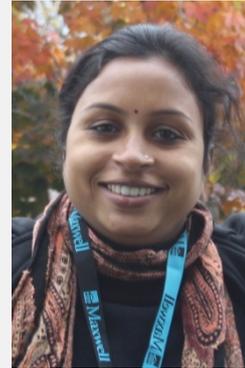


Interview with Manika Jha

Manika is an up and coming journalist in Nepal who writes on corruption, women's rights and discrimination. In Nepal this is a dangerous profession if you are a man; as a young woman doubly so. Dhanusha district, where Manika is based, is one of the most volatile regions of Nepal. It is also very conservative, particularly when it comes to the role of women in society. She was just nineteen when she started working as a journalist in this context, Manika now writes for a national daily newspaper. She is the only female reporter in the district. She has received numerous verbal and written threats and has been attacked on at least three occasions, including an attempt on her life in May 2010.



In Nepal there's a woman working as a journalist. Is that special? Yes, it sure is. Women having a job are rare in the male-dominated society of Nepal, and not without a reason. Despite the murder of journalist Uma Singh, many death threats and physical violence, Manika Jha (23) is still working as a journalist. She is determined to make a difference for women in Nepal, by reporting on their harsh living conditions. "My mother inspired me to do this. Initially she suggested that I should join the military or the police, but I thought I could achieve more as a journalist." Her work has led to many death threats and physical attacks on Jha in public and in her house. "The ones that do this are usually the people I write about, who after publication kick down my door and threaten me." At the moment she is accompanied by volunteers from Peace Brigades International to protect her when at work. Without this protection she is constantly in danger. "Authorities remain sensitive to international attention. When the international community forgets about me, I am no longer safe."

www.freepressunlimited.org/en/news/portrait-manika-jha-journalist-in-nepal-is-unstoppable

Can you tell us about your family background and your childhood memories?

I was born in Bathana-6 Madhaba of Mahottari district, Nepal in 2046. My father Bedanand Jha is a retired teacher and mother Rohini Jha, is currently working as lecturer of Psychology. My mother is from India and my father is Nepali. My mother's parents were quite well off both financially and also socially so when my father married my mother he broke the traditional dowry system that

prevailed in our society. My mother had two children, both girls, and I am the youngest daughter. At that time great importance was placed in having a son and people used to accuse my mother of being infertile because she has was not able to give birth to a son. The Hindu ritual of naming the child was not done for me because my family members were so disappointed that I was a girl. This shows how traditional and conservative the society I lived in was at that time. Also my parents were unusual because my mother completed her Master's degree whilst my father was still an undergraduate. My grandparents would complain and mentally torture my parents because it was expected that the husband would have a higher degree than his wife not the other way round!

When I was born I was underweight so my mother cared for me well by sending my sister to my grandmother. She did this to give me extra care in my early childhood. There were eight years between me and my sister and as I was the second daughter, my mother decided not to have any more children. My father's parents were really unhappy with this decision and did not let me or my mother enter or live in the same home as them until I was four years old. I went to school but was not able to go to a private school which is believed to provide a better education. My mother however had a strong desire to send me to an English medium school so that I could learn English but my father did not put me forward for admission into such a school. This may also be due to the economic situation of my family. I am proud to say that in my whole school life I never came second in my class I was always in first position. I came first in every programme and every event held at my school. Because I was so strong in my studies I used to participate in all the extracurricular activities which meant I was fairly free to travel and interact with other people. I came in first position in the district level examination of grade eight and my father was called and honoured due to this event. It was after this that my father started caring for me because he must have felt that I made him feel respectable. There was so much emphasis placed on having a son within our society that as a child my grandmother tried to burn me. This shows how much importance was placed on having a son rather than a daughter. I completed my School Leaving Certificate in 2004 from Janakpur. Similarly I have passed Intermediate level in Commerce from higher secondary examination board in 2009 and Diploma in computer applications. Currently I am pursuing my Bachelor of Education degree currently from Tribhuvan University. Now I am married with Bijay kumar jha. He is from Rautahat District. We have 8 month baby boy, his Name is Samarat.

What or who inspired you and what is your aim?

My main source of inspiration is my mother who has always encouraged me by saying that my daughter will be able to do something. My father on the other hand always used to say that if I was

a son then I would be able to achieve something. I used to be very much affected and inspired by mother's activities and behaviour. I was particularly inspired by the fact that she used to achieve so much in her teaching and that she used to teach and work in India and Nepal and had to travel as well for her job. Doing this work for her was only possible because our home was on the border between India and Nepal. My mother used to watch Indian news channels and would say that she would be very happy if her daughter could also be in the same position of media-person reporting various news and events from different parts of country and more. This inspired me to work in the field of media. During my childhood my desire was to work in the security sector of country as police. I used to imagine that police force was only for males and felt that if they also included females too then it would be a more attractive profession to follow.

What is your present position and what help have you received from others?

I am working as journalist of Annapurna post national daily newspaper. I am also engaged in research based activities. I am conducting research on the Conservative Culture and tradition of western Nepal. I have tried to focus my research on looking at Gender based practices and culture like compelling females to stay in a separate part of the house during the menstrual period and other human right cases.

I started working as a journalist for the Kantipur Daily paper. It was seeing an advert for a vacancy for Madehsi Journalists that attracted me to apply for the post. Fortunately I was selected for that post and for that I was helped by Shyamsundar Sashi, who is reporter of the same news daily for Dhanusa district. I also worked in the Radio station that was established by Shital Shah. I used to run a children's program in that station. At that time there were very few females working in the News section which was the main reason I was attracted to the job. I have been able to complete various types of training in media as part of my job which has been a good opportunity for me.

What are your main achievements and what challenges have you faced?

Very few women are attracted towards this profession and among these few I am one who chose to be a journalist and have reached the position that I am in today. I think that my work in this field is helping to attract other women into this profession and this is one of my main achievements. Some of the stories I have covered have led me to dig deep into the root causes into the death of some women. One case was Rupa Karna who it was rumoured committed suicide but the root cause of her death was due to the dowry system which led to her murder. I won this case and the criminal's involved in the murder were legally punished. Another case that I have fought against is the case for

Uma Singh who was a fellow journalist, who was murdered in 2009 by a gang of men. Through my writing I created a moral pressure for the concerned authority to take action on this.

Though the law is clear on human rights for women this is not so in practice. I used to fight to cover the cases that give insight into the violence women face in Nepal and to cover rape cases so that people will know about these issues. People have accused me of being corrupt and taking bribes here and there but I don't do such things and will continue my work. My main satisfaction comes from doing my job well, that is my main achievement.

Talking about challenges well I am frequently threatened with death due to these various cases I have fought against the criminals. These criminals threaten to kill me. The biggest threat that was made against me was after the murder of my fellow journalist Uma Singh as I was also threatened with death. I should have visited fifty eight districts of Nepal. Also being a *madhesi* female in Nepal is in itself an inborn challenge not only to me but for all the madhesi females. In my early career and being a young female my views were often ignored and not taken into consideration. My reporting and actions however show the things that can be done by women in Nepal. There has been accusations that I am encouraging and promoting prostitution. This is next important challenge to me.

What are your future plans?

Well at the moment there are no media houses owned by females in Janakpur. So, I have a plan to establish such a media house in Janakpur owned by frustrated, helpless and exploited women along with different networks of different professionals from different sectors. I am really motivated to publish a local newspaper in Janakpur.

Do you have any suggestions for other women?

Please don't get frustrated by only being a female. You should omit the feelings of being females and inferior in all aspects of your career. No one will show you the opportunities so you must search for opportunities yourself. Many careers are open to us but we have to work to get these positions and should not depend on men but work hard and be determined to get these positions. You need to show determination and conviction. If you do so you will certainly reach the goal you have set.

Qualitative Analysis in Action

Qualitative Analysis in Action provides open access to interviews undertaken with inspirational women of Nepal. In doing so it creates an environment where these women experiences can be explored, examining the gendered experiences of meanings of inspiration.