

# Developing Core Elements of Women's Empowerment

A Minor Field Study on an NGO-led Development  
Intervention in Nepal

# Abstract

This thesis is a qualitative case study of a development intervention aimed at women's empowerment. The case is the 'Danfe' program, led by a non-governmental organization in Nepal. The research explores how the Danfe program impacted on the empowerment of the participants.

The thesis follows the initial, feminist understanding of empowerment as a process involving personal development and changes in self-perception. The study is based on a theoretical framework that distinguishes certain 'core elements' as central for women's empowerment.

During a two-month long field study, former Danfe participants were interviewed in order to understand how Danfe had encouraged the development of core elements. The analysis traces on what levels in the women's lives that the elements were developed: individual level, in close relationships, and in relationships with the community.

The research found that the Danfe program helped the development of many core elements, predominantly on individual level, followed by the level of close relationships. However, less elements were developed in relationships with the community. A key finding was that the women in general lacked elements of collective empowerment. The lack of collective empowerment inhibited core elements in the relationships with the community, and discouraged actions in favor of greater gender justice.

*Key words:* women's empowerment; power; gender; Nepal

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# 1 Introduction

‘Women’s empowerment’ has become a catchphrase in the development industry over the past decades. Moreover, the term has been used by actors that have attached very different meaning to it (Batliwala 2007). Originally developed by critical feminists, the term women’s empowerment was conceptualized as a multi-faced *process* of social transformation that included consciousness-raising and personal development (Batliwala 1994; Rowlands 1997; Cornwall 2016). According to Srilatha Batliwala (2007), a pioneer in the writings on women’s empowerment, the concept of women’s empowerment has been ‘hijacked’ and has gone from being used as a multi-faced political process of social transformation to becoming a magic bullet for development issues as poverty alleviation and rapid economic development.

Feminists agree that empowerment is not something that can be delivered but must be developed from within (Batliwala 1994; Rowlands 1997; Kabeer 1994; Cornwall 2016). However, actors in development tend to frame their interventions as ‘*empowering women*’, as if empowerment was a good that could be distributed. Cecilia Sardenberg (2008:19) argues that such notions de-politicizes empowerment by taking power out of the equation, and instead focusing on technical aspects that can be taught or delivered. Andrea Cornwall (2016:356) also argues that if empowerment is framed as something that can be delivered, focus shifts to improving access to external goods and resources and away from empowering methodologies of transformation in consciousness.

In particular, contemporary development interventions have focused on economic empowerment by viewing increased access to and control over resources as a means of empowerment. The assumption behind such initiatives is that once women have access to economic resources, they will be able to make changes in other areas of their lives (Cornwall 2016:356). Feminists have long stressed that economic empowerment does not need to be translated to empowerment in other dimensions of women’s lives, and that it can contribute to increased burdens (Batliwala 1994:135).

Although feminists agree that empowerment cannot be delivered, they do agree that external actors can clear obstacles and support the long-term process of empowerment (Batliwala 1994; Rowlands 1997; Cornwall 2016). An external actor can be, for example, an organization that conducts activities for women that facilitates their empowerment process. Against this background, this thesis explores the process of women’s empowerment among former participants of an empowerment intervention led by a non-governmental organization [NGO] in Nepal.

## 1.1 Case

The thesis is based on field research carried out in Nepal, a country with 29 million inhabitants (World Bank 2019), landlocked in between India and Tibet<sup>1</sup>. The case studied is a development program for women called Danfe<sup>2</sup> that runs in the capital Kathmandu, led by the Nepalese NGO SAATH<sup>3</sup>. SAATH started in 2004 by a group of Social Work students as a small project aimed at supporting women and children living with HIV/AIDS. SAATH originally worked as a voluntary-based organization, and in 2006 it was registered as an NGO. SAATH has worked with different issues related to marginalized<sup>4</sup> communities, and in 2015, SAATH started the pilot batch of the Danfe program. SAATH currently employs 24 people, and their major funds come from international donors (SAATH 2019).

The Danfe program was set up as a response to the grave earthquake that hit Nepal on April 15, 2015, and the following quake on May 12. The earthquake killed nearly 9,000, injured over 22,000 and destroyed 1,000,000 houses completely or partly (Government of Nepal 2018). Of those impacted, women were the single-highest adversely affected group (UN Women 2016). Acknowledging the marginalization of young women from rural communities in some of the most earthquake-affected areas, SAATH set up the Danfe program with the aim of empowerment through tailor training and personality development (SAATH, n.d.).

The main component of the Danfe program is sewing training, and the participants get informal education in for example English, Business and Math. Moreover, they receive classes and workshops on topics as human rights, gender-based discrimination, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and societal issues such as trafficking and domestic violence. Feminist research has found that interventions aimed at economic empowerment may encourage consciousness-raising if women also get a chance to discuss the topics mentioned above (see Ckagnazaroff in Sardenberg 2008:23; Daniels in Cornwall 2016:348), which makes Danfe an intriguing case.

## 1.2 Research aim and question

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<sup>1</sup> Tibet Autonomous Region of China

<sup>2</sup> The name Danfe is taken from the bird *danfe* (eng. Himalayan monal), national bird of Nepal

<sup>3</sup> The name SAATH comes from the Nepali word '*saath*', meaning 'company' or 'togetherness'

<sup>4</sup> I am using the term 'marginalized' with Scheyvens, Scheyvens & Murray's (2014:214) conceptualization: "*The marginalized*" [...] is a term used to embrace groups which have been socially constructed such that they lack access to power, resources and privileges in society in relation to other groups.'

The aim of the research is to get a deeper understanding of the impact of development interventions aimed at women's empowerment, and explore what role they can play in the process of empowerment. The objective is to trace the empowerment process among former participants of the Danfe program. The research follows the feminist understanding of empowerment as a process that includes personal development and changes in self-perception, which is an understanding that has been largely forgotten in today's mainstream development industry.

The research adapts an analytical framework that distinguishes certain core elements of the empowerment process. The question that has guided the research is:

- *To what extent has the Danfe program helped develop core elements of empowerment among the former participants?*

In order to answer the research question, a minor field study was conducted to interview former participants of the Danfe program individually and in focus groups. The women's stories were analyzed with the purpose of understanding how participation in Danfe had encouraged core elements of empowerment.



## 2 Background

### 2.1 Situation of women in Nepal

The Nepalese society is anchored in patriarchal conceptions which places women under male domination. The patriarchal tradition in the family and social spheres determines the role and position of the woman, and her rights are often limited by a male authority. Authority in the family is passed from the father to the husband and there is a strong son-preference. Further, many girls are force-married, and domestic violence against women is common (Lamicchane et al 2011; Becker 2015:250). Moreover, women have fewer legal rights than men, and fewer women are found in formal positions than men (Globalis 2013). Women are also systematically subordinated through ideologies of seclusion and ritual purity (Rankin 2001:31). During menstruation, women are traditionally considered 'impure' and are often restricted from daily activities and/or secluded from the family. While the harshest forms of menstrual discrimination are mostly practiced in rural regions, discrimination occurs throughout the country, as the daily lives of most women are constrained during their period in one way or another (Upadhyay 2019).

For many women, gender-based discrimination intersects with other structures of oppression. The Nepalese society is permeated by inequalities and discrimination also based on factors as caste, ethnicity and region of origin (Becker 2015:249). Gender crosscuts all the above categories, thus leaving many women in positions of manifold discrimination.

### 2.2 Women's empowerment in Nepal

In 1990, Nepal saw a restoration of a multi-party democracy from the previous one-party government. The democratization proceeded alongside a commitment to political decentralization, bureaucratic downsizing and market liberalization. In the new climate of free-market policies and aggressive privatization, NGOs are praised for being more effective providers of services and overall development (Leve 2001:108-9; Karkee & Comfort 2016:2).

Between 1977 and 2014, almost 40,000 NGOs were registered in Nepal (Karkee & Comfort 2016:1). The proliferation of NGOs in Nepal occurred alongside the rise of a development paradigm centered on participation and empowerment, and an increased concern with women and gender in powerful organizations such as the United Nations [UN] and the World Bank. Consequently, there has been a proliferation of NGOs in Nepal concerned with women's empowerment (Leve 2001:108). There have also been major commitments to women's empowerment in Nepal by large international actors as Oxfam, the UN, USAID and the World Bank. These programs have predominantly targeted economic empowerment, leadership and political participation, and violence against women (USAID 2018; World Bank 2018; Oxfam in Nepal 2019; UN Women 2019).

The Government of Nepal has also made commitments to women's empowerment. The Department of Women and Children [DWC] in Nepal has the government's mandate to 'carry out functions related to women's empowerment' (Nepal DWC 2019). The Department runs the Women Development Programme [WDP], which has women's empowerment as direct objective (the Department uses the terms 'empowerment' and 'development' interchangeably). The WDP's strategy includes dimensions as financial stability; knowledge about reproductive health (but not rights); gender equity; institutional participation; and 'life-skills' including decision-making and self-confidence. Despite all dimensions mentioned in the strategy, the actual functioning of WDP is dominated by informing women in rural areas how to organize themselves into saving groups (Nepal DWC 2019).

NGOs, international organizations and the state are all claiming to 'empower' the women of Nepal. Yet, from a feminist point of view, the topic is scarcely researched. The significant studies of empowerment interventions in Nepal are the studies by Lauren Leve (2001; 2007) and Katharine Rankin (2001).

Leve (2001) studied empowerment through USAID-funded women's literacy programs in Nepal. Leve argues that the self-consciously political vision of empowerment that once characterized empowerment strategies has been replaced by a free-market approach to development aimed at keeping with a neoliberal ideological hegemony. Leve argues that both 'empowerment' and 'participation' has come to be used as strategies to remake consciousness in ways that support international hierarchies and the liberal political aspirations of the modernizing Nepali state (Leve 2001:109-10). On another note, Leve concluded that donor-driven development appoints women as important objects of intervention, but that they often fail to alter social relations on the ground (Leve 2001:118).

Rankin (2001) studied microcredit programs, a preferred strategy for rural development in Nepal. Rankin argued that the programs are gendered as they target female entrepreneurs, and that they cultivate the subjectivity of 'rational economic woman' (Rankin 2001:28). Moreover, Rankin criticizes how microcredit programs encourage women to home-based enterprises that do not interfere with domestic responsibilities. In that way, they are reinforcing rather than challenging the gender division of labor that institutionalizes women's subordination (Rankin 2001:32).

Further, Rankin found that the obstacles that women encountered to their new entrepreneurial capacity had more to do with cultural ideology than lack of finance itself. As such, Rankin concluded that barriers to women's empowerment in Nepal lies not in lack of financial capital, but in the persistence of subordinating gender ideologies (Rankin 2001:31).

Although women's empowerment in Nepal continue to engage a multitude of actors, there is little recent research on the topic. The feminist studies mentioned above are dated, and so this research aims to fill the gap on what happens with interventions that claim to empower the women of Nepal in the late 2010s.

## 3 Theoretical framework

### 3.1 Feminist understandings of women's empowerment

The feminist scholarship on women's empowerment agrees that empowerment is a process, not a fixed-state or an end point. For example, Batliwala (1994:130) conceptualizes empowerment as the *process* of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power. Likewise, Naila Kabeer understands women's empowerment as 'the *process* by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability' (1999:435, emphasis added). Cornwall's scholarship (Cornwall & Edwards 2014b; Cornwall 2016) stresses that empowerment is a dynamic, relational *process* which varies according to context and circumstances and does not have predictable outcomes. For example, what is empowering for one woman might not be for another, and what empowered an earlier generation might not do so today (Darkwah 2014; Khan 2014 in Cornwall & Edwards 2014).

Further, feminist scholarship argues that empowerment includes elements of **consciousness-raising and personal development**. Jo Rowlands' (1996; 1997) scholarship focuses on **personal development and changes in self-perception** as a way of undoing internalized oppression. Rowlands (1996; 1997) sees empowerment as a dynamic process along three interrelated dimensions; personal, relational and collective. Cornwall (2016) also stresses that empowerment entails changes in self-perception; empowerment requires that women start thinking differently about themselves and the situations they are in, their social worlds, relationships and possibilities. Moreover, women's empowerment requires **shifts in socially embedded norms** and practices in the wider society (Cornwall 2016:357). Batliwala, on the other hand, places **consciousness-raising** at the center of women's empowerment. Developing a critical consciousness entails that women start recognizing the structures and ideologies that sustain and reinforce their oppression (Batliwala 1994). Batliwala (1994) sees the **collective** as crucial in consciousness-raising. Together, women can critically reflect on their lives, recognize the power structures that are sources of women's subordination, discover their strengths and eventually initiate action. By and large, feminist scholarship has stressed the **collective notion** of women's empowerment. Solidarity, social relationships, and collective support are crucial for initiating actions that challenge women's subordination (see Rowlands 1997; Sardenberg 2008; Cornwall & Edwards 2014; Kabeer & Huq 2014; Cornwall 2016).

Although feminists agree that empowerment cannot be delivered, they do agree that **external actors can clear obstacles and support the long-term process of empowerment** (Batliwala 1994; Eyben 2011; Cornwall & Edwards 2014b). External agents of change can enable women to recognize and reflect on their subordinate position. This can take many forms; it can include, for example, initiatives that make women break their isolation, the formation of groups where women can share experiences with other women, or making women gain access to new worlds of knowledge (Batliwala 1994:132).

While economic empowerment interventions have been criticized by scholars as Batliwala (1994) and Sardenberg (2008), research has found that economic empowerment interventions can, in some cases, encourage the consciousness-raising element of empowerment. If the interventions make women get together in groups to learn about and discuss topics such as women's human, sexual and reproductive rights, it can lead in the direction of consciousness-raising and inspire action for change (Ckagnazaroff in Sardenberg 2008:23; Daniels in Cornwall 2016:348). Against those findings, the Danfe program is considered as a possible catalyst for women to develop a critical consciousness and change their self-perception.

### 3.2 Empowerment and power

Understanding power is central to understanding the concept of *empowerment*, as it is a source of the word itself. A traditional understanding of power views it as a zero-sum model where an increase in one individual's power means a decrease in someone else's power; the '*power over*' (Rowlands 1997:10). However, as Batliwala (1994:134) argues, the point for the empowerment process is not to take power and use it in such an exploitative and oppressive way. Thus, the power in empowerment differs from '*power over*'. Instead, empowerment entails the '*power to*', '*power with*', and '*power from within*' (Rowlands 1997). '*Power to*' is the power to act, react, resist, create or participate. It is a generative form of power as it does not include domination. '*Power with*' is the power with the collective; a sense of collective agency and solidarity, and the feeling that the sum can create greater impact than each part. '*Power from within*' is based on self-acceptance, self-respect and dignity, and involves the feeling that one is worthy of rights and of respect from others (Rowlands 1997). Rowlands (1997) argues that the power in the empowerment process can be experienced and exercised individually, in a close relationship, and in a group. The three dimensions are interrelated, and the development of power in one dimension may feed into another in various ways (Rowlands 1997).

### 3.3 Core elements of women’s empowerment

As stated, Rowlands’ (1997) scholarship sees personal development and changes in self-perception as central for the empowerment process. These changes are understood as ‘the transformation of an individual or group that is the “key” that opens “locks” on the empowerment door’ (Rowlands 1997:110). Rowlands (1997) developed a framework that outlines a set of elements which are the core of the empowerment process (the “keys”). Rowlands (1997) understands empowerment along three dimensions, and there are core elements identified for each dimension (Table 1).

<b>Personal empowerment</b>	<b>Collective empowerment</b>	<b>Empowerment within relationships</b>
Self-confidence	Group identity	Ability to negotiate
Self-esteem	Sense of collective agency	Ability to communicate
Sense of agency	Group dignity	Ability to get support
Sense of ‘self’ in wider context	Self-organization and management	Ability to defend self/rights
Dignity		Sense of ‘self’ in relationship
		Dignity

*Table 1: The core elements of empowerment, developed by Rowlands (1997).*

Personal empowerment is experienced as a feeling of personal change and behavior. Thus, in personal empowerment the core elements are a personal experience. Personal and collective empowerment often feed each other. For example, a sense of personal empowerment is often necessary for engaging in a group, and a sense of collective empowerment may encourage personal empowerment. However, for analytical purpose, Rowlands sees the core elements in collective empowerment as experienced by women by virtue of their membership in the group, and regards ‘the group’ as a separate entity distinct from its members. Thus, in collective empowerment the core elements are experienced by the group. The third dimension is empowerment in relationships, and the core elements lie in the experience of the relationship (Rowlands 1997:113-20).

Rowlands (1997) argues that by developing core elements, women’s self-perception can change, and their internalized oppression can be challenged. However, empowerment is not represented by the core elements themselves, but rather by the actions that arise from them. For example, as women start perceiving themselves as having the capacity and right to act and influence decisions, their ‘power to’ act, react, resist or participate may grow. Similarly, cultivating a sense of dignity may develop an inner strength on which a ‘power from within’ can rest. Moreover, developing a sense of collective agency with a group can result in the

experience of a ‘power with’ (Rowlands 1997:117;127). Thus, by developing the core elements, women’s ‘power to’, ‘power with’ and ‘power from within’ can increase.

### 3.4 Analytical framework: location of core elements

Thinking with Rowlands (1997) and *beyond* Rowlands, I have developed an analytical framework for this research. I have adapted Rowlands’ (1997) ‘core elements’. However, I do not focus on Rowlands’ (1997) three different dimensions of empowerment, but on **identifying where and how the core elements appear** in the women’s lives. The levels of analysis are the self; close relationships, including the family and the friends from Danfe; and relationships with the wider community. The purpose is to trace how and in which relationships the elements are developed. Moreover, the framework allows for exploring what elements are inhibited, why, and on what levels.

The analytical framework is visualized below (Figure 1). This framework will be the conceptual entry point to the data. In order to fit the analysis with the research question, I analyze how the development of elements are related to the Danfe program.

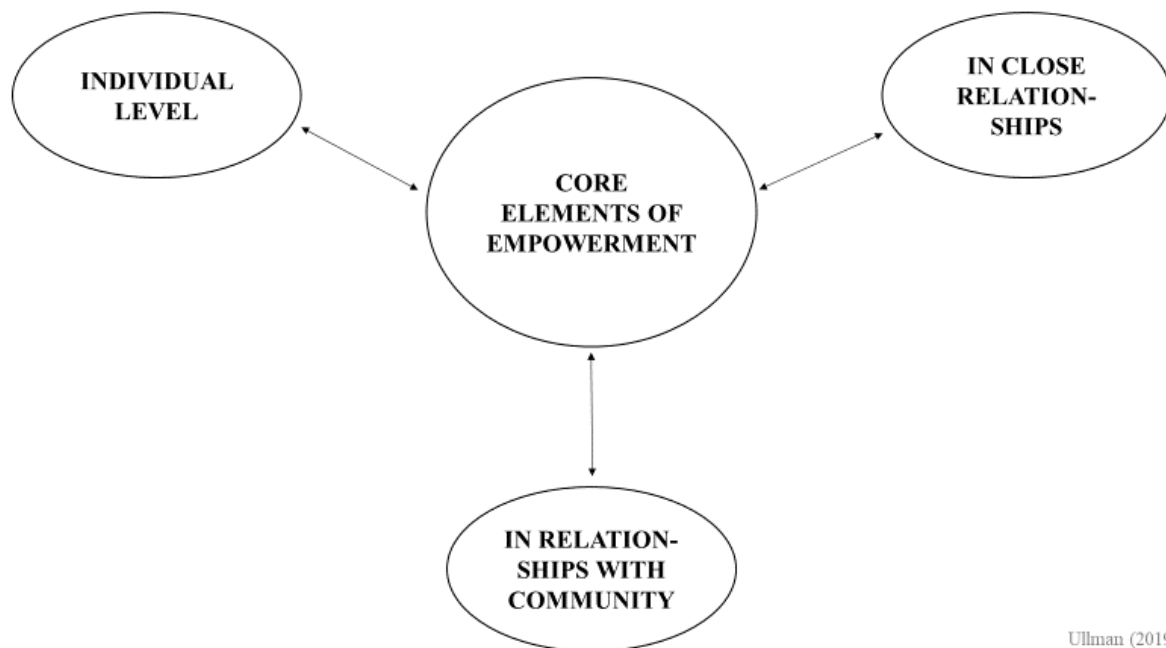


Figure 1: Analytical framework: location of core elements of empowerment.

# 4 Methodology

## 4.1 Research design

This thesis is based on a qualitative research approach that seeks to understand and provide rich information about the social world with careful attention to context and subjective experiences (Stewart-Withers et al 2014:59). The research is placed within feminist theory, with implicit purpose to highlight gendered structures and promote the undoing of patriarchy.

The research was carried out as a case study. The case study allows for a holistic understanding of a phenomenon within a naturalistic setting (Bryman 2012:66-7). The case, the Danfe program, was chosen since it was an appropriate context for studying the research topic.

Danfe is a six-month long training program that focus principally on skilled training to pave way for income generation. Thus, the Danfe program exemplifies a development intervention which focuses on economic empowerment. The Danfe program started with a pilot project in 2015, and the current structure provides batches consisting of 25 women each with six months of skill training. The women are between 16-25 years old and come from rural districts in Nepal's province no 3, near the capital district Kathmandu. The women are chosen based on a set of criteria that marks their disadvantage and multiple discrimination regarding gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and/or community belonging. During the six-months long program, the women live together in a hostel in Kathmandu and attend the tailor training course six days a week. After the program, most women are reintegrated into their communities (SAATH, n.d.). As stated, Danfe exemplifies a broader category of similar cases, viz. empowerment interventions. Thus, it is an exemplifying case (Bryman 2012:70). Moreover, as I have personal connections with staff members of SAATH, it is also an opportunistic case, as it was easy for me to get access to the case (further discussed in 4.5).

## 4.2 The field study

With curiosity and a flexible mind, I set out for a 66-day long field trip to Nepal in order to get a deeper understanding of what happens with women's empowerment interventions. The field work was conducted between January and March 2019. I



lived most of the time in the capital city Kathmandu. I collected the data in the districts Kathmandu and Sindhupalchowk, both in Nepal's Province no.3 in central-eastern Nepal (see map in Figure 2). The field work resulted in 15 individual interviews and two focus group discussions (see Appendix 1: Interview List), and several field notes and observations.



*Figure 2: Map of Nepal, Sindhupalchowk district marked (Map data © Google 2019)*

#### 4.2.1 Sampling and accessing participants

Upon my arrival in Nepal in January 2019, 79 women had received training from Danfe since the pilot project in 2015, and 25 were currently under training. Among the 79 former participants, I met 18 women for individual interviews and/or focus group discussions. The women in the sample all had different backgrounds. They were between 17 and 25 years old, came from different villages and belonged to different ethnic groups, had varying levels of education (from dropping out at the age of 8 to having completed 12<sup>th</sup> grade), and different family backgrounds. The women had attended Danfe in the four different batches between 2015 and 2018.

SAATH provided me with contact information about all former participants of Danfe, and among those I used a convenience strategy for sampling, based on their availability and location (Bryman 2012:201). The women in the first batches of Danfe came from four different districts, however for the last batches SAATH's focus has turned almost completely to the district Sindhupalchowk, which is why I chose to sample women from there.

Road conditions in Nepal, especially in rural areas, are poor and travelling can be difficult. I decided to try to reach women that lived near each other. This

facilitated for the women as they would not have to travel far if they wished to participate in a focus group discussion. Thus, I reached out to women living in and around two different villages in southeastern Sindhupalchowk. In the selected two villages I conducted focus groups and individual interviews.

After the interviews in Sindhupalchowk, I decided to conduct additional interviews to reach data saturation (Stewart-Withers et al 2014:63). As I did not have time to go back to Sindhupalchowk, I conducted four additional interviews in Kathmandu. There were only a few former participants from Danfe that had stayed in Kathmandu after their training, so the sampling was based on available participants. Three of the women I interviewed in Kathmandu were from Sindhupalchowk, while the fourth was from another district<sup>5</sup>.

#### 4.2.2 Interviewing

As the research question required to understand the participants' own thoughts, interviewing was the most appropriate way to collect data (Stewart-Withers et al 2014:65).

Focus group discussions were held in each of the two villages visited, with duration of almost one hour each. Nine women participated in the first focus group, and four in the second one. A purpose of the focus group discussions was to find out how women made sense of topics in a group, and possibly ignite some arguments (Bryman 2012:501-3). However, the focus group discussions did not become much of discussions at all. They turned out to be more like traditional interviews in a group (Punch 2005:171), where the participants simply answered to the statements or topics I brought forward and then waited for the next topic. However, the focus groups still served an ethical purpose. A motivation for conducting focus groups was to befriend and warm up the participants before the individual interviews, and to sensitize topics before the individual interviews. These aims were achieved; at the time of the individual interviews, the participants already knew me and had fresh reflections in their minds regarding the topics we would talk about. In the individual interviews in Kathmandu, where I did not conduct a focus group discussion, I noticed that the participants were shyer in the beginning of the interview.

I conducted 13 individual interviews, each with a duration between 25-45 minutes. The individual interviews were semi-structured, as I had prepared an interview guide with topics that I wished to cover. The interview format was, however, flexible; I asked spontaneous follow-up questions, and picked up on topics that the participants themselves had brought to the interviews. The flexible format resulted in that some interviews turned out more like life stories (Bryman 2012:488), as some women wanted to tell me long stories rather than answering questions.

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<sup>5</sup> Sindhuli district, south of Sindhupalchowk, also in Province no.3.

Moreover, I conducted two unstructured key informant interviews; one with the CEO at SAATH and one with an employer of three former Danfe participants.

The interviews were carried out with an interpreter, who translated from English to Nepali. All interviews, except with the key informants, were recorded, given the participants consent, and later transcribed to English. The participants' consents were given after an informal introduction of myself and the purpose of the research. I also explained the rights of the participants; they would be anonymous, could skip questions, and could withdraw from the research without consequences. Considering the cultural oral tradition and that some women had difficulties reading, verbal consent was most appropriate (Banks & Scheyvens 2014:165-6).

The interviewing and transcription proceeded simultaneously, and so the transcription helped sharpening the focus for the coming interviews.

### 4.2.3 Working with interpreter

Acknowledging that the interviews were conducted *with* rather than *through* an interpreter, the role and subjectivity of the interpreter should be critically reflected on (Edwards 1998:197). I chose an independent interpreter without connections to SAATH or the participants communities. The interpreter was, just like me, a young woman with academic background belonging to the urban middle-class. Moreover, she belonged to an ethnic group that is socially constructed as 'higher' than most participants, so there was a hierarchy between her and the participants. However, since she shared fundamental traits with the participants (female, Nepalese, and young), and because of her positive and welcoming attitude, the participants were comforted by her presence.

The interviews have been a three-way creation of knowledge, as the interpreter had an active role. By using third person interpretation both during interviews and transcription, it is made sure that the interpreter's role is not hidden (Edwards 1998:203).

## 4.3 Data analysis

The data analysis started as I transcribed the interviews in the field. The initial analysis was iterative, as I moved back and forth between conducting new interviews, writing memos and field journals, and transcribing and pre-coding the collected material.

The analysis roughly followed four stages: data collection; organization/transcription; coding/deconstruction; and reconstruction (cf. Stewart-Withers et al 2014:76). After completing the transcription, the data was deconstructed in a process of coding and simultaneous memo-writing and reflection. After I started identifying themes and patterns through the coding, I revisited empowerment theory in order to relate the emerging themes with theory.

In an inductive manner, the theoretical framework was refined after the analysis had begun.

The final stage of analysis was reconstruction of data by theoretical coding, in order to present emerging theoretical insights (Stewart-Withers et al 2014:73). The theoretical coding included first and second order codes. The first order codes included the dimensions where the core elements of empowerment appeared, as 'self', 'close relationships' or 'other'. The second order codes consisted of the core elements, and inhibiting factors.

The analysis was inductive as it moved from specific to general (Stewart-Withers et al 2014:59). Moreover, the analysis has followed an 'abductive reasoning' (Bryman 2012:401) as the theoretical understandings are grounded in the participants' worldviews and their understandings of the social world.

## 4.4 Ethical considerations

### 4.4.1 Positionality and ethics

Following feminist methodology, a constant reflection on my positionality has permeated the research process (Sultana 2007). My gender, age, ethnicity, class, values and interests have influenced the entire research process. During the field work, my position as a privileged outsider materialized most obviously. I constantly negotiated my positionality through my actions in order to minimize the hierarchical relationships that are a risk during field work. Although reflecting on positionality and ethics does not mean that power-relations within the field are eliminated, or even minimalized, the alternative of *not* reflecting on it would be even more problematic (Sultana 2007:383).

Being a white Western woman interviewing Third World women, I am trying to not be stuck in the idea of development fieldwork as purely hierarchal and extractive. As Mirafteb (2004:597) stresses, emphasizing hierarchical research relationships might exaggerate the suggested power imbalances. Further, as Scheyvens & Leslie (2000:125) conclude, fieldwork by Western women need not be a negative experience for Third World women participants. This was confirmed during the interviews, as many women expressed their genuine happiness for talking with me. Moreover, the flexible format of the individual interviews allowed the women to bring up topics that they felt were important. Some women commented that they enjoyed how the interviews had made them reflect deeper on the issues discussed. As such, it is possible that it has contributed to a raise in their self-esteem or dignity (see Scheyvens & Leslie 2000:127).

Finally, considering my role in the construction of knowledge, I have tried to be an active learner of the participants who can tell the story from their point of view (Stewart-Withers et al 2014:61).

#### 4.4.2 Ethics in analysis and writing

As Wasserfall (in England 1994:86) remarks, as a researcher I cannot pretend to fully represent the voices of the participants and must take responsibility for the way I present their lives. Consequently, I have been careful when analyzing and presenting the interview material in order not to depict the women as poor or helpless objects, which could exacerbate marginalization. I have tried to write this thesis in a way that sees the women as active subjects of the research and recognizes and encourages their dignity (Cupples & Kindon 2014:239). Moreover, to ensure anonymity of the participants, they have been given culturally sensitive pseudonyms.

### 4.5 Limitations

As the research is a single case study, the generalizability of the findings is low. However, the research does not make any such claims, and non-generalizability is supported by empowerment theories that clearly state that empowerment trajectories are diverse, context-sensitive, and that they tend to look different from one woman to another (see Rowlands 1997; Cornwall & Edwards 2014; Cornwall 2016). More than being specific to context, the findings are also time specific. As empowerment is a dynamic process, that might as well reverse, it is not possible to predict the women's future empowerment trajectory. Further, as empowerment cannot be delivered by others, the Danfe program can only be considered as one small event out of many that could influence or 'add-up' in the long-term process of empowerment.

SAATH's role as gatekeepers should also be mentioned. I have tried to minimize possible biases by not letting SAATH direct me towards certain participants. Another possible source of bias is my relationship with the staff in SAATH, whom I know from an earlier visit in Nepal. The research process has been independent of SAATH's interests, and I have not had any intention to present SAATH, or the Danfe program, in a certain way (neither positive nor negative). Yet, my position may have influenced the depiction beyond my awareness.

# 5 Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis of the empirical material collected during field work. Some of the findings from the analysis are displayed in the analytical framework in Figure 3 (below).

The following chapter (6) discusses the findings and highlights the argument that derives from the analysis.

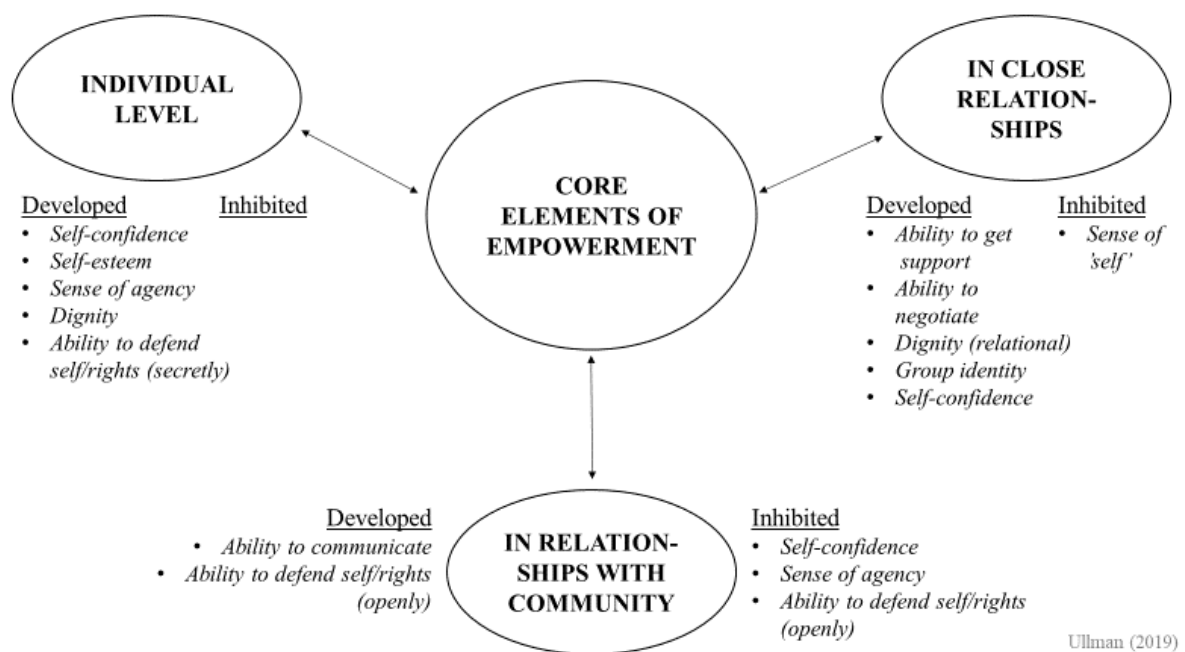


Figure 3: Core elements among former Danfe participants.

## 5.1 Core elements at individual level

Most of the core elements that the Danfe program had encouraged were experienced at individual level, within the self. At this level, the program had encouraged the development of self-confidence, self-esteem, sense of agency, dignity, and the ability to defend rights.

The major component of the Danfe program is skill development by tailor training, but the women also get classes and workshops in other subjects<sup>6</sup>. Learning new things was connected to the development of core elements. Many of the women had dropped out of school early, often because they had to take care of household responsibilities, or because of the family's financial situation. Some women expressed that as they had not studied for long, they were happy to have learned something else that they could use in their lives.

*Interpreter [I]: 'If she hadn't gone there, she wouldn't have had any skill whatsoever. And she hasn't studied too much, so she feels she would have had a very disadvantageous life. She would have maybe grown old and just done nothing at all to speak of. But because of Danfe she learned a lot of skills.'* (Aditi).

Most women highlighted that **learning a skill was the most important for them**. Others stressed the activities beside the skilled tailor training, as counselling sessions or drama classes.

*I: 'She says that because she left school very early, she never knew about counseling, drama, or anything of that sort. So when she went to Danfe she was very happy about it and it really made a change in her. And now she knows how to determine right from wrong, and **she can talk to people, and answer questions that are directed to her**. So there is a significant change in her'* (Manisha).

Regardless of what the participants valued learning the most, the general experience was that by learning something new they had become more **confident**.

*I: 'She says that before Danfe she didn't really have a lot of skills, and because now that she is trained, she feels that she is **more confident in herself**, that she can do more things for herself'* (Sanumaya).

The increase in self-confidence often related to increased **self-esteem**, as the women had started appraising themselves and their abilities more.

*I: 'Before Danfe she used to think that "I've grown up, but yet I can't do anything", like "I have not been able to do anything". But after Danfe she feels that she believes in herself more, and that she can stand up on her own two feet. **She believes in herself now**'* (Sita).

Further, some women valued that learning tailoring had made them able to support themselves and become less dependent on others.

*I: 'Neha says that the main thing [that has changed after Danfe] is that she is more confident about herself and that **she doesn't have to depend on anyone else**. Now she knows she can trust in herself, in her training. So*

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<sup>6</sup> Including (for example) English; Math; business management; drama classes; individual and group counselling sessions; 'life-skill' training; workshops on women's rights

*that's what she said – there's something to fall back on, you know.  
Everyone else said the same as well' (Focus Group Discussion [FGD] 1).*

The participants related their new ability to earn money to both independency and being **more able to make decisions for their lives**. Thus, their new sense of 'economic empowerment' had also given them a **sense of agency** by increasing their feeling of being able to make decisions for their lives (see Kabeer 1999).

*I: 'She says that after learning all of this, she wants to continue with her sewing. She wants to continue it 'til forever, and that is because she is getting money for herself. She is taking decisions for herself. She doesn't ever want to depend on another person, she wants to depend on herself for her own life. Now **she has the money to make decisions in her life, and to help others**' (Manisha)*

Developing elements as self-confidence, self-esteem and a sense of agency demonstrates 'personal empowerment' according to Rowlands (1997) framework. These elements are also closely related to a 'power to', as the women experience that they have become more capable of *doing* things. Self-esteem also relates to a 'power from within', as they have started to appraise themselves and their abilities.

Another core element that the women had developed which relates to 'power from within' is a **sense of dignity** (Rowlands 1997:126). Dignity relates to 'power from within' as it rests on an inner strength, a feeling of being worthy of rights and respect.

During Danfe, the women have classes and workshops where they learn about and discuss women's rights and discrimination based on gender and caste<sup>7</sup>. In the interviews, women told that they used to think certain events they witnessed or experiences were bad, yet they did not really know if those practices were, in fact, wrong. The women expressed that as they learned what was 'right and wrong', they also realized how themselves should be treated. Having knowledge of the concept of rights, and what it consists of, had made the women reflect on that they, too, were **worthy of those rights**. Thus, learning about rights in Danfe had developed the women's sense of dignity.

After getting to know more about rights, some women had started defending their rights openly, within their families or in the community, as will be further shown in section 5.3. However, even the women that did not defend their rights openly still did so secretly. During our interviews, the women told me about unjust things that they had experienced or witnessed, and how they thought such discrimination was wrong and unacceptable. Thus, the **women that did not**

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<sup>7</sup> The classes and/or workshops are held on human rights issues, particularly related to women and marginalized communities; and on sexual and reproductive health and rights [SRHR]. The sessions have been held by a human rights lawyer and a SRHR activist respectively.



**defend their rights in public still had a sense of being worthy of the rights.** Defending one's rights *covertly*, within the self, is also at the core of empowerment (Rowlands 1997:117).

## 5.2 Core elements in close relationships

The close relationships consist of those between the women and their family members and friends. The latter are classified as the friends from Danfe, because for many women these were their only friends apart from relatives.

The core elements Danfe had encouraged in close relationships included dignity, group identity, and ability to get support and negotiate. Moreover, the relationships among the women friends had also strengthened other elements, as self-esteem and self-confidence. However, relationships with the families inhibited some elements.

For some women, being in Danfe had encouraged family **support**.

*I: 'The brothers and sisters back home told her not to worry about the house, they said that "we will take care of everything here", "you have gone there for training, you should focus on that, do your best with that". So she feels she got her family's support' (Sarala).*

Other women experienced that their families' confidence in them had increased *after* they had been in Danfe.

*I: '[...] And I asked why it was that her parents had so much confidence in her. And she says that it's because now she has already stayed in Kathmandu for six months, and learned a skill as well, so her parents would feel that she can handle herself if she decides to go back to Kathmandu, or somewhere else, for work' (Rohita).*

Women felt that as their families had become more confident in them, they had also started **supporting more of the decisions that the women wanted to make** in their lives.

Further, the family's increased respect and support had made women believe in themselves more. Thus, self-esteem, which is experienced at individual level, was strengthened by their increased ability to get support within the family relationship. The relationship between the two elements demonstrates Rowlands' idea that different elements in the empowerment process can feed into each other in ways that make them hard to disentangle (Rowlands 1997:110).

For some women, core elements in family relationships involved sense of **dignity**. The dignity rested on a feeling of being **worthy of respect** from their family members, and often manifested as a feeling of **pride**. Renu told, showing confidence and pride, that:

*I: 'Before Danfe her own aunt used to tell her: "Who's going to ever wear something that you made? What are you ever going to do with your life? ". She always wanted to prove them wrong [...] then the first clothes that she made was for her aunt. And after giving it to her, the aunt didn't make any more comments' (Renu).*

As stated in section 5.1, the feeling of dignity shows a 'power from within' (Rowlands 1997). Further, Rowlands (1997:125) points out that empowerment involves not just a change in women's expectations and behavior, but also in the expectations and behavior of *others*. Both Rohita's and Renu's stories (see above) show how their families' expectations and behavior had changed after Danfe. In this regard, it demonstrates what Rowlands (1997) calls 'relational empowerment'.

After Danfe, many women experienced that they had become **increasingly involved in decision-making in the household**, which can be related to an increased sense of agency. Moreover, women had started to **bargain and negotiate**, also a feature of agency (Kabeer 1999:438), with their family members. Sadhika had stayed and worked in Kathmandu after Danfe and told how she had bargained it with her family.

*I: 'She says that even if the family wouldn't have approved, she would have been very stubborn about it. [...] And she mentioned that she used to tell the family that: "you know, if I work here [in Kathmandu], then I'll earn money as well." So that's why she was able to convince her family [to let her stay in Kathmandu], because she told them these things' (Sadhika).*

Other women indicated that **increased analytical capacity** had helped them negotiate and decide about household related issues.

*I: 'Now she's cleverer when she's doing her household work, and they [the family] have noticed that as well. The things that they need for their house, she can decide like- "ok, we need this much", "we need that much". She is smarter about that. [...] Also when she was travelling to Danfe and when she was coming back, she knew what kind of expenses that she would need. And she gets to handle that as well, so she has become cleverer about management' (Neha).*

Before Danfe, most women had lived secluded lives in their villages. During Danfe was, for many, the first time they had made friends outside their relatives. Their time in Danfe had created a **group identity** of them as being 'Danfe sisters'.

*I: 'Over there [in Danfe] they made lots of friends. Sometimes they would get into arguments, but they were also friends. So it was a little bit like, "push and pull". [...] It was like a family bond' (FGD1).*

As seen in the quotation above, the relationships among the 'sisters' had also included argumentations. It is possible that these argumentations had encouraged the ability to bargain and negotiate with the family, which was mentioned above (see Kabeer & Huq 2014:263).

The relationships with their friends had also strengthened other core elements among the women. Most women expressed how they had first felt insecure as they came to Kathmandu, but that the friendship that emerged had made them secure and more **confident** in themselves. The women had also showed **support** and care for each other during the program. Neha's mother had been sick during her time in Danfe:

*I: 'And I asked: "Was it easy that she had the girls around her to share her problems with?" And she said it definitely was. Sometimes she would be so worried about the family back here that she would always feel like crying. Then it was nice to have the girls there to talk to' (Neha).*

Social relationships and support from other women are positive influences for women's empowerment (Kabeer & Huq 2014). Further, encouragement of core elements of empowerment was also experienced in the relationship with **the female trainers** from SAATH. Earlier studies on development programs have concluded that the relationship with front-line workers in programs can play a significant role in women's empowerment (Sholkamy 2011;2014 in Cornwall 2016:348-50).

*I: '[...] in the first few months while training with Danfe she felt very insecure and scared of talking with the ma'ams [trainers] and everyone at Danfe. But then the ma'ams explained that "everybody is the same, you don't have to feel awkward about talking to us". The ma'ams made her become a lot more confident and she started talking more confidently' (Aditi).*

Although many core elements appeared in close relationships, there were also elements that were inhibited. Many women **restricted the imagination of themselves** according to what their families would allow for them. Lakshya dreamed of opening her own business and not having to rely on anyone else for her future.

*Researcher [R]: '...and what can make you become independent and make decisions for your life?'*

*I: 'She needs to be at the scenario where her family is confident in her as well. She feels that **if the family doubts her capabilities, then of course she wouldn't be able to do it**' (Lakshya).*

Lakshya's story demonstrates how the sense of 'self' was inhibited in the relationship with the family. Most women imagined themselves as being embedded in the entity 'the family', rather than as separate entities of 'self'. Accordingly, they restricted the imagination of themselves in the wider society, and their futures, according to 'the family's' ideas.

## 5.3 Core elements in relationships with the community

The core elements that Danfe had helped develop in the relationships with the wider community were ability to communicate and defend self/rights. However, the development of agency, self-confidence and (paradoxically) ability to defend self/rights, were obstructed in the relationships with the community.

The participants related their experiences in Danfe to better **ability to communicate** with people outside of their close relationships.

*I: 'In the village she couldn't even say namaste<sup>8</sup> to people. She was very shy about things, so when she came to Kathmandu and Danfe, that's when she **learned to talk to people**' (Renu).*

Participants also expressed how their increased communication abilities could help them in the future.

*I: 'Before the training she used to be very shy and reserved. Through the training she learned how to **speak up in front of other people and how to express her own thoughts**. She says that even if you have education, **you need to have the power to get your own words across**, otherwise you would not be able to do anything' (Sanjiya).*

As discussed in section 5.1., the women had learned about and discussed rights and discrimination during Danfe. The knowledge the women had gained from these classes was transformative in its impact. Gaining knowledge of the concepts of rights had made the women reflect on inequalities and discrimination that persisted in their own villages. This had made some women **perceiving the social order in their villages as unjust and unnatural**; which are central reflections for a critical consciousness (Batliwala 1994).

*I: 'What Sarala and Nanimaya said is that in villages, like very small rural communities, there is a lot of discrimination that goes on and it is as if it was very normal. After going to Danfe **they realized that it is not the normal thing**, it is not okay to discriminate between people. What Rohita and Manisha also said is that there are discrimination and inequalities in the village areas, but that they didn't know it was not normal until they went to the classes [at Danfe]. Then they realized that: "oh, it's not normal"'. (FGD1).*

The classes about rights seem to have lent the Danfe program some transformative quality in the direction of consciousness-raising (see Cornwall 2016:348).

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<sup>8</sup> 'Namaste' is the main Nepali greeting

However, even if most women had started to reflect on the unnatural and unjust order in their societies, **their raised consciousness was not necessarily critical** (cf. Batliwala 1994). Most women connected oppression and discrimination to **lack of education or being ignorant or ‘unlearned’**.

*I: ‘She feels that people here [in Kathmandu] believe that sons and daughters need to be treated the same. In the village they don’t know about it, or they ignore it. I asked if it’s because they’re more well-learned here in Kathmandu, and she says that yes, people are more educated here in Kathmandu and that’s why they don’t discriminate between sons and daughters’ (Sunila).*

Most women reasoned that if people became more educated, learned, or understanding, the discrimination of women would decrease. Thus, **they view oppression as an individual, rather than a structural, phenomenon**. The women had started reflecting on the oppression that they witnessed and experienced, but **very few had reflected on the ideologies or structures** behind the discrimination and inequalities, which is central for the critical consciousness-raising associated with empowerment (Batliwala 1994; Sardenberg 2008).

As stated in section 5.1, some women had **started defending their rights** after Danfe. The women related this to the realization that some practices they witnessed or experienced were actually *wrong*. Some of the women defended their rights openly among other village members.

*I: ‘She said that before Danfe she didn’t know what was right and what was wrong. So she couldn’t articulate herself, her thoughts, in front of other people. After she went to Danfe and learned all that, she got the confidence to speak up for herself and actually talk about right and wrong things’ (Manisha).*

Defending oneself or one’s rights (either openly or secretly) shows a ‘power to’ react, resist, and defend (Rowlands 1997).

*I: ‘Lakshya says that she speaks up against all of these practices. If discrimination is happening around her, even if people are older than her or more learned than her – she always tells them that this is wrong. A lot of people in the village think she is rude, but she doesn’t care, because she feels like she needs to speak up against people she thinks are wrong’ (FGD2).*

Yet, for most other women, defending rights openly was **inhibited** by the fear of the reaction from other village members.

*I: ‘I just asked if Srijana and Gita also spoke up about those things or not. But Srijana says that when they speak up against these things, they get scolded. So it’s very difficult for them to speak up against things. Because they don’t get a positive reaction from people’ (FGD2).*

As the quotation reveals, Srijana and Gita did not defend their rights because **they were afraid of the reactions from others**. For some women there was a

link between learning about rights and ability to defend them. Yet, for other, the fear of other people's reactions broke that link. As such, their ability to defend themselves was inhibited in the relationship with other village members.

Further, **gender norms** persistent in the village relations were considerable obstacles for core elements to develop.

*I: 'Neha, Sarala and Nanimaya they all agree that Kathmandu is different because women are allowed to talk to men, and in the villages they are told that "you shouldn't be talking a lot with men, people might look at you in a different way", in a very negative way. There are all these things which they need to consider before they're talking to men that are not related to them. Also, another thing is how they dress. In Kathmandu, even if women dress in a certain way, they aren't looked at differently. But in the villages, they are looked at very differently. They have to dress very conservatively' (FGD1).*

One of the norms in the village is that young, unmarried women should not speak to men who they do not know; this would be a sign that the woman is 'promiscuous', 'out of hand', or of 'bad character'. Villagers talk about such 'bad women' as if they could 'spoil' other women in the village.

The gossip and backbiting against young women who do not conform to the gender norms **discouraged the women from acting as they wish**. Accordingly, the women's sense of agency and their confidence were inhibited in the level of village relations.

Because of the risks associated with not conforming to gender norms, the women felt they had to behave according to them.

*I: 'Sarala says that yes, there is a certain fear associated with it. They feel odd talking to the guys. [...] Neha also said that they have to go along with what the community, or society, is like.'*

[...]

*R: 'So in the community you don't talk to the men because of what others would think?'*

*I: 'Yeah, it's because of that' (FGD1).*

As Kabeer (1999) point out, women are likely to be given greater respect within their communities for conforming to its norms and to be penalized if they do not. Thus, their own values and behavior are likely to reflect those of the wider community and to reproduce its injustices (Kabeer 1999:457).

**The lack of a supporting collective** was a factor that discouraged women from acting as they wished, defending rights or challenging norms in the village relations.

*I: 'She feels that with just one person's support she would not be able to do anything. But if everyone supported her, she would be able to tell them [other villagers] that now the daughters should also be educated. If they get training and work, they can also stand up on their own two feet. She says that if she gets support from a large mass, the villagers' ideas about girls could be changed' (Sanjiya).*

As Sanjiya indicate, **the lack of a 'power with' held her back** from advocating change in the gender norms within her community.

## 6 Discussion: Collective empowerment – the missing link?

Among the women from Danfe it was, in general, core elements from Rowlands' (1997) dimension 'collective empowerment' that were lacking (see Table 2 below). To some extent, the structure of the Danfe program can explain that few collective elements were developed among the participants. The lack of autonomous activities and the focus on individual learning are two aspects of the program that could have obstructed the development of sense of collective agency or group dignity (Rowlands 1997:118). Moreover, the dependency on SAATH for the existence of the group(s) impeded a sense of self organization and management<sup>9</sup> (Rowlands 1997:118).

<b>Personal empowerment</b>	<b>Collective empowerment</b>	<b>Empowerment within relationships</b>
Self-confidence	Group identity	Ability to negotiate
Self-esteem	<u>Sense of collective agency</u>	Ability to communicate
Sense of agency	<u>Group dignity</u>	Ability to get support
<u>Sense of 'self' in wider context</u>	<u>Self-organization and management</u>	Ability to defend self/rights
Dignity		<u>Sense of 'self' in relationship</u>
		Dignity

*Table 2: The core values of the empowerment process, developed by Rowlands (1997). The core elements that were not identified in the analysis are overlined.*

One participant that possessed a collective element, apart from group identity, was Sarala. Sarala had a sense of collective agency with her old friends<sup>10</sup>, which no other participant indicated. Sarala was very confident and defended her and other people's rights openly in her community, which I also witnessed her doing (own observation 2019-02-12). Sarala told that **her confidence and ability to**

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<sup>9</sup> It is questionable whether the element 'self-organization and management' is relevant in the study of Danfe participants. Rowlands (1997) studied women's groups within development programs that (to some extent) supported self-organization and management of the women's groups, which is fundamentally different from Danfe's structure.

<sup>10</sup> The friends Sarala referred to were friends outside of her Danfe 'sisters'.



**speak up about discrimination were dependent on the fact that she had many friends that were of similar mindset to her.**

*R: 'If you tell others these things, are you never scared what they will think? How do you have the confidence to tell them?'*

*I: 'Sarala says that it's because she has friends, that there are all these women backing her up so she can say it more confidently' (FGD1).*

The **sense of collective agency and solidarity with her friends encouraged Sarala** to speak with confidence and defend herself in the community. She stressed this in both the focus group and her individual interview.

*I: '[...] When she has friends around, she feels that she gets even more confident about speaking up about things and sharing her own thoughts and feelings' (Sarala).*

Sarala demonstrate how the support from friends, or the 'power with' them, can encourage speaking up against injustices and defending oneself.

Rather than discovering what core elements that were developed (or not), the most interesting finding is how the elements appeared in relation to the self and to others. **On the level beyond the individual, in particular with the wider community, many elements were inhibited.** Although the Danfe program had encouraged the development of many core elements within the self, **the women generally lacked feelings of a collective solidarity, or a 'power with', which is central for women's empowerment.**

A key finding from the analysis is that the lack of collective empowerment among the women seems to be **a reason why few core elements were developed in relationships with the community.** As shown in the analysis (5.3), lack of a supporting collective held women back from defending themselves or confronting unjust ideas in the wider community. Moreover, there was no collective solidarity that could reduce the risk for, and cost of, penalization for the individual women who wished to challenge gender norms (cf. Kabeer 1999:457). Individual women that act against the norm often have to pay a high price for their autonomy by risking penalization from the wider community. Thus, the project of women's empowerment is dependent not just on individual confidence but on a collective solidarity in the public that can reduce the costs for individual women that tries to challenge injustices (Kabeer 1999:457). Challenging gender norms is crucial for women's empowerment, yet it goes **beyond the level of the individual** (Cornwall 2016:346).

Feminists have repetitively stressed the role of the collective in women's empowerment and the power of collectivization in confronting subordination (see Batliwala 1994; Rowlands 1997; Sardenberg 2008; Cornwall & Edwards 2014; Kabeer & Huq 2014; Cornwall 2016). While individual women can act against the norm, their impact on the situation of women in general is likely to remain limited (Kabeer 1999:457). When women come together and organize collectively, they

are more likely to succeed in making changes for themselves and other women (Cornwall 2016:352). In brief, collective empowerment, and the actions that arise from it, is crucial for changing women's lives. Subsequently, although the women from Danfe demonstrated many elements of empowerment at individual level, **the lack of collective support and 'power with' discouraged actions that could have made substantial changes in favor of greater gender justice.**

## 7 Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore what role a development intervention can play in the process of women's empowerment. The research focused on Rowlands' (1997) 'core elements' which are central to the empowerment process, and tried to understand how the elements had developed among former participants of the Danfe program. With inspiration from Rowlands (1997), I developed an analytical framework that traced on what levels in the women's lives that the core elements were developed, and where they were inhibited.

The thesis was based on data collected during a field trip in Nepal, where interviews were conducted with former Danfe participants. The analysis and discussion were guided by empowerment theories, including, for example, Batliwala (1994), Rowlands (1997), Kabeer (1999), and Cornwall (2016).

I will conclude the thesis by answering the research question: *to what extent has the Danfe program helped develop core elements of empowerment among the former participants?* From the analysis it became clear that the Danfe program had helped women develop a set of core elements. Most elements were developed on individual level, such as self-confidence, self-esteem and ability to defend oneself secretly. On the level of close relationships with family and friends, the core elements developed included dignity and abilities to negotiate and get support. The relationships between the Danfe 'sisters' seemed to strongly encourage the empowerment process. However, in family relationships, some core elements were inhibited, such as a sense of 'self'. Finally, least elements were developed, and most inhibited, in the relationships with the community. While some women developed the ability to defend themselves openly in the relationship with others, most of the women were discouraged from doing so. One large obstacle for developing the core elements in the relationships with other community members was gender norms in the village. The lack of elements developed within relationships with the wider community can be regarded as obstacles to further empowerment processes.

A key finding was that very few core elements that the women developed were from Rowlands' (1997) 'collective empowerment' dimension. This led to a discussion on how the lack of collective solidarity or 'power with' other women inhibited the actions necessary for societal change and greater gender justice. To conclude, the findings of the research have strengthened the notion developed by feminists as Batliwala (1994), Rowlands (1997), and Cornwall (2016): that women's empowerment is dependent on collective solidarity, and that it must involve changes beyond individual level.

Based on the findings, a topic for further research is how interventions aimed at women's empowerment can work to better encourage the collective elements of

empowerment. Another finding that motivates further research, although not extensively reflected on in this thesis, is that many women understood oppression and discrimination as a problem caused by the individual's lack of education or 'understanding'. Further research can explore how interventions can encourage the critical consciousness that entails reflections on structures and ideologies rather than individuals. Preferably, the suggested research would involve participatory action strategies, where women would be involved in planning the research projects, and subsequently acting (collectively) based on their own findings.

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# Appendix 1: Interview list

## **Focus group discussions (anonymized names)**

Focus group discussion 1 [FGD1], 2019-02-12 in Sindhupalchowk.

Participants: Amrita, Manisha, Nanimaya, Neha, Rohita, Salima, Sanumaya, Sarala and Sita.

Focus group discussion 2 [FGD2], 2019-02-14 in Sindhupalchowk.

Participants: Anushri, Gita, Lakshya and Srijana.

## **Individual interviews (anonymized names)**

Manisha, 2019-02-12 in Sindhupalchowk

Neha, 2019-02-12 in Sindhupalchowk

Rohita, 2019-02-13 in Sindhupalchowk

Sanumaya, 2019-02-13 in Sindhupalchowk

Sarala, 2019-02-13 in Sindhupalchowk

Sita, 2019-02-13 in Sindhupalchowk

Aditi, 2019-02-14 in Sindhupalchowk

Sanjita, 2019-02-14 in Sindhupalchowk

Lakshya, 2019-02-15 in Sindhupalchowk

Sadhika, 2019-02-28 in Kathmandu

Sunila, 2019-02-28 in Kathmandu

Sanjiya, 2019-03-07 in Kathmandu

Renu, 2019-03-07 in Kathmandu

## **Key informant interviews**

Rita, owner of a tailor shop where three former Danfe participants work, 2019-02-14 in Sindhupalchowk

Kritishma, CEO at SAATH, 2019-03-25 in Kathmandu