 people were killed in the earthquake, over 22,000 were injured, and nearly 900,000 houses were destroyed or damaged<sup>3</sup>.

One of the worst affected districts was Sindhupalchok, the district within which Helambu and the three villages that I visited lies. As of May 6<sup>th</sup> 2015, 3,057 people were dead, 860 were injured, and many more remained unaccounted for. In addition, over 66,000 homes were severely or moderately damaged. Due to the mountainous geography of Sindhupalchok and the landslides that occurred as a result of the earthquake, recovery has been slow and it has been difficult for aid to reach the region<sup>4</sup>. Had the earthquake not been on a Saturday in the middle of the day many more lives would have been lost. Just over a year since this catastrophic disaster, people are still struggling to re-build and pick up the pieces of their lives. This paper will focus on a specific group of people: the women of Helambu.

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<sup>1</sup> Equal to about 47 miles

<sup>2</sup> As of June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015

<sup>3</sup> "Nepal Earthquake 2015: Post Disaster Needs Assessment", *reliefweb*, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/nepal-earthquake-2015-post-disaster-needs-assessment-executive-summary>.

<sup>4</sup> "Nepal Earthquake: District Profile- Sindhupalchok ", *reliefweb*, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/nepal-earthquake-district-profile-sindhupalchok-08052015>.



## PARAGANG, SATHIL, AND GHANGYUL

While the majority of the women I interviewed were from Paragang and Ghangyul, during my time in Paragang, I was also able to walk to and speak with the women of the nearby village of Sathil. All three of these villages are located 8,000 feet above sea level in Helambu, a very hilly region in Sindhupalchok, Nepal. The main livelihood for the people of these villages is agriculture, specifically the farming of potatoes, wheat, and maize. About forty-four people live in Paragang and there were no fatalities in the village at the time of the earthquake. However, one man from Paragang was killed in a landslide just outside of the village. Sathil is a little smaller than Paragang, consisting of about thirty-three people. There were no fatalities in Sathil. Located just down the mountain and across the Melamchi River from Paragang, Sathil can be reached by foot in about an hour and a half. As it is located down the valley in a less hilly area, wheat and maize are the main crops grown there, rather than potatoes. Ghangyul is the biggest of the three villages by far, and is the only one that tourists and trekkers pass through. Before the earthquake there was a lodge and restaurant in Ghangyul called 'Dolma Lodge', which has since been rebuilt. There were three fatalities in Ghangyul, all of whom were female. The owner of the Dolma Lodge's wife, her daughter-in-law, and her grandchild were inside the lodge when the earthquake hit, causing it to collapse on top of them, killing all three women. Nearly one year since this tragic event, these women were being honored and remembered with a puja<sup>5</sup> during the time of my visit. Ghangyul is the only one of the three villages to have its own monastery right in the village, and it serves as a place for the community to gather in times of sadness and happiness. Despite the monastery being completely destroyed in the earthquake, a temporary building has since been constructed, serving as a space for villagers to practice their religion and come together for events. A man in Ghangyul told me that if it weren't for the relatively large number of people in the village leaving to go study and work in Kathmandu and abroad, the total number of villagers would be between 300 and 400. He said that there are presently 100 people in the village. While Paragang, Sathil, and Ghangyul are all different in their own way, the destruction that each suffered during the earthquake was equal and indiscriminate.

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<sup>5</sup> A ceremony in which meditational prayers are offered to the Buddhas and holy beings to request their blessings or help. In this instance, it is being performed for the deceased.

## MAP OF HELAMBU AREA



Located on the map above are Paragang, Sathil, and Ghangyul (sometimes spelled with an extra 'y'). As Ghangyul is the most populated of the three villages, it was the only one that I could find labeled on a map. I have added in Paragang and Sathil myself, just farther up from Ghangyul<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> "Helambu Trekking Map", Digital Image, Langtang Trekking in Nepal, 2011, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <http://www.langtangtrekkinginnepal.com/helambu-trekking.html>.





Photograph by Emma Squier. Flowers stand before a temporary home that was constructed in Ghangyul.

## WHY WOMEN?

The earthquake on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015 struck the Nepalese population as a whole, but the impacts experienced by women were different from those of men and children. Women and girls are prone to face greater risks after a natural disaster, particularly elderly women, women with disabilities, and female-headed households. Women become even more vulnerable during and after emergency situations and experience certain difficulties that men do not<sup>7</sup>. The root causes of this vulnerability are due to a lack of resources that allow people to cope with hazardous events—such as income, education, health, and social networks. Oftentimes, access to these assets may be gendered, with women having less control over these assets than men<sup>8</sup>. Most disasters place an immense amount of stress on women who are responsible for unpaid work such as providing care, water, and food for households<sup>9</sup>. In addition to the immediate effects of a natural disaster, as the primary caretakers for their households, women experience an increase in their workload as well as an additional emotional burden. The familial responsibilities that women have before a disaster are only magnified by the onset of that disaster, as they have significantly less support and resources. Women play a paramount role within the family, meeting the immediate survival needs of family members as well as managing the home<sup>10</sup>. It is sometimes said that the secondary impacts on women that arise from disasters represent a ‘double disaster’ for them. Aside from the loss of home, lack of resources, and insecurity that is experienced after a disaster, a major impact felt by women is a drastic increase of hours in the working day, which effects their mental and physical well being. Despite the great importance of women’s roles within their family and the community, these roles are often devalued because they do not generate any income. Women’s responsibility for unpaid care work can make them dependent on men for access to economic resources and may add to their economic vulnerability. In addition, vulnerability is closely linked to poverty, which can make recovery and rebuilding after a disaster even more of a challenge, especially for a country like Nepal<sup>11</sup>. By understanding the experiences and challenges faced by women in disasters, we can learn to address these issues in the reconstruction process, and rebuild in a way that enhances the rights of women.

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<sup>7</sup> “Impact of natural disasters on girls and women”, *Norlha*, June 2015, [http://norlha.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/04/Impact\\_of\\_natural\\_disaster\\_on\\_girls\\_and\\_women\\_Norlha\\_June\\_2015.pdf](http://norlha.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/04/Impact_of_natural_disaster_on_girls_and_women_Norlha_June_2015.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Bradshaw, Sarah and Maureen Fordham, “Women, Girls, and Disasters”, *Department for International Development UK*, August 2013, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/236656/women-girls-disasters.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/236656/women-girls-disasters.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> “Gender and Disasters”, *United Nations Development Programme*, October 2010, <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/crisis%20prevention/disaster/7Disaster%20Risk%20Reduction%20-%20Gender.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> “Women and Disaster Relief”, *Humanitarian Coalition*, accessed April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <http://humanitariancoalition.ca/info-portal/factsheets/women-and-disaster-relief>.

<sup>11</sup> Bradshaw, “Women, Girls, and Disaster”.

## FOOD AND WATER

Two of the most basic and practical needs, food and water, tend to be in short supply after natural disasters causing great concern for people who are in need of them. The earthquake in Nepal was no different, and many people were in need of immediate assistance. For many of the women, attaining food was the biggest immediate challenge, along with the destruction of their homes. One year after the earthquake, every woman that I spoke with was still eating the food that was donated by the government or other organizations. The big problem for these women was the fact that, in many cases, the first floor of their homes served as a storage place for all of their food. With their houses completely crumbled to the ground, this food became inaccessible and they had to wait for donations. The women of Paragang and Sathil reported going without food for anywhere from two to five days, after which they had to walk over three hours to Timbu to pick up rice and dal donations from the government. Many said that the government food donations stopped just a couple months after the earthquake, but they were very thankful for the donations from all of the other organizations. Melamchi, Tarkeghyang, and Timbu are more developed and accessible than Paragang and Sathil, so donations had to be dropped off by helicopter, leaving villagers to have to walk for hours to retrieve them. In addition, some of the women's relatives who were living in Kathmandu were able to get supplies to Melamchi and Timbu.

For the women of Ghangyul the wait for food was shorter. A nearby nunnery was able to help out the village. Despite being completely destroyed, Thupten Hoezerling Nunnery in Ghangyul had a stock of rice, dal, and biscuits that they were able to dig out and distribute to the villagers after just one day. This donation of food lasted the villagers until the donations from other organizations arrived. In addition to the food donations received from various organizations, the women of Ghangyul also received donations from monasteries around the Kathmandu area. Aside from the food that they received from the nunnery, all of the other donations had to be picked up from Timbu as well.

One peculiar food donation that women from all three villages mentioned was from World Food Programme. A representative from the organization came to each village and told people that, in exchange for clearing off the roads that had been blocked due to landslides, they would receive bags of rice. After working for forty days, each household would receive five bags of rice if they had helped to clear the roads.<sup>12</sup> All of the women that I talked with about this program did not seem to have a problem with it. They seemed content to do the work because they were in need of more food and the roads also needed to be cleared<sup>13</sup>. Although it is true that this work may have benefitted both sides, I cannot help but think that there may have been a better way to go about getting the roads cleared. In my opinion, food is a basic human need and should never be used as a reward, especially for disaster victims. After exploring this issue further, I found some information on World Food Programme's website that states, "WFP implements schemes to provide employment opportunities to create protective and productive assets and restore and rebuild livelihoods in the exchange of food, cash, or a combination of food and cash"<sup>14</sup>. They

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<sup>12</sup> Kesang Dolma Lama. 4/8/16. Paragang, Helambu. 56. Farmer and Homemaker.

<sup>13</sup> Karchung Lama. 4/17/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 48. Farmer and Homemaker.

<sup>14</sup> "Nepal- current issues and what the World Food Programme is doing", *World Food Programme*, 2016, <https://www.wfp.org/countries/nepal>.



Photograph by Emma Squier. Kesang takes a break from working in the fields in Paragang.



believe that participants will directly benefit from the food and/or cash transfers, and even more, will benefit from the assets that are created<sup>15</sup>. In the case of these three villages, the cleared roads benefitted the entire surrounding areas, and at the same time, they were able to receive much needed food. I suppose that this program has its advantages as well as its drawbacks.

As far as water is concerned, aside from some minor issues, it was thankfully not a problem for the women that I spoke with. For those who did experience water difficulties, it seemed to be a result of landslides that were blocking the water from reaching them. In any case, these issues were not of major concern and were something that most people could fix on their own.

Looking to the future, I asked the women what they thought would happen when the food donations from organizations ran out. Some were concerned that it would be a challenge, while others believed that they would be able to get food the way they always had. They would exchange the potatoes that they grew for rice with people from nearby villages, and if that did not work, they would need to buy it from Timbu<sup>16</sup>. For now they still have enough food donations to last them, as well as a multitude of other problems to worry about- the biggest being their homes.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Zangmu Sherpa. 4/17/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 20. Farmer and Homemaker.

## SHELTER AND RECONSTRUCTION

With nearly 900,000 homes destroyed or damaged due to the earthquake, shelter became Nepal's most pressing need and was something that the women interviewed said had been their greatest challenge time and time again. It has now been over a year since the earthquake, and every woman interviewed is still living in a temporary shelter. Living in such a confined space, where exposure to extreme weather is a constant concern, can only increase the stress experienced after a catastrophic earthquake. It is not safe for people to be living in a weak structure for any amount of time, let alone an entire year<sup>17</sup>. Shelter is one of, if not the most important of needs, and it is still not being met. Nearly every woman that I talked with said that the greatest challenge for them following the earthquake as well as one year later had been their shelter.

With every home in Paragang, Sathil, and Ghangyul destroyed, building temporary shelters became the biggest need, but this has been no easy task. For many families, building their original homes had been difficult enough due to a lack of money. Many of them have almost no money left. Immediately after the earthquake, people from neighboring villages came together, huddling under tarps, tents, and former buffalo sheds for days. Fear of additional earthquakes kept many of them from constructing any new shelters. Many families began constructing temporary homes one month after the earthquake, using materials that they managed to salvage from their previous homes. For many it was their first experience building a home. Villagers worked together helping each other construct something that would be livable.

As one can imagine, a home constructed of materials that had previously been torn to the ground by a 7.6 magnitude earthquake, is not the most sturdy of structures. However, many families started to rebuild before the donations of tin had arrived. With no money to buy their own materials, they were left with no other choice. Each household was given sixteen sheets of tin from the government, which they were able to pick up after walking hours across steep mountainsides. Some families have incorporated the donated tin into their current temporary homes, while others have attempted to build a stronger shelter with the donations. In some cases, the donated tin is being used to construct new buffalo sheds.

Some families were able to hire workers to construct their temporary homes for them, but for many it was just too expensive<sup>18</sup>. In addition, there is a shortage of workers right now because so many people are building and re-building their temporary homes. Another difficulty arises from the fact that the majority of these tin structures consist of one rather tiny room, maybe two, if the family has the materials. This lack of space has been a great challenge for the women, with their entire families and the rest of their belongings crammed into one small space. In addition, there is the constant fear of big storms. Many women expressed fears that their home would fall apart due to the storms. Having lived in two of these temporary shelters during my village homestays, I can attest to the fact that the tin shakes in the wind and it often seems as if the entire house could

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<sup>17</sup> Jackson, Ruth, "Rebuilding a More Resilient Nepal", *OXFAM*, October 2015, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/rebuilding-more-resilient-nepal>.

<sup>18</sup> It costs 1,000 Nepalese rupees to hire a construction worker for the day. This is equivalent to about \$9.37



Photograph by Emma Squier. Nema Hyolmo stands on the porch of her temporary home in Ghangyul.

easily blow away. It is difficult trying to sleep through a violent thunderstorm when the only thing separating you and a bolt of lightning is a thin sheet of tin.

Home is a place where you should feel safe and not have to worry about whether or not your house can survive a storm. For these women, it is a constant fear. Of course, they want to be able to build permanent homes again, but their families do not have the financial resources to do so. Some hope that in a few years it will be possible, but this all depends on if they can make enough money or if the government decides to help them out. One thing is for sure though- these temporary homes are not going to last forever, and when they begin to fall apart, the same issues are going to arise<sup>19</sup>. The tin is eventually going to rust and get holes in it, and the wooden beams that are holding many of the homes up will become damaged over time from water and insects.<sup>20</sup>

Ideally, these villages would be able to build back better than before, using earthquake-resistant materials, but they cannot change the design of their homes if they do not have the money to do so. Perhaps even more difficult than the inability to build back a stronger home is the loss of the homes that these women had before the earthquake. With the destruction of their homes, these women saw their lives crumble before their eyes, watching memories from their childhood and their children's lives disappear. It is more than just the loss of a home, it is the loss of all of the irreplaceable memories that go along with it<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Yangjun Hyolmo. 4/18/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 40. Farmer and Homemaker.

<sup>20</sup> Chindolma Hyolmo. 4/18/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 45. Farmer and Homemaker.

<sup>21</sup> Nema Hyolmo. 4/15/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 52. Farmer and Homemaker.

## CHANGE OF SEASONS

One of the biggest challenges for the individuals living in temporary shelters was when winter arrived and the temperatures began to drop dramatically. Tin does not provide any sort of warmth and families had to stay huddled around the fire together so that they would not freeze. One woman who I talked with compared the temperature of her home to Terai<sup>22</sup>, saying that it is very cold in the winter and very hot in the summer. Thankfully, winter supplies were provided for the villagers in the Helambu area to help alleviate some of the bitter cold.

In January, a United States evangelical Christian organization called Samaritan's Purse arrived in Melamchi by helicopter and delivered emergency relief kits to nearly 1,000 families. They gave out big blue duffel bags containing jackets, blankets, and hats, to families that had walked hours in the snow to get there<sup>23</sup>. For the majority of the women that I spoke with these donations were very helpful, however, some of the families received jackets that were way too small, and as a result, had no use for them. When possible, families were able to trade with each other for proper sizes, but the jackets given to each household were all random sizes which meant that some people did not receive any jackets at all.

As if the earthquake was not difficult enough, the winter brought enormous obstacles, only exacerbated by the fact that many people did not have a proper, warm shelter in which to stay. Some might say that the worst is over for now, but with summer fast approaching, along with it comes unbearable heat. There is no way for people to stay cool as the sun beats down on their tin shelters.

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<sup>22</sup> One of the three regions of Nepal, Terai is known for its hot temperatures in the summer and cold temperatures in the winter.

<sup>23</sup> "Winter Relief Reaches Remote Villages in Nepal", *Samaritan's Purse*, January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016, <http://www.samaritanspurse.org/article/winter-relief-reaches-freezing-nepalis/>.





Photograph by Emma Squier. Temporary home in Ghangyul.



## INCREASE IN WORKLOAD

Women are responsible for such varied work roles involving productive, reproductive, and community labor. Because of the gendered division of labor that typically exists in homes, women's caregiving roles and responsibilities may increase their pre-disaster vulnerability and place additional burdens on them during disaster recovery. The work done by women oftentimes helps their families cope with disastrous events and holds them together after a disaster. In most societies, the everyday responsibilities of household work and caring for children are women's work. Therefore, when disaster strikes, "it falls to women to create and re-create a sense of security for children in what is often a series of makeshift shelters or temporary houses"<sup>24</sup>. In addition to all of the household and childcare duties that women are responsible for in everyday life, when a disaster strikes, these duties increase and women oftentimes find themselves with an increased amount of work, creating an emotional and stressful burden for them.

The Nepal earthquake was no different, and nearly every woman that I talked with felt that the amount of work that they were responsible for had increased afterwards. For a majority of the women, one of the biggest concerns was the added emotional distress of having lost their homes. In addition to cooking, cleaning, caring for their children, and farming, women now had to sort through the rubble to rescue their belongings and plan the relocation of a temporary home, all while remaining strong for those dependent upon them. These women are dealing with so much work and stress now that many do not even know where to begin. Many of them feel as though their lives are incomplete<sup>25</sup>. The amount of work surrounding these women's settlements is never-ending, but there are only so many hours in a day. These women's lives were already busy maintaining their crops everyday while taking care of their household, but now that they are living in temporary shelters, this only adds to the stress<sup>26</sup>. Most of the women are unable to hire workers to build a stronger home, due to a lack of money. Another stressor mentioned by some is that they have no storage for their potatoes. Their main source of sustenance is rotting and becoming inedible. All of these extra tasks and chores are what add to the already overwhelming workloads of these women, but they become even more of a challenge for women who are the head of their households.

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<sup>24</sup> Enarson, Elaine, Alice Fothergill, and Lori Peek, "Gender and Disaster: Foundations and Directions", in *Handbook of Disaster Research*, ed. Rodriguez, Havidan, Enrico L. Quarantelli, and Russel R. Dynes (Delaware: Disaster Research Center, 2006), 136.

<sup>25</sup> Dawa Phuti Lama. 4/15/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 51. Farmer and Homemaker.

<sup>26</sup> Mingmar Hyolmo. 4/16/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 48. Farmer and Homemaker.



Photograph by Emma Squier. Dawa Phuti Lama sits outside of her temporary home in Ghangyul.

## FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

For the women in Parangang, Sathil, and Ghangyul who do not have a husband at home with them- due to either migration or death- their everyday roles become even more of a challenge. All of the responsibilities of managing the household fall upon them. With the rise in males migrating elsewhere for work, the number of female-headed households and women farmers has increased. With their husbands gone, the role of farming falls completely to the women and they become more reliant on agriculture for their livelihoods<sup>27</sup>. Household management in poor communities is difficult even in the best of times, but for female-headed households after a disaster, it becomes even more difficult<sup>28</sup>.

In Parangang and Sathil, I found that a large number of males have been migrating to Ladakh during the summer season to do construction work. Typically, they will go for 6 months beginning in April or May and then return to their villages for the winter. If possible, the women will go with them and do construction work too, but for the most part it is up to the women to stay back and farm. With their husbands away, this creates even more work for the women, having to do all of the farming on top of childcare and household duties<sup>29</sup>. Construction work in Ladakh is the main source of income for many of the people in Sathil, and although some of the women would like to go and help earn money, they must look after the rest of their family and take care of the crops<sup>30</sup>.

For Dolma Lama, life after the earthquake in Parangang has been particularly difficult. Like everyone else in the village, her home was rendered unlivable by the earthquake. One year later she still does not even have a temporary shelter to call home. Dolma does not have any children and her husband spends most of the year in Ladakh doing construction work, leaving her alone in Parangang for a majority of the year. Even if she had the money and resources to re-build her home, it would be a great challenge for her because she is alone most of the time. Dolma says that her husband will come back to Parangang maybe once a year, but their communication is very limited. This has taken a great toll on her, leaving her to do all of the farming and other various chores. She says that she cannot rebuild her home until her husband returns to the village. For the past year, various women in Parangang have opened up their homes to Dolma, giving her shelter and a place to stay<sup>31</sup>. Not having a place to call home is difficult, but it is even more difficult when you are on your own. The earthquake greatly affected everyone, but for female-headed households, life became even more challenging.

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<sup>27</sup> Jackson, Ruth, "Rebuilding a More Resilient Nepal", *OXFAM*. October 2015, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/rebuilding-more-resilient-nepal>.

<sup>28</sup> Enarson, Elaine, Alice Fothergill, and Lori Peek, "Gender and Disaster: Foundations and Directions", in *Handbook of Disaster Research*, ed. Rodriguez, Havidan, Enrico L. Quarantelli, and Russel R. Dynes (Delaware: Disaster Research Center, 2006), 136.

<sup>29</sup> Phur Dhiki Lama. 4/11/16. Sathil, Helambu. 25. Farmer and Homemaker.

<sup>30</sup> Ritchu Lama. 4/11/16. Sathil, Helambu. 38. Farmer and Homemaker.

<sup>31</sup> Dolma Lama. 4/8/16. Parangang, Helambu. 52. Farmer.



Photograph by Emma Squier. Dolma Lama stands inside what used to be the kitchen of her damaged home in Paragang.

## INCOME

For the villagers in Paragang and Ghangyul, one of the only ways in which they can earn income is by selling their potatoes to villages like Sathil that are unable to grow them. Before the earthquake they relied on exchanging their potatoes with people from other villages for rice, or if it was a good year, they were able to sell one kilogram of potatoes for seventy rupees<sup>32</sup>. Since the earthquake, a lot less people have been coming to buy or exchange potatoes, and this has been the cause of a lot of difficulty and stress for these women and their families<sup>33</sup>. The women say that the price for one kilogram of potatoes has dropped down to fifty rupees due to effects from the earthquake.

One of the biggest challenges that these women have been faced with since the earthquake is the farming of their potatoes and the decrease in income from it. Many women did not farm immediately after the earthquake due to fear of another one coming. There came a point when they had to continue, though, because farming is their livelihood and a main source of food for their families. The earthquake did not seem to have any effect on the women's crops in Paragang or Sathil, however, the women in Ghangyul found that their potatoes have been growing much smaller and the potato plants have been dying more frequently since the earthquake. When the one crop that these women are able to sell begins growing smaller and dying, the effects for them are monumental<sup>34</sup>. Less potatoes means less potatoes to sell, and even worse, less food for their families. Everyone's livelihoods have been affected by the earthquake. The people that once came to Ghangyul to purchase or trade for potatoes, may not have the resources to do so anymore. In addition, roads blocked by landslides made access to the village much more difficult, so for a while the buyers could not even get to Ghangyul<sup>35</sup>. Financial instability is one of the greatest concerns for these women- especially since the earthquake- and although there is not a huge economy in these villages, earning more money would give these women the resources they need to build, among other things, a new home.

As mentioned earlier, in villages such as Sathil, there has been an increase in (mostly) male villagers migrating to Ladakh to earn money as construction workers. While this is a job that most of them do not want to be doing, the majority do not have any other options for making money. In Paragang, the restoration of a nearby healthpost has opened up another way for some people to earn extra money, but the work is primarily for men. This leaves women with farming as their only real option for work, and it is a job which earns very little income.

A large number of the women that I spoke with in Ghangyul have daughters who are working abroad in Dubai. Most of them are housekeepers. With a lack of opportunity and skill, there are no other options for many of these women. For some, it is preferable to be cooking and cleaning abroad and earning money from it, than to stay at home earning relatively no significant income. Cleaning and taking care of another person's home earns them more money than if they

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<sup>32</sup> This is equal to about sixty-five U.S. cents.

<sup>33</sup> Gaki Hyolmo. 4/15/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 73. Retired Farmer, and Homemaker.

<sup>34</sup> Kesang Hyolmo. 4/15/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 49. Farmer and Homemaker.

<sup>35</sup> Nema Hyolmo. 4/16/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 48. Farmer and Homemaker.

were to stay in their village and farm. The options for women in these villages are extremely limited. Perhaps this is a direct result of their lack of education.





Photograph by Emma Squier. Roses bloom amongst the rubble in Ghangyul.

## EDUCATION

“One child, one teacher, one pen, and one book can change the world.”

- Malala Yousafzai<sup>36</sup>

A lack of education for girls is an important factor in gendered disaster vulnerability and something that can greatly reduce their opportunities in life<sup>37</sup>. Nearly every woman that I spoke with was uneducated, due largely in part to the fact that there were no schools nearby when they were growing up. Some of the younger women, however, were still unable to go to school due to financial reasons. One young mother that I spoke with had the opportunity to go to school up until class ten, but then she failed one of her subjects and never thought to re-enroll<sup>38</sup>. For most of the women, though, education is an opportunity that they could only have dreamed of.

For some of the women there were no nearby schools while their kids were growing up. In spite of this, some women have been able to give their kids the opportunity they never had. Before the earthquake, there was a small school for classes one through six that was a twenty-minute walk from Paragang. The school has now been completely destroyed. Some students have been able to continue their education in Kathmandu, while younger students attend school in a nearby village called Nakote. After class eight the only nearby option for older students is a school in a town called Melamchi, which is far enough away that students must stay in a hostel. The school is also more expensive than the school for younger children. Although these schools in the nearby villages are less expensive than schools in Kathmandu, they still charge a fee and many children have been forced to drop out for financial reasons<sup>39</sup>. For those children who do not have school as an option, some have begun helping their parents farm, while many boys are sent to monasteries to become monks<sup>40</sup>. For some students, dropping out is a choice and they choose to leave so that they can help their parents earn extra money.

One younger mother that I spoke with had only completed two grades of school when she was forced to drop out due to financial reasons. She now has two daughters of her own, a two year old and an eight month old. She hopes to be able to send them to school one day, affording them the opportunity she was unable to fulfill herself<sup>41</sup>. Despite not having had an education themselves, all of the women that I spoke with recognized the importance of education in terms of jobs and other life opportunities that it can open up. These women care deeply about their children and want to give them the best future possible.

I spoke with a woman named Kesang in the village of Ghangyul. The subject of education was obviously a difficult one for her to talk about. With tears in her eyes, she related to me a life

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<sup>36</sup> 18 year old Pakistani activist for female education, and the youngest ever Nobel Prize laureate.

<sup>37</sup> Enarson, Elaine, Alice Fothergill, and Lori Peek, “Gender and Disaster: Foundations and Directions”, in *Handbook of Disaster Research*, ed. Rodriguez, Havidan, Enrico L. Quarantelli, and Russel R. Dynes (Delaware: Disaster Research Center, 2006), 136.

<sup>38</sup> Sunita Lama. 4/11/16. Sathil, Helambu. 19. Homemaker.

<sup>39</sup> Dawa Gyalmo. 4/8/16. Paragang, Helambu. 55. Farmer and Homemaker.

<sup>40</sup> Jangmu Lama. 4/9/16. Paragang, Helambu. 65. Farmer and Homemaker.

<sup>41</sup> Kanchi Maya Lama. 4/9/16. Paragang, Helambu. 29. Farmer and Homemaker.

filled with missed opportunities and little to no chance at a decent education. Kesang stressed how lack of education still remains a big problem in the village. If she had had the opportunity to go to school, Kesang says she would have been able to do a job other than farming and earn more income for her family. Kesang's granddaughter who lives with her is currently in school in Sermathang, which is about a two-hour walk from Ghangyul (far enough away that she must stay in a hostel there). The school in Sermathang costs 5,000 rupees per month per child. This additional financial burden is stressful for Kesang. She is happy that her granddaughter is getting the opportunity that she never had, but she is worried about her granddaughter's future and education<sup>42</sup>.

The small school in Ghangyul was completely destroyed in the earthquake. Prior to the earthquake the school had already closed due to low enrollment and the fact that kids did not enjoy going because the teacher was not very good. My translator, Yangdolma, informed me that many of the kids in Ghangyul had been sponsored by tourists and were, subsequently, able to attend school in Kathmandu. Kids who are not sponsored but still able to attend school typically will go to Sermathang. Most of the sponsors are tourists who have visited Ghangyul and want to do something to help the kids there. Oftentimes word gets passed around the kids that already have sponsors that their sponsor might be looking to support another child. In addition, tourists visiting Ghangyul will sometimes learn about kids in the village from the owner of the lodge and restaurant there, and then decide to sponsor them. Yangdolma's sponsor is a man from Italy who was sponsoring one of her friend's before sponsoring her. Yangdolma's sponsor is supporting the education of eight kids in total, including Yangdolma and her younger sister. In addition, a woman from Italy is sponsoring Yangdolma's younger brother and her older sister. The educational sponsorship of children is something that I did not see in Paragang or Sathil. The children from Ghangyul who were being sponsored were extremely grateful. Yangdolma tells me that it is very difficult to break away from the tradition of farming. For her, the opportunity to go to school is like a dream- something that she thought would never happen.

For the majority of these women and even some of their children, going to school is not a feasible option. Many wish for the opportunity to do something more than farming but without the skill or financial means it is not possible. As a result, many children are following in their parents' footsteps as farmers, doing construction work, or in some cases, traveling abroad to do housework.

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<sup>42</sup> Kesang Hyolmo. 4/15/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 49. Farmer and Homemaker.





Photograph by Emma Squier. Kesang Hyolmo stands in the kitchen of her home in Ghangyul.

## HEALTH

In villages where lack of healthcare is already of great concern in everyday life, these concerns worsen when a disaster strikes. With no nearby hospitals in these villages, this created more of a problem for individuals who became injured in the earthquake.

There is a tiny Healthpost between Paragang and Sathil in a village called Karchung, but only two nurses work there, and it is not equipped to handle medical emergencies. The healthpost was sponsored by an organization abroad in 2002 and built by community action Nepal in 2005. One woman that I spoke with said that when she was pregnant she was able to give birth there<sup>43</sup>, while another woman took the bus to Kathmandu a month before her baby was due so that she would be able to give birth in an actual hospital<sup>44</sup>. Many pregnant women do not want to risk complications during their delivery so they must travel in advance to Kathmandu as a precaution.

The closest healthpost for villagers in Ghangyul is located in Timbu, but it only treats for minor health issues. Due to a lack of transportation, people have to walk there most of the time, which can take a few hours. This walk becomes even more difficult during the rainy season, when roads become muddy and even more difficult to navigate. For nine villages there is only one ambulance, which is even more problematic because of the bad roads. The women say that it is difficult not being very close to a health post and some cannot afford to get to the hospital in Kathmandu<sup>45</sup>.

Fortunately there were no major injuries in these three villages during the earthquake. Since a majority of the women were outside farming during the actual earthquake they were spared any serious injury. For those who were injured it was a challenge getting medical attention. Roads to Ghangyul were completely blocked after the earthquake due to landslides. This made getting help for the injured even more difficult. For those who were badly injured, a helicopter was able to come and take them to a hospital in Kathmandu a few days later. One of the injured was Kesang's granddaughter who was buried under her house with a bad head injury. Fortunately, her family was able to dig her out in time and get her the help that she needed<sup>46</sup>.

The most devastating loss as a result of the earthquake occurred in Ghangyul. A woman named Zangmu, who was three months pregnant at the time, was in her house when the earthquake struck, crushing her and her unborn child. Zangmu was able to get helicoptered out and she survived, but tragically, her baby did not. At such a young age, Zangmu has already experienced such immense tragedy in life, but she has not let that stop her from living. After our conversation, Zangmu had a smile on her face while she showed me pictures of her wedding, which took place just a few years earlier at the monastery in Ghangyul. One year after the earthquake life is far from normal, but she has her family, a roof over her head, and is six months pregnant.

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<sup>43</sup> Nima Dickey Lama. 4/8/16. Paragang, Helambu. 38. Farmer and Homemaker.

<sup>44</sup> Kanchi Maya Lama. 4/9/16. Paragang, Helambu. 29. Farmer and Homemaker.

<sup>45</sup> Phurpa Lama. 4/16/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 45. Farmer and Homemaker.

<sup>46</sup> Kesang Hyolmo. 4/15/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 49. Farmer and Homemaker.





Photograph by Emma Squier. Zangmu Sherpa stands outside her home in Ghangyul.



Pregnant women are one of the most vulnerable populations after a disaster and require even more attention in these emergency situations<sup>47</sup>. There is a major shortage of health workers in the developing world and an urgent need for more female health workers to save the lives of mothers, newborn babies, and young children. Many women give birth every year with no professional help. Save the Children has been employing the use of female community health volunteers in some villages to help combat these issues. Investing in a mother and her child is one of the best ways to help ensure healthy children, prosperous families, and strong communities<sup>48</sup>.

My wonderful host-mother in Ghangyul is a part-time volunteer with Save the Children as the community female health worker for the village. She specializes mainly in child health, providing vitamins and medicine for the children in the village, as well as treating and referring children with diarrhea and other illnesses. In addition, she receives special training in maternal care and birth preparedness. There are monthly meetings held at the monastery in the village to discuss problems related to children's health as well as to make sure that the medicine and vitamins are getting to all of the kids in the village. Chindolma has been the female health care worker in the village for the past six years. She is overseen by the healthpost in Timbu. Although critical health cases must still be sent to Timbu or Kathmandu, the work that Chindolma is doing in Ghangyul is helping women and children who otherwise might not have gotten the help that they needed<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> "Impact of natural disasters on girls and women", *Norlha*, June 2015, [http://norlha.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/04/Impact\\_of\\_natural\\_disaster\\_on\\_girls\\_and\\_women\\_Norlha\\_June\\_2015.pdf](http://norlha.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/04/Impact_of_natural_disaster_on_girls_and_women_Norlha_June_2015.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> "Women on the Frontlines of Healthcare", *Save the Children*, 2010, [http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGIpI4E/b.6178267/k.CE3/Women\\_on\\_the\\_Front\\_Lines\\_of\\_Health\\_Care.htm](http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGIpI4E/b.6178267/k.CE3/Women_on_the_Front_Lines_of_Health_Care.htm).

<sup>49</sup> Chindolma Hyolmo. 4/18/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 45. Farmer and Homemaker.



Photograph by Emma Squier. Phur Dhiki Lama cradles her three-month-old baby in her arms.

## THE WOMEN

Going into this project I had no idea what to expect or if the women in these villages would even want to talk with me. I quickly learned that these women wanted to share their experiences. In fact, many of the women in the villages approached me to be interviewed. I was overwhelmed with all of the positive responses to my project and at the end of each interview I would always ask if they had any questions for me. The response was usually no, but then they would often tell me how grateful they were to have been able to share what they went through with me. They said that nobody had ever come to talk to them like that before and they did not think that they would ever get the chance to share their feelings and challenges surrounding the earthquake. I, in no way, changed these women's lives, but I do think that being heard by another human being who was listening and responding was a very powerful experience for many of them.

These women experienced great challenges immediately after the earthquake, and are still experiencing some of these challenges today. Disaster is not an easy subject to talk about, but I am so appreciative that these women felt comfortable enough to share their stories with me, as difficult as it may have been at times. These women welcomed me into their homes and lives and made me feel like I was a part of the village in a relatively short amount of time. One woman in Ghangyul told me that she felt like I belonged there and asked if I could stay in her home. The kindness and warmth that these women showed me is something that I will never forget. The earthquake may have taken away these women's homes, belongings, and for some their livelihoods, but it has not taken away their dignity- or their smiles.



Photograph by Emma Squier. Prayer flags fly in Paragang.



## CONCLUSION

The earthquake that struck Nepal on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015, killed almost 9,000, injured over 22,000, and destroyed or damaged nearly 900,000 houses,<sup>50</sup> but none of these numbers can properly convey the immense suffering experienced by those who were affected. It has been just over a year since that horrible day and much destruction and devastation remains. I talked to women from three different villages in Helambu, Sindhupalchok in order to learn about the struggles they faced immediately following the earthquake.

Many of the issues addressed in this paper were, of course, problems that everyone faced after the earthquake- not just the women. I wanted to examine these issues through the perspectives of the women in Parangang, Sathil, and Ghangyul. These women do so much for their families and communities, all while maintaining their homes, cooking, and farming. The workload of their many roles has only increased since the disaster, putting them under even more stress, as they also must worry about the fact that they still do not have a permanent place to call home. These women want to be able re-build their homes and feel safe where they are living, but without the proper financial means to do so, it is nearly impossible. Many of these women wish that they could have done something other than farming, but a lack of education and skill, in most cases, leaves them no other choice. Things are beginning to change though, and some have been able to give their children the opportunity that they never had.

It has been a difficult year filled with more setbacks than positives, but the women of Helambu are strong. They are incredibly hard workers and have done so much for their families and community members around them during a time when they had very little. There is much more that needs to be done, but they have remained hopeful, taking the recovery process one day at a time.

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<sup>50</sup> "Nepal Earthquake 2015: Post Disaster Needs Assessment", *reliefweb*, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/nepal-earthquake-2015-post-disaster-needs-assessment-executive-summary>.

## LIMITATIONS

Perhaps the biggest challenge for me during my independent study project was the language barrier, and consequentially, having a translator. I love both of my translators dearly, and while their English skills are impressive, I feel that having a translator can be limiting at times. Not only does it break up the flow of conversation, but there were times when I felt that I had to simplify what I was asking, prohibiting me from getting as in depth as I would have liked to during my field research. In addition, many of the women that I interviewed cried during our conversations, which was difficult for me, because I wanted to be able to comfort them and offer them emotional support, but I felt like this was extremely difficult, as I did not speak their language. I feel that if I had spoken the same language as the women, I would have been able to gain a completely new perspective on their lives.

Another smaller, but unexpected obstacle that I faced in the field, was husbands who would speak for their wives. While this only occurred a few times, it caught me off guard. Before beginning any of my interviews, I made it clear that I was talking to the women about their experiences. In a few instances the husbands took over the conversations while their wives just sat there. This was especially difficult for me not speaking the language or really being able to do anything about it.

Another obvious obstacle was time. With ISP lasting only one month I constantly felt pressed for time. Despite this, I felt that I made the most of my time in Paragang, Sathil, and Ghangyul, and was able to talk to more women than I had ever expected.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One topic that I had heard about before and during my research, but was unable to learn more about, was the trafficking of girls in Nepal, specifically in the Sindhupalchok district. This is a major issue that has always been prevalent in Nepal, but it is said to have increased after the disaster, as girls became even more vulnerable. Many of the areas affected by the earthquake were largely poor and uneducated, leaving some families desperate for cash and vulnerable children at greater risk for exploitation. I think that this would be an extremely difficult topic to tackle but it is an important issue and one that needs to be addressed in Nepal.



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*Participant's name. Date of interview. Location of interview. Age of participant. Occupation of participant.*

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Pasang Lamini. 4/16/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 40. Farmer and Homemaker.

Nema Hyolmo. 4/16/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 48. Farmer and Homemaker.

Karchung Lama. 4/17/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 48. Farmer and Homemaker.

Lakchung Hyolmo. 4/17/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 72. Retired farmer, and Homemaker.

Zangmu Sherpa. 4/17/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 20. Farmer and Homemaker.

Kanchi Hyolmo. 4/17/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 36. Farmer and Homemaker.

Nudolma Hyolmo. 4/17/16. Ghangyul, Helambu, 71. Retired farmer, and Homemaker.

Phurpa Lamini. 4/17/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 47. Farmer and Homemaker.

Norbu Hyolmo. 4/18/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 60. Farmer and Homemaker.

Yangchin Hyolmo. 4/18/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 55. Farmer and Homemaker.

Karmo Hyolmo. 4/18/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 50. Farmer and Homemaker.

Yeshe Lamini. 4/18/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 54. Farmer and Homemaker.

Lhamu Hyolmo. 4/18/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 47. Farmer and Homemaker.

Yangjun Hyolmo. 4/18/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 40. Farmer and Homemaker.

Chindolma Hyolmo. 4/18/16. Ghangyul, Helambu. 45. Farmer and Homemaker.



Photographs from the field of the author, Emma Squier, at work.

Bottom left: Heading back across the bridge towards Paragang after leaving Sathil

Top left: From left to right, my host mother, myself, our neighbor, and my translator Kiran

Top right: Kiran and I sharing laughs after tea in Paragang

Bottom right: My translator Yangdolma and I, in her village Ghangyul