

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS



A Feminist Approach to Sensitive Research

Designing the Clay
Embodiment Research
Method

TRICIA ONG



A Feminist Approach to Sensitive Research

This book explores the development and implementation of the Clay Embodiment Research Method (CERM) with one of the most stigmatized, oppressed, and marginalized groups of women in Nepal: sex-trafficked women.

It argues for the use of a feminist approach to such research given the prevailing patriarchal norms, cultural sensitivity of reproductive health, stigmatization of sex trafficking, and low literacy of the women involved. Beginning with an exploration of the author's relationship with Nepal and the women who guide the study, and the realization that a more accessible research approach was needed than the techniques otherwise commonly used, it discusses the use of clay and photography as ideal entry points to engaging with the women in the research and creating this ethical methodology for self-empowerment. Not only does the volume highlight extraordinary insights offered by the women involved in this study through the application of CERM, but also the recognition that its use requires expertise that can deal with the potential elicitation of trauma. The book makes the case for further study on improving the method's use in research, education, and therapy involving low-literate, stigmatized, oppressed, and marginalized populations, particularly where cultural sensitivity is an important consideration.

A Feminist Approach to Sensitive Research is suitable for students, scholars, and researchers in Gender Studies, Sociology, Health Studies, Anthropology, and Asian Studies.

Dr. Tricia Ong is Lecturer in Career Education and a member of the Deakin Research for Violence Against Women hub at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. This is her first book. She has published on the multiplicity of stigma of sex-trafficked women in Nepal, clay as a medium in three-dimensional body-mapping, and on the impact of patriarchal norms on young, sex-trafficked women in Nepal. She has also written non-academic articles on women's reproductive health issues.

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To Smriti Khadka, staff and the women and girls of Asha Nepal. This book was always meant for you and we hope that it can bring ‘asha’ (hope) to the lives of many women and girls in your care.



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Preface

In March 2011, I embarked on a work journey to Nepal that would change the course of my life. From catching glimpses of the Himalayas, staying in a guesthouse on the grounds of the Shechan Tennyi Dargyeling Monastery in Boudhanath, to running art therapy and women's reproductive health sessions with sex-trafficked Nepalese women and girls, it was a profoundly moving experience. For all too short a time, I was in the company of a generous collective of people living lives that so contrasted my own. On the rooftop of a guesthouse in a town that fills its air with smoke from firing clay into bricks, the amazing Smriti Khadka described the work of Asha Nepal, a Nepalese non-government organization she manages, which shelters and helps rehabilitate sex-trafficked women and girls into the community of Kathmandu and teaches life skills to enable them to build a life with dignity beyond sex trafficking and, in some cases, return home to their families. While in Nepal, I found myself reflecting on my work, life, motherhood and protecting my own daughter, who was the same age of many of the trafficked girls I worked with there (see Ong 2011).

Just days before leaving Nepal, I was given the inspiration to return. As I said goodbye to everyone at Asha Nepal, a young, trafficked girl I had just met looked me in the eye and said, in English: "Don't forget us". I felt a tacit thread being woven between her heart and mine. On my last night, I watched Kutumba, Nepal's most popular folk band, perform the trekking song "Ray Sum Fee Riri" on the steps of the Shechan Monastery at dusk. It took me back 24 years to when, as a 21-year-old, I first trekked the Himalayan mountains, and the awe of my first trip to Nepal trip came flooding back.

I returned to Australia unsettled by my experience in Nepal. It felt "incomplete", and I longed to return. Powerful reminders kept my mind on the Nepalese women I had met, including a viewing of the

documentary *The Day My God Died* (2003) on one of Nepal's sex-trafficking pathways – trafficking to India – which featured Anuradha Koirala, the founder and the director of Maiti Nepal, a Nepal-based non-profit organization supporting sex-trafficked women. This was followed by a deeply moving conversation with Anuradha at a subsequent fundraising dinner when she was in Australia to promote the work of Maiti Nepal. I then got to know the Nepalese diaspora community in Melbourne, Australia, and their open-hearted conversations and celebrations helped me navigate Nepalese culture.

Several months later, I was back in Nepal, arriving in the middle of the (Hindu) Dashain Festival, a festival honoured by all of Nepal's 100 ethnic groups regardless of the religion they practise. From friendships formed in my earlier visit, I stayed with Hindu and Buddhist families in Kathmandu. I received family *tikka* (blessings) on the tenth (Blessing) Day of the Dashain Festival. I trekked in the Annapurna region with Nepalese friends and saw the magnificent Machapuchare (fishtail) mountain, which holds iconic memories of Nepal for me. I partook in rituals of the (Hindu) Tihar Festival or “Festival of Lights”. I visited Maiti Nepal and women I had worked with on my earlier trip. I visited Smriti at Asha Nepal.

Yet, I left Nepal with the same sense of longing to be back as before. A year later, I returned, this time for a Hindu Newari wedding at which I was given a red *sāri* by the family for their daughter's wedding. It was the (Hindu) month of Mangsir, an auspicious month to get married in Nepalese society, and I observed not one but many weddings at Hindu temples and in family homes. I became very engrossed in the varied traditional practices of Nepal's many different ethnic groups and their impact on Nepalese women and being right at the doorstep to Nepal's caste system. I later contributed an article to *Pipalbot*, a Nepalese community newspaper in Melbourne, about weddings in Nepal (Ong 2013a) and, after, I attended a Teej Hindu women's festival celebrated to honour the union of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati in which I wore my red *sāri*, which attracted the most comments from Nepalese readers (Ong 2013b).

On my last day of the wedding journey, I visited Smriti at Asha Nepal. We cofacilitated a reproductive health workshop together with adolescent girls at Asha Nepal, which gave me further insights into reproductive health issues for Nepalese women and girls. I learned further rudimentary Nepali. Over *masala chia* (Nepali spiced tea), we had a long discussion about adolescent girls and reproductive health in Nepal and a reproductive health training manual she was developing for the adolescent girls at Asha Nepal. At the end of our conversation, she took

my hands, looked into my eyes, and said, “I really want to work with you”. I returned her gaze and said, “Let’s make it happen. I promise I will find a way”.

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Acknowledgements

It was a personal goal to pen a book on my experiences in Nepal after I completed my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in 2018. However, it was unexpected to see it being moulded through clay. But it was – when it happened – an unexpected joy.

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