



Women and Trekking in High Altitude Regions of Nepal Global Independent Study



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Project Goal & Summary

- The purpose of my Global Independent Study was to learn about the role that women play in the trekking industry in high-altitude regions of Nepal.
- Over the course of three weeks in Nepal, I interviewed four female trekking guides about their experiences in the industry. I also spent a week hiking with one female guide, Tsering Sherpa, to see the high-altitude trekking industry in action.
- The project was motivated by my interest in gender dynamics in the outdoor adventure industry, as well as my interest in the intersection of the economic and development implications of Nepal's growing tourism sector.

Nepal: Country Context

Nepal is a land-locked country in Southeast Asia, located between India and China. It is home to eight of the fourteen highest mountains in the world, including Mt. Everest, in the Himalayas. For this project, I spent time in Kathmandu, Nepal's capital city. I also spent a week trekking in the Annapurna Conservation Area, the country's largest protected area.



Social Work Connections

Classroom Connections:

Understanding women's roles in the trekking industry is key to promoting equitable development, particularly as involvement in this industry can be a source of economic empowerment for many women. The trekking industry in Nepal is historically (and currently) male-dominated, but an influx of female guides and women-owned businesses along well-traveled routes is contributing to a cultural shift toward gender equality. This is heavily related to P.O.D.S topics from SW504, SW691, and SW647.

Career Connections:

This project gave me a chance to dig into an industry that I am passionate about and have extensive work experience in in a new cultural context. In the future, I anticipate that the communication skills and global experience that I developed during this trip will help me as I work with diverse communities on a variety of social issues.

Outcomes

Select Findings:

- Women that were interviewed for this project were primarily motivated to pursue careers in the trekking industry by **their sense of adventure and desire to travel. Proximity to trekking routes and family members in the industry** were also factors that influenced their decision to become guides.
- A major challenge that the women faced was dealing with **menstruation** while in the backcountry. **Periods are a taboo subject in Nepal**, and pose both physical and social challenges for the women operating in a male-dominated field.
- Community members are **generally supportive** of women in the trekking industry, though **often skeptical**. One woman that I interviewed leads trips in secret while her husband is away, because he is not supportive of her travelling alone.
- It is important to note that women's role in the trekking industry is **not limited to guiding**. Opportunities for women to reap benefits of the tourism economy also include **owning and or staffing tea houses, outfitters, and other small businesses** along well-traveled routes.

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Academic Outcomes

Skills Developed:

- Key Informant Interviewing
- Focus Group Facilitation
- Cross-Cultural Communication

Final Product:

My final academic product for this project is a hard-back photo journal, in which I include background research, journal entries, a summary of the project findings, and pictures from the trip.



Advice

- **Expect the unexpected, and be flexible.** Whether it be a cultural ceremony that conflicts with your pre-scheduled meetings or an abundance of leeches stuck to your legs, international travel is bound to bring surprises, and it is best to go with the flow.
- **Seek out authentic experiences.** Rather than following the beaten path of tourist attractions, build relationships with locals and learn about the country through their eyes. Approach these relationships and conversations with cultural humility, and be open to the beauty and the challenges that these conversations will inevitably bring.