

Still a Man's World: Reflections of Women Foresters in Nepal

Kalpana Giri¹ & Jeannette Gurung²

Abstract

The history of forest management in Nepal can be characterized over the years as a story of “men and jungles”, as forestry has been widely assumed to be a “male- sector”. Gradually, from the early 1980s, the focus of forestry shifted from protection to community management, and thus opened up spaces for women to enter forest institutions, including the Institute of Forestry. This paper brings forth perceptions and reflections of women foresters as they have tried to integrate into forestry organizations for almost three decades. Specifically, the paper analyzes the prospects and challenges of women foresters in both academic institutions of forestry and in work places. Focus group discussions were conducted with about 50 women foresters in different geographical locations of Nepal. Data was gathered through women’s foresters’ life stories and testimonies. The findings indicate the lack of a gender-responsive environment in both academic institutions as well as in forestry organizations throughout the country. Various patterns of covert discrimination exist in these institutions. A set of factors that largely influence women foresters’ opportunities and commitment within the natural resource management sectors has been identified. Reflections by these women also point out the gradual changes in society towards women, in this case seen through the increasing recognition of women as foresters. There are also instances of women getting support from male colleagues, both within academic institutions and in the organizations of their employment. However, such instances are limited. There is an urgent need to institutionalize these supportive behaviors within a context where such good practices are seen as the norm rather than the exception.

1 Introduction

The history of forest management in Nepal can be characterized over the years as a story of “men and jungles”, as forestry has been widely assumed to be a “male- sector”. With the adoption of participatory policies in the 1980s that emphasized and advocated for social mobilization, women’s entry to the forestry sector was deemed necessary. Strongly backed by international donors, women’s professional involvement in forestry sector started in 1982 with the intake of women students into the Institute of Forestry (IOF) for the ‘Technical Certificate in Forestry (TCL)’ and ‘Bachelor of Science in Forestry (BSc)’ courses.

Nearly 25 years later, the IOF has prepared more than 300 women forestry professionals, who now work in various organizations with a diverse range of expertise. Women’s professional involvement in forestry ranges from mid-level field workers, district level officers, researchers and academicians to program managers. However, some are even jobless (mostly the current graduates) and some have abandoned the forestry profession to join other disciplines. Only very few positions at higher levels are occupied by women graduates. At

¹ Institute of Agriculture and Forestry Economics, University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences, Austria.

² Women Organizing Together for Change in Agriculture and NRM (WOCAN).

present, there are only two women District Forest Officers (DFO) within the country's 75 districts. This is the highest position taken by women foresters in the government structure. This indicates a highly skewed gender imbalance. Even outside government, very few women have occupied senior positions, though the proportion of women employees is more in international/non-governmental sectors (INGO) than in government organizations (GO).

Women foresters are often blamed for not being able to carry out fieldwork, which is considered suitable for 'sturdy' male professionals. Women are often projected as being professionally less capable by their male counterparts. However, in practice, it is evidently found that many women foresters perform extremely well in their respective jobs demonstrating their high potential compared to their male counterparts. Thus, in order to achieve gender equitable impact in natural resource management, it is absolutely essential to give equal opportunity and freedom to women professionals. But there are very few analyses and little evidence available regarding how women's job performance is related to underlying structures and processes that cultivates and reinforces strong gender biases in the sector. As well, the lack of a forum for communication and networking among women professionals has constrained a debate on this issue.

Towards this end, this paper is an attempt to explore and analyze the prospects and challenges of women foresters³ and others⁴ working in natural resource management (NRM) sectors. The present status of women foresters and their experiences in NRM sectors is documented here. It is expected that this work will provide a basis for better integration of women forestry professionals in NRM sectors by creating favorable environments in respective organizations, sensitizing employers, empowering IOF students, building networks, and so on. This work is meant to contribute to IOF's efforts to develop greater gender sensitivity in IOF and to incorporate gender related topics in the course curriculum.

This work is a part of a project titled "Centre of Excellence" currently being carried out by University of Virginia Tech, United States of America and the Institute of Forestry, Nepal.

2 Methods

A total of four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held to articulate, discuss and analyze the prospects and challenges of women foresters and other women professionals working in NRM sectors. A FGD is a qualitative method that is considered an appropriate method to obtain in-depth information on concepts, perceptions and ideas of a group⁵. These FGDs were held during March-April, 2008 at different geographical locations in Nepal: two in Pokhara and two in Kathmandu.

³ Female graduates who completed their BSc and MSc degrees at IOF were the focus of this study. However, women students who passed the TCL from the IOF with substantive professional experience were also included.

⁴ Other women professionals who have not studied at the IOF at any point of their lives but who have been working in the NRM sectors.

⁵ http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-56615-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

FGD participants were purposely selected based on various criteria, such as year of graduation from IOF (from the first women graduates of 1987 to recent graduates of 2007), field of expertise (community forestry, wildlife, social mobilization etc.), ethnicity, career level (entry, mid, expert), type of associated organization (academics, GOs, NGOs and INGOs) and IOF/ other women professionals. This heterogeneous mix of participants in the FGDs provided a very good platform to express, discuss and bring forth the perceptions and reflections of women foresters as they have tried to integrate into forestry organizations for almost three decades. It also highlights the changes and the unchanged aspects within IOF and the NRM sector. Specifically, the discussion was focused on the prospects and challenges of women foresters in both academic institutions of forestry and in work places.

A total of 50 women with an average of 12 women participated in each of these FGD. In all the four FGDs, the discussion was conducted in three subsequent sessions of 1.5 hours each and recorded on tape. A facilitator moderated the FGD sessions while an assistant took notes about the key words and the expressions (such as ferocity, anger, happiness, eagerness etc.) of the group members during the discussion.

FGD participants discussed their experiences as female students at IOF around questions including: were they encouraged to attend forestry schools, what encouragement/ obstacles did they face as women students at IOF, whether they had found the curriculum at IOF relevant and applicable in field settings and whether the response of IOF faculty/administration towards women's education/problems at IOF were properly addressed or not and so on. Further, women students and other women professionals discussed their career aspirations prior to and after graduation, existing employment opportunities for women forestry graduates, and recruitment policies and management practices of different organizations.

Information recorded on tapes was transcribed and interpreted qualitatively, primarily using the process of content analysis. Content analysis is a standard methodology in the social sciences for studying the content of communication. Information was analyzed using testimonies of the participants.

3 Results and discussion

The results of the FGDs indicate the lack of a gender-responsive environment in both academic institutions as well as in forestry organizations throughout the country. Various patterns of overt and covert discrimination exist in these institutions.

3.1 Environment of IOF in terms of gender awareness and sensitivity

Women's entry to academic institutions such as the IOF dates back to about two and a half decades in Nepal. Participants have discussed and analyzed the academic and organizational environment of IOF in terms of gender and social inclusion. The major findings are presented below:

Social perception towards forestry education for women

The early period of women's entry to IOF can be described as that of "women entering into men's domain". Many of the women foresters reported that it was quite difficult to convince their parents before they allowed them to study forestry. Forestry was considered a "tough"

field, requiring extensive travel and labor to remote areas and, therefore, inappropriate to women (for lacking sturdiness and for safety reasons). Additionally, parents were hesitant to send their daughters away from home for a residential course (programs at IOF required a stay at student hostels during the program period).

Thanks to the generous support from the USAID supported Resource Conservation Utilization Project (RCUP) and other donors and projects, the resources to inform and encourage both the parents and the women students to join forestry were provided. A student recalls,

“Two female lecturers came to my village searching for prospective women students for forestry at IOF. They separately discussed with me and my father about the necessity and prospects of forestry education for females. My father and I were so much motivated that I immediately enrolled to study forestry.”

(Event year: 1984)

Nevertheless, these projects had identified their priority areas of the country so the information dissemination program took place only in certain districts. These districts were located in mostly in the mid-hills region. Furthermore, parents were hesitant to send their daughters far away from their homes for safety reasons. Therefore, the early women graduates from IOF came from Kaski or Makawanpur, or from nearby districts (Tanahu, Baglung, Parbat, Chitwan, Nawalparasi). Very few women from other districts attended.

Till now, forestry has been identified as a technical field that offers promising career prospects. Yet, students reported that the information dissemination about IOF is inadequate and limited to only a few big towns. As such, many have not either heard about forestry colleges or have faced difficulties to access the detailed information about the program. This is particularly true for students belonging to rural and remote parts of Nepal.

Admission criteria and logistic support

IOF has allotted 10% quota for women in the ISc and BSc programs. This quota offers a provision where women have to compete with only women to get into the program. In recent years, the number of girl students at IOF has exceeded the allocated quota seats. This could be related to the fact that a large number of women students now come from families of higher incomes. The number of women students from disadvantaged communities (poor, low caste, ethnic groups) is still negligible at IOF.

Women's entry to the IOF was financially well supported through scholarships in the earlier time. Many women students reported scholarship as a strong incentive to join forestry. One student states,

“Given my family's very low economic profile, I didn't want to study any course for which my family has to pay for my education. When I came to know about forestry and scholarship scheme, I immediately applied for it. During those times, every women student used to get scholarship and the amount of scholarship was also sufficient to meet the expenses. During the entire course program, I never had to worry about my finances. That was a great encouragement for me!” (Event year: 1985)

At present, there are some scholarships at IOF that are open to all men and women students, on a competitive basis.

Lack of gender sensitivity

All the participants have unanimously agreed on the lack of gender awareness and sensitivity at IOF. Despite many of the faculty members being supportive, women's issues and problems are still not attended to. IOF faculty and administration tend to treat their students indifferently irrespective of their students being male or female. However, from a woman's perspective, the society is, in general, quite male-dominated. So, women feel that the

attitudes, thinking and behavior of the male students/colleagues appears quite biased, which the faculty and administration do not seem to understand.

At times, even the faculty fails to comprehend with some of the common yet pertinent issues such as periods of women's menstrual cycle and pregnancy. One student recalled,

"I remember a friend of mine, who was pregnant and had to attend one of the field schools organized by IOF. All the students of our class were randomly divided into five different groups and as we were few women in the class, each of us was alone to work in these groups. My pregnant friend requested the coordinator to place her with some other women friend's group so that she can feel secure to have some other women's support in case of need. Despite her pregnancy, the coordinator refused her request and told her, "you are here to study forestry; you need to be daring!". (Event year: 2000).

Lack of pre-orientation and counseling

The IOF does not provide any kind of pre-orientation program to inform students about issues of gender and social inclusion. Both men and women students require such courses, mainly at the TCL and BSc levels.

"We used to feel humiliated/felt mentally tortured with the remarks of some of our male batch mates. We used to cry at home because we did not know how to tackle such a situation".

"Orientation on gender sensitivity is lacking at IOF. IOF has enough potential to serve as a learning platform for faculty, students (men/women) and administration to educate all about gender awareness".

Lack of information/communication

Women students lack information and access to communication channels at the IOF. *"Information about almost everything mostly follows this route: from faculty to boy's hostels to the girl's hostel", says a student. "It even applies to crucial information about the dissemination of oral-exam schedules, timing and venue of practical classes, etc. Due to this, we (women students) have to depend on them (men students) to get information. This makes us (women students at IOF increasingly dependent on them (men students)". (Event year: 2005)*

Lack of courses on social and gender inclusion

Women who have substantial experience in the field of forestry have reported that study courses at IOF concentrate mostly on technical aspects, and don't cover the social aspects that are equally necessary while working in the field. Therefore, there is an urgent need to blend the two. In this regard, special courses on social processes such as gender mainstreaming and social inclusion, social change and social mobilization are needed.

Issues of Excellence

Women students stated that women students who excel in studies are equally meritorious and competitive with men, but are treated differently. *"Since the level of competition between men and women students has increased in recent years, women students started to face comparatively harsh behavior from their male colleagues."*

When girls start to compete with boys, it is hard for boys to accept women's competence or excellence. Meritorious female students were regularly subjected to derogatory and derisive comments. When events of this kind are viewed as processes - not as mere innocent or 'funny' episodes - it becomes clear that gender discrimination is involved, i.e. systematic negative unequal treatment on the basis of gender as expressed below:

"My worst days at IOF began after I started to compete with male students in studies. All the smiling faces suddenly turned into taunted expressions! I always used to congratulate when my male colleague used to top the class. But as far as I remember, a very few (not more than 5) male colleagues used to congratulate me. When I used to top the class, instead of congratulating, they used to ask me "Oh! How did you get such high marks? What did you write in the paper? We also read the same books but didn't get such marks". I used to

feel that my academic excellence was a threat to my social life at IOF. Sometimes, I used to feel so alone and aloof in the campus.” (Event year: 2002)

Periods of high harassment

The structure of forestry courses deliver practical training and exposure to different parts of Nepal (TCL) and India (BSc) that are commonly known as ‘field programs’. Many women reported that such field periods were also used as grounds to harass women. However, they noted that the extent of discrimination during these programs also affects the cohesion amongst girls and boys in a class/batch.

Covert Internalization

Internalization is a long-term process of consolidating and embedding one’s own beliefs, attitudes, and values. The process starts with learning what the norms are, and then the individual goes through a process of understanding why they are of value or why they make sense, until finally they accept the norm and consider it as a “normal” viewpoint.

The IOF environment is built around internalized belief systems of students, faculty and administration and is affected by various events and interactions. Men and women students, unknowingly, accept, practice and reinforce the social traits within IOF, without challenging them. Many men want to keep their leadership positions, while many women remain submissive to men. By doing so, both men and women students also accept these beliefs and actions as normal and fail to understand that many such beliefs and practices are covert signs of gender discrimination.

“Girls also do not talk or ask questions. Many of them are shy and do not lead”.

“Forestry boys think that they have rights to humiliate girls. If any girl wants to react, she is bound to face more trouble from boys. At IOF, it is lot easier for submissive girls who maintain their submissive nature as the boys/society want.”

“Since the number of female students is normally quite less compared to male students, faculty also opts for majority decision, which benefits exclusively male students (since male students outnumber female students)”.

“The structure of ladies hostel at IOF, Pokhara is overprotective. While living at IOF hostel, I did not feel that it was some form of overprotection (as I did not know that there could be other better alternatives). When I went abroad to study, I felt that our (women’s) hostel at IOF was overprotective in structure. The hostel’s corridor has a huge wall with many small holes so that we can see outside but none (mainly boys) can see us (girls) walking in the corridor. The intention might be behind security issues, but that has kept women aloof from being visible even within the IOF premises.”

“Though I am at par with my class boys, I have to face harassment from them. They simply do not respect girls who are at par with them. What behavior would you expect out of them while working in the field, when they deal with rural women who are much less educated, less aware and less vocal! ”

Lack of a significant number of women faculty

There are very few women in the faculty of IOF. At present, IOF has only four women faculty, two of whom with forestry backgrounds are temporarily employed. Many female students reported that if there were more women faculty (preferably from forestry fields), it would be easier for them to express their problems without any hesitation (including those related to abuse and humiliation from boys). Women faculty could then potentially mediate/communicate their concerns and interests to the administration.

Political Environment of IOF

Many female students reported that the highly politicized environment at IOF is a major impediment to facilitate a responsive environment towards students’ pressing problems.

Female students reported that displays of politics at the decision-making level were very discouraging. Likewise, some female students recalled that they suffered from unfair evaluations during exams because their political ideology differed from that of the faculty. “That is the reason why female students would have to think twice or thrice before reporting against any kind of physical or mental torture, mainly in cases when the abuser and abused bear different political ideology”.

Be it a political reason or that of any other sort, two points play an important role in determining whether a woman student reports any kind of discrimination to the administration. Firstly, she must consider how the organization perceives women’s issues and problems. Secondly, she considers what mechanisms exist to address such issues. IOF lacks room for both.

“I had applied for a scholarship. When I got the scholarship, I, repeatedly received abuse messages in my cell phone from a particular number. I reported to the police about it. The police found that the number belonged to a male classmate of mine. Later, a faculty member called me to the office and told that I should have taken permission from faculty/administration before reporting it to police. I am sure that even if I had complained, the IOF administration would not have acted against the case. I knew it from previous experiences (of other women) with the administration.” (Event year: 2007)

3.2 Employment prospects for women foresters

Women professionals discussed various issues ranging from the transition period of job hunting to their existing situation of organizational experience.

The transition period of job hunting

The job market for forestry graduates is shrinking and, therefore, is more competitive compared to earlier times (1980-1995). Personal contacts, access to networks and head hunting are the commonly used methods to circulate information and locate a potential candidate. Most of the women agreed they don’t have enough access to information about organizations, networks and contacts during the transition period. This has limited their opportunities to find jobs.

Additionally, women participants stated that women’s participation in most of the forestry networks and forestry representative bodies have shifted from ‘no participation’ to ‘namesake participation’ by fitting women to the post of ‘member’ and/or ‘joint-secretary’.

Women students felt the need for prior counseling at IOF to acquire the skills required to obtain a job. Skills in CV preparation, presentation, interviewing tactics, information and contacts of various organizations are needed.

While searching for a job, students with no prior work experience in forestry were pressed with the requirement to record substantive work experience in their profiles. Owing to the lack of experience, they were denied many promising jobs.

Many women students recalled that during job hunting periods they did not have adequate knowledge about the multiple opportunities that forestry education could possibly offer. “Forestry is a multi-dimensional field and is not only limited to jobs in the government, but can also generate many self-employment-type-jobs (such as nursery management, herb production), jobs within environmental NGOs, academic institutions, etc. There is a need to explore other possibilities of using forestry education in teaching in colleges and universities.

Gender sensitivity in job sectors

Women professionals also stated that various organizations that work in forestry and NRM in Nepal lack sensitivity about gender and social inclusion. Many organizations treat womanhood as a barrier to attaining a successful career in forestry and NRM instead of creating avenues to match employers and women employees' interests. The following issues were raised and discussed.

Recruitment policy and practice

Though most of the organizations comprehend practices of gender and social inclusion at the policy level, such practices rarely materialize. One of the well-cited examples include the vacancy announcement that reads, "Women are highly encouraged to apply" while in practice, it seems that women are "discouraged to recruitment".

Another covert discrimination that is prevalently observed in I/NGOs is the practice of addressing gender friendly and socially inclusive policies through non-inclusive processes. Women are fitted to lower administrative positions whereas higher seats of decision-making are retained by men. Often an organization evaluating gender and social inclusion in quantitative terms (i.e. using the target of 33% women employees) fails to consider such operational differences.

Interview phase

The process of interviewing women was also reported to reflect biases against women candidates. During interviews, traits related with womanhood such as physical attractiveness also posed as a barrier to attain jobs. Some typical interview remarks to women professionals were:

"Will you leave your job once you get married or if your husband asks you to?"

"Your appearance seems quite appropriate for banking (another jobs), not for forestry".

Organizational environment

The organizational environment of an institution largely influences the motivation and commitment of their employees. Having an environment where employees are recognized for their performance and are encouraged to excel in their professional skills is very important; otherwise motivation and confidence of employees are lowered.

Lack of a encouraging environment

Most of the women professionals working in GOs expressed the lack of an encouraging environment within these organizations. There might be many 'socially inclusive' rules on paper but these are rarely practiced. Many of the senior male officers still maintain the idea that women rangers can not work in the field. Women reported that the major reason behind women not getting avenues to work in the Terai forests is due to the highly prevalence of corruption in the use of forest revenues in the region.

"Every person wanted to get a context where they can fill in their interests and groom their professional expertise. There are rare avenues to prove your competencies and get credit in GOs. I found the environment very discouraging and I quit the job of forest ranger." (Event year: 1989)

This might explain the existing apathy of women foresters towards government jobs. Many participants reported that the extent of availing opportunities is better in I/NGO and bilateral projects as compared to GOs.

Lack of gender sensitivity

Most of the organizations are unaware of and insensitive to women's needs and concerns which at times (such as pregnancy, breast-feeding, baby care etc.), are very different from

those of men. Additionally, most of the organizations perceive such differences as stumbling blocks to attain professionalism.

“After I joined the office, my boss explicitly told me that I should not make any excuses citing family reasons. Once my two-month old baby was sick and I had to go to the field site. I could not say that I would not go because I have to stay back and look after my sick baby as that would undermine my performance. Additionally, there were no provisions where I could take my baby along with me in the field. (Event year: 1999)

Nevertheless, many women also reported that having a gender-aware male boss was very encouraging to work with, despite many obstacles that are faced by peers due to fierce competition. Support from senior employees can prove to be a one of the greatest source of encouragement and continued motivation.

“There was a time when applications for an international training were sought from the women foresters working at GOs. I did not know about that application. My boss, the DFO disseminated the information and recommended me for that training. Luckily, I was nominated. I did not know anything about study tour. Had this DFO not shared the information and recommended my application, I would not have been nominated for that opportunity. I felt more encouraged and supported with this nomination.” (Event year: 1988)

Such experiences are, however, very rare. Most of the male colleagues behave as if they support/encourage women colleagues, but when it is comes to sharing information or availing incentives/opportunities, do not encourage or support women.

Most of the organizations lack policies on sexual harassment. Even where they exist, the room for application is very narrow and restricted.

Conflicting social norms and organizational culture

Forestry is a sector that requires extensive travel and stay in remote areas. As there are very few women working in forestry and NRM sectors, women are bound to work with teams of male colleagues both at the office and in the field. The social and organizational perception of viewing such teamwork as an affair is quite prevalent, which by itself is a mental trauma.

“Such rumors can sometimes be devastating to your marital life. If you lack proper understanding with your husband, such rumors can end your marital life. Are you ready to take such risks? How much risk can you take just because you are a woman forester?”

Many a times, the male colleagues invite senior staff to evening parties (mostly practiced as drinking culture with men) and are adept at extending their personal relations to get professional benefits. If a woman employee starts practicing the same with the boss (which is usually male), she is bound to face derogatory remarks and rumors about her character. If she limits such personal relations owing to cultural sensitivity, she lacks the advantage to get professionally groomed.

Women at the outset of governance issues

Many women during FGDs reported that the poor governance practices prevalent in many organizations also undermine the context for women’s self-development. As a woman with substantive experience in forestry puts it:

“I was working as an assistant program officer in Biratnagar, where I had to work in collaboration with rangers. I was responsible to make the plan. I was committed to my work and wanted to experiment some innovative approaches. The TOR demanded to work from 10 am to 5 pm. The ranger, who was male, asked me to “loose work (2 or 3 hours in field and not from 10am to 5 pm) and make fake bills (to show more night holds in the field)” which I did not agree. He came back and told that “he would never collaborate in any of the future programs with me i.e. he did not like to work with me in a team. The impression that such incidents created in my office is that I lacked the capability to work in a team. Now to correct this notion of incapability, I have to exercise extra effort and time which I otherwise could have used more productively for my self-development”. (Event year: 2002)

Acknowledging women's competence/excellence

During the last 20 years, the presence of women professionals in NRM sectors has become evident. And yet, there are many practices within organizations and by individuals that fail to acknowledge women's competence. Many women experienced not being "acknowledged, heard or listened to" within their organizations. The following testimonies based on some of the participant's experience are an indication of such patterns.

"I and another male applicant were the final two competitors for a job. From some inside sources, he came to know that I, and not he, got selected for that particular job. He called me up and told, "I realized that you need this job more than I need and, that is why, I have withdrawn my application." I think that he was not disturbed with the fact that "I succeeded (as anyone else could also succeed!)" but that "he lost to a woman." (Event year: 2004)

"I was working as a Technical advisor for one of the environmental projects. During our monthly meetings, we used to discuss about the problems and employees were asked to propose some viable solutions. Whenever I used to suggest some opinions, the organization somehow ignored my points. In some meetings, the same point was forwarded by my male colleague and that he was applauded for the idea. What an irony was that! I have professional skills and still I do not get acknowledgement for my opinions and credit to my good work just because I am a woman". (Event year: 2006)

Other factors

Additionally, there are some other factors that seem to exert significant influence on women's professional career as foresters.

Social perceptions

Nepal is a patriarchal society that allocates identity to women in relation to their male members of the family such as daughter, wife, mother etc. Traditionally, women were the caretakers of the home and were limited to private spheres, whereas men were the breadwinners of a family and worked in the public. Such traditional roles are still performed stringently in rural and remote areas, whereas such structures and roles are increasingly getting more flexible in urban areas.

During the early years (1985 to 1990), women foresters experienced disbelief as to their identities as foresters. Back then, the society could not think of women studying some technical subject such as forestry which was entirely considered a male's domain and attaining an acclaimed post of first class non-gazetted officer as Forest Ranger.

"Most of the village people thought that I was a typist. Some others asked if I were the forest watcher. When I told them that I am a forest ranger, they did not believe me."

In addition to the existing social structures, society perception about technicians is of "a man with moustache and/or fat and belly" which nowhere suits to a "thin, small and skinny women".

The level of this identity crisis of women as foresters has reduced considerably. Today, the society has started to hear, see and accept women as foresters yet still the general assumption (and reality) assigns women a sub-ordinate position to men.

"Even when I go to field with the lower administrative staff (a male), local villagers expect the male staff as a boss and I (a woman) as his sub-ordinate."

However, there are also times when being a woman makes it easier to work. A motivated woman can effect impressive changes in the society through her conviction and good work. A participant recalls,

“While working with community forestry, I encountered a village with persistent history of conflict. My job was to resolve the conflict and handover the forest to the user groups of that village. When I approached the villagers for mediation, they find it difficult to out-rightly reject my proposal (considering that I was a young woman working amidst such difficult conditions of conflict). They felt a kind of moral pressure to agree attending the mediation meeting, which turned out to be one of first few steps to solve the persisting conflict.” (Event year: 1998)

Family support

In Nepal, the concept of family exerts a distinct and unique impression of identity to individuals and acts as an integral institution to regulate the lives of its members. Women’s access to opportunities and their capabilities to excel can be highly influenced by their family values and prescribed women’s roles in the society. Especially in Nepal, where a female’s purity (virginity/chastity) is considered as an emblem of her morality and individuality, many educated and liberal families are scared and skeptical to send women members to work in remote places citing safety reasons.

“I come from Central development region in Nepal. Once I was offered a promising job in the Mid-western Development region. My father did not allow me to do that job on the grounds that it was not located within the central region itself. I understand that he was scared about my safety but I lost a significant opportunity to expand my professional career.” (Event year: 1992)

Such concepts of safety or purity are associated with the ideology of a home and many women and their families want to preserve such values even at the cost of their professional career.

Compared to unmarried women foresters, married women encounter added responsibilities and work burdens to meet their dual responsibilities as professionals outside the home and family nurturer inside the home. Women participants pointed out the utmost need for family support to continue with their conviction and motivation as women foresters.

Individual strengthening

Due to the above-mentioned challenges, women foresters stated that self-confidence and negotiating skills are necessary to negotiate within the existing systems and society.

“A daring attitude helps a lot! You have to be prepared to say ‘NO’ and start acting; which adds to more responsibility and accountability”.

Challenging the status quo is, however, not easy. It may sometimes even evoke hostility from the family, within the IOF, and in the community, and can lead to difficulties for the woman. This means that the IOF and employers need to make a special point not just of initiating good practices, but of finding the most effective ways of institutionalizing them.

4 Conclusion

The early days of forestry in Nepal were represented by male foresters cutting down the country’s jungles. There was no place for women. Gradually, the emphasis of forestry shifted from protection to management, from harvesting to extension. Thus began women’s entry to the IOF. This paper has attempted to explore and analyze the prospects and challenges of women foresters and other women professionals working in NRM sectors through four focus group discussions conducted with women foresters in Kathmandu and Pokhara.

The findings indicate the lack of a gender-responsive environment in the IOF but also in forestry organizations throughout the country. Various patterns of covert discriminatory

behaviors exist in these institutions. A set of factors that largely influence women foresters' opportunities and commitment in NRM sectors has been reported by the almost 50 women foresters that participated in these focus group discussions. The documentation of their life stories and testimonies reveals the life experiences and challenges faced by women foresters, even today.

Reflections by these women also point out the gradual changes in society towards women, in this case seen through the recognition of women as foresters. There are also instances of women getting tremendous support from male colleagues, both within IOF and in the organizations of their employment. However, such instances are limited. There is an urgent need to institutionalize these behaviors within a context where such good practices are seen as the norm rather than the exception. A number of observations were made and recommendations put forth to develop and institutionalize a gender-responsive and socially inclusive environment at the Institute of Forestry.

What is clear to the reader of this document is the commonality and consistency of these women's experiences, implying that the forestry institutions in Nepal have daunting challenges to overcome in order to address the calls for social and gender inclusion echoed throughout the country in this post-Maoist period.