

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Outmigrating men: A window of opportunity for women's participation in community forestry?

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Abstract

Encouraging women to become active participants has been an important goal of the community forestry program in Nepal. Achieving this goal has been elusive, and studies have identified a range of formal structures and informal processes that can exclude women. This study explored whether there is a relationship between men's outmigration and women's participation in community forestry. Data were collected using a semi-structured survey, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with women from two community forest user groups. The analysis indicated that men's outmigration provides a "window of opportunity" to increase women's participation, as the left-behind wives were more likely to attend and voice their opinions during the general assembly. However, the extent to which outmigration represents an opportunity depends on family type and composition. The women who do not have an adult man in the household are those who become most involved in the community forest user group. By participating in the general assembly, they may achieve increased participation in forest decisions.

Keywords: *Decision-making, left-behind women, migration, Nepal.*

Introduction

In a globalized world characterized by regions differing in their economic dynamics, migration is widespread. Migration from rural to urban areas or to other countries in search of employment is common in developing countries such as Nepal (NIDS, 2007). Research on migration has mostly focused on understanding the structure and drivers of migration (Graner, 2001; KC, 2004), the economic role of remittances (Seddon et al., 2002; Thieme & Wyss, 2005) and the migrants' networks (Rigg, 2006). The social and cultural impacts on the communities of origin have so far not been studied extensively (Hadi, 2001; Biao, 2007). However, in societies in which men are responsible for representing the interests of the family in the public sphere, widespread outmigration of men is likely to have fundamental impacts at both the household and the community level. The wives of migrant men, i.e. the left-behind women, will not only have to take care of household tasks traditionally performed by men (Khaled, 2002;

Kaspar, 2006), but also have to venture into the public sphere to represent the family in community institutions.

One such institution is community forestry, which plays a key role in securing forest resources for the household, such as fodder, firewood and timber. As there are few forests that women can access freely, these resources mostly come from a forest managed by a local user group, commonly called a community forest user group (CFUG). Although women are considered responsible for going to the forest to collect forest products, traditionally it is the men who represent the household during the general assembly of the CFUG. During these assemblies decisions pertaining to the management of the community forest are taken following a deliberative process. To maintain their membership, each member household must have at least one person present at the general assembly.

Although the community forestry programme has made some efforts to be gender inclusive, women have so far played only a subordinate role (Agarwal,