

Paying for Modernity: Women and the Discourse of Freedom in Kathmandu

Mark Liechty

You know they say that women used to just watch [outside] through the eye-windows [windows with ornate wooden lattice covers] but these days windows like that are only made for the tourists!

20 year old Chetri woman

What has happened to the people in this city? What have they become? They are educated people. They shouldn't behave like this.

31 year old Chetri woman

The *jana āndolan*, or Nepali "people's movement," of 1990 was an event of such magnitude that its echoes and ripples are still rebounding uneasily off the many facets of Nepal's socio-political landscape. This paper records some of those *āndolan* echoes in the voices of middle-class Kathmandu women in the early 1990s.¹ In this electric political atmosphere—charged with the promises of liberal democracy—women spoke of the contradictions between rhetoric and reality in slogans touting democratic rights, equality, and freedom. In so doing they raised a host of issues pertaining to more general contradictions embedded in contemporary capitalism and the class interests that maintain this particular (though universalizing) model of modernity. In a period of social and political possibility women questioned the relationships between public and private, tradition and modernity, political and apolitical, and above all, how gender was to be mapped out across these ideologically loaded divides.

In this paper I consider one theme in this working-out of a suitably-modern gender practice: middle-class Kathmandu women's dialogue on the concept of "freedom." For these women "freedom" is at once a fundamental component of their understandings of self as modern, but also a source of fear—fear of social stigma, harassment, and violence. The debate over "freedom" is an important point at which women

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confront the contradictions of modernity and attempt to construct valued middle-class identities. In the social and political ferment of Nepal in the 1990s women have much to gain, and much to lose, in claiming the space of public freedom.

Thus even though recent democratically-elected parliaments have included a handful of female members, many women (at least in Kathmandu) view the restoration of democracy less as an empowering moment than as a threat to their own personal security. One Newar woman in her mid-thirties living in the heart of Kathmandu noted that it is no longer safe for women to walk the streets. "Since the multi-party system began," she complained:

people seem to be willfully harassing women. Before people felt safe. The police would take action. But now nobody cares. Some people say it's because of the multi-party system. The multi-party system has come so who can do anything about it? Everybody's shouting "We have the right of speech!" They say, "One can do whatever one wants [*je pāyo tyahī garna huncha!*]" So now it's difficult for us women.

For this woman and others, democracy and freedom are very much gender issues. When "freedom" means that men can say and do whatever they want, it becomes "difficult" for women. Another young woman, a Brahman post-secondary student, had a similar view. When asked why she felt unsafe on the streets she replied haltingly:

Because, . . . because the boys think that . . . After the multi-party system [the boys think] "We are *free*. There is *freedom* now." They think that to do anything is OK. That's why the girls have to look out for themselves.²

In the political ferment of post-*āndolan* Kathmandu women indeed must "look out for themselves" if they want to claim, maintain, and build upon their rights in the public sphere.

Because the key terms in this debate have to do with "publicness"—its nature, boundaries, and membership—this essay considers some of the gender dynamics of the middle-class public sphere in Kathmandu. To the extent that the domain of publicness is constructed through a new "modern" democratic rhetoric of freedom, rights, and openness, it is also an arena in which new public identities have to be negotiated. While the

2 Asterisks in quoted material designate English words used in colloquial Nepali.

middle-class officially condemns earlier modes of public practice that tied authority to inherited or innate privilege (genealogy, caste), its rhetoric of freedom coexists uneasily with a continuing patriarchy. The challenge for women is to construct a new femininity that claims the ostensibly non-gendered promises of freedom offered in the new rhetorics of publicness: individual rights, educational advancement, achievement, and merit.

Constructing class cultures is always about constructing cultures of gender (Sacks 1989). In the ongoing processes by which social boundaries in Kathmandu are being redrawn in terms of class (Liechty 1994), gender identities also must be reconstructed. Along with changing social conditions—party politics, market economies, education, consumer lifestyles—new rhetorics and practices of "womanhood" need to be negotiated to maintain the structures of an acceptable femininity. As the public/private divide becomes more unstable—in schools, work places, "public" spaces—so does the placement of gender within these domains. In shifting socio-political contexts the challenge for dominant gender and class groups is to domesticate women within new modes of representation. Here I am particularly concerned with how a domesticated femininity is recast (and indeed "classed") in new discourses of modernity, fashion, family, and nation, and how middle-class Kathmandu women confront these reconfigurations of patriarchy.

The labor of forcing the rhetoric of freedom into reality is especially onerous for middle-class women who must build a new public femininity that conveys a middle-class respectability that is at once modern, and preserves acceptable (usually double) standards of sexual propriety. Modern women must make *visible* and *portable* a respectable femininity that was in earlier generations largely restricted to domestic space (cf. Chatterjee 1989). In negotiating modern lives women must typically both construct themselves as the fashioned objects of modern middle-class consumption, and bear the burden of modern "immorality"; women are to be "fashioned" in modernity, even while bearing fashion's stigma. Thus negotiating suitable class practice is intimately tied to the parallel challenge of negotiating suitable gender practice. In Kathmandu the processes of class formation and the mapping of class onto gender are ongoing as women struggle to make the new rhetoric of "freedom" more than just another mode of male domination.

In this paper I use the debate over women's freedom as a window onto the complex politics of gender and class in Kathmandu. Largely through education women learn to value freedom and use the concept in their efforts to construct valued senses of modern selves. Freedom offers

women access to the new middle-class realm of public spaces and public institutions from school, to the work place, to political office. But especially for women, freedom is an ephemeral possession full of contradictions: growing sexual harassment challenges women's growing access to the public sphere, and in a social prestige/honor (*ijjat*) economy, women struggle to escape a system of victimization that threatens to keep them housebound. In the discourse and practice of freedom, *ijjat*, and public lives, the middle-class debates what it means to be both gendered and modern. The outcomes are vital to the interests of women who stand to be frozen out of the new middle-class public sphere. In Kathmandu processes of "gendering" the middle-class are under way, but "normal" practice is still a matter of negotiation.

To illustrate what is at stake in the gender politics of publicness, I begin this paper with a brief overview of literature that examines relationships among gender, class, and public culture in western capitalism. In part two I consider ways in which middle-class Kathmandu women experience and define freedom. Women celebrate new freedoms offered in education and careers, but struggle in a continuing and re-configuring patriarchal prestige (*ijjat*) economy. Because *ijjat* is both one of the primary policing mechanisms for middle-class privilege and a fundamental domain in which patriarchy is naturalized, women are trapped in contradictions between claims to class status, and rights to gender equity. Part three describes women's experiences with shifting female/male relations, increasing sexual violence against women, and the moral double standard that women face upon entering the public sphere. The conclusion summarizes the paper's main themes and places these in comparative perspective with some of the issues raised in part one. As a Nepali version of capitalist modernity takes shape the experiences of women in Kathmandu are not predetermined but, based on middle-class gender politics in other times and places, it is clear that women's freedoms are by no means automatic, or inherent, in the bourgeois public sphere.

Women in the Public Sphere

Although this paper is about middle-class Kathmandu women's experiences in the 1990s, I begin by considering some of the extensive literature on women and public culture in Europe and North America. These historical and theoretical perspectives highlight some of the primary processes of class and gender construction in capitalist societies and help set the stage for discussing related processes underway in Nepal. I return to some of these themes in the paper's conclusion.

Jurgen Habermas's account of the bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe (1989 [1962]) opened the way for a great outpouring of historical and theoretical writing in the last two decades.³ Habermas's work emphasizes the communicative implications of the rise of middle-class associational networks, reading or literary societies, and clubs. While celebrating the rational Enlightenment values of these eighteenth-century bourgeois groups, Habermas tends to underplay the fact that these associations functioned in contexts of social inequality and were premised on exclusion. Along with other classes and other races, most notably excluded from the new sphere of "public opinion" were women. Key social perspectives, "such as the material conditions of production and reproduction, including sexuality and childrearing" (Hansen 1993:xxviii), were barred from the rational political discourse of the bourgeois public sphere. As critics such as Joan Landes (1988) point out, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European public sphere represents not simply the *persistence* of patriarchy, but the *creation* of a new ideology of exclusion aimed at women. Ironically the Enlightenment project of human emancipation—through new conceptions of citizenship, rights, and equality—required that these new freedoms be engineered so as to omit women.

This feat of social engineering hinged on the distinction between public male political "culture," and private female apolitical "nature." Writing of the social transformations in early nineteenth-century France, Geoff Eley (1994:311-312) notes:

The new category of the "public man" and his "virtue" was constructed via a series of oppositions to "femininity," which both mobilized older conceptions of domesticity and women's place and rationalized them into a formal claim concerning women's "nature." At the most fundamental level, particular constructions of "womanness" defined the quality of being a "man," so that *natural* identification of sexuality and desire with the feminine allowed the *social* and *political* construction of masculinity.

Women's "nature" permitted them access to certain roles in the new bourgeois public sphere—consumer (Jones 1996:20), medical patient (Turner 1995:84ff), prostitute⁴—but left them with little public political power. Above all a middle-class woman's "nature" qualified her for a

3 For review and commentary see, for example, Calhoun 1992, Eley 1994.

4 In his study of bourgeois culture in nineteenth-century Paris T.J. Clark notes that prostitutes were literally known as "public women" ("*filles publique*") (1985:106)!

domestic (and sexually-domesticated) life in the patriarchal home. In a sense the modern "public" man only came about with the creation of the "private" woman.

As encapsulated in the Enlightenment values of a bourgeois male public sphere, capitalist modernity's "other" resides in a peculiarly conjured conflation of femininity with other negative traits against which it imagines itself.⁵ Bourgeois patriarchy constructs a field of divisions whose contradictions lie at the heart of the experience of modernity.

male	female
culture	nature
public	private, domestic
capital	labor
rational	sexual
political	apolitical
universal	particular
modern	traditional
global	local
metropole	colony

The contradictions lie in how, in all of these oppositions, the former claims to legitimately represent the latter in terms of rational public opinion (democracy, free trade, development), even while it excludes the latter's voices from the spheres of constitutive debate. As Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge argue in their critique of the European bourgeois public sphere,

The revolutionary bourgeoisie attempted, via the emphatic concept of public opinion, to fuse the whole of society into a unity. This remained as a goal. In reality . . . it was the value abstraction founded on commodity production that forced society together (1993 [1972]:xlvii).

In other words it is production and consumption (and the bourgeois values that maintain these economic processes) that "fuse the whole of society into a unity," not the universal values of liberal democracy professed in "public opinion." Herein lies the contradiction between a rhetoric of public, universal values of freedom and equality, and the reality of the market that binds people and regions together in unequal relations of

5 As Judith Williamson puts it, "woman is the great Other in the psychology of patriarchal capitalist culture" (1986:110).

production and consumption. The same contradictions of modernity play themselves out in separatist and ethnic politics in which groups seek to protect and shelter cultural *particularity* by appealing to the *universalizing* rhetoric of human rights (Chatterjee 1995:28-31), or conversely, in the ability of a universalizing capitalist modernity to generate "a diversification of appeals and constituencies" even as it seeks to commodify the "raw materials" of local experience in all its diversity (Hansen 1993:xii).

Here I would like to suggest that these contradictions and anxieties of modernity are often displaced into women's lives and onto women's bodies, and perhaps especially those of Third World women who must confront the most contentious configurations of "modernity" and "tradition" embedded in development discourse. For these women the experience of modernity is precisely about the clash between the particular and the universal, the local and the global, "tradition" (the particular, local past) and "modernity" (the apparently universal, global future). Women's lives are among the key places where transitions from "tradition" to "modernity" are publicly scrutinized in domains such as consumerism, careers and labor, religion, citizenship, and sexuality. In negotiating new lifestyles, modernity for women is as much a threat as a promise.

Many of the symbolic battles over modernity are fought in the realm of women's lives, lives that are made to contain the unresolved (and unresolvable) contradictions of modernity. For example female participation in emerging middle-class public spheres (in careers, politics, etc.) is both admired and condemned; women-in-public are both promoted as modern and progressive, and derided as sexually dangerous and threatening to the family. Female "freedom" is at once celebrated as the liberation of women's potential, and denigrated as sexual license. In the male-dominated public sphere "freedom" becomes a zero-sum game in which woman's advances are seen as coming at the expense of men's losses.

To the extent that "modernity" is claimed as a male domain, women are relegated to an equally imagined domain of "tradition." With surprising regularity across time and space,⁶ bourgeois patriarchy has

6 Compare, for example, Landes's (1988) account of women in revolutionary France, Chatterjee's (1989) description of the nineteenth-century Indian nationalist bourgeoisie and the "new woman," and Williamson's (1986) critique of women's "nature" as represented in contemporary advertising.

sought to contain women within a domestic space of "traditional values." In their domestic spaces women are given the "sacred charges" of childhood socialization, the maintenance of "traditional local morality," and ultimately the "protection" of a national identity in the face of universalizing forces of modernity. Inability to do so is pinned on women as evidence of their moral failing, and the rejection of their natural roles as traditional wives and mothers. In this way bourgeois patriarchy hides the commercial/industrial production of contemporary society behind claims that society's values are produced in the home. As Williamson argues, the values forced upon women "are exactly what the economic system fundamentally negates, based as it is on the values of competition and profit" (1986:106).

[A]ll the things society claims to value in private and family life (caring, sharing, freedom, choice, personal development) . . . are regarded as entirely inappropriate in the sphere of political, social and economic life. Their lack there can be covered up, however, by locating these qualities in women and in the family, as cornerstones of our culture. Women, the guardians of "personal life," become a kind of dumping ground for all the values society wants off its back but must be perceived to cherish: a function rather like a zoo, or nature reserve, whereby a culture can proudly proclaim its inclusion of precisely what it has *excluded* (ibid).

Similarly women's bodies—as the designated sites of conspicuous consumption through the disciplines of "fashion"—become the preferred repositories of bourgeois patriarchal guilt. In the cult of the fashioned middle-class female body, "the male cloak of morality [is] posed against the evidence of avarice, worn by women." In a world of patriarchal capitalism, women bear "the ornamentation of sin" (Ewen & Ewen 1982:106).

As I discuss in more detail elsewhere, in Nepal too female adornment practice is being transformed along with the emergence of a new middle-class consumer culture (Liechty 1994:304-311). An earlier system of adornment and ornamentation helped designate what kind of person the wearer was, whether in terms of sexual/marital status, ethnic/caste identity, or social strata (Bledsoe 1984). As commodities ornaments made of precious metals also signaled the *amount* of wealth a person or family possessed. But as one young Kathmandu woman noted, fashion these days "is like a new kind of ornament (*gahanā*)." The "new ornament" of fashion is also about amount. Yet, while gold holds value and is easily converted into other resources, the modern commodities associated with

fashion lose their value not only with use, but as fashions change. The new fashion goods mask the interests of capital behind a facade of commodity aesthetics—glamour, "new-ness," eroticism (Haug 1987); as objects of mass consumption, their nature, meaning, and value are eminently perishable.⁷

Again and again women's lives and bodies are made to contain the contradictions of modernity. In the work place and in the home, in national rhetoric and in consumer culture, the burdens of modernity are deposited on women's shoulders while men claim the freedoms of the bourgeois public sphere. In essence women must pay for modernity, both as producer/consumers, and as moral scapegoats. Women are trapped between an imagined "tradition," and a patriarchal modernity that threatens to freeze them out of newly emerging middle-class public spheres.

Because they are made to bear the contradictions of capitalist modernity, middle-class Kathmandu women are particularly well placed to view the fault lines between rhetoric and practice in the modern public sphere. Following the 1990 *āndolan* women in Kathmandu had particularly powerful experiences both of modernity's promises, and their negations. That "freedom" is a contested gender domain comes through clearly in the voices of women seeking to critique the inequities of freedom, and claim a place for femininity within an emerging public sphere.

Women's Freedom: Progress and Problems

In the early 1990s when women in Kathmandu spoke of changes in their life experiences, as compared with previous generations, they most often spoke in terms of freedom and modernity.⁸ In fact for many women freedom was the defining feature, or measure, of modernity (even though the meaning of freedom varied widely from person to person). Yet while women pointed to progress made in the acquisition of personal freedoms, they were equally quick to point out the barriers that remained.

Many women spoke of freedom as liberation from tradition. For example those women whose mothers had grown up in rural areas spoke

7 Baudrillard argues that "it is the investment of things with value; it is the placing of a sign on a thing and the logic of this process of signification [that] is the true essence of capital" (1975:5).

8 While many women had imported the English words "free" and "freedom" into everyday speech, Nepali terms such as *ādhunik* (modern) and *bikās* (progress) were often used to convey notions of modernity.

of the contrasts with their own urban up-bringsings. One woman spoke of her mother who had been married at age twelve and had lived a life of misery (*duḥkha*) carrying water and cutting grass. "Compared to hers my life is one of happiness (*sukha*)." Unlike her mother this woman refused to enact what she viewed as archaic customs such as eating chilies and cucumbers after giving birth. "These days the daughter-in-law doesn't have to pay so much respect to the mother-in-law" she noted. "It's because of the modern *style*." Like this woman, many others also equated a "modern *style*" with freedom from heavy manual labor, now-irrational customs, and tyrannical in-laws. Said one young married Newar woman, "Compared to before we women are very *free*. In all respects we're more *free* than before. They were conservative but now it's not like that."

One important aspect of this perceived change is how women in Kathmandu often understood growing freedoms to be the result of outside, foreign, influences. For these women freedom (like "development") is a quantifiable condition that exists in greatest concentrations in specific foreign places but also to a certain extent in Nepal (cf. Pigg 1992). This line of reasoning came through clearly in the comments of a 21 year old Chetri woman while explaining how things had changed in local society.

What people wear, how they walk, how they speak, what they eat, how they work—in all these there are changes. Now they follow foreign behavior. Now they are *using* foreign [ways]. It seems like it's all mixed up from European, American, Indian and everything. But I like the American rather than Indian.

Q: How so? Isn't India very similar to Nepal?

Well maybe, but still, they [Americans] have very *free* lives. Nobody comments or says anything no matter what they do. But here in Nepali society, if one [woman] just shakes hands with a man, suddenly everyone is off saying "Oh, she did this or that with so and so!" It's disgusting. They [Americans] don't behave in this way, and that's why I like theirs [their society/ways].

In this woman's mind Americans "have very *free* lives" and this freedom is essentially the ability to interact openly and without fear with men. Of course this woman's interpretation or definition of "freedom" is a highly local, even individual, matter built of experiences with global mass media representations, travel (or travelers' tales), and foreigners in Nepal

(cf. Liechty 1996). Yet what seems especially significant about this and other comments is that for these women freedom is a means of evaluating life that is built on a transnational, and to a considerable extent global, awareness. Here Nepal, compared with an image of "America," ranks poorly. This awareness reflects new frames of reference—from local, to national, to global—through which women evaluate their own conditions.

Many women associate their growing freedom with access to education. Women quickly claim the ideological promise in education of a kind of liberation of potential, equality with men, and an entree into public life. In the words of a teenage Brahman high school student:

Nowadays girls can go out [of the house] to study and even to do a job. This isn't considered bad, but in my mother's childhood it was considered bad even for a girl to go to school. So now I think the situation for women is much improved. Before woman had a kind of bondage their whole lives.

I don't like that old system because, I mean, the women in that time also had skills, abilities, feelings. The educated people now realize that they [women] have potentialities and can also do something valuable. If women are educated they won't hesitate to do things in the society. So this is the difference between now and then, and it's because of education.

With education women can recognize their potential and "do things in the society" without hesitation. For women, "the difference between now and then"—their growing access to the public sphere—is largely "because of education."

Women pointed to this link between women's advancement and education repeatedly. Thus perhaps more revealing are the ways that women *critiqued* this association, even while claiming it as valid. One common discontent that women voiced concerning education was that, while education promised freedoms, frequently these freedoms did not extend beyond the academic setting. Thus, on the one hand, some middle-aged women with grown children complained that their husbands will not permit them to continue their education as adults. Said one such woman:

I still have the desire to go to the *campus* [for post-secondary study] but my husband doesn't permit it. Maybe he thinks I'll fall in love with somebody else. This is what I've thought. But I just don't like to sit around and do nothing. I want to be involved.

Older women long for the freedoms of the campus where they can "be involved" and do something. On the other hand, younger women recently

out of school long for their school days when their families allowed them certain liberties. They spoke of having to abandon activities they had enjoyed as school girls. One woman spoke in terms of *sokh*⁹:

Now I have many *sokhs* but I'm not able to satisfy any of them. Like when I was a girl I used to have a real *football*-playing *sokh*. I even got an award at school! But since my marriage I haven't had any *sokh* at all.

Q: What do you mean?

I mean I have many *sokhs* but no possibility of fulfilling them. If I were *free* again, sure, I'd be ready to do anything! Dance, games, singing—I'd do some of everything!

Another young woman had similar complaints even though she was still in school studying at the intermediate level. "I used to play volleyball," she complained:

But now it's hard to play at the campus because I have to wear a sari. Now we just watch, sitting on the ground.

I also like to watch swimming. I mean, I actually like to swim myself but this too my family won't allow now. They say it is not good for a woman to be swimming. They don't have ideas like I have. All I can do is watch swimming on *television*.

Many of these young women are likely to be among the first generation of women in their families to have a high school education, and in some cases, any education at all. As pioneers in public education they are also likely to have a host of experiences—athletics, informal contacts with boys, etc.—that would have been very unusual in previous generations. Yet when they leave school (or enter post-secondary education) these women are expected to abandon the relatively unrestrained modes of expression they enjoyed as school girls in favor of more or less standard adult female behaviors. Like the two women above who gave up athletic activities that were obviously extremely important to them, many women

9 The word "*sokh*" is often translated into English as "hobby," "pleasure," or "luxury" but a more satisfactory translation would convey the idea of "an elemental desire," or "an innate proclivity." People in Kathmandu often speak of an "X-doing *sokh*" that might include something as hobby-like as stamp collecting, but more often has to do with some desired way of being or natural inclination. People spoke of having a "film-acting *sokh*," a "guitar-studying *sokh*," or a "*sokh* for becoming a doctor."

comply with social expectations, even though they have learned different ways of thinking. "They don't have ideas like I have" said the young woman forced to forsake volleyball and swimming. For women education offers an experience of, or taste for, certain freedoms that persists even when they are forced to give some of them up.

While some women give in to social expectations, others react bitterly to this double standard or contradiction that educated women must face. While in school, girls experiment with ideas of self as relatively non-traditional, progressive individuals with specific aptitudes and goals. But as women mature they begin to recognize that certain "modern" behaviors are acceptable only for adult males. These sentiments were especially clear in the remarks of an upper-caste Newar woman—married, with two children and in her mid thirties—who had completed a B.A. degree and continued as a part-time M.A. level student. This woman struggled to reconcile her identity as an educated adult with the realities of living in a conservative Newar extended family. Recalling her experiences before marriage, she complained:

Here if one [an unmarried woman] tries to be clever then people just gossip and that makes marriage difficult later. The senior family members control the rest. From fear of other people [outside the family] the senior people do this. For that reason women can't progress in anything.

Q: But aren't things better than before [for women]?

Sure, now it's *free* compared to before. Now they don't say women can't go to school or college. But still, when it comes to women, discrimination remains. In our society, it's always this gossip, and people can only think about *ijjat* (prestige/honor). Women feel uncomfortable even going outside the house with friends. In every house, even the married women worry about *ijjat*, not to mention the unmarried ones. Staying inside the house, they have to keep all their wishes inside their hearts.

While the basic content of these remarks is probably familiar to women around the world, the timbre in this voice—the cultural overtones and resonances—are perhaps more unique. Like many thousands of educated middle-class women in Kathmandu, this woman must in almost every waking moment confront the tyranny of *ijjat*. Whether via education, labor, or social service, women are "free" to enter the public realm—that area "outside the house" where the *ijjat* economy is conducted—but they do so at considerable danger. In immersing themselves in the official values of freedom and rights propounded in development discourse and

education, women risk attracting the slander and gossip reserved for those who transgress the bounds of traditionally acceptable behavior. The official discourse of education and *bikās* (development) offers women a place in the public sphere but those women who go "out of the house" risk losing their own, and their family's *ijjat*.

Over the past decades Kathmandu's emerging middle-class has appropriated *ijjat* as one of the key elements in its project of constructing itself as a socio-moral community (Liechty 1994:210-238). As the conceptual lens through which people in the middle-class ascertain suitability, *ijjat* is a crucial component in debates over class practice and class membership. For the middle-class *ijjat* is a thing: it can be gained or lost, preserved or squandered. Honor or prestige is the central form of middle-class social capital. In this social economy sexual propriety, suitable marriages, ritual observances, TVs, education, and jobs are not *ijjat* in and of themselves. Instead they *give ijat* (*ijjat dine cij*); they *produce* social capital. Staking claims in this prestige economy is perhaps the central feature of an individual's or family's efforts to negotiate membership in the middle-class.

This prestige economy is never only a *moral* economy or only a *material* economy. It is always both. It is always a matter of strictly adhering to the moral canons of sexual and ritual practices, *and* of consuming the goods (including education) that act as recognized material markers of the middle-class. Practices like sexual sobriety and ritual observances separate the middle-class from those *above and below* by constructing a privileged *moral* high-ground which the middle-class can claim as its own. In this domain of public morality the middle-class distinguishes itself from the vulgarity of those "below" them. But by laying claim to "traditional" moral values (such as *ijjat*), the middle-class also distinguishes itself from those "above" who have sold out to the morally bankrupt lifestyles of affluence, pleasure, and affiliation with foreignness.

Alongside this rhetoric of morality, the *material* domain of the *ijjat* economy is equally important in generating class distinctions. The wedding celebrations, home furnishings, clothing, and hundreds of other material accouterments that are required for claims to middle-class status effectively distinguish its members from those in poverty. But these same goods also signal middle-class "modernity" by indicating their owners' identification with wider spheres of meaning beyond the strictly local in which those below them are trapped. Thus the middle-class constructs a kind of moral material modernism. In its moral tempering, this

modernism at once critiques the material excesses of elite lifestyles, and protects itself from critiques from below by melding its own materialism with a regimen of orthodox and "respectable" (*ijjaddār*) practices. The middle-class prestige economy marks out a new middle space between tradition and modernity, between high and low. In it people experiment with what it means to be both moral and modern, both Nepali and engaged with a growing world of transnational cultural forms and forces.¹⁰

The *ijjat* economy is also clearly a crucial space in which people negotiate a suitably modern and "classed" gender practice. As one of the key logics of patriarchal dominance, the prestige economy is one of the main institutions that women must confront in attempting to claim new rights in the public sphere. Yet many women are themselves in an ambiguous relationship with the power of *ijjat*. On the one hand they recognize that their class status depends on the maintenance of individual and family prestige. Yet on the other hand it is this same logic of prestige that limits women's access to the promises of modernity. This experience of contradiction and conflict came through in the comments of a Gurung woman in her late twenties. A married part-time college student, she compared life in Kathmandu to that in the village in central-west Nepal where she had lived until the age of seventeen. When asked what she thought of the opportunities urban women now have for education, her answer was somewhat surprising:

Of course it's good in a way because, well, in the villages they don't allow women to be educated at all. In Kathmandu there is the *benefit* of education. But to give that much opportunity is not always good. Like on the one hand the parents' ambition is to give the daughter a good education, but on the other hand the daughter may have her own ambitions. So there may be a *negative result*. Though [villagers] are conservative, their *ijjat* is very safe. It's certainly not like that here [in Kathmandu]!

In the city women have far greater access to education, but the very values instilled by this education ("ambition") threaten to undermine a

10 Of course this experimentation is never simply a matter of free choice. Participation in the middle-class *ijjat* economy is always predicated on the ability to control and mobilize financial resources. Status within the middle-class is part of a complex and shifting calculus built around parallel and competing hierarchies of value and modes of cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu 1984). Yet it is money that provides access to the middle-class *ijjat* arena; without it, one "doesn't count" (Liechty 1994:345-351).

family's often tenuous foothold in the middle-class prestige economy. Thus for women *ijjat* amounts to a system of social discipline in which class interests are at odds with gender interests. To the extent that the prestige economy serves as the institution that articulates and polices middle-class privilege, it also protects male dominance within the middle-class. Women are stuck in the bind of needing to risk their class status in order to claim gender equity in the new bourgeois public sphere.

Thus women in post \bar{a} *ndolan* Kathmandu were quick to point out that the new public sphere—full of promises of progress, education, *bikās* ("development") and ostensibly a space of freedom and equality—was in reality another largely male domain. The same high-caste Newar woman quoted above who argued that in spite of education and career opportunities middle-class women are still prisoners of *ijjat*, went on to complain that:

I can't do what I want because I have to worry about if [my husband] will be happy or sad, if I'll be doing what he wants.

Q: What do you mean?

Like sometimes when there is so much commotion in the house I just want to go someplace quiet, someplace peaceful. But if people see us [women] there they will gossip saying "Look, she is there all alone!" That's why even if we want to do something, we can't. But for men, if they feel anxiety, they can go alone to a restaurant, or to a film, or some quiet place. For them they can do anything because they are *free*. There's a big difference between us and them.

Public places from cinema halls to restaurants to parks are places that women inhabit only at their own peril. In the public sphere the social currency is *ijjat* and in that sphere, women risk not only their own, but their family's prestige/honor. Furthermore men can be "alone" in public places yet it is unacceptable for women to experiment in this kind of public individuality. Indeed liberal-democratic individuality is an impossibility for women to the extent that society confines legitimate femininity only within a dependent relationship with a dominant male (father, brother, husband, son, pimp, sexual client). The "traditional" discipline of patriarchal dominance (*ijjat*) attempts to define femininity as sexual by "nature" thereby containing the "acceptable" women within the bounds of male sexual fantasy. A woman who is "alone" is one "outside" of the family and house that have traditionally defined (confined) her legitimate existence. The free, public, individual is a role not necessarily closed to women, but one that women adopt with trepidation, if at all, knowing full well the potential consequences.

What is at stake here are legitimate, modern female identities. To a considerable extent among the urban middle-class the categories of *ketī* (girl) and *chorī* (daughter) have been "modernized," or have conformed to certain of the standards of public education and the discourse of development. Yet it is beyond marriage, in the context of the husband's family, in the role of the *buhārī* (daughter-in-law) or even *āimāi* (adult woman) where the new "freedoms" have the most difficulty in penetrating. As a number of women quoted above mentioned, relations between married women and their in-laws are now often more "*free*" than compared with previous generations. Yet many women chafe under the double standards in, and contradictions between, rhetoric and practice, between natal home and marital domestic settings, between public and private spheres. It is in this constant dialogue concerning freedom, *ijjat*, public places, and public lives that men and women, young and old, debate what it means to be bearers of gender and class in a changed, modern context.

Female/male Relations: Taking Liberties

Another very important social node at which women's freedom is contested is in female/male relations. In a range of public settings from classrooms, cafeterias, and offices, to buses, cinema halls, and streets, women and men in Kathmandu interact more frequently and substantively than would have been imaginable even a few decades ago. The change is especially significant for women who now, from an early age, interact with males from outside their families in a variety of public roles and settings. But men also must learn how to deal with women in the public realm; whether as colleagues, classmates, or simply fellow commuters, men need to determine how they will treat the women they encounter outside the contexts of home and kin. In short, Kathmandu's middle-class has to create a new public gender practice.

In working out these modern relationships between women and men in the public sphere women have the most to gain, and the most to lose. If women can lay claim to the modern ideologies of freedom and equality they stand to increase their authority in both public and private settings.¹¹ But if post-*āndolan* democratic ideals turn out to apply only to men, women know that they will have not only lost any claim to the public sphere, but likely have their authority in domestic settings eroded as well.

11 Current efforts to improve gender equity in property inheritance laws illustrate this drive to claim the promises of modernity for women (Gilbert 1992).

Not surprisingly then, the content and quality of public female/male relations was a central issue for women as they thought about themselves and their identities in terms of freedom and modernity.

One of the first and most important settings in which women and men interact is school. Now from infancy children from middle-class homes find themselves in institutional settings where their peer groups are mixed both in terms of ethnic/caste backgrounds, and gender. School becomes an important setting for experimenting in relations with members of the other gender.¹² For school girls the challenge is how to negotiate between the (often commercially mediated) images of "modern" relations with boys on the one hand, and the fears they carry of gossip and loss of *ijjat* on the other. For example the English expressions "boy friend"/"girl friend" have entered vernacular Nepali and school girls in particular are quick to point out the contradictions (between sexuality and friendship) encapsulated in these terms. In the course of an interview with a female co-worker, one young woman—a 20 year old Brahman who had failed several times in her high school final examinations and now worked part time as a hair dresser—spoke of how she related to boys:

I speak to everybody, but I don't speak with bad *knowledge*.¹³ I don't have any bad *knowledge*. Now people ask "What is a *boy friend*?" [I say] a *boy friend* is just a friend (*xīthī*)! Just because of laughing and joking with some boys doesn't mean anything. But some people think you speak with bad *knowledge*. But I don't listen to all these things people say, I don't care. I make my own decisions and I don't care about anybody's comments, even my own parents'.

Q: So your parents let you be very *free*?

Hah! What is *free*? You go to work in the morning, come back home at night, and try not to do anything wrong. Is that *free*? People of our age, at this time we shouldn't have to be like this. We should be able to speak and laugh.

12 Part of this developing culture of female/male relations is tied in to mass media representations. Nepali and Indian cinema (and often Euro-American films as well) frequently uses the school or campus as the institutional setting for youthful romances. In large part because of media influence "doing *fashion*" and "doing *love*" [*love* garne*] are both seen as "natural" (and often almost equivalent) phenomena in Kathmandu schools and campuses. For more on links between "doing *love*" and "doing *fashion*" see Liechty 1994.

13 Here "*knowledge*" seems to mean "intention," "design," or "motive."

Q: What do other people think when they see a girl who walks and talks *free*ly?

Narrow-minded people think one way. Broad-minded people think another. Suppose you see some sisters walking with their brothers. Narrow-minded people will go about gossiping: "Oh, *boy friend*, *girl friend*!" But broad-minded people will say, "Maybe they are brother and sister."

But actually I think that to be an extremely *free* and outgoing person isn't good either. I mean this isn't really a problem for me. I don't like being called arrogant or proud, but I also don't mind speaking with whomever I wish. I just say "Hello younger brother" to some, and "Hello older brother" to the others.

In these lines one sees a revealing mixture of optimism, cynicism, and caution. This woman is bold in asserting that there is nothing wrong with girls having friends who are boys, but also careful to qualify her statements by saying that a woman should not be "extremely *free*." One should not speak with "bad *knowledge*" that would indicate arrogance, sexuality, and aggression. As for many other women, her strategy for interacting with men in the public sphere is to label them with kin terms in an effort to superimpose the socially legitimate sister/brother relationship onto public female/male relations and thereby defuse their potentially damaging sexual/moral implications.¹⁴ Even "free" women must resort to the terms of patriarchal protection.

Yet this young woman was also aware of the cynical hypocrisy of this social slight-of-hand, that is, the necessity of trying to defuse and contain potentially dangerous males by domesticating them within the bounds of acceptable kin relations. The bitterness in her voice when she spoke of being "*free*" revealed a deep anger at the way in which women in the public realm must constantly guard their honor. (In fact this honor that women must guard is not *theirs* at all, but instead that of current or future patriarchs.) Women are "free" to go to school, and "free" to work, but from morning to night they must "try not to do anything wrong." "Is that *free*?" this young woman asked sardonically. What kind of "freedom"

14 This use of "fictive" kin terms is neither new nor restricted only to instances of women interacting with men. Yet compared to other situations—such as when men (or women) address non-kin women as older- or younger-sister—the status and power differentials elided in this particular social fiction are of potentially greater consequence for women who must protect their *ijjat* when dealing with men in the public sphere.

is it that imposes the subtle terror of constant social surveillance on women? Women and men are "free" to enter the public sphere, but for women this "freedom" involves far more personal risk than for men.

In addition to the (relatively) subtle threat of gossip and loss of prestige, women who enter the public domain also increasingly risk the very real threat of verbal and physical harassment, and even rape. On streets and campuses, in cafeterias and cinema halls, women talk of facing a steady barrage of name calling and groping. In its relatively benign form this kind of harassment of women is known throughout South Asia as "eve teasing"¹⁵ and consists of efforts on the part of boys and young men to distract and pester women and girls. Hanging out on street corners groups of boys call out to female passers-by and claim small victories if they can elicit some acknowledgment of their taunts.

One woman, a married Brahman in her thirties, described some of her recent experiences with harassment and compared these to the time when she had been in school. In her experience:

Now in the crowds the boys will hit you with their elbows even if the girls try to stay away. They must have learned this kind of thing from the films. I know, before the boys also used to tease, but from far away. Like if they knew your name . . . Or they'd just use hand gestures if they didn't know your name, like at school. But now they don't just use words, they touch with their hands too. I actually fear being in a crowd these days for this reason. It's really bad.

The same woman went on to describe how several weeks earlier, while walking with two sisters in a crowd returning from an exhibition on Kathmandu's parade ground, one sister had been molested.

They [men] were running around going like this [makes a gesture of grabbing and pinching a woman's breast]. They did this to my sister and it was like they were trying to pull off her breast!

She also described an incident in which she had been grabbed in an alley near a busy market in the old city and dragged into a room where a pornographic video was being shown.

15 I do not know where this expression comes from though it may have been introduced into Indian English during the British colonial occupation.

All I was doing was going out to buy tomatoes! This is what is happening to women in their own neighborhoods! What has happened to the people in this city? What have they become? They are educated people. They shouldn't behave like this.

This lament seems to capture much of the frustration, despair, and rage that grow out of women's experience. One senses this woman's exasperation and disappointment at the prospect of an urban male population that is at once more educated, and more threatening. In many ways, for women education is their key to public lives. Education should both promote women's freedom, and bring men to an awareness of gender equality. Yet women's increasing presence in public spaces is met with increasing harassment. "What have these people become?" she asks. For at least some urban men post-*āndolan* "freedom" has meant taking liberties with—and from—women.

The ironic relationship between freedom and harassment is especially bitter for women to the extent that society routinely blames the female victim, not the male perpetrator, for acts of public aggression against them. In fact instead of expressing anger, it seemed more typical for women to take this burden upon themselves. Women commonly dealt with male aggression by attempting to absorb the harassment either in the hope that it would stop, or simply to protect their own reputations. By the perverse logic of the *ijjat* economy, many women viewed incidents of male harassment as events that rob *them* of social prestige, not their attackers. For example one young woman I met who took public transportation to her college campus spoke about the agony and humiliation of being groped every day by male passengers on the bus. Yet, she complained, "You can't even scream or anything because it embarrasses you also!"

Other women had similar stories. One 20 year old Newar college student spoke of the dangers of walking on the streets.

Nowadays if a girl goes outside walking on the street, there are always boys who will be teasing and trying to touch her in the crowd. It's usually in a crowd that this happens. I have also been teased a lot though I haven't been hit.

But what can we do? We just tolerate it. We don't say anything even though the boys are jeering at us using bad words. If we try to say something back, they will only use worse words and the situation will

only become more evil. So we just walk by silently without acknowledging them in any way.

Q: Like what do they do to the girls?

Some of them will come up from behind and yank our hair, or try to pull at our hand bags. Some call out bad words. We hate it but there's nothing we can do! We can't fight with them so we just walk by as though it was nothing.

Q: Does this mean they like the girls?

No, I don't think any of them like me. They are just bad and stupid. It usually happens in places like New Road, or around Asan Tol. They do this to all the girls. It is terrible.

But we cannot even tell our parents about what is happening. We can only talk about it among our friends. Telling this to our parents or brothers would make us feel very uneasy. We get very angry and feel that we should do something to those bad people, but . . . [shrug] . . .

Despite her anger all she can do in response to harassment is "just tolerate it." Aside from peers, there seems to be no one to turn to for help. Parents and brothers are traditionally the people who would protect young women but telling them of these incidents makes the victims "feel very uneasy." Women are in a peculiar bind in that, on the one hand they value the freedom to move about in public places, but on the other they wish to be protected from harassment. They know that the "remedy" parents or brothers would impose would likely be to simply keep them inside, against their will. By acknowledging their experiences of harassment and humiliation to their families, women risk losing their own freedom.

But from the point of view of the victims, and especially their families, the loss of freedom is perhaps less worrisome than the loss of prestige, or *ijjat*. Another Newar college student in her early 20s talked about walking to and from her campus, Kathmandu's only all-female post-secondary campus.

In school we feel very *free*. We have no problems and there is no teasing. It is outside, after our classes finish, then the boys are standing there, using bad words, looking at us from the side of the road.

Q: What do you mean by bad words?

Oh, sometimes they will just say "*Hello*!" or sometimes they will call out the names of some film heroine to tease us. Or they may start calling out "Hey Shorty!" (*dallī*), or "Mosquito-legs is coming!" (*lāmkhutṭe ayo*)

But also, ummm, . . . What to say? They will shout out, "*I fuck you*!" and like this, like this. This is too much. This is what they usually say when they are in a group. When alone they just harass [in other ways] but they don't say words like this. And also the boys are trying to do *body touch*. These days even on [co-educational] campuses the *body touch* happens a lot. I have friends who are so upset that they have stopped going to campus for this reason.

Q: What do you mean? What happens?

Like sometimes on the street a boy will walk up and try to give a girl an elbow or shoulder [trying to knock her down].

But what can we do? We can't do anything because just to acknowledge them, not to mention talking with them, would be a huge loss of prestige/dignity (*beijjat*). At school, what is bad is that girls don't even dare mention this to their teachers because they are afraid that their honor will be damaged. This is what girls are thinking. This is what I've been hearing for several years now.

Thus women seem to have no choice but to ingest (if not digest) harassment for fear of losing prestige. As I have noted several times already, in Kathmandu society places an enormous burden upon women to accrue and protect honor. More so than for men (for whom *ijjat* is more likely to be measured in terms of material possessions and, indirectly, jobs), in the eyes of society, women's *ijjat* is a personal attribute; it is a matter of character and moral essence. Especially when it comes to marriage negotiations, a woman's *ijjat* is like an egg shell (or hymen): once damaged it cannot be repaired. Because male harassment of women is inescapably sexual and aggressive, it is seen as tainting the victim's own sexuality, even though it is unwanted. In the marriage market a woman known to have had these experiences is like damaged goods in a very well-stocked shop. Even rape in Kathmandu is interpreted more as a loss of a woman's (and her family's) honor, than as an act of male violence.¹⁶

16 I say this not because anyone condones rape—far from it—but because rape and other sexual crimes are almost never reported. From journalists to police to social workers to dozens of middle-class women I spoke with, there was a unanimous sense that the incidence of rape was on the increase even though statistically rape practically did not exist. Complained one journalist:

There's no question that it [the incidence of rape] is rising but we just can't say much about it because there isn't good information on it. It's a *prestige*

Part of this sense of social shame and loss of prestige comes from the rarely-voiced, but I believe fairly typical, belief (even among women) that those who "get it" are the ones who "ask for it." Most women who have experienced harassment report that it does not matter what clothes they are wearing. Said the young woman studying at the girls' campus, "We get this treatment in any kind of dress [school uniform, street clothes, etc.]" But other women were much more willing to make connections between dress, morality, and harassment. Another college student—a Brahman studying commerce at the intermediate level—explained that the girls who are getting into trouble with boys are the ones "doing *over fashion*" or, in other words, those who dress *too* fashionably and are, by implication, coquettish and provocative. Speaking of harassment, she went on:

That kind of thing only happens to girls who are, you know . . . like "that" (*u tyahī*). It doesn't happen to the others. It mostly depends on the girl's character and conduct.

As is often the case in spoken Nepali, here *u tyahī* is used to refer to some negative, undesirable behavior or trait that is implied by the context, but perhaps too unsavory to mention in polite conversation. Women who attract the unwanted attentions of men are of "that" type—those whose "character and conduct" bring it upon themselves. As for those "other" morally upright, demure, and properly fashioned girls, it "doesn't happen" to them.

Although most young women who spoke of harassment by males did not place the moral blame directly on the victims, it is likely that much of the shame women experience and their reluctance (even refusal) to report such incidents stems from the fact that this reflexive moral condemnation is all too common in the local society. When simple involvement is

problem so nothing comes out. All the information we generally get is the kind of thing passed along informally from one *housewife* to another. It is almost never found in the published sources. We hear about it frequently but who can say anything definite?

Aside from a few scandals brought to light for overtly political purposes, the only published account of a rape in Kathmandu that I found describes a woman raped in her own home by a brother's friend. When the girl told her mother what had happened, the mother reproached her, warned her not to tell anyone, and advised the victim to simply forget about it (Yami 2047v.s.:25-27).

interpreted as complicity or even guilt—and therefore loss of *ijjat*—women have every reason to fear social stigma more than the harassers themselves. With public sexual harassment apparently on the rise, *ijjat* appears to be an increasingly effective means of limiting women's access to the promises of freedom in the emerging public sphere.

One of the central dynamics at play in women's efforts to negotiate class and gender rights in the public domain is fashion. Like *ijjat*, fashion is an institution that often pits class interests against gender interests. Ironically fashion has become one of the main *material* components of claims to middle-class status, even while emerging as one of the most *morally* denigrated practices of modernity. Not surprisingly Kathmandu's middle-class men bask in fashion's significations of material prosperity, while women risk its moral condemnation. As evidenced in the comments above, in Kathmandu, as elsewhere, capitalist modernity targets middle-class women as the primary objects of fashion (in films, magazines, fashion shows, etc.) even while saddling them with the burden of maintaining "traditional morality."

Women in Kathmandu spoke of being trapped between the class imperatives of presenting a fashioned self, and the moral stigma (and harassment) that "doing *fashion*" often invited. Indeed both middle-class men and women spoke repeatedly of the necessity of fashion (Liechty 1994:339-345). In the words of one young Brahman woman, nowadays:

fashion has become necessary. I mean even your own relatives will ignore you, or pretend they don't know you if you're not looking *fashionable*! These days if you do *fashion*, even though there's no money and nothing to eat in your house, people will consider you to be a rich person.

Yet along with the class necessity of fashion, women in Kathmandu (much more than men) must constantly negotiate the treacherous terrain of fashion suitability. When asked if she had any interest in fashion one twenty-three year old Newar woman replied:

Well, I'm not that interested in it, but *naturally* these days I like to dress in a moderately *fashion*able manner.

Q: How come?

(Laughter) What can I say? Look at my friends at college: some of them are into *make-up* and some aren't at all. I mean it's not that *make-up* alone makes someone look good. One should do the *make-up* that's suitable [*suhāune*] to them. Being *too simple* isn't good. But being really *vulgar* isn't good either. So one should be somewhere in the middle it seems to me.

For women fashion must be "suitable": not too simple, not too vulgar, but "somewhere in the middle." Women who stray into the realm of being "*over fashioned*" cross the line between fashion as a required class marker, and fashion as a sign of "modern" (promiscuous) sexuality.

The potential dangers of negotiating suitable fashion practice are particularly onerous for women who pursue public careers. Office jobs generally, but jobs in travel agencies and hotels in particular, are typically thought to demand a certain kind of attire. There is an uneasiness about these jobs in which women assume highly public roles interacting closely with a wide range of usually male customers and co-workers. Most men and women harbor suspicions about these "office girls" who are often thought to be "overly" fashionable and therefore promiscuous. One young Newar woman voiced some of the common middle-class female anxieties over fashion and career women:

Their interest is to make themselves appear very good looking for others. But for some people, they have been compelled to do *fashion* just to feed themselves. Like in the *travel agencies*, I've heard that they tell girls, "Ordinary isn't enough!" They are obliged to wear [high] *standard* clothing or lose their jobs. They have to look *tip-top*. That's why the girls who work there have to do *fashion* whether they can afford it or not. It's for the *boss* too, you know. They *have* to be good looking.

In this woman's remarks there is an interesting tension between a condemnation of fashion as a sign of sexual compromise on the one hand, and on the other, a condemnation of the modern labor market that not only obliges women "do *fashion*," but seems to offer them few other opportunities for "suitable" public careers. Fashion seems almost to be forced upon women who enter the public sphere ("They have to look *tip-tip*") thereby literally marking them with the signs of moral laxity. Thus middle-class fashion, like *ijjat*, seems to consist of a range of rhetorics and practices that patrol women's access to the public sphere. Fashion is an important field in which middle-class women construct themselves as modern, but they must constantly balance on the knife's edge between fashion's class promises, and its gender threats.

Conclusion

In Kathmandu middle-class women spoke of a new sense of freedom tied to experiences of modernity in the form of education, the liberation of potential, and escape from seemingly irrational customs and social strictures. But at the same time they spoke of the experience of certain

freedoms offered in youth but denied in adulthood. Here *ijjat* or prestige plays a major part. Ironically education enhances a woman's *ijjat* on the register of class status even while the promises of advancement and achievement embedded in educational rhetoric threaten to diminish her social prestige by placing her in the male dominated, and potentially hostile, public sphere.

Thus entering the role of the "public woman"—the free, individual in the public sphere—is like entering a mine field; threats of harassment and sexual stigma await those women who dare to break out of a traditional femininity that was confined within dependent relations with dominant males. As in the west where critics have noted the containment of women in rhetorics of "nature" and private domesticity, in Kathmandu also the logic of *ijjat* constructs women as "naturally" sexual objects whose sexuality must be confined and protected. Male "culture" by contrast is public.

The persistence of *ijjat* (the discourse and practice of patriarchal social prestige) in Kathmandu's middle-class public sphere forces us to ask "What is old?" and "What is new?" in the patterns of gender relations in the 1990s. As discussed in part one, social historians of Europe argue that the rise of a new liberal democratic bourgeois public sphere—more than simply a continuation of an earlier patriarchy—in fact implied a reformulation of the ideology of male dominance, and a greater domestication or confinement of women. Is the same true of post-*āndolan* Nepal with its promises of democratic freedoms?

This paper suggests that middle-class Kathmandu women in the 1990s experience both a continuation of earlier forms of patriarchy, and signs of a retrenchment or extension of male dominance. On the one hand women experience a powerful *ijjat* prestige economy that seems little diminished even in the face of new rhetorics of public freedoms, achievement, and equality. On the other hand the seemingly stepped-up harassment of women suggests that men may be taking disciplinary measures to guarantee that women do not claim a place in the emerging bourgeois public sphere. In the rising incidence of sexual violence are signs of a new gender policing of legitimate publicness. In post-*āndolan* Kathmandu earlier forms of social surveillance and systems of gender inequity coexist with liberal rhetoric and opportunities, but increased violence against women threatens to close the door to increased public rights opened by those men *and* women who fought to restore multi-party democracy. The modern Nepali "public woman" is "free" to go to school, "free" to go to work, "free" to consume modern goods and enter the public sphere, but

unlike the "public man," she must constantly bear the burden of *ijjat* and sexual harassment. Along with the young woman quoted above we might ask, "Is that *free*?"

Arguably what is different about post-*āndolan* Kathmandu is that publicness is no longer simply a matter of access to public spaces and public roles. In the new democratic Nepal the public sphere is now also the sphere of political power. In the context of an emerging electoral democracy publicness takes on new meanings as the public individual (voter) becomes the fundamental unit of political power. The challenge for bourgeois patriarchy is to construct a "modern" gendered class practice that redefines women's "nature" to include certain public roles (consumer, laborer) while retaining the political power of the new democratic public sphere for itself.

In this paper I have shown some of the ways that such a reconfiguration of patriarchal middle-class gender roles might occur in Kathmandu, but I have also shown that there is much debate over, and resistance to, these trends. The explicit and implicit critiques voiced by women in this paper are now increasingly being acted upon as women take a more aggressive stance in claiming public rights and freedoms. Legislative debates over inheritance and property rights, public outcry over prostitution and trafficking in women, and legal challenges to marriage and divorce laws, illustrate how women are actively pressing the institutions and processes of liberal democracy to uphold their rights and address their interests. Ongoing debates over the merits of arranged- vs. "love"-marriages, and extended vs. nuclear households also guarantee that matters concerning women's freedom remain very much in the "public eye."

Since the rebirth of multi-party democracy in Nepal in the early 1990s the shape and meaning of freedom is, more than ever, on the line. Women recognize that "freedom" is a concept up for grabs; it must be beaten into shape by a range of forces and interests all clamoring to have a voice in the emerging public sphere. As in other times and places where periods of bourgeois political liberalization have seen parallel campaigns to deny these rights to women, in Kathmandu the increased rhetoric of liberal democracy has seen increased harassment and public humiliation of women. Even as women register their outrage, patriarchy seems intent on re-engineering itself in a new liberal guise. The "people's movement" of 1990 opened a space for a new public sphere in Nepal though it remains to be seen precisely *which* people will be able to claim that space of "freedom."

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