

In the absence of their men: Women and forest management in the Mid-hills of Nepal

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Abstract

In Nepal, the management of community forests is based on the participation and decision making of forest users. The premise of its success is the involvement of the real users in forest conservation and management. The Nepal Forest Laws identify women as key forest users and underline the importance of their participation in community forest management. However, given the socio-cultural setting and the prevailing patriarchy, fostering women's active participation remains a challenge. Women are traditionally limited to the private sphere and men tend to look after the responsibilities in the public sphere. However, the increasing trend of male outmigration observed in the Mid-hills may offer a window of opportunity for women to become more involved in the public sphere and thus, be able to have a decisive influence in forest management. This paper investigates the factors that have increased the participation and decision-making level of women in two community forest user groups. Data were collected through focus group discussions, informal discussions and interviews with key informants. The results suggest that key factors that encourage women to take an active role in the management of community forests are: degraded forests hampering the women to fulfil their duties (supply of firewood, grass, etc.), previous experiences with women's groups to increase their self-confidence, an unsatisfactory flow of information and men's full support. Given the high prevalence of male outmigration in the Mid-hills of Nepal, these results are relevant to formulate policies and strategies that foster women's empowerment.

Keywords: community forestry, community forest user group, male outmigration, left-behind women, participation, decision-making, focus group discussion.



1 Women's participation in community forestry

Promoting the participation in decision-making of the less vocal and less powerful has remained orthodoxy for development work. In the management of natural resources such as forests, the emergence and institutionalization of participatory programmes has taken various forms under such umbrella terms as social forestry, collaborative forest management or community forestry.

The concept of local people's involvement in the management of natural resources is not new. What might be new is that to empower local people, structured models of participation are used, built around specific decentralized policy frameworks. Community forestry is one of the highly acclaimed participatory programmes in Nepal that implements the principles of decentralization [1]. It aims to cover the basic needs for forest products of the local people by ensuring their participation through the formation of a community group, widely known as "community forest user group" (CFUG). CFUGs are cohorts of users of a certain forest at the local level (neighbourhood, ward or village) that enjoy use rights, after the forest has been handed over from the state to the community. Each CFUG is governed by an Executive Committee that acts on behalf of the General Assembly of all members.

Participation is a dynamic process through which stakeholders influence decisions and share control over the resources and the development initiatives that affect them [2]. Participation is defined in its narrowest sense in terms of nominal membership and in the broadest sense as a process in which the voice of the disadvantaged (e.g. women) is heard and they thus, influence decision making [3]. According to Agarwal's [3] "ladder of participation", women's participation in a CFUG is "passive" if they may get some information about community forest management but lack any opportunity to make choices or influence the decisions, whereas an "active" participation is characterised as women voicing their views, whether solicited or not, and their ability to actively and directly influence the different initiatives of the CFUG.

Whereas the participatory approaches and decentralized policies of community forestry promise inclusion by creating spaces to exercise decision-making and equitable development, claims to women's participation and decision-making into such "participatory" processes has remained mostly a rhetoric [4, 5]. Indeed, evidence suggests that women's involvement in community forestry has mostly been "passive", represented in the form of women's household entitlement to CFUG membership [2, 3, 5]. As such, women are often simply position holders without the possibility to influence decision-making.

Empirical evidence indicates various factors that constrain women's participation in community forestry. Some argue that the socio-cultural context of Nepalese society and the existing local power structure that provides more power to men can lead to "participatory exclusion" of women [3, 5, 6]. The influence of the socio-cultural context may be maintained through the resistance from village men, based on expectations regarding the behaviour of women during public forestry meetings [7-9]. Also women's needs and aspirations

regarding the timings of forest meetings might not be taken into account, nor their lack of self-confidence in a public setting [6, 8]. As such, traditional gender roles assigning different responsibilities to women and men can restrict women's access to natural resources and frequently excludes them from decision-making in community forest management.

While the effect of the socio-cultural context has been reported to affect women's inclusion and influence on decision-making in community forestry, this social-cultural context is not static but undergoes continuous negotiations, adaptations and changes. Male outmigration has been widely reported as one mediating factor that can bring forth negotiations and social transformations by (re)structuring traditional gender roles, thus leading to increased access to resources, greater decision-making powers [10-12] and women's active involvement in community development activities and farming [12, 13].

Given the "passive" state of women's participation in community forest management and the potential of male outmigration to mediate changes in social relations, this paper aims to explore how rural women's participation and decision-making in community forest management has been affected by male outmigration. It also offers indications of the impacts of women's participation and decision-making in community forest management and the continuing constraints and challenges they face.

2 Methodology

2.1 Site selection

The study was conducted in the Mid-hills, a mountain range that crosses Nepal from east to west, between the Himalayan range in the north and the Ganges River plain in the south. The altitude of the Mid-hills varies between 1,000 and 3,000 m. The Kavre district, some 70 km east of Kathmandu, was selected as livelihoods rely mostly on subsistence agriculture, livestock farming and forest resources [14]. Also, Kavre district borders Kathmandu and is well-connected to other major towns such as Dhulikhel and Banepa. Therefore, many men come to these cities either for study, work or business. In addition, Central Bureau of Statistics [15] reports many of the men from Kavre district go to other countries such as India, Malaysia and Saudi Arab for employment.

For this study, two CFUGs with a high rate of male outmigration were selected. As official statistical data on migration is inadequate to grasp the accounts of outmigration within Nepal, outmigration levels in Kavre district were assessed through discussions with key informants from District Forest Offices, District Development Committees (a local administrative unit acting at district level), range posts, and NGOs. This provided a preliminary list of areas within Kavre with particularly high rates of male outmigration. Six CFUGs were then visited to check the rate of male outmigration and other characteristics of the CFUG through discussions with members of the Village Development Committee, school teachers, as well as members of the CFUG and its executive committee. Finally, two CFUGs – Chande Majuwa and Katunje Pakha – were selected, as both had a high rate of male outmigration and an active participation

of women in the CFUG. Also, the two CFUGs are similar in other important aspects, such as access to markets, income from the CFUGs and exposure to tours and trainings.

2.2 Data collection

Primary data was collected between November 2007 and January 2008 through focus group discussions, individual interviews and participant observation.

Three focus group discussions were carried out with ten women in each CFUG. Each focus group discussion took about two hours. The main issues discussed were the factors that motivated women to participate in the management of the community forest (which were ranked in order of importance in each CFUG), the changes that took place after women started to participate, and women's perception regarding men's attitude towards women's participation in these CFUGs.

Furthermore, informal discussions with male members of the CFUG were conducted to assess their perception of women's involvement in community forest management. Additionally, individual interviews with key informants such as the school teacher, forest rangers and local tea-shop owners were conducted to explore the issues of forest condition and management. The data was transcribed, analysed qualitatively and triangulated with secondary information obtained from the minutes, constitutions and operational plans of the CFUGs.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Factors influencing women's participation in the management of the community forest

Forest management in both CFUGs started about 25 years ago, through the reforestation project of the Nepal Australia Forestry Project. Both community forests were formally handed over to the CFUG about 15 years ago. At that time, women's participation was predominantly passive. Male CFUG members held meetings and took decisions while women were barely – if at all – informed about the timing and/or outcome of these meetings. Women were unaware of the functioning of the CFUG and the potential benefits they could gain from the use of CFUG funds. However, in the last five years, women's awareness and stake in forest management has increased, so that now their participation in decision-making can be described as active.

As the main factors that allowed for this increased participation and active engagement in the decision-making within the CFUG, the women in the focus groups stated that collecting forest products is their responsibility, and that through their increased awareness of the importance of the CFUG and their confidence in their own abilities to manage the CFUG, they started to take a more active role in the management of their community forest (see Fig. 1).

3.1.1 Forest products and water are women's responsibility

Since in Nepal the collection of forest products such as fuelwood, fodder, grass and bedding material is mainly women's responsibility [4, 9], women in both

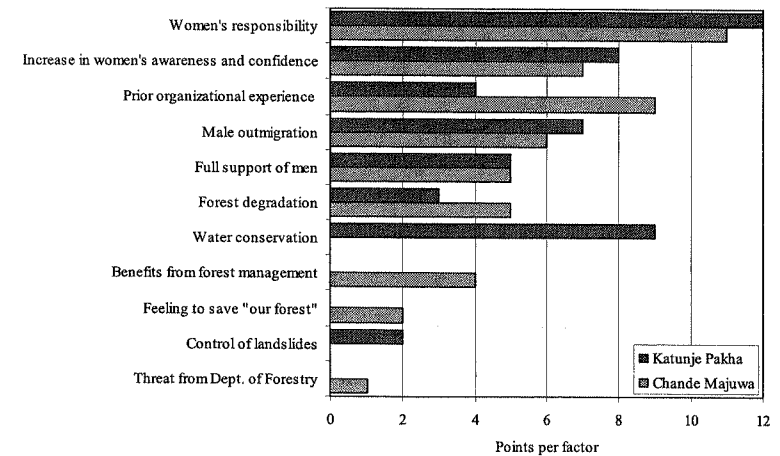


Figure 1: Weighed ranking of factors that motivated women to increase their participation in the management of the community forest. [Note: Each of the 10 women participating in the focus groups was given 5 points to distribute among the factors listed. Not all factors were listed in both CFUGs.]

CFUGs started to face problems in meeting their household requirements as the state of the community forest degraded. Pressured to meet their household duties, women started to sneak into nearby community forests or national forest to collect forest products. However, these were farther away, so that the women had to spend more time to collect the forest products. Also, if the women were caught stealing the forest products from other CFUGs or a national forest, they had to face penalties for misbehaviour and public shame. Securing a regular flow of forest products, therefore, became a core issue for the women, encouraging a more active participation in their own CFUG.

3.1.2 Women's increased awareness and confidence

The adult literacy programmes conducted by the Village Development Committee in both CFUGs provided a venue where women could sit together and learn in groups. This opportunity for information exchange made them more aware of the benefits they could potentially derive from forest management, such as planting medicinal plants in the forest to generate an income, or using CFUG funds from wood sales to address community problems.

3.1.3 Prior experience in organization

Approximately four years ago, women had the opportunity to get involved in some other organizations. In Chande Majuwa, women started a 'saving and credit scheme' where each woman had to contribute 100 Nepalese Rupees (Rs.) per month. This allowed the women to set up a revolving fund that was used to solve the problems of member households in times of need. This experience



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provided women with the feeling that, if they organized themselves, they could solve their problems on their own, i.e. they did not always have to depend on their husbands or on another male household member.

This experience strengthened the women's feeling of self-confidence and showed them the potential benefits they could derive from a successful organization. It also increased men's awareness and acceptance that women can successfully lead organizations. In the words of a woman in the focus group:

"Before, women in these villages were limited to performing assigned duties within their household only. But after being involved with the saving group, I also took on responsibilities of my household just like my husband. This has increased my self-esteem in my family as well as in society."

Focus group discussion, Chande Majuwa CFUG

Women in Katunje Pakha participated in a programme for children and women, called DOCAW, initiated by the Katunje Village Development Committee. Among others, the DOCAW provided training to raise the women's awareness of their legal rights. Participation in this training has enhanced women's knowledge and their self-confidence:

"Before, I did not know anything. Participation in DOCAW made me aware about my own rights as a woman. It has also increased my self-confidence and capability to voice my concerns in public meetings."

Focus group discussion, Katunje Pakha CFUG

3.1.4 The high rate of male outmigration

The former Executive Committee of the Chande Majuwa CFUG was a men-only committee. When they made decisions about forest regulations, women tended not to receive any information about the timing of meetings or the decisions taken:

"Earlier we did not even hear about meetings. Men used to do that. They also did not use to share information. We didn't even know when the forest was opened and closed. We thought that it was only men who should held meetings and make decisions."

Focus group discussion, Chande Manjuwa CFUG

In Katunje Pakha, women were formally included in the initial Executive Committee, but men monopolized the decision-making, so that the women ended up not participating in the meetings.

When the rate of male outmigration increased, this led to a lack of guidance within the CFUG. Indeed, in Chande Majuwa most of the male members of the Executive Committee left for cities in search of better employment. Thus, the men were no longer present and able to provide the time required to solve the various problems in the community forest. As a result illegal tree felling and forest encroachment was rampant in both CFUGs. In Katunje Pakha, forest degradation led to issues of water scarcity and landslides, which were a core concern of the women.

3.1.5 Full support of village men

Given their inability to cope with the rampant forest degradation, combined with an increased confidence in women's ability, men in both CFUGs finally

encouraged women to come to the fore and take part in decision-making on protection, management and use of the community forest. In both CFUGs, women perceived that male members fully supported their engagement. Men thought that if women participated in decision making, introducing their perspective and concerns, the forest would be better cared for. Indeed, since it is mostly the women who go to forests to collect forest products, they tend to be the most knowledgeable [7, 9] about the forest condition, areas of illegal felling and even the illegal encroachers. In Chande Majuwa – combined with the outmigration of the male members of the Executive Committee – this led to the formation of an all-women Executive Committee. In Katunje Pakha the women's share was increased to 50% of the Committee members (up from 10% about four years ago).

3.2 Family composition and remittances as mediating factors

A left-behind woman has to cope with new responsibilities in the absence of her husband [11, 12, 16]. Such new responsibilities can lead to stronger exposure to the public sphere, as is the case with decision-making in the Executive Committee or the General Assembly of a CFUG. This particularly applies to women living in a nuclear family without any adult son. In the absence of their husbands, these women started to attend public meetings and forest assemblies. This public exposure provided them with a new opportunity for learning and information sharing. With it, their interest in the management of the CFUG increased. This public exposure also provided them with enhanced negotiation skills and allowed them to voice their concerns related to forest management, thereby influencing decision-making.

However, in extended families, the responsibilities of the man who had outmigrated were taken up by another male member of the family, e.g. a father-in-law or brother-in-law. Thus, in both CFUGs, left-behind women who lived in extended families participated less in forest meetings and assemblies, compared to those living in nuclear families. These results are congruent with other studies that analyze gender relations within households [11, 13].

All the left-behind women reported that their husband used to be their major source of information about issues in the public sphere, e.g. the time and location of CFUG meetings and decisions taken in assemblies. When their husbands left, they lost this prime source of information. Whereas women in joint families relied mostly on other family members (male or female) to obtain such information, women in nuclear families relied mostly on neighbours and relatives. However, if the left-behind women in nuclear families were not satisfied with the information provided, they had a strong incentive to attend the next meetings themselves.

Research indicates that left-behind women tend to have a high workload [12, 16]. In the focus groups, although the left-behind women reported that their workload had increased, it did not hamper their participation in the management of the community forest. Indeed, the women noted that they were happy to attend forest meetings and General Assemblies as such meetings provided them new avenues for learning, thereby supporting their self-development.



Another issue is the remittances that outmigrated men send home and the control over this new resource. In extended families, it is mostly the male member of the family who handles the remittances. Women's opinion on the use of remittances is heard, even if they often end up being used to purchase land or to build a house. In nuclear families, usually the left-behind woman shares decision making with her outmigrated husband and thus, has more influence on the use of the remittances. Some families, both extended and nuclear, of the women in the focus groups have invested a part of the remittances to purchase alternative sources of energy, e.g. gober gas. In these cases, the remittances helped to reduce the women's dependency on forest resources, especially fuelwood.

3.3 Impact of women's engagement in the management of the community forest

Women in both CFUGs perceived that their increased involvement yielded many benefits. The forest is now better protected and forest condition has also improved in terms of forest regeneration and reported thefts of timber from the forest. Women now have easier access to forest products such as fuelwood, fodder, grass and bedding material from their own community forest. Also, women's active involvement in the CFUG has helped to draw attention to women's concerns and identify possible solutions to address them. Indeed, now that women take part in the meetings, they can voice their ideas and influence the decisions. Women are also better able to ensure that the funds generated in the CFUG are used to address their livelihood issues. Moreover, participation in the CFUG has exposed the women to public meetings and speaking in public. Successfully meeting this challenge has increased women's self-esteem and self-confidence.

3.4 Constraints and challenges to women's engagement

Despite women's active engagement in the management of the community forest, women still feel hampered by their low education level and their lack of knowledge about legal and financial aspect of community forest management. Most of the women in both CFUGs are illiterate or just literate. Therefore, women tend to develop a feeling that "they might do something wrong" if they undertake legal or financial management of CFUGs:

"In one of the Executive Committee meetings, male members of the Committee were suggesting that this CFUG should be converted into a women-only Committee. They also asked my opinion about it. I felt a bit troubled wondering how women could deal with financial matters of forest management on their own. Most of us are illiterate. How could we handle the required skills to maintain the minutes and financial records?"

A member of the executive committee of the Katunje Pakha CFUG

Though women fully acknowledged men's support behind their active participation in forest management, they also felt unsettled by men's desire to use the CFUG funds according to men's own interests. In Katunje Pakha, male

members of the Executive Committee put the CFUG fund in a bank, despite female members' preferences to set up a revolving fund to provide 'easy loans' to needy families in the community. During the focus group discussion, women also mentioned other conflicts regarding the use of CFUG funds:

"Once, a few men came to us and requested a grant from the CFUG fund to construct a road nearby. All the women signed to allow cutting trees from the community forest to raise about Rs. 35,000 for constructing the road. Later we came to know that only a small amount was used for road construction, the rest was used up by the men themselves. We felt cheated, but this event has made us more careful."

Focus group discussion, Chande Manjuwa CFUG

4 Conclusion

Community forestry in Nepal is one of the highly acclaimed participatory programmes that aim to encourage the participation of local people, mainly women, in forest management. Yet, women's inclusion and active participation in decision-making remains as a challenge, and is often mere lip-service. However, the male outmigration, which is becoming a widespread phenomenon in the Mid-hills, could mediate social changes. This exploratory study was conducted to assess and analyze under which conditions male outmigration could lead to women's increased participation in the management of community forests.

As the cases of Chande Majuwa CFUG and Katunje Pakha CFUG indicate, male outmigration can indeed open a 'window of opportunity' for women. As women carry the prime responsibility of collecting forest products, they tend to be more concerned about sustainable forest management. Positive experiences in organisational management – e.g. of a savings group – or participation in a women's rights programme, has increased the women's confidence and self-esteem as well as the awareness of the options they have. Under these conditions, and with the men's support, women are willing to take on new challenges and seize the opportunities that can arise from male outmigration. The extent to which left-behind women become actively engaged in the management of a community forestry seems to depend to a large part on them being in a nuclear family and feeling that the information about the community forest they get from their social networks is not satisfactory.

Given the increasing rate of male outmigration in the Mid-hills of Nepal, there is a tremendous scope to encourage women's participation in community forestry. To realise this potential, further research is needed to identify the factors that foster women's participation and their interrelations.

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