

# ‘Satisfied with My Job’—What Does She Mean?: Exploring the World of Women Construction Workers in Nepal

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## 1. THE QUESTION

How do women construction workers in Nepal evaluate their jobs? Upon asking the question, ‘How satisfied are you with your job?’, most of them merely replied, ‘satisfied (with my job)’. Thus, this paper is an attempt to clarify as to why or how they would answer in this manner by exploring what these women’s world of work is like, what kind of expectations they foster in relation to their jobs, and what type of performance makes them respond in this way.

Work in the construction sector is tough; the working environment is as rough in Nepal as, perhaps, anywhere in the world; a fact which anybody can figure out from a mere glance. However, if one looks into the trade, focusing on the female workers more closely, it soon becomes apparent that the difficulties Nepali women construction workers face are not limited to toughness and roughness of the trade; the wages they earn are the lowest in the sector, the prospect of increase in wages or development in career is practically non-existent, and the employment condition is extremely unstable. Further, the work is rather monotonous and far from rewarding. As a person becomes more familiar with the circumstances in which these women work, the larger the question looms about their response of ‘being satisfied’. The question becomes even more pressing when one compares the women construction workers to Nepali middle-class working women in terms of research data collected through the same structured interviews.<sup>1</sup> The comparison shows that the level of job satisfaction among working middle-class women was substantially lower than that among construction workers.<sup>2</sup>

Some responses of Nepali intellectuals with whom I had casual conversations on this matter seem noteworthy here. Instead of responding with-surprise, they rather took these workers’ satisfaction for granted. They reasoned that these workers have already got used to hardships in the trade, and that they, devoid of any education, were not aware of any better alternative or had simply given up hope for anything better. These

responses seem to mean that construction workers do not have enough sensitivity, intellect, or imagination to feel dissatisfaction with their present state of employment. Interestingly enough, the workers' satisfaction is here tacitly equated with *lack* of dissatisfaction and is explained by their *lack* of sensitivity, intellect, and so on; all of which the middle-class intellectuals presume they possess. For one thing, as it will be explored in the discussion below, people's satisfaction is not necessarily the same thing as their lack of dissatisfaction. For another, explaining the absence of some traits among certain people by another absence may not be logically sound, especially if the aim is to understand those people's living experience, and the aim of this research is to explain the construction workers' satisfaction, not their lack of dissatisfaction, by considering what they have, rather than what they do not have.

To briefly deviate from Nepal and reckon similar situations in a global context, the incidence of objectively *disadvantaged* workers expressing job satisfaction which is nearly akin to that of objectively *advantaged* workers appears fairly common (e.g. Mottaz 1986; Clark 1996; Warr 2003 [1999]). However, this does not diminish the necessity of exploring the situation of Nepalese workers. Irrespective of explanations in other locales or parameters correlated with expressed levels of job satisfaction across geographical boundaries, the more pressing question of female construction workers in Nepal can and needs to be fully answered by examining these women's living reality, which is exactly what this paper attempts to do. In short, the present project is ethnographic, that is, it aims to construct a view of the world as seen through the women construction workers' perspectives.

In the context of Nepali studies, this project's aim focused on an occupational and gendered category of people may appear rather exceptional in the ongoing discussions, academic or otherwise, on Nepali society. The dominant discussion categories in the last decade or so after the Maoists emerged as protagonists in the mainstream political scene have been predominantly ethnic, ascribed ones—*janajatis* or *madhesis*.<sup>3</sup> Here, we certainly witness a paradox. Saubhagya Shaha puts it this way: 'It must be considered a strange twist of fate that just when the communists finally emerged as the dominant force in Nepal, class as an analytic and political category has been replaced by ethnicity and identity as the major frames of intellectual, political and developmental engagement (2007: 233)'.

Why has this been so? Nobody who casts a glance at cultural, social or historical profiles of Nepali society can deny that ethnic issues are urgent. That aside, the urgency about ethnic issues should not mislead one into believing that class is *not* an issue here. Alongside the reintroduction of multi-party democracy in 1990, Nepal initiated a policy of economic liberalization that actually pushed its economy deeper into global

capitalism's periphery. In fact, sharp divisions among classes, or disparities in the distribution of wealth, deepened through the 1990s, with no sign of remedy so far.<sup>4</sup> Although some notable research exists on issues of class in Nepali society (e.g. Seddon et al. 2002; Liechty 2003; 2010; Rankin 2004; Fitzpatrick 2011), the drive towards greater understandings of the matter has been undeniably weak and needs a powerful boost.

This paper does not argue that issues of ethnic or ascribed identities are not as important as those of class. What is argued here is that the issues of class are at least as important as those of ethnic identity. Indeed, the threads of argument concerning class and ethnicity should be carefully sorted out.<sup>5</sup> At the moment, the dominance of ethnic discourse on Nepali society is such that the issues properly analysed from the viewpoint of class tend to be subsumed under the discursive frame of ascribed identities. This presumably aggravates certain analytic confusions as well as real-world conflicts. Eventually, it tends to cast out any understandings or breakthroughs in this seemingly deadlocked state of affairs of the country.

As the ethnically mixed composition of interviewees for the present study illustrates,<sup>6</sup> some aspects of Nepali society are not simply, or mainly, predicated upon ethnic identities, and they must be approached through the lens of class (or e.g. gender, occupation, region). Common sense alone tells us that every social phenomenon, every social cleavage, or every important difference is *not* derived from ethnic ascription. Researchers who aspire to tackle reality in current Nepali society should firmly reconstruct their efforts. This project was conceived as a step, if modest, towards that direction. The following section presents some basic information on the group of workers under study, before entering into the main discussion.

## 2. WOMEN CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN NEPAL

In the still predominantly agricultural Nepali world of work, close to one-fourth of the population works in the non-agricultural sector. In the non-agricultural sector, 11.9 per cent are employed in construction industry; of that percentage, 11.2 per cent (41,000) are women workers.<sup>7</sup> The modern construction industry is said to have taken root in Nepal in the mid-1960s (Jha 2002). Virtually all the workers engaged in the industry are informally employed. Construction is regarded as a major non-agricultural industry which informally employs a large workforce in Nepal.<sup>8</sup>

Inside Kathmandu Valley, female construction workers are concentrated in two types of jobs:<sup>9</sup> *jyami* or helper (hoddie) and *chips-marbal* or *chips*.<sup>10</sup> *Jyami* means an unskilled manual labourer—both male and female—who carries out various chores at construction sites. *Chips-marbal* means

grinding and finishing *marbal* (marble) floors or *chips* floors. *Chips* is a mix of cement, gravel and broken pieces of marble. *Marbal* and *chips* are now widely used as flooring both in residences and in commercial or office buildings in Nepali urban areas. This floor-finishing work is gender segregated, at least within Kathmandu Valley.<sup>11</sup>

*Chips-marbal* work is mainly performed using two types of grinding machines, large and small, which are owned by the workers.<sup>12</sup> Finishing works—including grinding corners where a machine cannot be used, cleaning and waxing—are all manually done. The typical 'career' pathway for a woman construction worker is to enter the construction sector as *jjami* and then, as she accumulates experience and expands her job-related social network, to gradually move into *chips* work. As a result, long-term workers are almost invariably *chips* workers. Accordingly, this study's discussion mainly focuses on *chips* workers.

The data in this study was mainly collected in a series of structured interviews,<sup>13</sup> the bulk of them conducted in Kathmandu Valley<sup>14</sup> from August 2011 through March 2012. In all, 51 female construction workers were interviewed,<sup>15</sup> out of which 42 engaged in *chips* work. Interviews were usually conducted on the interviewees' worksites, i.e. construction sites, which facilitated the researcher's ability to closely observe their work. Additional data were obtained through informal conversations, observations at construction workers' meeting points (especially a point adjunct to Ratna Park at the heart of Kathmandu), at their gatherings, union meetings

TABLE 1. SUMMARY INFORMATION ON THE INTERVIEWEES

Question	Response	
Age	17 ~ 76 years old (average = 40.5)	
Marital status	Married = 36; bereaved or separated = 12; unmarried = 3	
Ethnicity/caste	Parbate Hindus = 16 or 18* (including 1 Dalit) janajatis = 27 or 29* (7 Newars, of whom 1 Dalit)	
Birthplace	Within Kathmandu Valley = 15; beyond the Valley = 36	6 unknown
Present residence	Within Kathmandu Valley = 44; beyond the Valley = 7	
Job category	<i>Chips-marbal</i> = 42;** <i>jjami</i> = 3; painting = 2; gravel extraction = 4	
Job experience	Less than a year ~ 37 years (average = 15.5)	
Unionised or not	Unionised = 37; non-unionised = 13	1 unknown
Job satisfaction	satisfied = 37; so-so = 11; not satisfied = 2	1 unknown
Continue the present job?	yes = 39; no = 3; do not know = 9	

\* If two Thapas (who could either be Parbate Hindu or janajati) are included.

\*\* Two of them also do painting.

and at their homes. Table 1 presents summary interviewee information directly related to the discussion.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. DISCUSSION

This discussion contains three sections. The first section reports on investigations of the women construction workers' world of work. It examines the ways they evaluate and compare their jobs in relation to other jobs in their world of work. The second section examines the work in relation to the women's expectations; some expectations are fulfilled from their work and, in turn, their work nurtures some of their expectations. In other words, the question is how the work and the women's expectations interact. The third section analyses the women's statements about them being 'satisfied'. Put differently, the utterance is examined as a performative act that involves not only *saying* but also *doing* something through its execution.

#### 3.1. COMPARISONS

These workers' stated satisfaction must be elucidated, in part at least, through favourable evaluation of their present work (*chips* work) in comparison with other types of work, i.e., those jobs they have actually held or those they could hold in other circumstances. Other possible types of work are the following: subsistence labour in a village (most were born and raised in rural Nepal and then immigrated to the Valley as adults), including fieldwork, fetching firewood or water and various household chores; unskilled work in the construction sector (*jyami* work), including carrying loads of bricks or sand, mixing cement and so on, which many did before moving into *chips* work; and other informal jobs, including weaving carpets, sewing, cleaning, domestic work, home-based work and so on. This list constitutes their world of work and provides comparisons for measuring their present satisfaction. However, this does not mean that the women are unaware of any work beyond the ambit of *their* world of work.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, one should also bear in mind the domestic labour involved in maintaining one's household, which is not an alternative for a construction job but something that they must do alongside this or any other job. Their subsistence domestic labour may be regarded as *basso continuo*, as it were, in their world of work.

What many of these women first say when describing *chips* work is that they do not have to carry loads.<sup>18</sup> Carrying heavy loads on one's back, secured by a band on the forehead is common and persists in subsistence labour in a village or in unskilled construction work.<sup>19</sup> Carrying loads which weigh nearly the same as, or are sometimes heavier than, one's body weight is physically demanding to say the least. Moreover, in Nepal,

carrying such loads has rightly come to be something that is symbolic of pain or drudgery (*dukha*), and thus it indicates one's weak economic standing or class position: only those forced to do so by circumstances carry such loads (Dixit 2004 [1996]). Although *chips* work is not devoid of any physical hardships, it does allow a worker to *not* carry loads, and from the women's perspective, this is a crucial point in the *chips* work's favour.

Remuneration for daily *chips* work was in the range of ₹ 250 to 300 at the time of this project, and it is generally higher than wages offered for the alternative jobs listed above in the informal job market. Interestingly, *chips* work does not pay a higher wage than *jyami*. An outside observer may question why unskilled *jyami* work pays the same as skilled *chips* work. Could this be explained, in part, by the work's gender segregation?<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, the *chips* workers themselves do not pose these queries; for them, the value of *chips* work lies in the fact that it pays better than most other types of informal work.

However, another factor must be taken into account here. Because employment in the construction sector is unstable, income from *chips* work is not necessarily high when calculated on a monthly or even long-term basis. The *chips* workers may be unemployed for days, weeks or even months. Thus, a worker, when evaluating her employment, considers the situation by mulling over the following to herself: 'I am satisfied if I've got work; dissatisfied, if I haven't'.

Whether *chips* work's wage standard is justifiable according to the skills required or whether its long-term remuneration is better or worse in terms of the informal job market, a fundamental advantage is that it pays at all. The same is true for other jobs, of course. While the fact that the work may be unjustly or intermittently remunerated may well bear considerable significance for these workers, the bedrock of their world of work is founded on unpaid domestic labour for household consumption, which most of them have been doing practically all their lives. Accordingly, the women evaluate every job they do against that labour as well. Earning money in exchange for labour makes their economic contribution readily visible and affords them a greater power to behave according to their discretion. In response to the question about control of the money that they earn, all but one worker reported that they keep the money and mostly spend it themselves. Even so, most purchases are not of personal goods but for the whole family's day-to-day needs. One worker stated that she took the job to have 'pocket money', so she would not have to ask for money from her husband for day-to-day expenses. She also stated that she paid tuition for her children and for cooking gas cylinders. The greater part of her household budget appears to be coming from her earnings, and she seems happy about it—not an isolated case, by far.

The situation just described is starkly different from that of a woman

engaged in unpaid subsistence labour in a village, in which case, economic contributions are not readily visible, and accordingly, the fruit of her labour cannot be expended according to her discretion. This situation essentially also applies to those who spend their day doing unpaid domestic labour. I am not contending that full-time housewives in Kathmandu (or in other parts of the world, for that matter) are generally dissatisfied—this actually turns out not to be the case<sup>21</sup>—but that the relative invisibility of their labour contribution and the necessity of economic dependence on their partners may negatively affect their evaluation of housewifery.

The *chips* workers evaluate their jobs highly on the generally agreeable social relations and quite extensive social networks they develop by working. They work in small numbers, one to four-five people at the most, at a construction site, and they either work for a daily wage or contract the work by the number of square-feet. Their working is quite independent of, and certainly not subject to dictation by other (mostly male) workers at the same site (although occasional co-operation is both required and done, of course). Usually, they oversee their own work. A *chips* worker who has contracted the site is by definition in a position to oversee the work, but usually the contractor also works alongside the daily wage earners. Quite often the contractor is the only *chips* worker on the site. In other words, *chips* workers work independently and without direct supervision. Unwanted pressure or offensive behaviour from the supervisors' end is rare, rather than imminent. Also noteworthy is the generally amicable and horizontal relationship among the workers—'we sisters', as they occasionally call themselves. That aside, the positions of contractor and wage earner are not rigidly fixed.<sup>22</sup> If one worker contracts a site, other workers receive daily wages to complete the contract; next, a wage earner may contract another site, where the former contractor works as a wage earner.

The construction workers' sisterly relationships extend beyond individual worksites. Of the several meeting points in Kathmandu Valley, the largest and most bustling one is on the northwest edge of Ratna Park, where construction workers and contractors gather in the mornings to find work or workers, exchange information and socialise over a cup of tea.<sup>23</sup> The *chips-marbal* grinding workers generally flock together to chat. Some stay well into mid-day because they could not find work that day. Some go on to visit each other's rooms.<sup>24</sup> In short, they find 'mates' in this occupation. They construct fairly broad networks of co-workers as they work at various sites scattered across, or even beyond, the Valley, where construction work has been booming for decades. With these extended networks of co-workers and their consequent familiarity with the Valley's transportation system, their social world and geographical mobility seems impressively broad ranging.

Social environments differ substantially from other jobs. *Jyami* work is done under the constant orders and supervision of others. In garment or carpet-weaving work, performance is continuously scrutinised and the workers need to sit at their factory workstations the whole day. In paid domestic work, the employee must constantly heed others' needs and, worse, are possibly subjected to the employer's misconduct. Usually isolated behind walls, domestic workers have extreme difficulty reaching peers and constructing a network among them (GEFONT 2011; Sato 2011). Finally, home-based workers have much in common with domestic workers in terms of social isolation.

The working schedule for *chips* constitutes another advantage for the women. When asked about working hours, they invariably state that regular working hours begin at 10:00 a.m. and end at 5:00 p.m., with up to half an hour break for snacks. These hours are considerably shorter than the possible alternatives.<sup>25</sup> Those who had experience in garment or carpet factories reported that those jobs begin at approximately 8:00 a.m. and end at 6:00 p.m., with frequent overtime. Although for domestic or home-based work, it is difficult to generalise the same because hours vary with every case, but it seems safe to say that the hours are generally longer than those for construction workers. This is certainly true if hours 'waiting on' somebody are included, especially in the case of full-time domestic workers (Sato 2011). Home-based workers generally do piece-work and the extremely low piece-rates mean that the workers have no choice but to work long hours to earn a substantial amount of income.

Observations reveal, moreover, that the *chips* workers' actual hours can be even shorter than what they have stated. In a number of cases, the workers stayed at the meeting point past 10:00 a.m., which means that they could have got to a worksite around 10:30 at the earliest.<sup>26</sup> If they work on a contractual basis, scheduling can be even more flexible. As long as the work is completed within the required time, when and how long the contractors work is left entirely to their discretion.

The ability to take time off when they decide to do so is also a positive point for construction workers. Given the unstable and competitive environment, where obtaining work is not always possible, the workers tend to work as much as they can without taking time off, unless circumstances force them to do otherwise. So they may not actually rest more than workers in other jobs. However, the important thing for the workers is not that they can afford to take more time off but that their decision to do so is not impeded by those who exercise authority over them. This circumstance is again far apart from, say, that of domestic workers. If working full-time, domestic workers have no regular day off and must plead with the employer to be granted some time off when they need it. Worse, the domestic worker must compensate the employer by



way of docked wages or by providing the service due afterwards (Sato 2011).<sup>27</sup>

### 3.2. EXPECTATIONS

*Chips* workers' job satisfaction should also be understood in the light of their work-related expectations. These include their expectations towards their work (what they actually need to receive from their work) and the expectations their work makes it possible to sustain (whether these expectations are fulfilled is another matter). That is, their satisfaction can be partly explained by what they expect to get from doing their job, and also, what they *can* expect by way of doing their job. Let us start with what they expect from their work.

What they definitely expect, or rather need, from their work is their families' living, which they have been getting so far with varying degrees of prosperity. As a long-time *chips* worker put it, 'Even if not in the same way as those who have got wealth would do'. Expressing satisfaction, many of them go on to relate, 'Eating and wearing needs are being met'. In other words, they can provide food and clothing for their families. As mentioned, reportedly the *chips* workers spend their earnings mostly on basic living expenses. As another worker observed, 'If womenfolk do not do the work and earn money, a home would not go on'. In a few cases, women stated that their earnings were subsidiary to their household budget, but none of them seemed to spend their income solely for personal gratification. Actually, around half (21 cases) claimed that they contribute the most money to their household economy. In some 10 cases, they were the sole contributor.

Apart from food and clothing, the women strive the most to cover the cost of educating their children. When responding about job satisfaction, many of the *chips* workers added, 'And I am able to cover the cost to have my children attend school'. Significantly, many of these women send their children to private boarding schools. They definitely incur more economic burden than what they would have if these women had sent their children to governmental schools, but they believe private schools provide a better education, and thus, a better future for their children.<sup>28</sup> The ability to provide their children a better education and, potentially, a better future via their earnings constitutes a large part of their positive feelings about construction work.

While the income can provide what the worker expects to obtain, it can also encourage the worker's hopes. In other words, work nourishes expectations. For many, if not for all, being able to hold on to some expectation—never mind about its realisation—is in itself quite important.

It is noteworthy here that many *chips* workers are upholding a prospect or a possibility for a better future by engaging in this job, however modest it is. How can this be when *chips* wages do not rise with experience and no career path offers a step up from this demanding physical labour? Expectations nourished by *chips* work appear twofold: one, something to be hoped for in the present generation and two, in the next generation.

Upon entering the trade, the *chips* workers hope to purchase their own *misin* or grinding machine, large or small, which would earn them an additional ₹ 100 per day. A small machine costs about ₹ 2,000 and a large one about ₹ 25,000. Similarly to unskilled *jjami* and skilled *chips* workers earning the same wage, the vast disparity in investment seems at odds with a similar return. However, two facts justify the arrangement: the area to be ground using a small machine is correspondingly small, and this machine is generally deemed more difficult to handle than a big machine. Using the small machine increases the chance of cuts and severely exposes the operator to stone dust.<sup>29</sup>

Over a period of time, many workers gather a machine or two, even three in some cases, and begin to contract jobs, building on the knowledge, social networks and negotiation skills they have developed in the trade.<sup>30</sup> Contracting offers the possibility of making more money than working for a daily wage. At times, contractors incur deficits, and contracting *chips* workers always mention the unpredictability of income from contract work.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, the prospect of more substantial income or the chance for a 'bigger deal' seems significant to many. As a woman said, 'You get to have a chance to deal with big money, if you take up a contract'. However, the contracting workers also stress that the chance of a good deal has decreased in recent years because of fiercer competition among the ever-increasing number of contractors.<sup>32</sup> And yet, somehow, the expectation of a 'big deal' seems to have survived with some air of reality among these workers, at least at the time of this research.

The second expectation is not for themselves, but for their children, the next generation. As mentioned, these women take great pains to send their children to private schools and gain satisfaction from their ability to do so. They sustain their hope that their children will have a better future by paying for their education. Or, to put it the other way around, their expectations for their children's future are sustained by schooling them via their earnings. Whether their expectation for their children's future is to be fulfilled, by definition, is unknown presently. Even then, being able to pay tuition for their children should certainly be regarded as a source of satisfaction in their jobs. Because it is this expectation or the hope itself, not its realisation, that fuels their present sense of satisfaction; the uncertainty of its fruition does not necessarily diminish its significance.

If that was the case, what is a 'better' future for their children—as imagined by these workers? They expect their children to acquire a 'good

job', that is, a white-collar position in the formal sector, where employees are paid better, their jobs are more stable, more prestigious and offer greater benefits. These positions go only to those with a school-leaving, or higher, certificate in hand. Because of the *dukha*—the sufferings and hardships—these women endure in their present jobs, they do not want their children to acquire the kind of job they themselves embrace.<sup>33</sup> Does this attitude mean they denigrate their work, and for that matter, themselves? The discussion will return to this point (3.3).

However, perhaps equally significant is what these women did *not* mention about job satisfaction and expectations. Conspicuously absent from their narratives is comparison with men's jobs—men's jobs, say, in the same construction sector. These women neither expect earnings comparable to the earnings of men from their present job nor do they aspire to have 'men's jobs' for themselves.<sup>34</sup> The absence of any expectation in women that they be dealt with in the same terms as men appears to keep *chips* workers from being dissatisfied.

As mentioned, gender segregation in this sector, except for *jyami*, is rather rigid, and no women (or men) seem to have challenged it, and as already mentioned, *chips* work is the lowest paid job (₹ 250 to 300 per day); its wage level equals only that of unskilled *jyami*. Other jobs in this sector, occupied by men, pay much higher on an average, although rates vary according to skill and knowledge. For example, starting at ₹ 300 per day as a novice, a fully skilled painter commands ₹ 800 per day and a fully skilled carpenter, ₹ 1,000. Now, you may say that *chips* work does not particularly require deep knowledge and skill; a novice can function, under others' guidance, on the day she begins.<sup>35</sup> But it should be noted that even painters can do the same. As a matter of fact, according to the long-time *chips* workers, it takes almost a year to become fully acquainted with the trade: to gain sufficient knowledge and experience of using and maintaining the machines; to be acquainted with people in and around the trade, and so on. Conservatively put, the *chips* workers are underpaid. One cannot help suspecting gender discrimination here. If these women had considered the 'comparable worth' of their work against men's (painters, for instance), their expectations for and satisfaction with their jobs might not have shown the same results in this study.

Another conspicuous absence from their narratives is any expectation for the job to be rewarding in itself. None of the interviewees expressed resentment for the monotonous, possibly boring nature of the job. One can infer that this aspect of *chips* work does not negatively affect their job satisfaction.

### 3.3. PERFORMANCE

This section turns to another aspect of why the *chips* workers respond as 'satisfied'. Their responses must be understood not just in terms of what

their state of mind is or how it comes into effect. For complete understanding, their words must be explained not only in the contexts of the circumstances surrounding their jobs or how they perceive their jobs, but also in the context of its uttering, that is, the conversation between them and a foreign researcher seemingly eager to know about their work and lives. In replying that they are satisfied with their jobs, what kind of action are they performing? Next, we explore *what they do* by responding thus. To put it differently, the thing at stake is the performative aspect of their speech.

Reading into the exact words the women used to express their satisfaction reveals a lot. Almost without exception, they were '*santusht nai chu*' or '*santushtai chu*'. That is, the adverb meaning 'satisfied' (*santusht*) was used with '*nai*' or '*-ai*', generally used to add emphasis to the attached adverb. With this emphasis, the phrase cannot be taken to mean that they are *perfectly* satisfied with their jobs. As explained previously, there are several reasons for satisfaction with *chips* work. However, the emphasis the women use here conveys a paradox: it implies that satisfaction is expressed not simply *for several good reasons*, but rather *considering all the perceived conditions that might make them feel otherwise*. In other words, they express satisfaction *in spite of* the grievances or dissatisfaction with the negative features of *chips* work.

The women imply the paradox of their satisfaction through their wording, as above, and in a number of cases they also add revealing statements: 'I would say that I am satisfied'; 'Satisfied—I must be'; 'Who would take care of me, if I complain?' Together, these statements reveal that the women are *choosing* to state that they are satisfied even when they are well aware of conditions that could or do negatively affect their feelings. After all, they well know that *chips* work is far from perfect: 'It is a job of hardships' or '*dukha ko kam*', as many succinctly put it.

Thus, what are the conditions they perceive that might adversely affect their satisfaction?

First, the women doing *chips* work face various problems and difficulties, which, naturally, they are aware of from their experience. During the interviews, although some workers tried to dismiss problems as 'no big deal', a number of workers came forward to relate a plethora of their difficulties. As mentioned at the outset, the physical environment of their workplace is invariably rough and yet safety equipment is practically non-existent. Workers have no goggles, masks or protective clothing; they work literally with bare hands and feet.<sup>36</sup> This circumstance naturally allows injuries (e.g. cuts, abrasions or electric shocks from the grinding machines) to occur more frequently than they might with appropriate safety equipment. In addition, the workers are subject to certain chronic diseases (e.g. asthma or eye problems caused by dust, back or knee pain especially during cold weather).

Although these women's remuneration is not particularly bad in the informal job market, their level of income from this job alone does not allow them to make provisions for rainy days either, and no social security programmes cover workers in the Nepali informal jobs.<sup>37</sup> To make the women's already unsteady economic situation worse, receiving late wages, or even no wages at all, sometimes occurs.<sup>38</sup> With immigrant workers from rural areas pouring into the job market, the workers acutely feel that job competition is getting fiercer and the rates for *chips* contracting are increasingly difficult to maintain, while the cost of living continues to rise.

Last, but not least, the low social esteem of construction work in general, especially for women workers, aggravates the women's plight. Although many workers did not dare to speak up, some exceptionally eloquent and outspoken women came forward to say that the social perception of *chips* workers was '*khatam*', that is, it was so bad that it could not get any worse. They are perceived as sexually 'loose' women and women with no respectability. In the context of Nepali society to this day, the respectability of women may get compromised as they work or simply go outside and interact with males outside their families. They can be suspected of having (wanted or unwanted) sexual encounters in those interactions, and if they are caught in the act, their reputations for chastity would be undermined anyway.<sup>39</sup> In this undeniably male-dominated industry, women workers must have some interaction with male co-workers. Incidents of sexual harassment or assault at work sites are not unheard of in this sector also. These damage not only victims' minds and bodies but also their reputations.<sup>40</sup>

In contrast to social contexts in other countries, working in the male-dominated construction industry does *not* compromise a woman's femininity in Nepal, where unskilled female workers make up such an integral part of the industry's workforce and *chips* work segregated by gender is well-established. In the US context, for instance, women in the construction industry tend to be seen as being engaged in some form of gender transgression. They are often viewed, by others and perhaps by themselves, as 'masculine' women (Latour 2008). In Nepal, it is obvious that women construction workers are no less feminine than women in any other occupations. They wear saris, put on lipstick, marry, bear children, and take care of their families as Nepali women in other occupations would do. On top of that, they are as vulnerable as any women in Nepal in terms of their sexual reputations, as we just saw. These difficulties would of course cause reservations in their job satisfaction.

Second, *chips* workers do perceive some jobs as more desirable than theirs, as touched on in the last section (3.2.). That is, they say they are satisfied with their jobs *even if* they know there are 'better' occupational options—presumably better paying, more stable, more respectable, white

collar jobs—in this world. However, they are fully aware that they cannot ever aspire to do such a job because they are uneducated. ‘I couldn’t get to be educated, so this is the way for me to make a living’, reasons one worker, a mother of two. As discussed above, they project that type of expectation and aspiration onto their children, educating them at some expense and thus embracing their expectations for the future.

Significantly, the women’s outlook on better or worse occupational options—in line with the dominant outlook of Nepali society across class boundaries—does not cause the women to denigrate their present jobs or themselves: not only because they value the job’s positive points (3.1.) or because they appreciate that it fulfils and sustains certain expectations (3.2.), but also because they know that obtaining any of those good jobs is squarely beyond their entitlement and thus, their accountability. They also realise that many share a similar position in society. On account of the occupational networking discussed above, they see themselves as *sisters* for whom their class position, gender, time and place prevented the possibility of education.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, they appear to have developed a realistic understanding that every job, good as it may be, entails its own difficulties and hardships. As a long-time *chips* worker put it, ‘They say even a job, in which all you do is go ‘round on your chair and slide your pen, has its own difficulties’. They rightly reason that problems, difficulties and hardships in jobs are not a fate reserved only to labourers.

Building on their wisdom about the nature of work, on their knowledge of better occupational options that have been unavailable to them and on their experience of various *chips*-job difficulties, but always remembering their job’s comparative advantages, in the final analysis, they respond, ‘satisfied’. This response does not transparently and automatically reflect an uncomplicated state of mind. From their context and perspective, it takes a lot to utter the word *satisfied*. Indeed, one can detect a quite complex exercise of agency in motion here.

In telling contrast to what some middle-class Nepali intellectuals expected of women construction workers, these workers pronounce ‘satisfied’ not because they are too insensitive to feel the hardships, not because they are too dull to perceive and articulate grievances, not because they are ignorant of alternative jobs and not because they have no hope for a better future. The *chips* workers say they are satisfied, but with full awareness of hardships in their present jobs and of better jobs they cannot obtain, of hope for their own and their children’s generation. Pronouncing themselves satisfied should be seen as truly thoughtful, realistic, positive and resilient. They understand their world, accept their places in it and, nonetheless, cherish hope for the future. In the last analysis, what is executed through uttering ‘satisfied’ is a decisive performance.

## 4. CONCLUSION

How can Nepali women construction workers say they are satisfied with their jobs? We have explored the question from three different viewpoints. First, their job—*chips* work—was situated in their world of work; in spite of its rough and tough profile, the work has a number of advantages compared with other possible alternatives. *Chips* work is a relatively light, socially relaxed, flexibly arranged and comparatively well paid job that is available to them. Secondly, the job was examined in relation to two kinds of expectations: expectations of the job itself and the expectations that its remuneration lets them nourish. They expect to earn a living—often plus the cost of education for their children—and that is what exactly they receive. In addition, the work lets them harbour the expectations that they can earn more by contracting than what they do via daily wages and also that by investing in education for their children, they create a better future for the next generation. Third, their responses were analysed as an act they perform through their utterance. From the women workers' standpoint, the utterance expresses their will to sustain hope despite the difficult circumstances that could negatively affect their responses.

This project, to answer the looming question of how the women can answer 'satisfied' under rather difficult working conditions, has provided much information about women construction—notably *chips*—workers in Nepal. One last note, perhaps already clarified in the main discussion but possibly not clearly enough: one may still wonder if their expressed satisfaction could be complicit in maintaining the status quo, thus hampering attempts at change, especially on the workers' own initiatives. That is not the case by far, I would argue. As delineated in some detail, the women are well aware of the problems in their working environment, and yet they have been, and are, willing to remain in the trade as inferred by their expressed satisfaction.<sup>42</sup> Thus, their satisfaction does not seem to contribute to maintaining the status quo. It might rather be regarded as a prerequisite to take action at all for the betterment of working conditions. With their expressed willingness to remain on the job and their awareness of problems to be addressed, they are basically ready to voice their demands.<sup>43</sup> After all, workers' willingness and empowerment to stand up for themselves is the first necessity for solving labour problems—so the change might be impending, the concrete contour to be built only by the future.

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## NOTES

1. Interviews of women construction workers were conducted by the author as part of a larger research project, which comprised interviews of four groups of women, mainly in Kathmandu. Those were street vendors, middle-class working women and housewives, apart from construction workers. As for the data on which this paper builds its argument, see below (section 2).
2. Among 56 working middle-class women respondents, only 17 replied 'satisfied', while most others stated 'so-so'.
3. See Aditya (2007; 2009), Ajit (2008), Lawoti (2005), Pfaff-Czarnecka (2009), to list a few.
4. According to National Living Standard Surveys, in 1995-6, the share of consumption for the bottom 20 per cent of the population accounted for 8 per cent of the total consumption, while the richest 20 per cent of the population accounted for 45 per cent, which remained almost the same after 15 years in 2010-11. In between, in the 2003-4 survey, the disparity in consumption was reported to have widened (Central Bureau of Statistics 2011).
5. The interconnections or engagements between class and ethnic phenomena should be articulated, of course.
6. See table 1 below. The ratio of Bahun-Chettri (of Parbate Hindu) interviewees turns out to be roughly in line with the ratio of this group in the composition of Nepali population in general (that is 28.8 per cent, see Central Bureau of Statistics (2012)), while the rest consist almost entirely of hill *janajatis*. Note that the question about ethnic/caste identity was *not* included in the questionnaire but inferred from their surname, thus inevitably some unknown cases remained.
7. All statistics are from Nepal Labour Force Survey 2008 (Central Bureau of Statistics 2009: Table 7.6).
8. Informal employment includes all workers in the informal sector, which consists of enterprises employing none or less than ten employees, and all employees in informal jobs, which do not have paid annual leave or social security contribution for the worker by the employer (Central Bureau of Statistics 2009: 26-7). Thus, one can be informally employed in the formal sector.
9. Outside the Valley, women are engaged in other types of construction jobs such as gravel extraction, brick-making, placing of concrete as well as *jjami* work (see below).
10. Very few are also found in painting of walls and ceilings.
11. Outside the Valley, it is said that male workers also do *chips* work.
12. Not every *chips* worker owns a machine(s). See the discussion below.
13. Pre-arranged questionnaire was used in the interviews, but interviewees were encouraged to respond freely and speak their minds so that a rich narrative data could be collected.
14. A few interviews were conducted outside Kathmandu Valley (in Banepa and Pokhara).
15. Interviewees were approached through the connection of a union in construction and related industry, CUPPEC Nepal, an affiliate of GEFONT (General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions). As a result, as is shown in Table 1, the bulk of interviewees turned out to be union (CUPPEC) members. While this may constitute some data bias, it was necessary to approach interviewees at all and in that sense was inevitable. Nonetheless, possible bias resulting from this method of data collection should be borne in mind when reading the discussion.



16. Questions on the following topics were asked in the interviews (those listed on Table 1 are underlined): (A) general information (name, age, marital status, birthplace, present residence, years living in Kathmandu, educational record, family members, etc.), (B) present work-life related issues (job category, job experience, employment status, working hours per week, monthly/daily income, dispend of earnings, degree of contribution in the household income, involvement in domestic work, workload assessment, occupational health, gender-related and other problem(s) at workplace, etc.), (C) union related issues (union membership, years of union affiliation, depth of involvement in union activities, etc.), (D) work experience and expectation (previous job(s), job satisfaction and intention to continue the present job).
17. See the discussion below (3.2. and 3.3.).
18. In general, that is. Actually, moving the big grinding machine from one site to another (or from one floor to another within a site) is a back-breaking task, which takes four to five people to accomplish (plus a vehicle, in the case of moving one from one site to another). A number of workers cited this task as one of the most difficult in their work.
19. Carrying loads of building materials from one place to another constitutes the main task for *jyami*.
20. See the discussion below (3.2.).
21. In research on housewives (*grihini*) in Kathmandu administered in the same period, 17 out of 51 respondents answered 'satisfied' while only four replied decisively 'dissatisfied'. The questionnaire applied for housewives was designed largely in line with that for working women, with some modifications needed to suit their housewifery situation.
22. But there are a few who work only by contract, while others work only for daily wages. Among respondents in the former category, two women have ceased to work *chips* themselves for the past several years because of health problems. Although these two should technically be regarded as employers, not as workers, that did not seem to be how they saw themselves or other workers saw them. Accordingly, they are counted among workers here.
23. If a worker's site for the day is already fixed, the worker can directly go to the site.
24. Very few *chips* workers live on their (family's) own property in Kathmandu. They almost invariably live in rented rooms.
25. These hours are the as-for-governmental jobs in Nepal.
26. They may work late to compensate for the loss of time, but I encountered cases where they did not. Anyway, even if they do, the advantage of flexible working hours remains for the workers.
27. In recent years, with the arrival of dry season, however, extensive hours of load-shedding make it difficult for *chips* workers to work regular hours. They had no choice but to adapt their working schedules in accordance with the power supply, and thus to arrange their working schedule extremely flexibly.
28. However, it seems that not only the tuition but also the quality of education varies greatly from school to school even in the private sector.
29. Some long-time workers stated that they had ceased to operate a small machine because of those difficulties.
30. *Chips* work by contract seemed to have started some two decades ago. Before that, all the work was done on a daily wage basis, and none of the *chips* workers possessed their own machines. They used those provided by their employers,

according to the long-time workers. This process of 'contractualisation' is part of the global trend in which workers must take more risk and are stripped of whatever protection they enjoyed as workers. The trend usually entails the process often called 'informalisation', which strips workers of job security, entitlements to benefits, and so on, none of which *chips* workers—or any other workers in informal job market in Nepal—has ever enjoyed in the first place.

31. Unpredictability of employment is such that one cannot say how much they would earn on a daily wage basis either. Asking their monthly income is futile because of the work's instability.
32. On the other hand, the terms of contract are also affected by the number of construction projects, which, as some *chips* workers rightly pointed out, is partly dependent on the market's money supply and affected by the economy's overall condition.
33. I have not encountered a single case of a second-generation *chips* worker so far.
34. There are very few female painters, who to this day appear to remain exceptions to the rule.
35. That can be the case because occupational safety education in this trade (or in some other construction related trade) is virtually absent.
36. They wear sandals, except for two who wear gumboots.
37. Establishment of universal social security scheme for workers in Nepal has been high on the agenda of the construction workers union (CUPPEC-Nepal), of which many of the interviewees are members.
38. But this seems to be a labour issue the union has addressed quite effectively.
39. Here is the mechanism that blames the sexual victims at work, a situation also often encountered in other parts of the world.
40. But those who spoke up about this issue added that the situation has been changing for the better, both in terms of perception and actual violence.
41. Among 51 respondents, no one has a school-leaving certificate, and most of them (38) have never attended formal schooling.
42. In the interviews, whether they would continue in their present occupation was asked immediately after the question about job satisfaction. Their answers were predominantly affirmative—39 of 51—as shown in Table 1.
43. Here we return to the question of data bias mentioned before the main discussion: the bias that might have been incurred by approaching interviewees via a union connection. My estimation is that the bias is not that significant; of 13 non-union workers of 51 respondents, only 2 responded that they are not satisfied with their job, whereas 9 of them expressed their will to continue in the job.

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