

Promoting Gender Equity in Community Institutions: Evidence from Indigenous Communities in Western India

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Introduction

In the present era of globalisation, the values of gender equity are being accepted and promoted in almost all regions of the world. There are inherent cultural differences in different communities. The level of disparities between both the genders is generally higher in developing countries and especially among indigenous communities.

The importance of gender equality for sustainable people-centered development is well accepted (SIDA, 1995) and it is widely recognized that gender inequalities create inefficiencies and hamper growth (The World Bank, 1995a; MFA, 1995; Byers et al., 1994). The Agenda-21 adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 laid emphasis on the country governments to review policies and adopt suitable changes to encourage greater participation of women in the decision-making process (UNCED, 1992). Women specially face an unusual number of obstacles that limit their participation (FAO, 1989; Sarin and others, 1997) and therefore, there is a special need for adopting pro-active approaches (The World Bank, 1995b; Sarin and others, 1997). It is in this background that several steps have been taken up by the Rajasthan Forest Department in India recently by making suitable policy amendments and adopting some proactive measures to encourage women participation in community institutions being promoted for joint management (JFM) of common property forest resources. This study analyses the impact of such recent policy changes and the proactive measures.

The strategy of Joint Forest Management (JFM) is being followed in Rajasthan since 1991 and the enabling government resolution provided for taking one adult member from each household in the village forest protection and management committee (VFPMC) to be formulated (GOR, 1991). As a result, usually the male members from the villages constituted the committees and women members were hardly taking part in the functioning and decision making process of these village committees. Recognizing this fact, specific provisions were included in 1999 in the government resolution for forming women sub-committees with seven women representatives from each village and having at least one women member from each household in the VFPMCs (GOR, 1999). Mere formal compliance of these provisions and constitution of women sub-committees by itself was not adequate and therefore, an intensive drive was taken since early 2000 and is being continued to sensitize and activate village community members about gender issues.

This study is aimed at understanding the impact of intensive gender sensitization efforts that were made for encouraging equal participation of both the genders in selected community

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institutions promoted for joint management of common property forest resources in South Rajasthan in India.

The Study Area

The case study villages have been selected from Udaipur district of Rajasthan, which is a western state of India. This is a relatively dry zone of India with tropical dry deciduous forests having a relatively low productivity. Udaipur district has more than 3000 sq. km. of forests and administratively there are three forest development divisions in this district. The forest resources in this region have been facing severe degradation over last few decades owing to unregulated over-exploitation or what can be termed as 'tragedy of commons'. Because of enabling policy changes, the program of forming village forest protection and management committees (VFPMCs) was started after the state government adopted a resolution in 1991.

An intensive program of reforestation was carried out in the Udaipur (central) division under the JFM approach over the last eight years. As a mandatory provision, a VFPMC was formed in each village, before taking up any forestry activities. Prior to formation of VFPMCs, village level meetings were conducted to explain the concept and implications of JFM for motivating the villagers. The level of sincerity with which villagers were sensitized and made aware of their responsibilities varied considerably owing to ability and dedication of staff.

The pace of reforestation activities declined considerably about two years before after the closure of an externally aided project, through which most of the reforestation activities in this division had been supported. In most of the villages, the strength of collective regulation also declined as no serious follow up was continued after the closure of the programs in particular villages. At this stage it was considered important to initiate intensive efforts to motivate community members for strengthening collective action. Since the gender sensitivity and the level of participation of women in community affairs was limited, this intensive effort to strengthen collective action included a strong emphasis on gender sensitization. At the time of initiating this intensive effort, an assessment was carried out in June-September, 2000 to measure the level of gender sensitivity in selected communities, through an evaluation process as described later.

The Efforts for Gender Sensitization

These efforts included organization of separate women workshops, training programs for the forestry staff and local village workers, gender analysis exercises in village and group meetings, comparative analysis of separate (for men and women) and combined meetings over similar issues, and other follow up activities. By analyzing what activities are done and products are collected by male and female members of the society and discussing the impact on both the sexes, the effort was made to make women realize the need for equal participation in community affairs.

The special emphasis was laid on organization of cluster level women workshops with representatives from multiple women sub-committees for sensitizing and motivating them to take

an active role. The women sub-committee members were encouraged to mobilize women members of VFPMCs for participation in village meetings, taking up voluntary work for protecting their areas against illicit or unregulated exploitation, and helping in supplemental seeding of non-timber forest product species to increase their regeneration. As a follow up of cluster level workshops, women sub-committee members were expected to conduct meeting of women members in their villages. One of the important objectives of these workshops was to make women understand the role of women sub-committee in the functioning of community institution. The workshops were also aimed at making women realize the equal role of women members in effectively implementing the community regulations. Some successful examples or role models were also presented in these workshops to motivate the members. Exposure visits of selected members from each community were also arranged to neighboring districts from within and the adjoining states.

Training programs were organized for the forestry staff and local village workers to work as facilitators in these meetings. Simultaneously, similar efforts were made to sensitize male members also to encourage women participation. Special training programs were organized for women to motivate them to form self-help groups through which the women members were expected to organize in small groups of 10-20 and collect their small amount of monthly savings. These savings were virtually expected to accumulate which could be used by the women members of the group for reducing their drudgery or for initiating some income-generating activities. The training programs also focused on motivating women to become literate through locally run part-time education programs. Similarly women were made aware of a variety of income-generating activities and health and other women welfare programs that can benefit them.

The impact of these efforts was analyzed specifically in seven VFPMCs from Udaipur district in South Rajasthan through detailed observations.

The Selection of Case Study Villages

To understand the impact of the intensive efforts made for gender sensitization, an assessment was repeated during October-December, 2001, after nearly one year of initiation of these efforts. For this a sample of seven villages was selected out of more than 100 villages in the division through purposive sampling. The villages selected were those where intensive efforts could really be made and where about 2-5 years of reforestation work had been carried out covering the significant part of the forest land available in these villages. In one of the villages i.e. Palyakheda, the reforestation work had been taken every year for last five years while in rest of the villages, reforestation activities had discontinued during last 2-5 years.

In two of the villages i.e. Palyakheda and Salukheda, non-forestry development activities such as entrepreneurship training programs, construction of water retention structures, facilities for irrigation and drinking water supply systems, health camps, and other such activities of rural utility had been taken up during four preceding years. This was done under a special scheme of the Forest Department supported by the World Food Program and was aimed at motivating people for taking up protection and rational management of forest resources. Watershed

development programs had been initiated in five of the villages (Palyakheda, Kirat, Khakhad, Amleta, and Unkaliyat) during the current year by the forest department. These programs, proposed for four years, had provision for taking up soil and water conservation works and other activities for improving production on private agricultural lands as well as common lands. Thus, the sample provided variation in level and timing of forestry or other development activities taken up in the villages that affected the level and continuity of contact of forestry staff with the villagers.

The socio-economic attributes and the extent of reforestation work carried out in the selected villages are given in Table 1. Most of the villages were homogeneous with indigenous population, but two of the villages selected were heterogeneous with the presence of indigenous and non-indigenous communities. The data on human and livestock (including composition) population and land statistics provide indications about the land availability per capita and the extent of pressure on forest resources and other common lands. The pressure on forests was relatively high in Amleta, Malpur, Khakhad and Unkaliyat and moderate in Salukheda. Nevertheless, the availability of other common lands to some extent in Unkaliyat greatly helped in easing out the pressure particularly from grazing animals.

Evaluation of the progress

The effect of intensive gender sensitization efforts was evaluated through assessing the changes in five particular aspects viz. 1. Involvement of women in the functioning of community institutions, 2. Overall effectiveness of community institutions, 3. Self-empowerment of women, 4. Attitudinal change for women participation, and 5. Awareness and concern of women for community affairs. These aspects were so chosen that these can provide early indications of whether or not the efforts are having impact on the right direction and may provide pointers to the implementing agencies for suitable actions for promoting community capability and interests in achieving greater gender equality.

The assessment of involvement of women in the functioning of community institutions was done based on the presence of women in village meetings, raising of suggestions and opinion by them in the discussions and the decision making process, level of abidance by women vis a vis men of accepted community regulations and by voluntary group actions for community welfare.

The overall effectiveness of community institutions was broadly assessed through development of regulatory mechanisms and their implementation for managing resources sustainably. This included several aspects of functioning of community institutions such as participation of members, protection of resources from illicit or unregulated use, regulation of extraction of products and sharing of benefits, management activities and conflict resolution. In this study, the evaluation of all such community actions and processes was used as an indicator of the overall effectiveness of community institutions. Besides, the general condition of resources managed by community was also used for judging the effectiveness of community institutions. It has been a general observation that involvement of women along with men in the functioning of community institutions had directly and indirectly contributed to this effectiveness.

Several activities were initiated to motivate women to form self-help groups, adopt income-generating activities, undertake part-time education and to learn health promotional activities. These activities were aimed at self-empowerment of women and the assessment of this aspect was done by formation of self-help groups or adoption of income generating activities. Similarly participation in self-run part-time education programs and adoption of health promotional activities were also assessed as a measure of self-empowerment.

One of the important purposes of gender sensitization activities was to convince men that they should encourage women to participate and to motivate women themselves to participate in the functioning of community institutions. Therefore the change in the attitude of men as well as women was assessed to understand how both the genders consider it important to participate in the community affairs.

Another important aspect assessed was the rise in the awareness level of women about possible activities for their welfare. This is indicated by the raising of various issues relating to women welfare or the impact of forestry management activities on women. This was also reflected in women showing concern about resource conditions that affect them or demanding such activities that concern women welfare.

Semi-structured group and individual interviews with representatives of the communities and the local staff were used for the assessment of all the aspects stated above. The committee records were examined. Transect walks were taken with the community members to assess the resource performance keeping in view the succession of grasses, survival and the growth of planted seedlings, natural regeneration, and the damage of resources, if any. All the parameters of evaluation were scored on 0-20 scale, in which 20 score indicated best possible achievement in the local circumstances while 0 score indicated that the response on that particular aspect was absent. The total possible maximum score for the five indicators used thus became 100 and the total score was taken as the per cent level of gender sensitivity of community. Since the indicators are all qualitative, the process of assessment using scoring method helped in making this a relatively objective one.

Results and discussion

The total scores for the level of gender sensitivity (Table 2), assessed prior to initiation of intensive efforts for gender sensitization, showed considerable variation. The scores were generally low in Salukheda, Malpur and Khakhad. In first two of the villages, presence of a dominating caste – *Rajput* had contributed to lower participation of women. The women from this caste generally do not carry out activities outside the household. This also had influence even on the women from other castes. In Khakhad, remoteness of the village and lack of activities in previous years, appear to have contributed to the low gender sensitivity.

The scores, in general, were relatively higher in the villages where forestry or other development activities had continued during the current and/or preceding years. In Palyakheda, the scores were better because of the continuous activities in last few years, which had emphasized women participation and helped in developing a regular system of meetings and monitoring of

enforcement of community regulations. In Unkaliyat, the scores were better among others because this community had taken a leading role in associating other neighboring communities for joint protection and management and resolving a long-standing conflict with another neighboring powerful community about five years before (Jain and Jain, 1998). During this period, even women participation was mobilized through some of the non-forestry activities. In overall, this made the functioning of this community institution more vital.

The change in the scores for individual attribute and the overall score for the level of gender sensitivity, during one-year period of intensive efforts, also varied considerably among different communities. The improvement in the overall scores in all the communities, at least to some extent, indicates that the efforts for gender sensitization had some impact. This impact was higher in communities in which some development activities have been taken up even in the current year through watershed development programs. It needs to be stressed that the watershed development programs had mandatory provisions for intensive training and community organization activities including the emphasis on women participation. Besides, provisions for land improvement works on agricultural lands and training for different enterprises for raising income levels also generated greater community interest and involvement.

It is obvious that when development investment is continuing in a community, it would provide opportunities for greater interaction among the development agency staff and the community members. The pursuance of the agency staff with the communities is also greater in such villages during this period. People, in general, and the indigenous communities, in particular, remain concerned more for their short-term interests (Joshi, 1995; Chandra, 2000). Availability of wage employment through development investment remains an immediate concern and people seem to be less concerned of long-term sustenance (Saxena, 2000).

This response of communities raises a question whether or not the community interest in collective action will sustain after the investment in watershed or other development activities is over. If the investment programs are made without ensuring commitment from communities, as is by and large a *de facto* practice now, this might promote investment dependence among the rural communities and may prove counterproductive (Saxena, 2000). This will have an adverse effect on the process of forming and sustaining social capital that is so essential for collective action.

There are several instances in which development practices and the policies have destroyed highly effective social networks and norms (Putnam, 1993; 1995) or such programs have failed to develop effective community institutions (Poffenberger, 1990; Sarin, 1996). On the contrary, there are several instances in which self-initiated community groups have revived and managed resources sustainably without the support or the intervention of development agencies (Kant et al., 1991; Singh and Singh, 1992; 1993; Poffenberger et al., 1996; Poffenberger and Others, 1996, Sarin, 1996; Conroy, 2000). This is primarily because these groups realized responsibilities of regulating and managing resources in their self-interest.

Depending upon the local conditions and the nature of resources, some development investment may be necessary or desirable, but it is important that it is made in a way that the community commitment is rewarded rather than creating investment dependence. This can be achieved by

linking of rights and incentives (in the form of development investment) with the responsibilities, as elaborately discussed in a good practice manual for community-managed forestry programs by Jain (1998). In this strategy, progressive investment is made dependent on the community commitment and abidance with collective regulations in periodic assessments.

The analysis of change in the scores for individual parameters of the evaluation scale, after nearly one year of efforts, indicates that improvement in scores was visible in most communities in the level of 'involvement of women'. The efforts for encouraging participation of women were specially emphasized through special workshops for women, gender analysis in general meetings, and motivation of men to encourage women participation. These measures are widely recognized to be effective for gender sensitization and helpful in improving the effectiveness of community institutions (FAO, 1989; McGean et al., 1996; Sarin and Others, 1997).

Increase in women participation had effect on other several aspects of institutional functioning. In some villages such as Amleta, Kirat and Palyakheda, women members specially took responsibility of occasional patrolling of the area to control women offenders, which were difficult to be controlled by male members. The overall abidance to community regulations also improved as the community decisions tended to be taken with wider consensus of both the genders.

The level of self-empowerment of women improved in almost all the villages except Salukheda and Malpur, although the improvement was low in Khakhad compared to others. The women members took initiatives to form self-help groups in Palyakheda, Amleta, Khakhad, Kirat and Unkaliyat and self-run part-time women education programs also started in all the villages as a follow up of sensitization efforts. The variation in response appeared mainly due to the level of past exposure and presence of leadership among women in these villages.

There was an attitudinal change among the community members with regards to promoting women participation in all the villages. The conviction level of men as well as women improved in all the villages, which contributed to this attitudinal change. This resulted from intensive gender analysis exercises, which was an obvious and expected outcome of the intensive efforts.

One of the important outcomes of gender sensitization efforts was the rise in the level of awareness of women about various activities related to their welfare. The cognition level of women in general improved considerably. The women in these communities showed greater interest in a variety of development activities after the sensitisation efforts. Many women formed self-help groups and took initiatives to organize women members for taking up occasional patrolling for protection activities. The women in general started raising their voice in various community affairs. Although it needs to be continuously improved by exposing women to various possible activities, this has provided a basis for future change and acceptance of newer approaches in future. These observations indicate that once the initial resistance of women is broken for some activity, they become perceptive to several other development activities and the relevant roles and responsibilities. The effort was also made to reward such communities where collective action became stronger. This was useful in motivating the other communities for taking up responsibilities and encouraging women participation.

Among the local factors of socio-economic conditions, heterogeneity of community groups or social factionalism appeared to have pronounced influence on effectiveness of community institutions and indirectly on motivation for women to participate. Owing to the presence of different caste groups, it has been difficult to bring the community members to a common agreement for resource use and management in Salukheda and Malpur. The 'Gayaries' in both these villages constituted a predominantly grazier community, rearing mainly small ruminants. They were more interested in opening up the regenerating forest areas for grazing, while rest of the community was willing to keep them closed.

Homogeneity of community groups is widely acclaimed to facilitate collective action (Lowdermilk, 1978; SPWD, 1992; Jodha, 1996; Sarin, 1996; Kant and Cooke, 1999; Saxena, 2000) and this is explained to be so because of closer social ties and norms (Subramaniam et al., 1997; Singleton and Taylor, 1992). Conversely, caste heterogeneity is known to contribute to disputes (Fresson, 1979; Merrey and Wolf, 1986) and may increase factionalism (Kahkonen, 1999). It becomes important to initiate activities of common interest in these communities. It also requires more rigorous efforts to sensitize them for the common good to mobilize sustainable collective action. In addition to mobilization efforts, taking up of a variety of village development activities in Salukheda, such as drinking water and irrigation facilities, a floor mill, and improvement of school building helped this community, to some extent, to come to a common platform.

High forest dependence and scarcity of forest resource or the higher per unit area density of human and livestock population were also critical factors that appeared to have affected community response to the efforts for promoting women participation. The dependence on forest resources was high in all the villages under study. However, the scarcity of forest resources was high in Unkaliyat, Malpur and Amleta compared to other villages, causing somewhat higher level of degradation in these villages initially. Nevertheless, having felt the brunt of degradation, these type of communities have proven to be more responsive to mobilization efforts (Wade, 1994; Uphoff et al., 1990; SPWD, 1992; Sarin, 1996). In this study, the lower response in Malpur village do not appear to corroborate this observation, but this may be rooted in other factors such as heterogeneity.

Conclusions

The results were discussed, along the process, with a few selected members of these communities and the local staff of the Forest Department for deciding actions for further improvement in gender sensitization efforts and for improving the functioning of community institutions. It was insisted upon by almost all that the communities not receiving any investment in the past few years will require some level of investment support, to create a favorable atmosphere of communication for sensitization. In villages with heterogeneous populations, separate sub-group meetings were suggested to get an assessment of the variation in the needs of different castes.

The evaluation through the scale used was considered a very effective tool by the staff as well as the community members to identify the areas for greater attention for strengthening the capacity

for collective action, some of which probably would not have been realized otherwise. A strategy was accordingly designed for further action encompassing the areas for community sensitization through periodic and collaborative interaction and training activities and participatory resource monitoring exercises. It becomes evident from this study that regular persuasion for gender sensitization is essential for making community institutions more effective. Nevertheless, the program needs to be so done that the receptivity and response of communities do not become dependent on investments but the efforts should progress on self-realization and commitment.

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Table-1 Basic information about the villages selected for the study

Details	Name of the village						
	Palyakheda	Salukheda	Malpur	Amleta	Khakhad	Kirat	Unkliyat
<u>Social Profile</u>							
Population	545	624	615	357	1337	355	468
No. of Families	82	123	129	65	386	53	67
a. Scheduled caste	0	38	58	0	0	0	0
b. Scheduled tribe	82	60	45	64	386	51	67
c. Others	0	25	26	1	0	2	0
<u>Live Stock Statistics</u>							
Cows,Oxen,Buffaloes	766	588	621	325	1245	206	229
Sheep & Goat	892	609	799	525	262	375	544
Others	27	2	2	55	153	0	31
Total (Live Stock)	1685	1189	1422	905	1660	581	804
Livestock density per ha	2.47	1.74	2.79	2.58	2.81	1.14	1.61
<u>Land Statistics</u>							
Agriculture land							
a)Irrigated land	16	10	16	9	23	9.05	1
b)Unirrigated land	65	121	52	156	132	34.44	120
Pasture land	9.8	0	101	24	13	55.17	12.37
Forest land	511	337	218	104	412	401.34	175.45
Other land	81	87	122	58	9	8.02	191.43
Total land (in ha)	682.8	685	509	351	589	508.02	500.25
Forest land per capita	0.94	0.54	0.35	0.29	0.31	1.13	0.37
<u>Area reforested (ha)</u>							
1993	0	50	50	50	0	0	50
1994	0	50	50	50	0	0	0
1995	0	50	50	50	0	0	50
1996	50	50	50	50	50	0	0
1997	30+NF	0+NF	20	0	0	50	0
1998	50+NF	0+NF	0	0	50	50	0
1999	50+NF	0+NF	0	0	0	0	0
2000	50+NF	0+NF	0	0	0	0	0
2001	WD	0	0	WD	WD	WD	WD

NF = Non-forestry village development activities; WD = Watershed development activities