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ADVOCATING THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILDREN AND WOMEN IN NEPAL

The aim of my research is to interpret and advocate the rights of Nepalese children and women living in oppressive circumstances. The research is planned to have a strong practical basis linked with a theoretical discussion. It is a continuum to my master's thesis done recently upon the rights of the children living in children's homes and streets in Nepal (see Mikkonen 2010). The views guiding the thesis, as UN Convention of Child Rights, the new perceptions of children as active individuals, as well as anti-oppressive and anti-discriminative orientations of social work, are based mainly on individual perception of human being. While analysing those frames in Nepalese context I faced a contradiction: The children who I lived with and interviewed for my thesis talked mostly by using the term 'we' instead of 'I'. This might show the meaning of strong peer-group among them or a broader community-based perception of human being. (See Mikkonen 2010, 77.) Nepalese society with collective ideology differs by many ways from western viewpoints. Local cultures, knowledge, practices, values, languages and institutions play a significant role when finding a relevant base for social work (Ife 2005, 12). That argument raises a question, how western-based, individual rights meet the reality of Nepalese women and children? How those rights can be advocated by respecting collectivity? These questions make me to widen my perspective and connect anti-oppressive and anti-discriminative social work ideas with community-based practices.

The practical ground of my research is based on children's home and handcraft project for single mothers within one community in Nepal. Those two different fields have the same roots; they are based on local individuals' efforts for social justice. They started from a struggle against corrupted, violence and oppressive reality of a local children's home. The problems leading away from home often continue inside the walls of institutions, as children's homes' staff let malnutrition, discrimination and physical, sexual and mental violence to hurt the rights of the children (see Mikkonen 2010). To prevent this circle to move on, changing the management and practices of those children's homes is crucial, but also finding the roots of the problem. Often the low social status and poverty of single mother, either a widow or divorced, force her to offer a better opportunities to her children in an institution. The empowering of single mothers promotes the rights of the children as well. Therefore I put the advocating of children's and women's rights together.

Being a woman or a child in Nepal has special challenges defined by cultural and political structures, so in advocating their rights those specialities have to be taken into account. In so doing, I find feminist and anti-racist orientations as the basis of community work very reasonable. According to Margaret Ledwith and Paula Asgill (2007, 107-122) these orientations form a model of "radical community development", an integrated praxis of critical reflection and collective action for social change. Ledwith and Asgill see this kind of practice happening in the heart of people's lives in community but having a global reach. The local unprompted efforts that I aim to bring up include the elements of this praxis. By observing further and taking part to those activities, I have a vision to link them with broader discussions of *social justice*, *equality* and *development of communities* under oppressive and discriminative structures.

When linking the practice with theoretical discussions and approaches I have to be open and very sensitive with the people of my study. This includes a challenge to put their needs and hopes before my ideological interests. Therefore I need to find sensitive research methods. Ethnography fulfils this demand due to its orientation for cultural change, but also by taking part in the lives of informants, and by sharing the moments, feelings, sorrows and joys with them. This aim matches also with Margaret Ledwith's and Paula Asgill's (2007, 110-111, 114) argument of Freirean-feminist

research methodology. It defines feeling and experiencing also as sources of knowledge and forms “an epistemological possibility for a world defined by peace, co-operation and purpose”. Especially I stand for its vision of difference as strength, not division. By keeping this in mind, I can legitimate my role as researcher in the context so far from my origins.

References:

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