Gendered Narratives of Mobility
Spatial Discourse and Social Change in Nepal

ABSTRACT In the last 30 years women have been making significant inroads into Nepal’s public sphere, troubling long-held normative assumptions about women’s place in modern Nepal. In this article I examine the discursive strategies that working-class Nepali women employ to justify and legitimate their presence in Nepal’s urban public spaces and simultaneously claim an identity as a modern Nepali woman. Drawing on an ethnographic case study of one group of publicly visible women, female trekking guides, I provide a close analysis of how spatial language is leveraged by both state actors and informants to articulate multiple, sometimes conflicting, messages about Nepali women’s “place” in contemporary society. In particular, I focus on the use of spatial metaphors, showing how informants use terms such as inside, outside, forward, and backward to locate themselves within narratives of modernity, development, and national progress. I conclude by showing that unlike women in other examples from the global South, who have framed their emergent presence in the public sphere as an extension of a traditionally feminine and domestic role, informants in the present case study appropriate a masculine language of overt publicness and mobility to justify their visibility. In so doing, informants author themselves as agents of modernity rather than objects of the state’s development efforts.

In the fall of 2012, Tulsi, a 28-year-old Nepali woman, worked as an administrative assistant at a trekking company located in the popular tourist city of Sundari, Nepal. In this capacity, she met and began to date a young man from an English-speaking country. One evening, while strolling together on a very popular and scenic lakeside path, they passed by a group of three Nepali men walking in the opposite direction. Moments later, this same group of men turned around and walked purposefully back to where Tulsi and her friend where talking. The men ordered the couple to sit down while they drunkenly lectured Tulsi on the dangers of walking with foreign men at night. When Tulsi, frustrated and offended by the lecture, proceeded to stand and leave, one of the men grabbed her by the arm and aggressively ordered her to sit back down. As Tulsi and her companion protested, the three men proceeded to beat them both. During the attack Tulsi was kicked in the face, leaving her with a cut lip and a black eye. Several days later, when I talked to Tulsi about the incident, she was less angry about the assault than about the reaction from her family. Though relieved that she was not more seriously injured, her relatives lectured her on the risks of “going outside” and imposed more stringent restrictions on her after-dark movements. As we talked about her family’s reaction, Tulsi sighed in frustration and explained that it was

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still a common belief that women belonged “inside the house” while men could walk “outside” in safety and at their leisure. Tulsi called such beliefs “backward,” antiquated, and a hindrance to women’s full participation in modern Nepal.

While recounting her story, Tulsi employed the commonly used terms inside, outside, forward, and backward to speak about the changing roles, expectations, and opportunities for men and women in modern Nepal. Why? Within the context of rapid socioeconomic change, what does the use of this particular terminology tell us about how a modern Nepali identity is tied to broader understandings of space and place? How does the gendered organization of public and private space present particular challenges to young women like Tulsi who are attempting to legitimate their presence in the public domain? To answer these questions I examine the discursive strategies that young, working-class women employ to justify their presence in Nepal’s public sphere and simultaneously to claim an identity as a modern Nepali woman.

Drawing on an ethnographic case study of one group of publicly visible women, female trekking guides, I provide a close analysis of how spatial language is leveraged by both state actors and informants to articulate multiple, sometimes conflicting, messages about Nepali women’s “place” in contemporary society. In particular, I focus on the use of spatial metaphors, terms such as inside, outside, forward, and backward that informants use to locate themselves within narratives of “modernity,” “development” and national progress. I illustrate how female guides mobilize this shared vocabulary to disrupt and repurpose hegemonic narratives about women’s supposed domesticity and in so doing to assert their legitimate stake in modern Nepal. I conclude by showing that unlike women in other examples from the global South, who have framed their emergent presence in the public sphere as an extension of their feminine and domestic role, informants in the present case study appropriate a masculine language of overt publicness and mobility to justify their visibility. In so doing, informants author themselves as agents of modernity rather than as subjects of the state’s development efforts. The findings of this paper thus inform our understanding of the varied and complex relationship that women in the global South have to development projects.

Since the mid-1950s, the discourse of development (bikaas) has been enthusiastically promoted by the Nepali state (Pigg 1992; Whelpton 2005). State-produced materials as diverse as education curricula, public service radio programs, and national legislation equate development with modernity (Pigg 1993; Ahearn 2001; Tamang 2011). To be modern (adbunik) one must be developed (bikaasit), and to be developed is to emulate a trope of the modern Nepali who is highly educated, visible in urban public space, and a productive participant in the capitalist economy. While equally inculcated in the discourse of modernity, a majority of Nepali women have been variously left out of the promises of development (Leve 2007). For much of its history Nepal was ruled as a Hindu monarchy, and hegemonic Hindu ideology, including gender ideology, was both the backbone of Nepali civil law and culturally dominant. Importantly, Hindu gender norms disapprove of women’s public visibility and participation in wage labor. As a consequence, the public venues of paid employment, higher education, and urban space, all of which have been touted as signposts of Nepal’s modernization, have until quite recently remained overwhelmingly male arenas (Rankin 2004; Grossman-Thompson 2013). However, women have been making significant inroads into
Nepal’s public sphere in the last thirty years. Three decades of rapid urbanization and the concomitant emergence of a wage labor economy have challenged the primacy of both agrarian livelihoods and caste-based stratification, especially in Nepal’s largest cities, where my own research was conducted (Liechty 2003). Such changes have allowed a growing stream of young, working-class women from diverse ethnic and caste backgrounds to migrate to cities in search of education, employment, and respectability as modern citizens. Although axes of social difference like caste, ethnicity, and religion continue to matter, this sizable new cohort is navigating Nepal’s new spaces of modernity in ways that reflect a profoundly altered social landscape (Liechty 2010). By entering Nepal’s urban public sphere, this group of women confronts the gendered politics of space and shifts normative definitions of who belongs where.

This article uses female trekking guides as one example of this new cohort of working-class, “public” women for two reasons. First, because of the state’s commitment to “development via tourism,” guides are on the front lines of Nepal’s vast modernity project. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, steady streams of tourists have arrived seeking a world-class trekking experience in the fabled Himalayas. The state has framed such tourism as a generator of development because it engenders global acclaim for Nepal, contact with the West, and substantial foreign direct investment. Consequently, the tourism industry and tourism workers are discursively bound up in Nepal’s modernization efforts.

Second, the particularly visible and public nature of their work allows guides to speak credibly on the spatial dimensions of gender and modernity in urban Nepal. Trekkers arriving to Nepal have typically relied on male porters and guides to shepherd them across the geographically and culturally foreign terrain, though in the early 1990s the first Nepali female guides began to appear (Ortner 2001). Female guides’ work is public in two ways. First, guiding consists of a fall and spring work season during which guides lead two- to forty-day excursions with primarily Western groups of tourists to remote Himalayan villages. In this capacity, guides associate intimately with strangers from other countries and other villages. Second, during the off-season guides most commonly share a small apartment with two to five other women in an urban center and live as financially independent women outside the boundaries of familial or community supervision. Working on the outer limits of women’s acceptable public visibility, female trekking guides are especially cognizant of the way in which gendered labor and gendered space are talked about and understood.

GENDER, LABOR AND THE STATE

From the mid-eighteenth century until 2008, Nepal was ruled by a Hindu monarchy. The Nepali state practiced strict geopolitical isolationism from 1850 to 1950, until a coup in 1951 ushered in an era of increased political and social openness that nevertheless maintained Hindu hegemony. From 1996 to 2006, Nepal experienced acute social unrest in the form of a Maoist insurgency fought through protracted guerrilla warfare (Shah and Pettigrew 2009). In 2008, the monarchy was dissolved, the Maoists were voted into power, and Nepal officially became a secular, multiparty democratic republic. Nevertheless, the cultural, political, and socioeconomic dominance of high-caste Hindus remains. The hegemony of high-caste Hindu norms, including gender norms, was strengthened by decades of legal enforcement. For nearly
all of Nepal’s history as a modern state, a legal code known as the Muluki Ain codified Hindu doctrine into state law. First implemented in 1854, the Muluki Ain applied to both Hindus and non-Hindus and explicitly monitored and policed gender and sexuality. Until 1963, punishments for sexual infractions were meted out according to the caste and gender of the offender. For example, women and lower-caste offenders were subject to harsher punishments for sexual offenses (Tamang 2000). The Muluki Ain formally institutionalized Hindu patriarchy and high-caste Hindu gender norms as the official law of Nepal. Consequently, the behavioral norms of high-caste Hindu women, including domestic seclusion, were legally sanctioned and culturally supported as normative throughout Nepal’s diverse populace.

Despite gestures toward inclusive development made by the current regime, scholars like Seira Tamang (2000, 2002b) underscore the disjuncture between official developmentalist discourse, which encourages women to be modern, and the reality of a persistently patriarchal, high-caste Hindu government. In particular, Tamang fleshes out the tension in official state discourse between exhorting Nepali women to come “forward” into development and simultaneously reinscribing their backwardness by repeatedly asserting that such movement has yet to occur. The state has a vested interest in maintaining this double-sided discourse, as Nepali women’s apparent lack of development provides the justification for the tens of millions of dollars in development aid that annually flows into Nepal’s economy (Tamang 2002a). By insisting that women, and particularly low-caste, ethnic minority women, are in need of development, the state discursively effaces the fact that some women have already carved out a space in the public sphere. Ironically, while promoting women’s development, the state’s continued reiteration of women’s backwardness serves to strengthen the ideological link between women and the private/domestic sphere.

In this historical context, what then does it mean for women to enter public space, claim the promises of development, and assert a modern identity? Feminist political economists have asked similar questions about the relationship between gender, labor, and development in various locales throughout the global South (Elson and Pearson 1981; Safa 1981; Wolf 1994; Parreñas 2001; Otis 2008). These scholars interrogate how gendered subjectivities are forged in the crucible of the local-global encounter and what role the state and local culture may play in setting the parameters of women’s public participation in development. As dimensions of contemporary globalization, proletarianization, and urbanization have both allowed and cajoled women into more public roles as wage earners, and challenged long-held normative assumptions about gender and labor throughout the global South. Numerous examples from the global South show that state intervention has often directed the trajectory of women’s incorporation into the global workforce via industrialization initiatives even as female workforce participation subverts conventional gender roles (Lee 1998; Hanser 2005; Ngai 2005; Lan 2007). This scholarship reveals how women have navigated pressure to participate in wage labor through a variety of techniques including spirit possessions (Ong 1987), appeals to their feminine identities as daughters (Wolf 1994), and labor strikes (Salzinger 2003). My research is an extension of this literature and focuses specifically on the discursive techniques used by my informants to define their emergent presence in the wage labor economy and other public arenas.
Examples from the global South show that women often appropriate the feminized discourse of motherhood (Fernandez-Kelly 1983) or of dutiful daughter (Parreñas 2001; Lee 1998) when describing their entrance into the public sphere via wage labor. For example, recent ethnographic work from Vijayakumar (2013) reveals that women IT workers in Bangalore make sense of their identity as wage workers outside the home by framing their labor as a temporary stopover on the way to the more respectable role of wife and mother. It would not be surprising, given the similar South Asian context of Vijayakumar’s scholarship and my own, if my informants also called upon tropes of femininity to justify their presence in the public domain of wage labor. Yet the young women I interviewed in Nepal do not justify their labor in this way. Instead, as I show in the following sections, informants invoke a *masculinized* vocabulary of modernity that purposefully inverts notions of female domesticity. My findings are in line with other research on gender and mobility in Nepal. For example, Brunson’s (2014) research on college-aged, urban-dwelling women who drive scooters shows that via their increased mobility her informants find a way out of “the socially policed realm of a young woman’s home and neighborhood” (p. 611). Brunson notes that as scooter drivers her informants counter stereotypes about female domesticity by participating in the historically masculine activity of driving. Like Brunson’s “scooty girls,” female trekking guides appropriate and regender the discourse of modernity for their own use by employing the historically male parallax of publicness and mobility in their everyday speech (p. 611). Elaborating on this unexpected discursive strategy, the present case study broadens current understandings of women’s responses to both state development efforts and hegemonic gender norms that censure “public” women.

**METHODS**

Data for this research were collected through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2012–13 in Nepal’s two largest urban centers, Kathmandu and Pokhara. The core of the data is twelve months of participant observation during which I lived and worked with female trekking guides. In addition, I conducted 37 formal interviews in Nepali, ranging from 45 minutes to two hours in length. I gained initial entrée into the research site through my own background as a trekking guide in the United States. Connected by our shared employment background, I built relationships with several female guides who would later act as my key informants and introduce me to the majority of my interview subjects. I used snowball sampling to reach the remainder of interview participants. Over the course of fieldwork I spent one month observing and documenting my informants’ daily labor routine while guiding and the remaining eleven months living and interacting with them in their urban residences.

My informants ranged from 18 to 37 years old and came from high- and low-caste backgrounds and several ethnic minority groups. In addition, the majority of informants were first-generation wage earners; that is, they represented the first generation of their family to forego subsistence agriculture as their primary means of livelihood. Most had migrated from rural areas alone or with a friend or relative but had spent the majority of their childhood and adolescence outside of an urban setting. All but two informants were also the first generation of women in their family to receive *any* formal schooling. Every informant had
completed primary school, and over half were enrolled in some form of higher education. Such facts are, as I discuss in the following section, the result of massive social change precipitated under Nepal’s development projects.

**The Language of Modernity: The Nepali State Courts Development**

After the 1951 coup, which saw Nepal’s increased participation in global geopolitical and economic networks, the Nepali monarchy made a concerted effort to court development via international aid and tourism (Whelpton 2005). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, foreign aid became an increasingly large percentage of Nepal’s GDP as development funding poured in from both individual countries and international bodies like the IMF and World Bank (Tamang 2002a). Yet despite the ubiquity of official developmentalist discourse, many Nepalis benefited little from foreign aid (Whelpton 2005). The entrenched poverty of the majority of rural Nepalis eventually culminated in the Maoist insurgency. Throughout the ten-year insurgency, both the Maoist guerrillas and the ruling party framed themselves as the bearers of a modern and developed Nepal. Given the centrality of development in the propaganda of both royalist and Maoist political factions, being *adhunik* (modern) and *bikaasit* (developed) is a particularly important aspect of identity for many Nepalis. Even before the insurgency, official state representations of Nepali history promoted a linear model of progress, which clearly demarcated an undeveloped past from the developed present and future (Pigg 1993; Ahearn 2001). In this binary understanding of Nepali history, Nepali women have been associated with the “backward,” domestic, and rural vestiges of Nepal’s past, while Nepali men have been associated with the “forward,” urban, and capitalist future of modern Nepal (Grossman-Thompson 2013).

Within the secular context of the current regime, the state is attempting to embrace a more inclusive view of civil society and the public sphere, but hegemonic understandings of gender and caste persist and are implied in the ranking of particular people as stubbornly backward. For example, in 2007, in a foreword to Nepal’s 11th Five Year Plan, then prime minister B. P. Koirala stated: “Fifty years of planned development have been completed in Nepal. Although ten periodic plans have been implemented during this period, many aspects of economic and social sectors have still remained backward from the perspective of development. Due to reasons like limited availability of resources, thirty years of restrictive political environment and a decade long conflict, the development process has not been able to move ahead at the expected speed” (Government of Nepal 2007:3). Five-year plans act as the central public document recording state policy, especially in relation to development. They are akin to a “State of the Union” and are thus important repositories of national development discourse. In the 11th Five Year Plan Koirala’s intention was presumably to urge continued effort in bringing more Nepalis “ahead” or forward, yet these remarks leave little doubt that some Nepali citizens remain “backward.” A later excerpt from the same five-year plan notes, “Substantial change in the status of women in the socially and economically backward groups and rural areas is yet to be achieved” (p. 100). Such depictions, though designed to criticize gender inequity, lend force to the legitimacy of gendered understandings of space and place that place some women “inside” and “behind.” Thus, according to the state, Nepali women—particularly ethnic minority women who do not meet hegemonic
high-caste Hindu gender norms—bear the stigma of lingering “backwardness.” At the same time, the state also asserts that such “backwardness” can be addressed and alleviated through continued development and modernization efforts.

Female trekking guides reject the state’s assertion that women have yet to come “forward” and instead use spatial metaphors to articulate their own relationship to modernity and development. I employ the term spatial metaphor to describe explicitly spatial words such as inside, outside, forward, and backward used frequently in the speech of informants. These words function as metaphors because their connotations extend far beyond a strictly literal description of location in time and space. Informants describe social change, and in particular the gendered implications of social change, through explicitly spatial terminology. Such language simultaneously invokes and challenges hegemonic understandings of space and place, which suggest that because Nepali women have yet to transcend the domestic sphere they cannot yet lay claim to the status of a modern Nepali subject. In the following section I detail the conventions of gendered space in hegemonic Hindu culture and argue that this gender schema continues to influence how both the state and my informants conceptualize women’s public presence.

INSIDE/OUTSIDE, FORWARD/BACKWARD: BINARY SPACES AND PLACES

Without exception, informants assert that Nepal has undergone a profound reordering in the last three decades. Although individual informants interpret the normative implications of development in fairly diverse terms, a striking similarity in how this change is described in relation to Nepali women is seen across responses. Twenty-one-year-old Usa Tamang told me, “In my opinion [women] must go outside. Staying inside like that, what can you understand? You can’t understand anything. If you go outside, then you can study many many things. . . . If you’re only inside, it’s not available; if you are outside, it’s available.” In another exchange, I asked twenty-one-year-old Nirjana Gurung, “And why do you say that some people think negatively about women who leave the house or village?” She replied, “Why do they think that? In our customary rules it’s like that. For girls, if they leave from the house to go outside then [people] think badly, it’s said.” And to my question “So, in your opinion, why are guides usually male?” Sila Roka, 24, responded, “Anyway, in Nepal it’s a man’s country, they are forward, aren’t they? Nepali women aren’t educated, right? Only now they have been. . . . It takes time, that’s why.” As evidenced in the above comments, informants use binary terms such as inside/outside (bhitra/bahir) and backward/forward (pachaadi/aghaadi) to describe both the experience of modernity in opposition to nonmodernity and the experience of Nepali womanhood in opposition to Nepali manhood. The use of spatial terminology is not exclusive to my informants. Rather, it reflects the common employment of these words to describe tropes of Nepaliess that range from the stereotype of the “backward” Nepali, burdened by poverty, lack of education, and a rural livelihood, to the image of the “modern” Nepali, who is educated, urban, and a productive member of the capitalist economy. As Guneratne (2001) notes in his research on ethnic identity in Nepal’s southern plains, “Backwardness and forwardness are new concepts closely linked to processes of modernity, in particular a statewide system of schooling and the rapid development of commerce centered in bazaar towns” (p. 530). Within the everyday speech of female
guides, the coupled terms *inside/outside* and *forward/backward* have become key signposts for discussing changing gender norms. Below, table 1 summarizes the common dichotomies used by informants. In the left column, the terms associated with hegemonic (Nepali) male-ness are listed, and in the right column are the terms associated with hegemonic (Nepali) femaleness. While this chart simplifies gendered understandings of space, it usefully distills the central binaries that structure the debate about who belongs in what kind of space and how that space is ideally occupied.

Table 1 succinctly demonstrates the trope of “the Nepali woman” as an identity in need of development. But how and where are such tropes replicated? Pigg (1993) has shown that the gendered binaries presented in table 1 are directly linked to state-produced media. In her analyses of government-funded development propaganda such as radio skits and textbooks produced in the early 1990s, Pigg demonstrates that these materials proffer an archetypal image of the developed (urban and male) versus the undeveloped (rural and female) Nepali citizen. Similarly, Ahearn (2001) notes that in state-produced “Nepali, English, and social studies textbooks from the 1980’s,” which informants would have used, “existing age and gender hierarchies are reinforced” (p. 160). In such media, the ideal Nepali citizen is portrayed as male, Hindu, educated, and professionally employed. In promoting development, the official discourse of the state reinscribes gender, ethnicity, caste, religious, and regional hierarchies that place certain types of Nepalis closer to development.

Various sociocultural currents have contributed to the Nepali state’s gendered framing of modernity and its spatial components, most notably the caste Hinduism practiced by a majority of the Nepali populace. Bennett’s (1983) ethnography of high-caste Hindu women reveals that the normative gender ideology in Nepali high-caste families encourages women to constrain their physical movement to a small domestic sphere. Bennett writes that among her high-caste informants, a great insult to a woman’s character is that she “goes where she likes” (p. 3). The equating of a woman’s free movement with loose morals is further highlighted when Bennett asserts that there are few public arenas in which a woman may legitimately be present, and that those that do exist explicitly center on a woman’s *domestic*

![Table 1. Discursive Binaries](http://online.ucpress.edu/socdev/article-pdf/2/4/323/355443/sod_2016_2_4_323.pdf)
status as bride, wife, or mother. For example, during the annual women’s festival of Tij, which is a nationally celebrated Hindu holiday and perhaps the most publicly visible consideration of the female identity in Nepal, women fast for the health of their future or current husband. During the daylong fast women gather together and dance in wedding regalia at local temples. As Bennett points out, the extreme public spectacle and visibility of women during Tij is made culturally appropriate only because the holiday reaffirms a woman’s primary role as wife and mother.

Although, as Bennett (1983) explains, high-caste Hindu women may participate in practices of female seclusion out of religious piety, this does not explain why Nepali women who are not high-caste Hindus have historically subscribed to these ideals rhetorically, if not necessarily in practice (March 2002). So why do non-high-caste and non-Hindu women recognize female domestic seclusion as an ideal? I argue that the spatial cosmology that sacred Hindu texts proffer is incorporated into state-sanctioned developmentalist discourse and influences how both Hindu and non-Hindu, high-caste and low-caste women think about different types of space. Here Gramsci’s (1971) concept of cultural hegemony is useful for understanding why low-caste Hindu women, ethnic minority women, and/or Nepali practitioners of a minority religion have recognized the ideal of female domestic seclusion. Gramsci’s explanation of hegemony helps make sense of the process through which the norms, values, and beliefs of high-caste Hindu elites, who have historically monopolized most positions of religious, cultural, and political power, have become the dominant and normative ideology of Nepal. The cultural hegemony of high-caste Hinduism is seen in the framing of high-caste Hindu women as the ideal Nepali woman in government-produced media as well as popular culture films, magazines, and radio programs (Ahearn 2001). Although female mobility outside the domestic sphere varies greatly by caste, class, region, ethnicity, and religion, the ideal of female domestic seclusion remains present in nearly all communities. The following section delves further into how informants challenge long-held assumptions about women’s domesticity and backwardness by using spatial language that expands hegemonic constructions of the modern Nepali citizen.

GENDERED WAYS OF BEING IN TIME AND SPACE
Female guides use the paired terms inside/outside (bhitra/bahira) to make a clear delineation between the “inside” and “outside” spheres of society. The Nepali usage of inside/outside is similar, though not identical, to the private sphere/public sphere binary seen in Western feminists’ discussion of gendered space and place (Gerson and Peiss 1985; Scott 1986). In Western feminist analyses of complementary spheres of influence, women are relegated to the domestic sphere of child rearing and reproduction of the household, while men’s domain is the public sphere of work, higher education, and politics (Kerber 1988). Although Nepali norms about the proper gender of inside (domestic) and outside (public) space mirror Western conceptions of the public and private sphere, the gendered politics of space in Nepal are much more closely related to those of other South Asian gender regimes, such as those seen in Northern India and Bangladesh (Kantor 2002; Anderson and Eswaran 2009).
As in other South Asian communities, ideals of female domestic seclusion take on particularly religious undertones in the Nepali context (Banerjee 2003). While the private/public sphere separation of the West was fomented in secular liberal democratic discourse (Landes 1988), the inside/outside distinction in Nepal is firmly rooted in Hindu cosmological understandings of space and place (Agarwal 1994). Further, and perhaps most important, the way the terms are used in everyday language is representative of the larger problem of cross-cultural translation in ethnography. The English dyads of public/private, inside/outside, forward/backward, and developed/undeveloped lack the specific cultural connotations these words have in Nepal, and Western conceptions of the public and private sphere cannot be simply mapped onto the Nepali context. Instead, informants articulate an understanding of gendered space that is historically and culturally specific.

Informants frequently describe their life using the terms inside/outside (bhitra/bahira). When female guides refer to “inside,” it is almost always within the context of “inside the house” or “inside the family courtyard,” whereas “outside” refers to all things, places, and institutions “outside the house.” Thus the term inside has a fairly delimited meaning, while the term outside has much wider and more diverse connotations. To be inside refers first to the physical parameters of a family dwelling. Second, it refers to the domestic duties associated with women’s work. Depending on a woman’s geographic location, status within the household, and socioeconomic and caste status, a woman’s domestic duties could vary from light chores to daily farm work and meal preparation for a large household. In rural Nepal, to be confined to “inside the house” may actually involve a good amount of travel to and from agricultural fields or a grain mill. Nevertheless, to be ideally inside, a woman would have to be in quite stringent domestic seclusion (Rankin 2004).

Unlike the term inside, the term outside refers to a wide variety of nondomestic arenas. Pursuing education, participating in the wage economy, and simply venturing outside the family compound for personal enjoyment and fulfillment are all implicated in the term. Thus outside has a distinctly nonspatial aspect in its colloquial usage. When informants talk about “going outside,” they are discussing a way of being with specifically modern connotations. Kopila Thapa, a 26-year-old informant noted that in the past, “[People] thought badly about [female guides]. People said, ‘It’s not women’s work.’ As for women going outside the house, people say in the Nepali situation that if a girl goes outside then she’s broken, they say that and think that.” However, Kopila also passionately stated, “Women shouldn’t only be staying just inside the house now. They shouldn’t only be doing housework. They also have to take all the knowledge of outside.” In both these statements, inside and outside are used less as descriptors of material space and more as adjectives describing a particular type of person. Importantly, inside is used to refer to how Nepali women used to be, while outside is used to refer to how a modern Nepali woman should be. The usage of these terms reflects both acknowledgment of long-held beliefs about women’s proper place in the domestic sphere and a direct challenge to this understanding of space.

The second set of paired terms—backward/forward (pachaadi/aghaadi)—is closely aligned with the first set of terms. Informants use the terms backward and forward to place themselves and other Nepalis within a linear narrative of development. Backward is used to describe the past, but also a way of being and thinking that is distinctly nonmodern.
For example, *backward* is used by informants to describe those archetypal individuals lacking the signatures of development, such as poor farmers (Pigg 1992), young uneducated brides (Ahearn 2001), or unemployed and (assumedly) drunken young men (Liechty 2010). These stereotypes of Nepali backwardness are revealing for what they lack: education, a particular kind of capitalist productivity, and acceptance of new social roles for men and women.

The desire of informants to distance themselves from backwardness is directly related to the state’s use of this term. According to state policy papers, annual public addresses by the head of state, and ubiquitous development initiatives, backward communities have stymied Nepal’s modernization efforts (Tamang 2002a; Leve 2009). The state’s discourse of forward and backward has trickled down into education materials, popular media, and finally, as shown in table 1, the daily parlance of informants. Given the negative connotation of *backward*, informants sought to firmly disassociate themselves from this term. As Kopila explained: “Modern Western women have so much freedom, for them it’s easy. From before a lot of change has already occurred [in the West]. In Nepal it has just, just now slowly change has occurred, that’s really challenging. It must be done, we must walk, but many people speak backwards.” In Kopila’s comment, speaking “backwards” is speaking against social change, women’s education, and women’s participation in the workforce. Kopila is careful to place herself with the “we” who do not “speak backwards.” Compare this to an excerpt from the state’s *10th Five Year Plan*: “Gender equality is the most important base for poverty eradication. It is necessary to merge socially and economically backward communities in the mainstream of development” (Government of Nepal 2003:515). In this quotation women are lumped in with so-called “backward communities.” In Kopila’s comment it becomes clear that her discussion of “backwards”-speaking people is also a reply to statements that presume to include her in “backward communities.”

Informants use spatial metaphors to explain the cause of Nepali women’s “undeveloped” status in terms of their inability to come outside and move forward. The following exchange that I had with Kamila Baarati, a 27-year-old high-caste (Brahmin) guide, exemplifies how these gender dynamics are articulated using spatial terms:

*AUTHOR:* Why were you surprised [about] women going [trekking]?
*KB:* In our *culture*, in the village . . . In our *culture* girls shouldn’t go outside, shouldn’t stay outside. Only sons can go out, says our *culture*. That kind of thing was on my mind. That’s why I was surprised and why I wanted to go.

The use of spatial terminology in Kamila’s reply reveals the persistence of a bounded definition of what a Nepali woman’s place in the home and in society has been. This place remains an important yet contested point of reference for informants in interpreting their own relationship to modernity. Although Kamila states that her “culture” dictates that “girls shouldn’t go outside,” she herself is a single woman who moved to an urban area and found wage employment, so her own biography exposes the fissures in this traditional conception of gendered space. Kamila’s language acknowledges the association of women with the inside, yet also asserts that going “outside the house” is something to which one should legitimately aspire.
As the antithesis of a backward identity, the term *forward* is used to connote a modern, developed, and contemporary way of being. Being forward is linked to education, urban dwelling, and capitalist productivity. Musing on the future of Nepal, Devi Pun, a 31-year-old guide from the Magar ethnic group who grew up in a farming community in Nepal’s southern tropical plains, predicted, “If we go 20 years forward in Nepal all the women will be educated probably, and all the women will be able to walk in freedom. And women, whatever they would like to do, whatever kind of job they want to do, according to that they will be able to stand on their own feet. That’s how I feel.” Here Devi reiterates that to come forward women not only should but must come outside, especially into the public domains of education and wage labor. It is not surprising that the very things the Nepali state promotes as evidence of development—education and capitalist productivity—are explicitly mentioned by Devi as the arenas that Nepali women will enter on their way to “freedom.” What is surprising however, is how informants like Devi describe women’s presence in public space using a language of autonomy and individual achievement. Such responses complicate recent claims that South Asian women tend to understand their labor participation in more “collectivistic” terms (Lynch 2007; Leve 2009; Vijayakumar 2013). As Devi’s statement makes clear, going forward involves not only the passing of time but the passage into a new set of norms and expectations for women, including opportunities to “[stand] on their own feet.”

**THE SPATIAL DYNAMICS OF GUIDING: GOING OUTSIDE FOR A LIVING**

While some women have always been visible in the public sphere of Nepal, outside of court royalty there have been very few socially legitimate and respectable public roles for women. Urbanization and the resultant expansion of a wage labor economy with a burgeoning service sector have opened up a variety of relatively socially acceptable public roles for women. Importantly, much of women’s movement into more publicly visible roles has relied on two major shifts. First, a dramatic rise in the rates of female education has prepared more women to enter the wage labor economy. A 2008 government of Nepal labor report reveals that in 1998–99 75.4 percent of women reported never attending school, whereas in 2008 that figure was only 58.2 percent (Government of Nepal 2008). However, profound gender disparity persists, as evidenced in the 2008 report’s literacy rates; 70.7 percent of men 15 and older were considered literate, compared to only 43.3 percent of women 15 and older. In a 2011 census this gap had closed somewhat, with literacy reported for 75 percent of the male population age five and older and 57 percent of the female population (Government of Nepal 2011). Second, as discussed earlier, a shift in Nepal’s labor market via industrialization and urbanization has opened up new public spaces for women in nonagrarian formal and informal sector employment. The 2008 labor census reports that, in just 10 years between 1998 and 2008, a 29.3 percent increase was seen in nonagricultural informal employment. This tremendous expansion is explained in part by the influx of millions of Nepalis displaced by the Maoist conflict into major urban areas such as Kathmandu and Pokhara. Women have benefited from the rapid expansion of cities and the accompanying need for manufacturing and service workers especially. However, women’s employment has been...
concentrated in particular occupational fields, which, not surprisingly, are still quite compatible with a woman’s domestic role. For example, female shop clerks, NGO workers, or teachers can still return home by late afternoon to cook, clean, and care for children. In her ethnography of a semiurban township in Nepal, Katharine Rankin (2004) compellingly argues that a key reason teaching was one of the very few socially acceptable professions for her high-caste female informants was that it both mirrored the traditional “mothering” expected of women and allowed women to be home in time to cook the family meal. Even as popular opinion continues to shift incrementally toward acceptance of increasing public visibility for women, ideals of female domestic seclusion still operate. Tellingly, many of my informants expressed a desire to eventually work in an appropriately feminine job such as teacher or social worker once they became too old to guide.

Unlike ideal forms of female wage labor that allow women to maintain their domestic role, a female guide quite literally walks out on her own, removed from any kinship circles and in the company of foreign strangers. Because guiding is not an ideal form of women’s labor, female guides face particular challenges in emphasizing the respectability of their profession. Given the tenuous respectability of their work, guides find it all the more important to discursively connect their own career choice with the discourse of progress, modernity, and development. Not only do informants reject being backward, they insist that their labor is emblematic of women coming forward. When I asked Devi Pun why it was hard to meet a good life partner, she replied, “Because in Nepal, now usually for women there’s not this freedom. That’s why I have gotten into this trekking profession. In this way we walk in freedom. For us we would like to stay with this freedom.” Devi’s answer exemplifies how informants discursively align themselves with the language of development and modernity, specifically with “freedom.” Using language invoked during Nepal’s recent democratic movements, Devi links her mobility as a female guide to Nepal’s national narrative of progress. Informants position themselves as the frontrunners of positive social change in their country and also their community, as exemplified in the following exchange with Man Maya Pun, age 20:

**AUTHOR:** The first time you heard about [female guides] how did you feel? Were you surprised?

**MMP:** I was surprised because in the village there’s no record of any of the girls leaving the house and going far.

In this comment, Man Maya frames her hypermobility as part of a sea change in social mores. By stating that there was “no record” of women leaving the house for work, Man Maya both suggests the pioneering nature of her own journey and gestures to the undercurrent of women’s exclusion that has historically defined the public sphere in Nepal. Informants discuss their work in terms of the “freedom” it gives them to “walk outside” in order to repurpose hegemonic language and position themselves as exemplars of Nepal’s successful development process. As the next section demonstrates, informants also use spatial metaphors as part of a broader account of the physical and social (im)mobility they experience as public women.
In conjunction with spatial metaphors, themes of mobility, or the lack thereof, are woven throughout informants’ everyday speech. Spatial metaphors are often deployed as part of complex narratives of mobility, which are the stories used by informants to describe shifts in women’s physical, social, and economic movement over time. In female guides’ narratives of mobility, the past is generally portrayed as a time of immobility for women, a time when women “couldn’t walk” and “couldn’t wander.” Conversely, the present is described as a time of increased mobility in which women are able to find opportunities to walk, wander, and see outside and beyond the domestic sphere.

Informants frequently juxtapose women’s lesser mobility in the past with their greater mobility in the present to highlight their own position as women with greater physical, social, and economic freedom than previous generations. For example, when I asked Swasta Rawal, a 24-year-old woman originally from an extremely remote region of Nepal, how women’s role in society had changed in the last 50 years, she replied: “For women, before in my mother’s age, daughters couldn’t go outside the house. Having married, they had to stay in the house. And people thought that she must manage the house. Now, in my age, people don’t have that negative thinking. Education has been made available to daughters as well. [Women] have walked outside the house. They have done their own work. It’s really different, before and now.” Just a decade earlier, Swasta had lived in a village with neither electricity nor access to a drivable road, yet today Swasta lives with a friend in a small flat in the heart of one of Nepal’s largest cities. Recently, Swasta used her saved earnings to purchase her own laptop computer. For Swasta, such change is indicative of the increased mobility that characterizes her life. Swasta asserts that women are now allowed to “walk outside,” whereas previously such movement would have been constrained by stricter norms of female domestic seclusion. Swasta contends that she has moved beyond the “negative thinking” of previous generations by working independently and pursuing an education. Explicitly citing her own mobility as evidence, Swasta counters the dominant narrative that women remain backward and clearly stakes a claim to a modern and developed identity.

An important component of female guides’ narratives of mobility is the use of verbs such as “walk” (hidné), “wander/explore” (gumné), or “see” (herné) in both a tangible sense, as in the physicality of trekking, and in the metaphoric sense of seeing the world and gaining knowledge beyond the family compound. Informants frequently use terms connoting mobility such as walk or wander to describe both the process of literally moving beyond the confines of the home and natal village and the generalized experience of living a life outside the domestic sphere. This makes sense given that women’s domestic role is often described using the verb basné, meaning both “to stay” and “to sit” (see table 1). For example, informants often explained women’s social role as ghar basné or bhitra basné, which means to sit/stay in the house or to sit/stay inside. In its usage, basné is domestic and feminized, while gumné and hidné are associated with the public sphere and masculinity. The association of
walking and wandering with public visibility is echoed in the following exchange between myself and Nitu Century, a 25-year-old informant:

AUTHOR: Do you feel that guide work is appropriate for women, then?
NC: If e e lg o o da b o utt h a t ,b e c a u s e...r e a l l y ,r i g h t ?I nm a n yn e wp l a c e s ,w a l k i n ga r o u n d is available [to women], right? There’s also income, for these reasons I feel really good about this for women.

AUTHOR: Are there negative things said about female guides?
NC: It could be the case, right. People aren’t all of the same opinion. For some with little education, those people see with a bad eye. Because it’s said to us women that we should only be staying in the home. And while women are going from the house to leave and do work, in people’s point of view it could also be bad.

Just as going outside represents a particular way of being a modern and developed Nepali citizen, walking and wandering represent a particular, and historically masculine, way of doing Nepali modernity. To walk, to wander, and to see outside connotes an ability to freely participate in public institutions that signify modern Nepal: government, higher education, wage labor, and city living. Because these venues have typically been reserved for men, informants’ use of the words walk, wander, and see suggests a purposeful appropriation of the verbs of masculinity and public visibility. Informants are asserting their own modernity by pairing their life experiences with these gendered terms.

Although narratives of mobility highlight newfound freedom of movement, informants are quick to point out that perceptions about women’s place in society are still mixed. Kopila Thapa reveals the continued prevalence of a dichotomous spatial ideology that places women in the domestic realm:

AUTHOR: In your opinion, why are guides usually only men?
KT: Hmm, now usually in Nepal whatever work is done is usually done by men. As for women, the house’s food, cooking, clothes, cleaning, [women] take care and stay. They care for the babies. If the work is done, then they also go to school. They should stay only in the house.

It is important to note that in this passage Kopila is speaking from her conception of a typical and normative viewpoint rather than her own opinion. Although Kopila recognizes a binary division of social roles as part of hegemonic understandings of gender in Nepal, her own life hardly reflects this ideal. Kopila is a lead guide, and during her six years of guiding experience she has earned the respect of her colleagues for her competency and skill. Given the disconnect between what she describes as the traditional gender division of labor and her own successful and rewarding career as a guide, I asked her to elaborate on how she saw her own life within Nepal’s larger modernity project:

AUTHOR: How can female guides be useful in Nepal’s development?
KT: In Nepal’s development female guides are very useful. Being a Nepali woman, explaining that like this is what guiding means, like this you walk, one can walk. First, in Nepal women who went outside, people didn’t think well [of them], now a little change has been brought.
As Kopila suggests, “a little change has been brought,” but ideals of female domestic seclusion linger. On the other hand, Kopila clearly aligns her own mobility and public presence as a wage worker with notions of “change,” progress, and modernity. An ongoing challenge for female guides is to stake an equal claim to the linguistic signifiers of modernity while maintaining a respectable identity as a young, Nepali woman.

CONCLUSION

In the context of rapid social change and the Nepali state’s ongoing push for development, spatial metaphors and narratives of mobility engage with and challenge hegemonic high-caste Hindu norms that consign women to the domestic sphere. Normative definitions of public and private space are changing to accommodate women’s new and more public role. Simultaneously these norms continue to subtly operate in Nepal’s most important institutions. The Nepali state is now officially secular, but a legacy of Hindu doctrine still permeates development discourse and policy. The state promotes a particular understanding of gendered space by arguing that Nepali women have yet to fully embrace modernity and remain relegated to the “backward” private sphere. Guides accept the narrative of modernity that is at the heart of the state’s development discourse but, through creative use of spatial metaphors and narratives of mobility, recast themselves as the subjects, and not just the objects, of development.

The case of female trekking guides enriches current knowledge of the creative, varied, and culturally specific techniques women in the global South use to navigate the often competing pressures of modernization efforts and normative gender regimes. Certainly Nepali women are not a monolith, and the great diversity of Nepali women necessarily means that various mediators of social location like caste, class, ethnicity, and geographic location will influence how development is experienced and navigated. Nevertheless, across this diversity there are some clear commonalities for young, working-class women in Nepal’s urban public sphere. This paper details the subtle but meaningful discursive work by which some Nepali women align their historically unconventional experiences with familiar narratives of modernity and progress. In particular, this article focuses on how the linguistic maneuvers of informants contest both hegemonic cultural norms and state-proffered narratives of development that implicitly exclude women from public space. By using the language traditionally associated with masculinity, that is, concepts of forward and outside, walking and wandering, guides position themselves as modern and developed citizens. Instead of aligning themselves with a traditionally feminine identity, informants discursively insert themselves into categories that have previously excluded them. They thereby lay claim to the status of modern citizen that state development discourse continually suggests is just beyond their reach.

REFERENCES


NOTES

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1. I identify my informants by a first-name pseudonym of their choosing. The second name (surname) refers to their real last name, which also indicates their caste and ethnic group. In addition I give the age of each informant.

2. The irony of this “safety” lecture was double and not lost on Tulsi. Tulsi was in danger, not from her foreign male friend, but from fellow Nepalis. Further, every morning on the very same walkway there were usually a dozen young Nepali men cruising for the attention of a foreign woman.

3. As many postcolonial scholars can attest to (Chakrabarty 2009), the terms development and modernity are fraught with tension. I use scare quotes at this first mention to reference the debate.
about the usefulness of these terms. In subsequent use of these words I drop the scare quotes for readability—though this does not imply that these concepts should be taken at face value.

4. Bolded words were spoken in English in the original.

5. Age categories were aggregated differently across the 2008 National Labor Report and the 2011 Census, making exact comparison of literacy rates for the same age group over time difficult.

6. Nonagricultural informal employment was defined as “paid employees with informal job conditions,” meaning no social security benefits or paid leave (Government of Nepal 2008). This encompasses the vast urban service sector that working-class and middle-class women tend to work in: shop clerk positions, restaurant work, administrative and clerical work, or apparel sales.