

# “Women in the Woods: Experiences of Women in the Forestry Sector in Nepal”

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## *Memorial Center of Excellence at the IOF*



In 2007, a partnership was established between the Institute of Forestry (IOF) of Tribhuvan University in Nepal and a consortium of US universities led by Virginia Tech (Virginia Tech, Principia College and Yale University) to establish a *Memorial Center of Excellence at the IOF*.

One of the objectives of the partnership with the IOF is to **“develop and implement programs to ensure the inclusion and success of disadvantaged groups including women and students from remote areas.”**



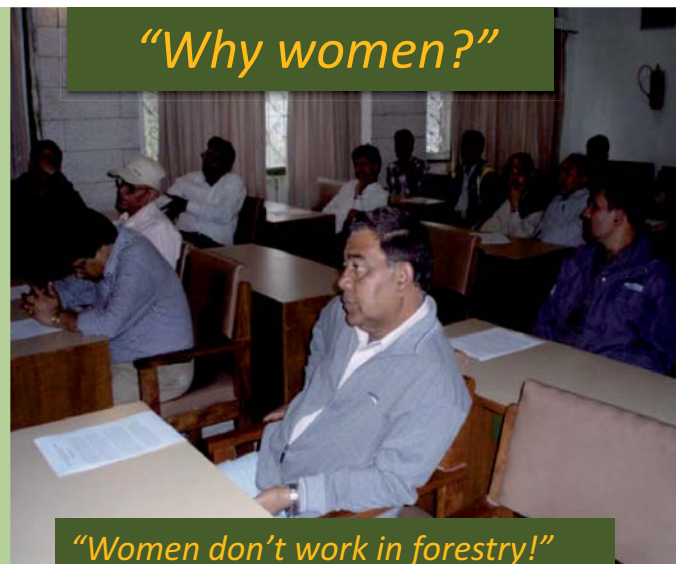
**Margaret Alexander, Deputy Mission Director USAID/Nepal with the USAID staff**

The Memorial Center of Excellence at the IOF is intended to be a living memorial commemorating the loss of 24 individuals. These leading conservationists from Nepal as well as several foreign dignitaries were killed in a helicopter crash in September of 2006 as they were flying to Ghunsa to formally hand over the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area.

- IOF opened in 1947; male only until 1981.
- In 1982 the Institute began admitting women.
- First year, seven women students were admitted.

Present Scenario:

- 22% of ISc. and BSc. are women
- 3 of the 11 MSc.
- 2 of 15 PhD students
- Zero women, full-time, forestry faculty



Stakeholders call for IOF graduates to be **“relevant”**—able to address social as well as technical issues in forestry.

**Research question: What obstacles do women face entering and succeeding in the field of forestry in Nepal?**

**Making women foresters visible**



***“...expectations about behavior in place are important components in the constructions, maintenance, and evolution of ideological values.”***

In Place, Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression (Cresswell 1996)

*Shorea robusta* forest, Institute of Forestry, Hetauda campus

## Community-based forest management

- Late 1970s: Community Forestry emerged globally.
- 1976: National forestry plan recognizes people's participation.
- 1978: handover forests for protection and management to local political administrative bodies.

### ***International pressure and support for women's participation in IOF in early '80s.***

- 1998: Master Plan for Forestry Sector gives full responsibility of forest management to community groups.
- **Required reorientation of foresters from previous role of policing the forest to facilitating change and encouraging participation of local communities in forest management.**





A large part of the responsibility for the management, development and use of forest areas has been handed over to the Community Forest User Group (CFUG), which have been provided legal authority to develop their own operational plans, set harvesting rules, rates and prices for products and plans for the distribution of surplus income.



The empowerment of local resource users has encouraged them to challenge traditional forms of authority and address the issues of unequal access to resources by less privileged groups.

## Theoretical Frameworks

### Masculinities, Place, Political Ecology, Feminisms

- Wilderness as a place where a “man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be before civilization sapped his energy and threatened his masculinity” (Cronon 1995).
- Paul Bunyan = ultimate exemplar of masculinity (Connell 1995).
- Masculinities “are highly contingent, unstable, contested spaces within gender relations” (Berg and Longhurst 2003).
- “Travelers in a male world”: women pioneers in male-dominated fields (Gherardi 1995, Marshall 1984).
- Geographic “looseness” (Domosh and Seager 2001).
- In her article on male bias in Nepal’s Department of Forests, Gurung describes forestry as a “predominantly male domain” in many parts of the world, with schooling similar to military training and foresters learning to “protect resources from the people” (Gurung 2002).



## Multiple Qualitative Research Methodologies

- Qualitative research between November of 2007 and February 2009.
- Interviews with students and alumnae during initial stakeholder visit
- Experiences of 48 women professionals spanning a period of about twenty-five years in different organizations; mostly IOF graduates.



### WOCAN/Nepal

Women Organizing for  
Change in Agriculture and  
Natural Resource  
Management

<http://www.wocan.org/>

## Methodology (cont'd)

- Participant-observation
- Focus on women's words and experiences
- 4 Focus Group Discussions (each in three sessions of 1.5 hours each)
- Life history interviews of eight women foresters
- Short profiles of 12 additional women graduates
- 6 structured interviews (face to face and via the Internet)





## “Travelers in a Male World”

Narratives of women from multiple professions often share the plot of “the outsider who enters an alien culture”...form part of the same discourse that “presupposes the **existence of a territory marked out as male which is trespassed upon by females who are formally members of the community but who, in actual practice, must stake out their positions in the field**” (Marshall 1984).

- **Rekha** is first female District Forest Officer (DFO) in Nepal and the only female out of 74 DFOs. “We were the first few women entrants to forestry education. The **whole society was watching** us as foresters”.
- **Sita** became Nepal’s first forest ranger in 1986. She passed the test conducted by the Public Service Commission but: “When I went to register as an employee [...] the administrative staff denied registering me as a forest ranger saying, ‘What? A forest ranger! **I have never heard of women rangers!**’ I had to show the official letter to prove and register my name as a first female ranger”.
- **Tara** completed the ISc forestry in 1986, and is now a PhD student at the IOF. “The society puts limits on women. **Once you start to cross over those limits, then you are bound to face obstacles.**”

- **Maya** was hired by a bilateral forestry project as a Community Forestry Officer to provide support to implementing a Community Forestry Program in the project districts and conduct training to government staff and forest users. The other staff, all officer-level men, “**could not digest the fact that a woman** —and one with a lower degree than theirs— **was doing the same job,**” she reports.
- **Indira** says “women have to constantly negotiate with existing social perceptions that tend to undermine women’s competency”. **Discrimination against women** becomes **more evident when women reach senior level positions.**
- **Janaki** was born in remote Batachaur in Baglung, As a Forest Ranger in Kailali, one of the many undeveloped districts of Nepal, she found societal perceptions—in the communities, forest based offices and administrations—of women very discouraging, particularly the belief that “**only character-loose women work**”.

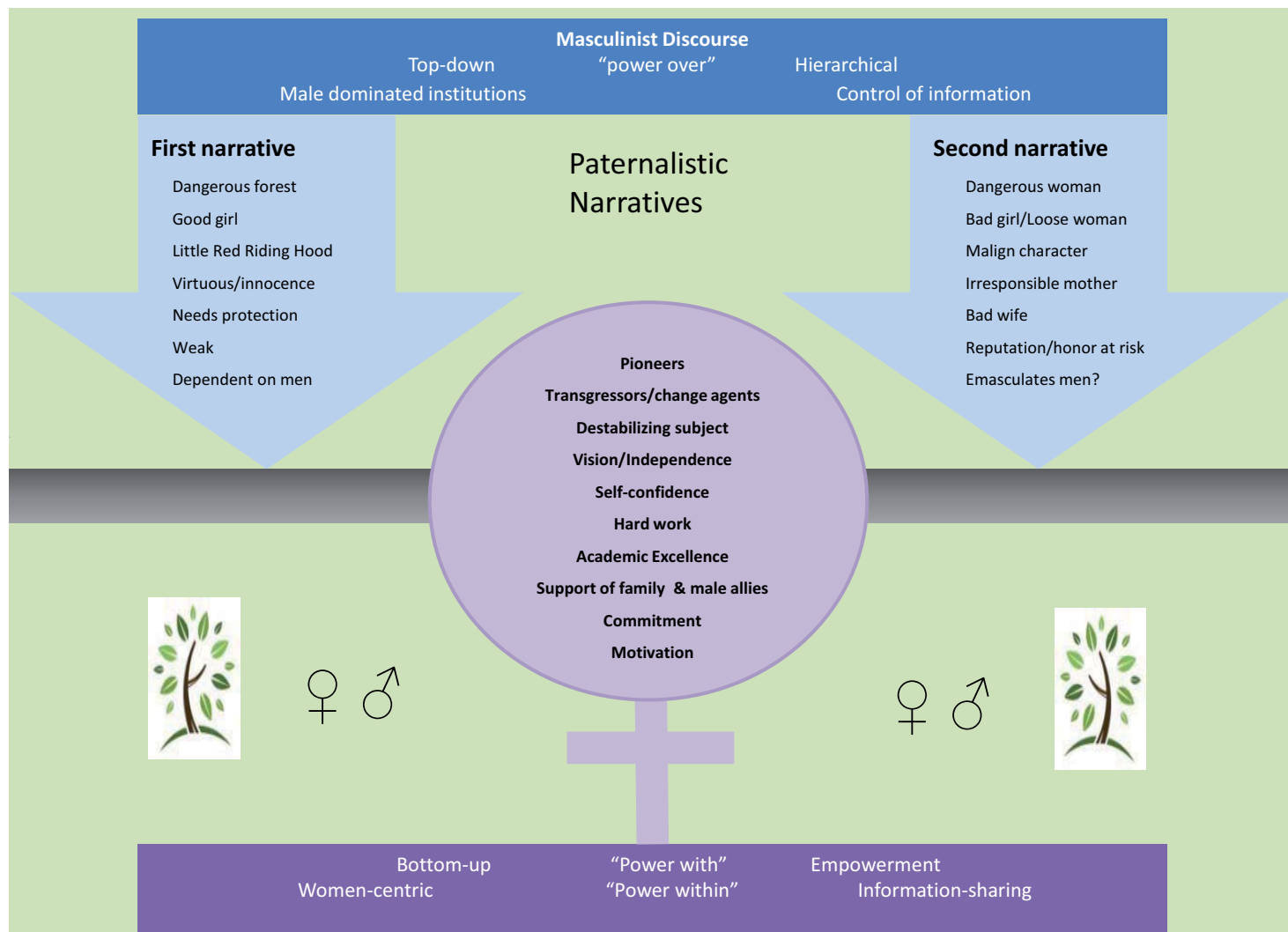


After nearly 20 years of experience, Luna says that forestry remains a masculine domain: ***“All the important decisions are made by men at all levels*** about forest resource management. ... “

- ***“Usually for men foresters, the forests represent TIMBER for business, the foresters seldom plan for minor forest products management. ...the common remark of the men foresters is, ‘women cannot log and cannot move alone like men in the forest’. The fact is, men officials seldom move around in the forest alone!”***



***“Interests of the women forest users—and 90% of the work is done by women—are seldom examined during forest research.”***





## **Geographic *looseness*: women out of place**

*“we may have to experience some geographical transgression before we realize that a boundary even existed” (Cresswell 1996).*

Domosh and Seager describe the characteristic of geographic “looseness” in women as a “universal marker for sexual wantonness—or at least cause for concern about their respectability” representing a “flight from commitment” and family obligations. (Domosh and Seager 2001)

***People acting “out of place’ allow a whole new concept of normality” to ensue (Cresswell 1996).***

Women in forestry have crossed the line. They have abandoned their children. They are “loose” women who not only work, but work in the woods, alone with men. Their apparent disregard for what others say puts in question their need to attract and retain males to support and protect them. The physical location of these women in remote areas—(if only symbolically by virtue of working in forestry with its connotations of wildness, and even though plenty of work is done in towns and cities)—puts in doubt women’s dependency on men, challenges the patriarchal system, and threatens to subvert the social order.

## **Transgression and resistance**

*“The power of transgression lies in its ability to reveal topographies of power that surround us. The limits to transgression lie in the fact that it is not enough to constantly deconstruct and destabilize” (Cresswell 1996).*

The presence and efforts of women in forestry have “revealed the topographies of power” but there is no question that the boundaries have not been replaced.

**The Institute of Forestry in Nepal, a gateway through which people enter the field, is a site of resistance where gender antagonism is played out.**



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Thank You  
Questions?