

STRONG *women*

Finding WORTH in Nepal

~ BY JEN HETZEL SILBERT ~



In 1998 Pact's Women's Empowerment Project (WEP) in Nepal (now known as WORTH) adopted an Empowerment Mobilization Strategy which builds directly on Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a participative, strength-based approach to planning that has been applied successfully around the world, from Fortune 500 corporations, to schools, hospitals, government bodies, faith-based communities, rural villages, and beyond. WORTH has captured and celebrated the pride and self-reliance of over 125,000 rural women in Nepal, empowering them with literacy, micro-enterprise, village banking, and legal rights and advocacy interventions – replacing fatalism and resignation with pride in achievements, self-confidence in women's ability to set attainable goals, and success in achieving them. In November 2009, along with Marcia Odell and Malcolm Odell, Jr. (two field staff who helped seed these efforts in Nepal over a decade ago), Jen Hetzel Silbert had the privilege of visiting three WORTH projects in the village of Chitwan. This essay was the result of that inspiring journey.

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From the moment our bus pulled in to the Chitwan region of Nepal I knew I wasn't in Kansas anymore. The air filled with dust from the dry dirt-covered roads, the sides of which were dotted with thatched roof mangers giving shelter to tethered water buffalo, hay-eating goats, and free-running fowl. Nearby and in a low squat position were the Nepali men, women, and children who appeared curious but pleased to see the dozen or so foreigners pulling into their village.

I had barely stepped off the bus when a young woman approached me to ask my name.

"I'm Jen," I answered.
"What's your name?"

"I Carmina," she responded, and she walked alongside my colleagues and I as we met an amazingly warm welcome by the village women, flowers and all. "Beautiful lady," she said. "Namaste."

"Namaste," I returned.

"Namaste," another woman smiled to me, gesturing her readiness to mark my forehead with a tika. She dipped her thumb into a pan of bright red powder then pressed it into my "third eye," just above and between my brows, leaving behind a red upside-down teardrop. Next came a beautiful lei of hand-strung marigolds, leaves, and red and purple flowers, which another woman placed over my head and around my neck.



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“Namaste,” I said, holding up my prayer-shaped hands, my heart overflowing with gratitude. I continued to make my entrance through the greeting committee, two lines of brightly adorned red, blue, and pink Nepali dressed women. Several gifted additional flowers to me, repeating the same warm Namaste welcome. Some proudly carried their infant children on their hip or in their arms. Never before had I felt like such royalty; this was a most warm, most proud welcome of my friends and I to their village.

Carmina met me at the end of the entrance lines; she hadn’t taken me out of her sight. She told me she was 15, and her face appeared curious, friendly, and anxious to meet us.

When she returned less than an hour later she was dressed in brightly colored red and black pants and scarves. Her hair appeared newly rinsed and she was eager to get my attention. “I show my house,” she said gesturing for me to accompany her through the village, pass the straw-covered barns of water buffalo and goats, to her home. I happily nodded and followed.



She introduced me in Nepalese to her grandmother, who crouched on a two-inch high stool, stirring sun-dried corn kernels over a ground-level fire. The woman turned to me and smiled enthusiastically. “Grandmother,” Carmina explained, and then proceeded to introduce other surrounding family members using the few English nouns she had memorized at the nearby English boarding school attended by privileged youth.

Yes, privileged. The ground we stood on was dirt covered but flat, their house

short but made of bricks and covered not by a thatched roof but one instead made of tin. The small manger nearby where the food was prepared housed a mother water buffalo and her calf, as well as a family of goats, to include several new kids. The sounds of baby chicks chirping filled the air, as well as the laughter of curious children eager to see the foreigner and her fancy camera.



The children smiled at me and pointed for me to take their picture. I took several shots then quickly gave them immediate gratification, sharing the newly captured images on my LCD screen. How they laughed at the sight of their bright shiny faces on my little camera.

Soon the corn seeds began to pop. The grandmother filled a small tin bowl with popcorn and gestured for me to eat. They sat me down on a tall brown chair delivered from inside the house to where we sat outdoors, and then Carmina fetched me a glass of water from her well. I didn't have the nerve to drink it, but nonetheless thanked her for her generosity and began eating the popcorn. They sat quietly watching me eat, and before long I heard the voice of my husband, Tony, approaching from behind. They fetched a second seat for him to enjoy, and I began to share my bowl of popcorn with him. Pride overwhelmed them. From the tin-roofed house, to the water buffalo, family of goats, and the well, they had earned their bragging rights and here was their shining moment of glory sharing it all with a complete stranger and her husband, whom they called "handsome man". Such strong women, such immense pride.

Later that day a woman from WORTH wrapped her arm around my shoulder and guided me down another path in their village to her home, one of brightly painted blue cement which stood in front of a thatched roof manger she used to call home. Thanks to her collaborative banking efforts with other women of the village she had made dividends over the past seven years, enough to move her family to a step up from the manger that now gives shelter to a family of goats. Goats represent much wealth, especially families of goats where there is a female and a male. Small furry kids now run around to represent the growing wealth that surrounds her and her family. It doesn't matter that the floors surrounding the

inside and outside of her home are covered with dirt and dried cow dung; she is a woman of immense wealth, indomitable strength, and determined confidence and pride – not just for herself and her own accomplishments, but for the many other young women of the village, like Carmina, who are beginning to walk in her footsteps.

It was on this day, during this visit to the women of WORTH in Chitwan, that I was reminded of my own high point experiences in feeling confident, capable, and connected to strong women of the world. I remembered the immense relief and pride that filled my heart the moment I met my newborn daughters for the first time, what it felt like feeling their heart being placed against my heart, their warm wet bodies against my own instead of inside it. It was such a feeling of peace and gratitude – not just for experiencing the joy of motherhood, but for experiencing childbirth and knowing that my body was so capable, so strong, so enduring and able to give a gestational home to, and then birth a new form of life, a soul intrinsically connected to that of my husband and my own. I remember so vividly the pride that overcame me after birthing our second daughter, Jocelyn, for whom we chose natural childbirth. She arrived so peacefully into this world that – in spite of the intensity with which my body released her – hardly any pain was experienced. Childbirth is so common, so ordinary everywhere around the world, every second of every day – and yet it's equally extraordinary, an out-of-this-world experience that I feel so blessed, so able, so grateful for having been a part of, and had the opportunity to share with my strong, supportive husband.



But beyond childbirth, I'm reminded of the many everyday ways in which I carry strength, commitment, and perseverance into this world: from busily readying my daughters for daycare and Kindergarten each morning, packing lunches, warm boots, and mittens they may otherwise forget; making memories with each new season's traditions; enjoying the company of friends whose make-your-belly-hurt humor and loyalty you cannot imagine going without; dropping everything to make room for sad faces that need a call from a good friend, or a quiet moment on mommy's lap; follow-through on every opportunity for learning and growth that will elevate the consulting firm I'm most proud to have co-founded with a group of business partners I love like family; and did I mention cooking, feeding the dog, and laundry?

Such ordinary experiences that remind us we are extraordinarily strong women. The generations of women from WORTH may appear quite unlike my daughters and I on the surface –different attire and material surroundings – and yet within we share a great deal. As it goes when we say, “Namaste” – I honor the spirit in you that is also in me. Though the visit a matter of hours, and the capacity for English-Nepali translation nil, there are few with whom I have experienced wholeness with such immediacy and at that scale.

Is there a sight more beautiful, more divine than that of a capable, confident, strong woman? Such a gift to have met those women of WORTH, to witness their pride first-hand, and to be reminded of my own immense strength and the promise of two capable, confident, strong young girls who make my heart swell with love and hope.



Pictures throughout this essay provided by Jen Hetzel Silbert, Tony Silbert, Ralph Kelly, Joe Sawyer, and Jon Somers.



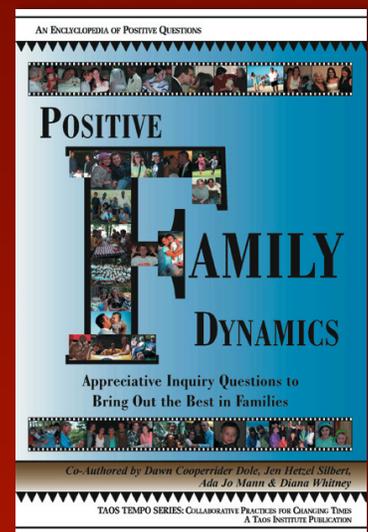
About the Author

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Partner and Co-founder of Innovation Partners International, Jen is an experienced organization development consultant, trainer, facilitator, and author supporting public, private, and social service organizations in the US and around the world. She specializes in teaching and applying strength-based collaborative approaches to change, with particular focus on

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