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Single but Not Alone: The Journey from Stigma to Collective Identity through Himachal's Single Women's Movement

Kim Berry

Across the northwestern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, never-married, divorced, separated, abandoned and widowed women have joined together across differences of caste, class, ethnicity and region to organize as members of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (The Association of Empowered Single Women). Until recently the term *ekal nari* (single woman) was rarely, if ever, used locally to describe a particular woman's circumstances of living outside the institution of marriage. Yet since the emergence of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (ENSS) in Himachal Pradesh in 2005, over 9,000 women have become dues-paying members of the organization, re-identifying as single women, and struggling collectively to craft lives of dignity and respect. In this article I focus on the new subject position of *ekal nari* and the formation of a collective identity. I argue that as *ekal nari* is deployed within the context of a new social movement, it becomes

a new subject position into which persons are called forth, resulting in both emancipatory as well as disciplinary effects.

Keywords: collective identity, heteropatriarchy, single women, subject position, women's movement.

The identity of the single woman is spreading. Their power is growing.... Men, trying to lessen their fear, are laughing and joking and saying, 'There is a single woman.' But they know she isn't alone. Behind her thousands are coming. Only in name is it single; when you think about it there is a lot in it that is hidden.

— Deepa Devi, 2007

Introduction

Since 2005, across the northwestern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, never-married, divorced, separated, abandoned and widowed women have joined together across differences of caste, class, ethnicity and region to organize as members of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (The Association of Empowered Single Women, hereafter ENSS). Until recently the term *ekal nari* (single woman) was rarely, if ever, used locally to describe a particular woman's circumstances of living outside the institution of marriage. Yet since the emergence of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (ENSS) in Himachal Pradesh, over 9,000 women have become dues-paying members of this social movement organization, re-identifying as single women, and working collectively to craft lives of dignity and respect. In the opening quotation, Deepa Devi, one of the leaders of ENSS in District Kangra, highlighted the rapid growth of the movement only two years after its inception. She also alluded to the threats single women pose to a social order in which husbands are presumed to control wives in both material and symbolic ways, resulting in single women's social and economic marginalization.

While non-normativity shapes all rural Himachali single women's lives, the dynamics of marginalization vary, not only by differences of caste, ethnicity, class, education, personality and the density of networks with family and friends, but also by the circumstances through which women come to live without husbands. Widowed women are viewed as inauspicious at worst, or *bechari* (poor thing), at best. They are formally and informally marginalized from kinship rituals, with young widows in particular viewed as symbolically dangerous and disruptive. Divorced and abandoned women, as well as women who have fled their marital homes (most often due to violence), are suspected of being *bouri* (bad), readily surveilled for signs of illicit love affairs, and subject to relentless and debilitating gossip. Women resisting marriage are seen as headstrong, 'a girl like *that*.' These statistically rare, and courageous, women must actively resist marriage for a decade or more before finally being left to navigate their lives without potential grooms arriving at their doorsteps. Disabled women are cast most readily as *bechari*, the object of pity; those

with minor disabilities generally find grooms and can be ushered into respectable/normative womanhood; others, with more severe disabilities may remain unmarried for life, or become a second wife to a couple without children, her womb and labor offering a hoped-for solution to infertility (Berry 2008).

These abject subject positions (widow, divorcee, abandoned woman, disabled woman, unmarried woman) are defined through contrast with the married woman—so clearly captured in the locally salient construction of the *suhagan* (auspicious married woman), but fundamental to multiple discourses of womanhood. For across a variety of gendered discourses within India (from pre-colonial heteropatriarchies, to colonial rule, nationalist strategies of resistance, and post-colonial development projects), heterosexual marital status is a foundational element of the normative gendered subject. A break from the institution of marriage, whether desired or not, threatens a woman's access to the position of the 'good woman' and normative gendered subjectivity (Bhaiya et al. 1996). Given that heteropatriarchal marriage serves to channel women's sexuality into the socially acceptable arena of reproductive sexuality, the Other of the good woman is constructed as unconstrained sexually, and thereby sexually available. In their groundbreaking work on single women in India, Bhaiya et al. (1996) have convincingly argued that while all women navigate their gendered identities in relation to the good woman/bad woman dichotomy (e.g., making daily choices about what to wear, where to walk, with whom to speak, on what topics, and with what tone), single women are always/already suspected of being bad women, simply by living outside of the symbolic protection of marriage. While older widows generally escape this gaze of suspicion, younger single women are frequently surveilled for sexual liaisons and must be ready and able to physically defend themselves from men who seek them out as sexually available (Berry 2008).

In addition to symbolic and sexual violence, poor, rural single women navigate economic marginalization as well. They find creative ways to piece together economic strategies to provide for themselves and their children, not as dependent wives or supplemental earners, but as heads of household with fragile rights to land and confronting androcentric norms of employment. Often working as subsistence farmers on their own plots of land, they earn income for clothing, school fees and other necessities through farm labor and/or housework for wealthier neighbors, or by selling milk if they are fortunate enough to have a cow or buffalo, or by making illicit alcohol, or gaining employment in a local business or non-governmental organiza-

tion, among other local survival strategies. A number of women living outside of marriage are caught in the limbo of having no home to call their own, tenuously managing relations with parents, brothers, sisters-in-laws, or with their ex-husband's relatives to secure a place to live. Even in the best of contexts, in which an adult woman living in her natal home is surrounded by love and support, it is still clear that she is the one out of place; such knowledge is an emotional burden that a woman bears in a household struggling to meet the needs of all family members (Berry 2008; National Forum for Single Women's Rights 2011).

Before the emergence of ENSS, single women employed myriad strategies to craft lives of dignity and respect (Berry 2008; Mehrotra 2003). Yet, ironically, many of their strategies for resisting stigma re-centered norms of good womanhood, seeking simply to broaden the category of the good woman to include some single women as well (Berry 2008).¹ While individual women are rarely able to contest norms directly without facing symbolic and material marginalization, collective forms of resistance enable a direct engagement with the dynamics of stigmatization as well as the material conditions which (re)produce marginality. Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan is the first social movement in the state in which women living outside the institution of marriage can re-imagine themselves collectively as single women and transform their marginalized and stigmatized status.

Below I focus on the new subject position of single women and the formation of a collective identity. When women disidentify with abject subject positions of widow, abandoned, divorced, and never-married women, and embrace a positive identification with the subject position *ekal nari*, they open up new ways of understanding themselves and their relations to others. As ENSS members and leaders refuse the heteropatriarchal norm of the dependent woman and fight for their rights to be seen as autonomous citizens of the state, organizing to demand basic economic security and justice, these actions can be seen as emancipatory. Yet within the space of this social movement, ENSS members and leaders may also discipline themselves (through choices about dress, movement, speech and which desires and goals to embrace and which to suppress) and/or others (through malicious gossip, scorn, or practices of exclusion), thereby conforming to (and reproducing) discourses of the good woman. Below I argue that as *ekal nari* is deployed within the context of a new social movement, it becomes a new subject position into which persons are called forth, resulting in both emancipatory and disciplinary effects.²

Research Journey

My activist research on single women began in 2005, during which I interviewed 46 single women in District Kangra over a period of seven months.³ During this time I also collaborated with my friend and neighbor Kishwar Shirali to hold monthly meetings at the NGO Nishtha for single women to share their joys and sorrows. Coincidentally, activists from Rajasthan implemented their plan to spread the single women's movement (founded in the Indian state of Rajasthan in 2000) to Himachal just as my activist research project concluded with a two-day *mela* (festive gathering) for single women in Kangra. Shanti, one of the Delhi-based feminist activists whose research on single women inspired my research project, along with three leaders from ENSS Rajasthan, facilitated discussions, role-plays and reflections on the lives and struggles of single women during the *mela*. On the final day of the *mela*, Kangri women celebrated the launching of ENSS Himachal that ENSS Rajasthan had initiated with the support of SUTRA (Social Uplift through Rural Action) and other Himachali non-governmental organizations.

I returned to Himachal Pradesh in the summers of 2007 and 2009 and eagerly followed the growth of the movement; I witnessed the transformations which had occurred in a number of women's lives. In 2011, inspired by the movement's demand for long term lease rights of agricultural land from the state, paired with the plan to create new family formations of an older single woman and a younger single woman and her children, I worked with SUTRA to write and submit an application for the Ashoka Changemaker's grant competition titled 'Property Rights: Identity, Dignity and Opportunity for All' (sponsored by the Omidyar Network). The receipt of the \$50,000 award has enabled ENSS in Himachal to begin the process of setting up a demonstration project, whose ultimate goal is to show recalcitrant politicians that ENSS's visionary plan of creating new families of single women (which I discuss later in the paper) is viable. In 2012, I returned to Himachal again, this time for seven months, to continue learning from the members and leaders of this movement.

This article is based upon the knowledge I gained from witnessing the lives, struggles and joys of diverse single women in Himachal. I have been fortunate to be able to compare the period where a single woman's only option was to navigate her life within known networks of kin and friends, to the current context whereby single women who join ENSS have an additional network of support: a social movement whose presence is felt at the levels of national and state policy making as well as village-based advocacy and support. Throughout my discussions below, I inter-

weave observations of ENSS meetings (from the village to the state level) and semi-structured interviews with members and leaders in 2009 and 2012, with excerpts from a lengthy filmed interview (in Hindi) with four leaders of ENSS in Kangra District of HP from July 2007.⁴

What I recorded on film and in text should not be seen as reflections of a 'true' identity or 'true' understanding of self, but rather must be understood within the more dynamic context of the forging of self within the context of power-laden discourses. As Goffman (1959) and Butler (1990) both remind us, identity is produced, and the illusion of an inner, stable identity is the result of iterative performative acts over time, each act citing prior performances. Thus the words and other actions of single women leaders are best seen as acts of negotiation of discourses with both emancipatory and disciplinary effects.

Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan, Himachal

In Himachal Pradesh, ENSS operates as a dues-paying organization, supported in its organizing efforts by non-governmental organizations that pay single women outreach workers based in nine districts across the state. The ethnic diversity of this Himalayan state, combined with the difficulty of travel due to the mountainous terrain, have resulted in a network of NGOs supporting the movement, with SUTRA (Social Uplift Through Rural Action), located in Solan District, at the head. Nirmal Chandel, State Coordinator of ENSS, is a long-time staff member of SUTRA, working with the semi-retired director of SUTRA, Subhash Mendhapurkar, and others in the SUTRA offices to coordinate state-wide meetings, secure funding, consolidate demands, develop documents, network with state-level politicians, and coordinate campaigns. Regional NGOs, such as Nishtha, based in Kangra District, help to support the movement by providing staff, organizing and hosting regional events, and working with the regional press and politicians to gain support for ENSS. The Rajasthan-based NGO Astha (the organization which provided primary support for launching ENSS in Rajasthan and spreading the movement across northern India) provides support for the National Forum for Single Women's Rights (Rashtriya Ekal Nari Adhikar Manch), linking Himachal's ENSS with representatives of ENSS from six other states (representing a total of approximately 50,000 members across India).

During the initial two years of ENSS in Himachal, leaders recruited members and facilitated meetings at the *panchayat*, block, district and state level to craft a platform of demands to improve single women's lives. These meetings were the first spaces within which diverse women living

outside of marriage were positioned by others and began positioning themselves as single women. Gathered together, they began sharing their stories of suffering, gaining courage to speak as they identified patterns of marginalization and articulated their needs for economic survival.

It was during this intensive work of movement formation that I conducted the interview with four local ENSS leaders (filmed by two young single women filmmakers from Delhi). The interview was held in my friend Kishwar Shirali's house, and it was followed by dinner, more talk, and a spontaneous slumber party once we realized how late it had become.⁵ The four leaders of ENSS knew each other well, and the interview was punctuated with laughter and a sense of camaraderie. I asked them what, if any, difference the identity of *ekal nari* has made in their lives and the women with whom they work. Ravindra, an unmarried woman of the Gaddi community, in her mid-twenties, hired by Nishtha as a fieldworker for ENSS (and who had served as my research assistant in 2005) recounted her experiences.⁶ "When I go to the village and meet with women, I ask them if they want me to say *ekal* or the names we used to use before—widow, divorcee, abandoned. They all prefer *ekal*, because [they said] when we first heard widow, divorcee, abandoned woman, the words were searing. We fell into a depression for many days; the sorrow ate away at us. It seems to me that the biggest difference is the feeling that we have found a name. Words like widow, divorcee, unmarried, 'that kind of girl' were like insults. That's the biggest difference in one year." Here Ravindra identified the way that *ekal nari* became a way of naming oneself that replaced the abject subject positions so profoundly affecting women's sense of themselves.

Building on Ravindra's comments, Radha, a *dalit* woman in her thirties who courageously left a violent marriage and who now works as a paid leader of ENSS (and current representative from Himachal to the national movement), pointed out that identification with the term *ekal nari* is not immediate, and the association not instantly positive.⁷ "When ENSS began [in Himachal], and when we first heard about *ekal nari*, we were worried about what was meant by single (*ekal*). We used to believe that *ekal* meant entirely alone, and we thought of a woman who lived separately from her husband, or a widow, or a woman who is head of her household, as alone and as feeling lonely (*akelapan*). But when I heard about ENSS and the support that we could gain, then I liked it." Radha identified the process of re-signification of *ekal*, one that replaced the citationality (Butler 1993) of 'alone and lonely' with a promise of community and support.⁸ For it is only through collective association, forged through participation in Ekal Nari

Shakti Sangathan, that the meaning of *ekal* is transformed and the position of *ekal nari* is moved from the realm of the abject to one of potential unity and strength. Through positioning self and other as single women, *ekal nari* became a new identity, which Melucci, in his foundational work on the formation of new identities within social movements, defines as the “delineation of this subject with respect to others; the ability to recognize and to be recognized” (1995: 6).

Deepa responded to the dialogue by foregrounding her association with this new identity and the ability to come forward to speak: “I remember the day when the work of Ekal Nari began. Even now I am moved when I recall those women who were too scared or too shy to speak [at the first meeting]. They can speak today; they are coming forward. They are finding their identity. They don’t like to say, ‘she’s a widow,’ ‘she’s abandoned,’ ‘she’s divorced;’ we say we are all *ekal*, meaning that we are all one (*ek*).” Deepa skillfully played upon the meanings of *ekal*, demonstrating that the root word of one (*ek*), can invoke collective unity when it is unmoored from over-determined meanings of isolation. In Deepa’s comments we can see the strategic deployment of the play of meanings, the active negotiation of the gap between signifier and signified, as central to the process of re-signification.

This assertion of collectivity and unity, necessary for this social movement, is always subject to unraveling due to the endless, intersecting differences that give shape and meaning to single women’s lives. Later in the evening Deepa articulated how the process of becoming ‘one,’ of collective identity as single women, is forged across such differences through the symbolism and narrative of shared suffering. She said, “I went to the first meeting in March.⁹ There were twenty-two women from different villages who were there, and all of our stories resembled each other. It seemed that while there were different needs, the sorrow was one. We were all connected to each other in one way or another.” At the time of this first meeting in 2005, Deepa had recently escaped an abusive marriage and returned to her parents’ home, devastated by the reality that she was unable to support her young child who remained with her husband’s family. She was filled with the sorrow of that tragedy, and, while her separation from her child continued to haunt her two years later, her newfound identity and work as a single woman leader had transformed her into an exceptionally skilled movement builder.

Speaking about her work as a leader of ENSS, visiting villages and attempting to build the membership of the organization, Deepa commented on the process through which she helps to create solidarity as single women: “At a

rally or if the Chief Minister comes, then all at once there is unity. But in the village meetings there is fear. However, if I start with my own story of suffering, then trust builds. Sure there are differences of caste and community, but when I share my sorrow...many women think that nothing has ever happened to me. They ask me, ‘What do you know of sorrow? You are fine. You laugh, eat, earn money.’ I tell them that I left my husband, that I left my child, that I am living without my child now. If you share your sorrow then they will trust you and share their sorrow as well, and then you will be trusted. We can bond with each other through sorrow. Also it takes time. It is not that unity happens all at once.”

Deepa, as a member of the Nepali-Indian community in Kangra, is also college educated (although she comes from a family who now rents a home in a village and her father has only a small military pension as a source of support). Thus, when working in villages without many ethnic Nepalis and among many poor, rural women, she is perceived as someone who differs due to ethnicity, as well as education. It is through stories of shared suffering that she is able to make a connection with other women and enable them to envision themselves as occupying a shared position as single women. This process of sharing sorrow is foundational to the production of a collective identity, in which diversely positioned women unite (in particular spaces, such as local ENSS meetings, protest marches, and actions in support of other members) across their myriad differences, through the position of *ekal nari*.¹⁰ The subject position *ekal nari* is bound up with suffering; those who position themselves and others as *ekal* draw upon the hardship of living outside the institution of marriage and then deploy this suffering to help produce a movement to transform both symbolic meanings and material realities.

Returning to Deepa’s comment that, “[i]t seemed that while there were different needs, the sorrow was one,” it is not surprising that one of the significant projects of the movement was to identify these different needs. During the first two years of meetings and movement building, leaders consolidated the knowledge gained about the hardships diverse single women face across the state and crafted a platform of integrated political and economic demands. ENSS demanded fast-track courts for divorces, as many divorces take twelve years or more to finalize. They also produced a far-reaching platform of demands to address the diverse economic needs of their constituents. ENSS demanded free diagnostic services, treatment and medications for single women in response to the spiraling costs in health care and poor single women’s resulting lack of access. They demanded that low-level jobs in the public

sector be reserved for single women (jobs such as office cleaners, water carriers in schools, assistants in village crèches). In addition, they demanded an increased pension for widows to help stave off dire poverty. Their demand for ration cards for single women who are separated from their husbands had far reaching material and symbolic effects, as ration cards are one of the key ways that poor households stave off hunger and/or malnutrition and access programs to alleviate poverty. These cards enable members of a household to buy subsidized food and cooking fuel at government ration shops, and they are also required when applying for government development programs for the poor (such as grants for house construction, access to rights in employment programs for the poor, and grants for her children's education as well as marriage expenses). Before this demand was granted by the government, poor women separated from their husbands were seen as dependent citizen-subjects whose only access to these programs was mediated through the husbands they left, or natal families who may or may not welcome them home. Upon receipt of a ration card in their own names, single women become recognized by the state as heads of household and entitled to apply for benefits.¹¹

ENSS's most revolutionary demand was for long-term lease rights to state land for poor single women, paired with the proposal to create the *naya parivar* (new family). Based upon my interviews in 2005 with single women farmers who were supporting and raising children, it is no surprise that single women are pairing their demands for land with a vision of forming mutually supportive relations with another single woman. Life as a single woman farmer is literally back-breaking, and the work of farming and running a household is more than one adult can bear (see Berry 2008). ENSS's re-envisioned family, the proposed *naya parivar*, is one in which an older single woman would join with a younger single woman to create a joint household of mutual support, the older woman taking responsibility for much of the reproductive work of cooking, cleaning and light farm work, while the younger woman would provide the intensive labor of farming and engage in some activity to bring income into the home.¹²

ENSS's vision of the *naya parivar* combines demands for a safety net with an economic strategy that foregrounds economic and food security based in subsistence agriculture. In addition, income would come either through sale of milk or other agricultural products, farm labor on wealthier families' land, employment in low level government jobs, daily labor through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, or work in the private or informal sector. This package of economic survival strategies mirrors the

primary mode of economic survival of many rural Himachali households, since the mountainous terrain and relatively small landholding size preclude large scale, mechanized agriculture.

In 2007, ENSS leaders presented these demands to politicians across the state and simultaneously began to organize a three-day *pad yatra* (protest march in the Gandhian tradition), in order to place the demands of this new social movement at the forefront of political debate. In April 2008, over 2,600 single women from across the state walked for three days over mountainous terrain from Dhami, a symbolic site of resistance to colonial rule, to the state capital of Shimla. The journey was trying for many, as the terrain was difficult and the weather abysmal. Late spring rains drenched the women as they carried their bags and suitcases upon their heads and burdened shoulders. They slept under large, festive tents, which, drenched by the rain, sent steady drips of water onto the participants while they attempted to sleep. Despite the dismal conditions, early mornings and evenings were spent dancing and singing songs of the single women's movement, lending a spirit of festivity and celebration.¹³

The *pad yatra* was a particularly potent site for the production of a collective identity, what Stuart Hall (1991: 52-53) so aptly identifies as an imaginary, political re-identification. Through carrying banners, shouting slogans, singing songs, being interviewed by journalists, and walking en masse through forested hills and small hamlets, they literally stepped out of multiple, place-specific identities (as someone's neighbor, aunt, mother, daughter, sister-in-law, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law; as women of particular castes and classes; as subjects of local gossip and surveillance) and positioned themselves as single women, forwarding a list of demands to address their economic marginalization.

At the conclusion of the *pad yatra* in Shimla, leaders of ENSS presented the Chief Minister of Himachal (the head of the state government) with their demands. After submitting to pressure he addressed the eagerly awaiting crowd. Faced by media cameras and several thousand women who had marched for three days, he made several promises: an increase in pension, identity cards for single women, increased health care, and access to low-level government jobs. However, the demand for long term lease rights to land was studiously ignored. This silence from the government is not surprising, as the demand for land combined with the plan for the *naya parivar* most fundamentally challenged the construct of the 'dependent woman' so central not only to colonial rule, but also to contemporary, post-colonial national and state policy (Berry 2011).

While the *pad yatra* placed single women and their demands on the political map, and while it resulted in some concessions from the government, it did not result in an avalanche of victories for the movement. Since 2008, single women workers have had to fight to make each of those concessions realized on the ground, navigating the often obstructionist offices of *patwari* (local government revenue department officer), *panchayat* (village institutions of self-governance), courts, and district-level government officials. The dream of the *naya parivar* (new family) is also being pursued through a demonstration project in Una District, which is in the early stages of development.

The *pad yatra* was a potent moment in the formation of a collective identity, helping to reimagine the subject position of *ekal nari*. However, the salience of this reimagined subject position is dynamic and contextual, receding into the background during daily routines in village life, and then surfacing in important ways in a variety of other spaces: village level monthly ENSS meetings; twice yearly ENSS gatherings at block level meetings; participation in events for International Women's Day and International Widow's Day; local ENSS actions in support of single women seeking justice from village councils or access to benefits from government development offices.¹⁴ Within these spaces diverse women position themselves and/or are positioned by others specifically as single women and as members of ENSS.

Attending to the processes of collective identity formation through micro-mobilization, social movement theorists argue that the creation of a collective identity should be seen as an achievement in its own right (Gamson 1992; Melucci 1989, 1995). In the case of ENSS, the imaginary and political re-identification as single women has created a space for some women to contest normative conceptions of good womanhood and forge new gendered subjectivities in their homes and communities. For others, the movement has greatly expanded their networks of support, enabling them to access government entitlements that were previously unavailable or unrealizable, and transforming their status from marginalized members of a community to members of a new fictive family of single women, with the collective power to defend rights to land, secure favorable divorce settlements, and confront symbolic and physical violence in their locales.

Yet this new subject position, which offers so many positive associations for women, also comes with the dangers of sexualization, for the position of *ekal nari*, crafted within the context of a collective struggle for dignity, remains tainted with the ever-present assumption that women who live outside the institution of marriage are suspect, bad,

and/or sexually available. Although members of ENSS are able to refer to other women as *ekal* without any visible tension or embarrassment, this latent sexualized meaning arises in contexts in which a man refers to a woman as an *ekal nari*. Single women, to retain their respectability, must defend their reputations against accusations of sexual behavior, or risk being branded as 'the bad woman.'

Radha demonstrated this dynamic when she discussed an encounter with a male lawyer (in the interview recorded in 2007). She had been telling the story of working as an advocate for a single woman and accompanying her to court. She said, "The next time I arrived at the court with her again, the lawyer said, 'The single woman has come.'" Radha began laughing loudly, and Vindru, Deepa, and Nanko joined in. Then Radha suddenly stopped laughing and said with great seriousness, "I didn't mind. It is fine. I am a single woman. Why should I be offended, because I am a single woman. And I said to the lawyer [and here she leaned forward, tilted her chin, and said boldly], "Yeah brother, what's the matter with that? (*Ha bhai, kya bimari*)?" while laughing like this." [Everyone laughed some more.] "And he said, [and here she deftly invoked the affect of an embarrassed and apologetic lawyer] 'No, no madam, I was just saying that you are coming here frequently for this work.' [Then quickly returning to her most dignified expression of self, Radha continued] And I said, 'It's fine, no problem.'"

As she recounted this interaction, Radha used the familial *bhai* (brother), and reported that he replied with 'madam,' a term of respect. Women in this region (and far beyond) commonly use the kin term *bhai* as a strategy to desexualize an encounter with unrelated men. By reporting that the lawyer used the term 'madam' in response to her retort, Radha definitively marked the transformation of a potentially sexualized encounter into one that is respectable, in this case by drawing upon a linguistic code with roots in colonialism and re-deployed in post-colonial contexts. Single women leaders, in particular, traveling alone on buses and walking unaccompanied through mountain hamlets, navigate the potential slippage in meaning of *ekal nari* in order to distance themselves from the residual trace of the single woman as the 'bad woman.' Thus we can see the ways that the subject position of *ekal nari* is simultaneously emancipatory and disciplinary as it is deployed by leaders and members. It enables single women to expand their spheres of movement, knowledge and action, taking them into encounters in *panchayat* meetings and courts, into meetings at the block, district, state (and in some cases, national) level, and into protest marches and meetings with the press and politicians. Simultaneously, as single

women navigate the potential slippage of meaning into its sexualized overtones of the bad, loose, and/or sexually available woman, they reposition themselves to conform to norms of respectable womanhood, disciplining their actions and desires.

Bhaiya et al. (1996) argue that inclusion of sex workers in single women's organizing is essential for resisting the disciplining of women through reference to the good woman norm. Sex workers embody the 'bad woman' Other, as they so thoroughly reject heteropatriarchy's delimiting of women's sexuality as acceptable only through marriage and in the service of reproduction.¹⁵ By including sex workers' lives and struggles as part of a collective movement, single women, they argue, can most powerfully contest the good woman/bad woman dichotomy that is central to the disciplining of all women's lives. While ENSS has included rural single women sex workers in their organization, they have shied away from foregrounding sex workers' unique needs and issues in the movement platform. This decision is due to a combination of factors, not the least of which is that rural sex workers who are members are concerned that they would face personal backlash (as well as backlash against the movement as a whole) if their unique concerns were publicly discussed.

Given ENSS's avoidance of this most direct confrontation of the good woman/ bad woman dichotomy, it would be easy to conclude that the movement as a whole is attempting to refute stigma by attempting to expand the category of the good woman to include single women as well. Such an approach would mimic the strategies of stigma management that widowed, abandoned, divorced and never-married women used before the emergence of ENSS: staying silent in the face of verbal harassment; adopting a pious persona to shift attention away from a sexual body and to recast oneself as a devoted spiritual being; and/or curtailing movement in order to reduce suspicion of illicit liaisons (Berry 2008). Yet in block level meetings in 2012, I witnessed the opposite dynamic. Several times as Nirmal Chandel, the state coordinator of ENSS, talked with a new young woman member, she advised the woman on how to manage the verbal harassment she knew this woman would be facing, recently returned as she was to her maternal home after leaving an abusive marriage. Nirmal advised, "If they gossip about you for wearing nice clothes, put on more lipstick and go out with courage. If they tell you you shouldn't go out, then go out more. It will take time, but you will gain strength as time passes. If you listen to them, the harassment will never end." An older woman, a member of ENSS from 2005, chimed in with a couplet reaffirming this survival strategy: *Sharikan ch*

basanaa/ ander rohna; bahar hansna (When surrounded by your community/ cry inside; laugh outside.) These pieces of advice provide women with an alternative discourse, along with a support network, through which to craft their identities as single women. In so doing they directly challenged normative ideas of the good woman, and simultaneously carved out spaces for single women to live their lives beyond the stultifying possibilities of stigma management.

Similarly, the emancipatory potential of *ekal nari* is used to reject one of the most ubiquitous representations of young widows and girls who remain unmarried due to disability: that of the *bechari* (poor thing). In 2012, Nirmal, Radha and Deepa all challenged women at the block level meetings whenever they used the word *bechari* to describe someone. Quickly one of them instructed, "say *kumari* (miss, unmarried young woman), not *bechari*." Radha also challenged members to think about their own complicity in gossiping about other women, thereby highlighting the micro-interactions through which normativity and stigma are reproduced, and by which women discipline each other into complying with gendered norms of behavior.

The potential for members to discipline each other (through, gossip, accusation, surveillance) to comply with norms of good womanhood is a latent possibility within the radical plan for the *naya parivar*. For this plan entails not only mundane routines of productive and reproductive work, but the fashioning of new symbolic and lived forms of family. In early 2012 in Una District of Himachal, ENSS was given access to an abandoned old age home and small piece of arable land, which, combined with the grant to help with start-up expenses, has enabled members to begin the work of forging a demonstration project. Leaders of ENSS have consistently assured those members contemplating the move that ENSS will become their new family, one who will ensure that participants will be taken care of in life as well as in death. The task of building such trust is monumental, for women will be abandoning known networks for survival (albeit tenuous) for an unknown and untested concept.

If successfully implemented, the *naya parivar* will be a space both familiar and new. The material practices of farming, raising children, cooking food, cleaning and maintenance of daily life needs have long and embedded histories which are transportable from one rural locale in Himachal to another. Change of locale itself is also familiar for those members who were once married, for they have experienced leaving their densely woven kin and community relations, (re)produced within lived contexts of both mundane and sacred geographies, and starting life anew in

their husband's community. However there is a profound difference between the transition from natal to marital household and the shift which some single women are now contemplating, as they decide whether to be the first group to initiate the *naya parivar*. For previously married women, the transition from natal to marital family was overseen by in-laws who sutured new wives into their marital locales. While such relations are negotiated and contested, this navigation of social relations occurs within the context of discursively produced identities of kin and community with a common framework of norms and expectations. In contrast, the creation of the *naya parivar* will entail the formation of new networks of relations both within the demonstration compound and with the broader community. These will be forged collectively within a context previously unimagined, without embedded histories of relations.

At the founding of this new family formation, many questions about the disciplinary workings of power emerge. Will hierarchies be established among women, mimicking kinship hierarchies among women within rural households? Will difference in caste identity structure routines of cooking and eating? In an attempt to garner respect from the broader community, will this new family become a site of disciplinary regulation of movement and sexuality? The seeds of disciplinary action are present within the experiment of the *naya parivar*; it is unclear whether future members of these new family forms will be able to craft a space capable of contesting the disciplinary effects of hegemonic notions of respectable womanhood.

Currently it is leaders of the movement, with support of their colleagues and NGOs behind them, who are most forcefully able to contest restrictive 'good woman' norms. During a quarterly meeting of leaders of the movement in 2012, discussion turned to the topic of single women being called a witch. Radha, while laughing, said, "It is fabulous when someone calls us a witch." Later she elaborated on this point, recounting that she used to be devastated by people's malicious gossip about her (before the formation of ENSS), but now when someone calls her a witch, she sees it as a wonderful opportunity because she can take strength from that accusation. She demonstrated her strategy by pronouncing, "I'll say, 'Yes, I am a witch,' and then they'll be scared of me." Here, rather than working to secure her reputation through reference to good womanhood, she deployed a strategy central to queer politics: re-signifying a slur and refusing the norm. By 2012, with seven years' experience as a movement leader, Radha's social capital, accumulated through dense political networks across the state, enabled her to deploy radical strategies

to contest others' attempts to discipline her into proper womanly behavior.

While leaders of ENSS are profoundly shaped by the subject position of single woman, the alter-narratives which circulate within ENSS meetings and events have differing degrees of salience for members. Those single women who face the most stigma—young widows, women who have fled domestic violence, divorced women, abandoned and never-married women—may realize emancipatory possibilities of this subject position by re-defining themselves and their relations with others through the embrace of a new identity. The depth and salience of this positioning can be seen as evidence of the production of a new gendered subjectivity, whereby *ekal nari* becomes one of multiple and co-constituting subject positions through which single women craft their lives, shaping actions (dress, movement, speech) and life goals and desires.¹⁶ In contrast, older women with the economic security of employed sons may not experience identity-based transformation, but rather may use their membership in ENSS to help serve others in their community who are less fortunate. For such members, the emancipatory potential of their identity as single women is realized through the additional symbolic capital of ENSS membership, added to the status of being mothers of grown sons and the benefits of daughters-in-law to lighten their household and farming chores. In 2012, I witnessed several occasions in which *dalit* single women members, whose sons were in the military (thereby providing economic security for the entire family), proudly accompanied paid leaders of ENSS in their support of more vulnerable members: once in the case of a *panchayat* hearing about a divorce settlement; another in the case of compensation for the accidental death of a member's husband. This latter case involved defending a destitute *dalit* widow against a Brahmin family with substantial land holdings, thereby contesting class and caste hegemony while also increasing members' standing in their community.

Yet not all women who live outside of marriage are joining this movement and re-identifying as *ekal nari*. Those who are financially secure and who have no interest in supporting others without such privilege may choose to maintain a comfortable distance from ENSS. In the Brahmin family referenced above, the widowed mother of the son who ran into and killed the *dalit* man not surprisingly defended her son and consolidated her class and caste privilege, while refusing the opportunity to join a movement of single women. A number of poor single women have also turned away from the movement, frustrated there is no automatic financial reward that comes from ENSS, but only the promise of collective struggle. There are others for whom

joining the movement is not possible: some young single women whose movement is so controlled they cannot find a way to participate, and others who fear that joining would risk their tenuous strategies for survival.

The thousands of women who have participated in ENSS over the past seven years have crafted a space for addressing a wide range of issues in rural Himachal communities. Leaders and members have provided physical and emotional assistance to women abused by their husbands; worked with the *panchayat* and/or the courts to secure maintenance payments by errant and absentee husbands; secured access to identity cards; facilitated fast track divorces by using the *panchayat* and then certifying the decision in local court cases; accessed micro-credit loans for buffaloes and cows and grants for house construction, children's education, and/or funds for a daughter's marriage; signed up members for health care benefits; checked in on older single women who are living alone and tending to them when they are ill; or assisted members in fighting for custody of children in cases of separation and divorce. In essence, much of the work has focused on helping members gain access to rights and entitlements, those which exist for the poor more broadly, and those won by the movement specifically for single women. Before the formation of ENSS it was common for poor widows or abandoned women to be ignored by government officials and shunted to the back of long lines, while their wealthy neighbors were offered tea and had their concerns addressed. Yet as members of ENSS, wearing badges with the organization's logo (and often accompanied by other members and/or leaders to support their cause), they are able, case by case, to secure rights and entitlements. Leaders of ENSS make a point of knowing the *patwari* (block development officers), and district commissioners, and these officials quickly understand that there can be political costs to ignoring members of an organization well-versed in organizing demonstrations and networking with the media. A number of ENSS members, strengthened by the knowledge gained in the movement (about government entitlement programs and the processes for achieving them, as well as laws related to issues such as divorce, accidental deaths, and land rights) have run for positions on the *panchayat* (local governing bodies). In 2011, twenty-seven ENSS members won seats in local governance. This foray into local politics is one of the strategies pursued by the social movement to increase the political power of single women across the state.

To date, ENSS has managed to avoid the primary pitfall of many women's movements, whereby the needs and issues of the most privileged members are foregrounded. From the beginning of ENSS, leaders have paid attention to

differences among single women within the movement. One example of this is the movement's own data collection. According to ENSS records of January 2012, out of 9,632 members, 4,158 were categorized as Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) (43% of the membership, as compared to Himachal's SC/ST population, which totals 28.7% of the state's population).¹⁷ In 2012, of twenty-two ENSS workers, only four were Rajput or Brahman, with the majority of workers from castes classified as 'scheduled caste' or 'other backward castes.' Tensions over caste relations do emerge in some village meetings when high caste members refuse to eat or drink at low caste members' homes, thereby reproducing logics of purity underlying caste hierarchy. While certainly these sedimented hierarchies are reproduced through such acts, they are cushioned by privileged caste members' assertions that their refusals are not due to personal belief, but rather due to the harassment they will suffer in their homes if it is known they have violated caste norms. This action of refusing food (and thereby disciplining bodies along hierarchies of caste), when disrupted by the verbal disidentification with caste hierarchy (calling forth emancipatory possibilities of equality across difference), maintains the space for collective action as single women across hierarchical differences.

Conclusion

Returning to the quote by Deepa with which I opened this article, we can see the tensions and possibilities in her statement that, "The identity of the single woman is spreading." The latent sexual meanings of 'single woman,' her sexuality unconstrained by heteropatriarchal marriage, help make sense of how single women are a potential threat to a social order, and that, "Men, trying to lessen their fear, are laughing and joking and saying, 'There is a single woman.'" This strategy of containment, of calling out one who differs from the normative married woman, is only effective when a single woman is isolated. Collective action provides the ability to re-signify *ekal*, transforming its associations with isolation and loneliness, into its meaning of collectivity and unity: "But they know she isn't alone. Behind her thousands are coming. Only in name is it single; when you think about it there is a lot in it that is hidden."

As diversely positioned women weave together their stories of shared sorrow in meetings, they have begun to re-envision themselves and others. Some members of ENSS have disidentified with abject positions (of widow, divorcee, abandoned women, never-married women or women fleeing violence) and positioned themselves under a new and collective identity as single women. For ENSS leaders, this subject position has become central to their role as

grassroots organizers and shaped their gendered subjectivity; for others it has meant recognition of their struggles and assistance with crafting a life of dignity and economic security.

While clearly offering emancipatory potential, the subject position of *ekal nari* operates as a site for the disciplinary working of power as well. Thus far ENSS has resisted the all too common social movement tendency to erase diversity and foreground a new normative subject of resistance. Rather ENSS continues, in both policy and practice, to attend to differences among single women, thereby avoiding the creation of a representative single woman established through exclusions of caste, ethnicity, class, physical ability and/or religion. Yet in relation to sexuality, we can see the practice and potential for the disciplinary workings of power, as individual leaders and members work to distance themselves from the slippage of sexualized meanings in the term single woman and position themselves within the norms of good womanhood. Even the radical vision of the *naya parivar* also contains within it the seeds of its own disciplinary action. It is precisely within and through these contradictions that Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan provides members with new discourses for imagining themselves, and new opportunities for crafting lives beyond the limitations of heteropatriarchal scripts of womanhood.

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Endnotes

1. For a related analysis of the stigma of being single, see Byrne's (2000) informative application of Goffman's foundational theories on stigma management to the category of single women in Ireland.
2. Here I draw upon Foucault's (1979, 1980) analysis of the productive working of power alongside Althusser's (1971) conception of interpellation, or the act of being hailed as a subject by an ideologically constituted subject position. See Najmabadi for a thoughtful analysis of "disciplinary techniques and emancipatory promises" when examining nationalist gendered discourses in Iran (1998: 94).
3. Leela Fernandes' (2003) concept of witnessing informs my ethics of transnational feminist research, particularly my engagement with the politics of positionality and representation, framed by my class, race, and national privilege (see Berry 2008 for an extended discussion of these issues).
4. For the remainder of the article, when I refer to ENSS, I am commenting only on the Himachal branch of the movement.
5. Dr. Kishwar Shirali, a feminist activist and retired professor of Psychology from Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, facilitated a series of meetings for single women at the local NGO Nishtha in 2005. In the following text I use the real names of leaders of the movement with their consent.

6. The Gaddi are a tribal community whose extended families often combine work herding goats and sheep across high alpine meadows, with subsistence farming and income generation in Kangra and Chamba Districts of Himachal Pradesh.

7. *Dalit*, derived from Sanskrit and meaning suppressed, refers to those previously identified as untouchables of the caste system.

8. Citationality is a concept that refers to the establishment of common sense or hegemonic meanings through the reiteration of words and other symbols over time.

9. Here she is referencing a meeting of single women organized by me, as part of my activist research project on single women's strategies of survival in Kangra, and facilitated by Kishwar Shiralgi in March 2005 at Nishtha.

10. In Kangra district, stories of women's suffering have been a part of local women's culture as well, in particular as they are formalized in the genre of women's folk songs called *Pakharu*. These songs recount the suffering of married women, wronged by husbands and in-laws, and until recently have been a prominent source of indigenous critical perspective on the vulnerability of women as wives and daughters-in-law (Narayan 1995).

11. In an article in progress I explore the contradictions which emerge in ENSS organizing, for as the movement makes demands of the state, it contests neo-liberal logics of transnational economic institutions (also advocated by many Indian politicians and elites) and simultaneously inscribes women's lives more intimately within the politics of rule.

12. In 2008, ENSS leaders named this new family form the *naya sasural*, or new marital family; by 2011, it had been re-named the more generic *naya parivar*. As Radha Devi, one of the leaders of the movement, explained to me in 2012, the word *sasural* is so infused with suffering for many single women, members and leaders of ENSS have begun using the terms *naya parivar* (new family) and *upna ghar* (our own house) instead.

13. While this protest was the first of its kind for single women, its framing is deeply rooted in a transnational politics and history of protest, with roots in Gandhian protest of colonial rule and women's movements informed by transnational dialogues and cultures of protest. The practices of song, dance and slogans are shared across political movements, and many of the slogans shouted are standards in Indian women's marches: *Awaz do: hum ek he* (Call out: we are one); *Hum Bharat ki nari hai; phool nahi, chingari hai* (We are the women of India; we are burning embers, not flowers).

14. I draw upon feminist cultural geographers in my understanding of 'spaces' as the dynamic interactions of persons with embedded histories of practices, discourses, and understandings and imaginings of place. See e.g., Moore (1986: esp. 1-7) and Massey (1993).

15. See also Butler's analysis of the social fiction of gender identity as operating as "an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (1990: 186).

16. See Blackman et al. (2008), as well as Smith (1988), Hennessy (1993), Moore (1994), and Kondo (1990) for authors who read Althusser's theories of interpellation alongside Foucault's analysis of the productive working of power. Blackman et al. propose that subjectivity is, "the experience of the lived multiplicity of positionings. It is historically contingent and is produced through the plays of power/knowledge and is sometimes held together by desire" (2008: 6).

17. The state population data above is from the 2001 Census of India: <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/population_enumeration.aspx> (accessed 5 May 2014).

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