Jan Brunson. 2016. *Planning Families in Nepal: Global and Local Projects of Reproduction.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

The two and half century of Nepali state can be understood as a period of changing relations between the rulers and the ruled. The formation of families was one among many areas in which these relations have been manifested. Until 1951, the state's direct involvement in the making of families was through codifying rules of sexual liaisons, based primarily on caste and ethnicity (Höfer 1979).

The end of Rana rule in 1951 redefined the relationship between the ordinary citizen-subjects and Nepali state. Forced labor got delegitimized, excessive taxation on agricultural producers was curbed, and formal guaranteeing of equal citizenship meant that the archaic rules of sexual liaisons were no longer acceptable. This post-Rana period was also a period of greater connection with the world beyond the national borders, and increasing integration of places and peoples within. This external connection and internal integration enacted a host of interventions: literacy and education, health, agricultural development, road building, electricity, radio programs, and family planning.

Anthropologist Jan Brunson's book, *Planning Families in Nepal: Global and Local Projects of Reproduction,* explores the relationships between the project of family planning and women's decisions regarding their family size and composition. The book focuses on Hindu women in Vishnupura, a pseudonymous place near Kathmandu. It is a village in the process of becoming a suburb, undergoing what the author calls "social vertigo," where people are connected to the larger world through the flows of new music, T-shirts, mobile phones, and travel. But Vishnupura is also like any other place where people make families, procreate, and follow the reproductive motion. In the midst of these, what changed and what remained the same for women as they enacted different roles in their families, beginning as a daughter and becoming a wife, daughter-in-law, mother, and mother-in-law? Brunson's work addresses these questions in the context of the heightened involvement of public actors in reproductive affairs through the project of family planning.

Brunson's ethnographic work unfolded over a decade. She began her research in 2000 when she interviewed a few dozen women in Kirtipur to find out how they made decisions regarding the use of temporary contraceptives. That project was followed by her doctoral research among "Hindu women" of Vishnupura. Then, in 2010, she interviewed thirty five young men about their perception of *Nayã* Nepal and their future in their families.

The "Introduction" discusses conceptual ideas and different timelines of her ethnographic work, including some of the encounters that led the author to this research. The first chapter explores the intersectional nature of caste, class and gender relations that shape the lived experiences of women in Vishnupura. In particular, by highlighting multiple cleavages of social relations, Brunson challenges the monolithic idea of a woman. The author also underscores a need for an in-depth and long-term research to further highlight a dynamic nature of such intersectional identities.

The retrospective interviews and her decade long engagement offer her insights into the way women transition into different roles: as a daughter, as a daughter-in-law, and as a mother-in-law, with varied responsibilities, expectations and relations with different members of the family. This constitutes the core of her second chapter, aptly titled, "Like a Potter's Wheel."

Women and men of Vishnupura make procreative decisions during this temporal mobility in their lifecycles. But they are not alone. Various actors outside the home, such as Nepali government agencies, international agencies, the private sector, and human rights organizations too are invested

in the family planning decision. The family planning project played a pivotal role in promoting an ideal image of a happy family as one with two-parents and two children. Though gender composition has changed, this ideal remains the standard imagination of family even today. Brunson, in the third chapter, provides a complicated picture of how women negotiate their reproductive decisions in the face of these idealized family norms.

Chapter four juxtaposes women's preference for sons and the sons' perceptions of their roles in the family as well as their expectations from the family. While women told Brunson that they wanted sons because daughters could not do the final death rituals for them, in reality at the core of this pervasive son-preference was actually a desire to have a daughter-in-law who would take care of the household responsibilities. The cultural expectations that sons would take care of the parents in the old age drives most women to aspire for sons. Many young men Brunson interviewed seemingly confirm their roles informed by the patrilocal family norms. According to her, "Ultimately, young men viewed the family as a place of refuge from dizzying shifts in values that were occurring around them, and their own ideals regarding their reproductive futures did not appear so different from those of their mothers" (p. 16).

The concluding chapter engages with broader theoretical discussions over freedom versus choice, and relativism versus universalism. For example, how to address the issue of patrilocality? On the one hand, it symbolizes the subordinate status of women in the family. After all, women come to the husband's family and that never changes even if their position shifts from that of a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law. Instead of seeing this through a limited lens of "freedom" or "choice," Brunson wants us to pay attention to the conditions within which choices are made. She adds, "To expect women to be independent actors with a moral responsibility to make so-called good choices about their reproductive health is egregious, and to pretend they have the ability to truly choose their reproductive actions as if they were selecting which sari to wear that day is farcical" (p. 125).

While rich in ethnographic details, this book provides a rather limited picture of the project of "family planning" in Nepal. Vast network of institutions and material infrastructure, geographically connected and enacted through radio and television programs, political speeches, posters, pamphlets, workshops, seminars, literacy classes, school textbooks, contraceptive distribution centers, and sterilization camps remain missing in Brunson's narrative (cf. Bhattarai 2004).

The book portrays women in Nepal as informants localized in their places that are undergoing rapid change. Yet it fails to engage with works of scholars (both women and men), feminists as well as non-feminists, who have written on this topic. A majority of these locally generated writings are in non-English languages, mostly Nepali. *Chāpāmā Mahilā* (Onta, Gautam and Banskota 1999) is one fine example of such work. It is ironic that despite a decade of research involvement in Nepal, Brunson finds not a single piece of non-English writing on women's lives worthy of engagement.

These limitations aside, this book is a welcome addition to scholarly take on unprecedented changes taking place in Nepal, particularly in the realm of the family. Emerging anthropologists may also gain insights into the power of ethnographic observation, an integral anthropological method. For example, what does a sight of "bundles of iron rods sticking out of the top of a single or two-storied home" signify? Her answer, "a sign that the family could not afford additional levels at that time but has plans for another floor" (p. 18). There lies the power of anthropological observation.

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