

Nepali Women Using Community Forestry as a Platform for Social Change

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Successful implementation of decentralized programs such as community forestry depends on participation of local users. Although women in Nepal have been recognized as the primary users of forests, they are widely reported as marginalized in decision-making processes. Previous studies mostly take a static view, focusing on exclusionary structures to explain how and why women are marginalized. A focus on social change processes would allow better understanding of whether and how women use interactions with the executive committee or during general assemblies to renegotiate their social role and rights. Based on a survey, interviews, and group discussions in two community forest user groups, we argue that women are engaged in an ongoing contestation of current structures to widen their participation in decision making and become increasingly active agents in community forestry. We point out the need to understand participation as an ongoing and open-ended process of social change rather than as a predefined outcome.

Keywords decision making, gender, management of natural resources, Nepal, participation, perception

Nepal initiated its community forestry program in the late 1980s with the twin goals of conserving natural resources and providing local users with forest products. Community forestry is widely recognized as a promising approach to forest management and governance, especially regarding its ability to improve the condition of forests (Banjade and Ojha 2005; Gautam and Shivakoti 2005; Koirala et al. 2008; Thoms 2008). Currently Nepal has some 14,400 community forest user groups (CFUG) involving over 1.6 million households (DoF, 2007). By devolving management rights to local user groups, the program also aims at contributing to social equity by securing resources for disadvantaged groups, such as the poor, those of low caste, and women

Received 3 May 2009; accepted 14 December 2009.

We are grateful to the three anonymous reviewers and Seema Arora-Jonsson for their critical comments that enhanced the argument and clarity of the article. We are indebted to the participating women and thank them for their patience and cooperation during the interview process. We thank the Austrian Exchange Service (OeAD GmbH) for funding this research.

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