

Rhetoric and Reality: Enacting gender-based inclusion in managing the Commons in Nepal

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Abstract

Despite the rapid expansion of community-based forest governance in the recent years, there are limited cases where women's meaningful participation has been realized. In Nepal, participation of women in community-based forestry is limited to increasing the numerical presence of women in its user groups and federations. A recent policy amendment has even required 50 percent women participation in its decision making bodies. Forestry being one of the primary livelihood strategies of village women, meaningful participation of women in their respective governance systems is indispensable. In this context, it is crucial to understand how effectively reservation policies have been able to enhance women's participation in actual sense.

This paper analyses the cases of two participatory forestry programmes - community forestry and leasehold forestry and explores whether, how and to what extent reservation policies have worked to augment women's meaningful participation. It will also identify factors and conditions that contributed to or constrained meaningful participation of women. The paper argues that i) reservation policy has been able to bring some women in the policy making forums but it does not necessarily mean that women are empowered and that they have been able to influence the decisions; ii) prevalent social norms and unequal power relations that hinder women to be recognized socially as a individual agency need to be taken into account while dealing with women's empowerment; iii) the level of freedom that women enjoy at household level is crucial determinant of their participation at community level governance; and iv) promoting women's network and helping to establish the linkages with other women's institutions can help women to gain collective strength to influence formulating gender sensitive policies and practices.

Keywords: community forestry, leasehold forestry, gender, women, participation, Nepal

INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing trend in the management of common pool resources by local people in the form of participatory approaches. In Nepal, it is one of the popular approaches of managing such resources in the form of community based forest management. Community forestry and leasehold forestry are two of the common programmatic approaches of managing forestry commons through local people. Community forestry (CF) being the pioneer community based forest management programme exist for the last 30 years covering around one fourth of the area of the

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total forest of the country, benefitting almost 40 percent of the total population of 30 million people of Nepal. CF as a flagship programme of the forestry sector, runs throughout the country, aims to ameliorate the environmental degradation and fulfilling the basic forest products needs of the local. Poverty reduction is one of the important agendas of the programme in line with the poverty reduction agenda of the country. As of June 2010 there are already 14572 community forest user groups and out of which 802 are women only groups.

Leasehold forestry (LF), started almost a decade later than community forestry, they are small in scale and of course benefitting population are also smaller. It has two specific goals: i) to alleviate poverty by raising the income of families in the Hills of Nepal who are below poverty line and ii) to contribute to improving the ecological conditions of the degraded forest land. To achieve these objectives, blocks of degraded forests land are handed over to the groups of select poor households in the designated project districts. As of May 2010, there are 2756 number of leasehold forestry groups spread in 37 districts out of the 75 districts. Out of this total number of groups there are 71 women only groups. Leasehold forest covers 12560.89 hectares of forest land and beneficiary household are 25463. The total population benefitted from leasehold forestry is about 14000. Same data source shows that women occupy 33% of the membership in LF decision making bodies.

This report is organized in three main sections. In section two, I present the findings and discussion and the third section is about the conclusion.

Methodology

This report utilized the first hand information collected from field during the year of 2010 in both leasehold and community forestry groups. Additionally, this report also utilizes the institutional memory of the author herself working as a researcher for several years. Principally, the following tools were used for information collection:

Focus group discussion (FGD) was one of the main tools used to collect information both from the community organizations and from the district implementation teams. In each of the community organizations visited, at least a FGD was organized, often mixed group of women and men.

Discussions with implementing agencies : discussion with DFOs and with leasehold unit within DFO discussion with the service providers (ECARDS and FECOFUN team) in both the districts, staffs of District Veterinary Office were carried out.

The discussions with staff members who accompanied during my field visits were very useful for validating or exploring multiple dimension of the programmes' implementation.

Observation was another important tool that helped to validate information about gender relations and about the condition of leasehold and community forest in the field.

The information from policy documents and already published papers/articles were also part of the analysis to triangulate the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, findings are discussed under four major categories. In each category, I discuss on the specific policy provisions already existed, the achievements made and constraints faced to enforce these policy provisions in actual practice. The findings are compared and contrasted between leasehold and community forestry programmes and within each programme itself to come up with the lessons on what remained as rhetoric and what has become applicable in reality in which conditions.

Provisions Related to Representation in Decision Making Mechanisms

In fact both of the programmes have explicitly mentioned the gender balanced provision of representation in their respective policy documents. In leasehold forestry, the project design document (working paper IV- 2005) and leasehold forestry implementation guideline (2009) are important documents to mention gender equity provisions. Similarly, CF guideline (2008) and Forest Sector Master Plan (1989) are the key policy documents that provisioned gender equitable policies.

The following statement about gender mainstreaming mentioned in the design document of leasehold forestry programme is the key element to devise all types of gender equity programmes and strategies. It emphasizes that in all the programmes it should ensure the equal number of participation of men and women.

gender issues and considerations would be mainstreamed in all activities of the leasehold programmes, in particular staffing (female group promoters), group formation, forest allocation, training and capacity building. For instance, the land development training provided on site to two members of each leasehold (one male and one female) would include at least one full day training session on gender awareness.

In line with the design document, recent leasehold forestry implementation guideline (2009) has made specific arrangements to promote the participation of both men and women in several activities. Some important activities are outlined in the Box1.

Box 1: Provision of gender balanced participation in different activities of leasehold forest (as per LFLP guideline 2009)

1. Both man's and woman's name must be listed as household heads of the respective household
2. One man and a woman from each cluster should participate in district planning workshop of leasehold forestry
3. One man and woman (throughout the district) should participate in district level forest coordination committee
4. One man and a woman should participate in a cluster level field coordination meeting
5. Both man and woman from a household should participate in group formation work
6. Both man and woman from a household should participate in operational plan preparation and its renewal training
7. Land development training will be given to both woman and man (from a household) for 4 days and within 4 days one day will be allocated for gender awareness
8. Recruitment of group promoters (women only) for social mobilization work
9. Recruitment of women only village livestock health worker

As a result of these policy provisions, the participation of women in decision making bodies is also increasing. As of May 2010, out of the total leasehold members in decision making bodies, women occupy almost 33% of the total membership which also include the members from 71 women only groups.

In one of the studied group due to the recruitment of women promoters the numbers of women only groups are increased drastically. The group formation record of 2008- 2009 of one of the studied districts show that women occupy more than 90% of the membership in decision making bodies including all key positions. The average representation of the district is 41 % whereas the national average of women's membership in leasehold forestry is 33%. Despite these encouraging results of the district and of the last one years' achievement of the same district, very few women occupy the position of chairperson and secretary in other groups in other part of the country. For instance in another studied group in another district none of the key positions were occupied by women and average membership of women is far low (17%) as compared to national average.

The reason behind the higher representation of women in one of the studied district in both membership and in key position is because of the presence of women group promoters, presence of ethnic communities as a beneficiaries where gender gap are less as compared to other caste groups, high outmigration of men (also resonate the figure from far western Nepal where due to high migration of men women occupy most of the leasehold forest membership but not all key positions (Bhattarai 2008). Another

important reason is the presence of separate leasehold forestry unit and allocation of additional human resources in district forest office to look after leasehold forestry.

In community forestry too, provision of representation in decision making bodies are mentioned explicitly in its policy documents. Forestry Sector Master Plan (1989), Gender and social inclusion strategy paper (2008) and CF implementation guidelines are the important policy documents that speak about the specific representation of women in the decision body of the community forestry groups. As per the provision made in the Forestry Sector Master Plan (1989), at least 33% positions of the executive committee of the CFUG are to be occupied by women. Following this legal provision, as of June 2010, 25% of the executive members are women against the national target of 33% provisioned by the master plan. This also includes the members from 802 women only groups where all members and key position holders are women.

Likewise, Gender and social inclusion strategy paper of the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation has also emphasized for the inclusion of women not less than 50% with at least a key position (either chairperson or the secretary) in the executive committee of the community forestry group. In line with this strategy, the recent community forestry guideline (2008) has specified that along with 50% seats in executive body at least chairperson or the secretary position should be filled by a woman. Additionally it also mentions that both the names of husband and wife from a household need to be included as household head in the constitution of the forest user group as opposed to the situation in previous arrangement where only men's name used to be listed as household head (see Box 2 for detailed provision made in the CF guideline).

Box 2: Provision of equal participation (GoN, 2008)

1. Both man's and woman's name is to be listed as household head in CF constitution
2. There should be at least 50% women in executive committee of the CFUG
3. In executive committee of the CFUG, either chairperson or the secretary will be a woman
4. In all decision making processes of CFUG both man and woman from each household should participate
5. A man and a woman from each household are encouraged to participate in each CF general assembly
6. Attempts are to be made to have 50% participation of women, poor and dalit in CFUG general assembly
7. There will be special programme for women, dalit and ethnic groups
8. Presence of a clear gender disaggregated format for collecting information from each CF
9. Women also be the member of self monitoring and evaluation team and the team should take into account women's' issues as one of its tasks

Extracted from CF guideline (2008)

Despite the good representation of women in the decision making bodies of both community and leasehold forestry groups, it cannot be said that women are exercising

the same level of power that the men are enjoying. In one of the CF groups studied (Chhetri et al. 2006) showed that women wanted to have separate women only group to exercise the management practice of community forest because in the mixed group men as a key position holder did not allow women (though women are also the part of the decision making body) to be part of core management team. This example exactly resonates what Bina Agarwal (2001) said 'participatory exclusion of women from participatory institutions' from her research from South Asia including Nepal. Since the equal representation policy exists only for two years the numbers of women in executive committees are expected to increase in the coming years.

Provisions Related to Service Provisioning

In both of the programmes, the provision of service provider is integrated to foster the goal of providing more services especially to the poor and excluded. In LF programme, ECARDS and PRI-PAD are contracted as service providers in all their working districts. However the role and functions of PRI-PAD are yet to be fully visible. The main role of ECARDS as social mobilizer has been well taken and implemented through recruiting female only group promoters and district supervisors. In each district, 5-7 group promoters are employed under the leadership of a district supervisor. LF Programme has also envisioned group promoters as local agents of social mobilization and supposed to complement the district leasehold forestry programme teams in that they are local and female, while rangers and livestock technicians are outsiders and male.

Because of the presence of the women group promoters it has been easy to form more groups led groups. The group formation information of the last fiscal year (2008/2009) shows that 90 % of the memberships are taken up by women including all the key positions. As leasehold forestry programme basically deals with fodder productions which are linked to goat rearing, women are the right group of people to work with as these roles come under their management jurisdiction. Most of the time men are out in search of work hence women have to put their lasting efforts to manage fodder and fuel scarcity. It is important for women if they can produce fodder and fuelwood in their respective leasehold forest by which they can reduce their workload and liberate some time for social causes. Otherwise managing the fodder and fuel for household consumption are the most time consuming and tedious tasks for livestock based household economy from which women have not been able to get rid of so far.

It is found that the role of group promoters is well appreciated both by the district forest office team and the communities for whom they work. As local change agents they have been able to foster the process of leasehold group formation with the greater participation of women and poor people. The services offered by the group promoters seem effective in reaching out the poor and excluded community members especially of the women.

Provision of female group promoters to mobilize and support leasehold forestry groups has played an important role to empower women in different ways: first they not only support in leasehold forest group mobilization but also offer various services like facilitating citizenship card granting process with district administration office, support in basic health and hygiene related things and so on. Second: the group promoters themselves as women are seen as 'role models' for the village women which has encouraged village women to be active in public sphere through breaking up some of the cultural barriers.

Despite such good efforts made by the group promoters, the working condition does not seem encouraging for them from different aspects. Group promoters are assigned extensive tasks not only supporting the functioning of the leasehold groups but assisting to the communities in varieties of other activities as mentioned above. Theoretically, these group promoters should be from the target community itself and also the members of leasehold forestry groups in their own village and are given the responsibility to mobilize up to 20 leasehold groups within walking distance of their house, usually within a VDC of their residence. All the four group promoters met during field visit reported that they work almost for 30 days in a month and get around \$60 per month including travel cost and extra lodging and food cost when they have to spend night outside their home (approximately for a week or more).

It is appreciable that the project has given opportunity to women to be exposed in public sphere as group promoters to mobilize the leasehold group members. However, the low level of remuneration and the facilities that the programme has offered to them is very low even below the lowest rank of civil servant in Nepal. When compared with employee of FECOFUN for similar types of work, the salary level of group promoters is less by almost 33% to that of FECOFUN. The practice of paying low wage to women has seen as another form of discrimination in the work place.

The conditions of low payment to the female group promoters reflect the scenario of the mainstream society where women are low paid than that of men from similar/same type of work. It can be argued that the salary structure made in the project design rather reinforced the gender inequality instead of breaking it.

Another important constraint is that the group promoters are under capacitated. The training given in the start up their job seem more or less fulfilling the target rather than ensuring their learning. The requirement of almost 10-12 hours' session every day and heavy theoretical contents has constrained their learning.

Yet, there is another intervention of the leasehold forestry programme to train animal health care volunteer (women only) has been mostly unsuccessful because of the no provision of the remuneration for the job. Women are asked to work for free. After they have gone through 35 days long training, they are asked for the primary animal health care services and supposed to collect their service charge from the villagers themselves. Vaccination, as major part of their job, they get very nominal amount of

money otherwise their work almost voluntary. Because of the nature of this volunteer work, most of them have already discontinued their job either they already got better opportunity or started to leave outside the original village. As opined by the district in charge of the Veterinary office of Makawanpur district, asking almost free service is also not justifiable and the level of education (SLC pass) is already highly qualified to retain them in the village which has to be revised.

Similarly, in community forestry groups, there is social mobilization programme going on in some of the districts and one of the studied groups falls under this category. The goal of the animation programme is to mobilize community forestry groups and avail some funding for income generation programmes to the members of community forestry groups through the process of active mobilization of their CFUG fund and helping to link them to other support organizations.

Provisions Related to Economic Justice

In both of the programmes, there are ranges of income generating activities managed by the groups with the support from the respective programmes. As one of the goals of the leasehold forestry programme is to reduce income poverty, it has implemented three major types of interventions to achieve its goals. Such interventions include goat rearing supported by grasses and fodder production, cultivating fruit trees and bamboo culms and compulsory saving schemes. In a group where the group has allocated land to each household, they are entitled to get all the benefits accrued from their individual plots. As reported by its members in one of the studied leasehold group a family has been able to get nearly \$200 per annum from the sale of male goats, fruits and bamboo culms. However the gestation period required to produce male goats, fruits and bamboo differs by locations depending upon the availability of productive land to produce fodder and also the variety of goat. It is seen that income from inter cropping of fruit trees and grass production is decreasing as the increased crown cover of the leasehold forest. There are no provisions so far in leasehold forests to apply forest management operations even in the case where forest are becoming dense not allowing any understory growth. Such types of management practice may hinder the objective of fodder production to feed project distributed goats and hence derail the overall project goal.

In Community Forestry too there is already a provision to allocate 35 percent of the community forestry income to the benefit of the poor and excluded. However due to lack of appropriate monitoring mechanisms, it hasn't properly implemented rather limited in the operational plans. None of the CFUGs studied have implemented this provision. As the CF areas are large in size and forests are also in good condition as compared to leasehold forest, the main source of the income of the group is from fees and payments collected from the users themselves by selling different types of forest products. One of

the studied groups has accumulated more than US \$ 7000 in their group account. The fund is with the group and this can be utilized for different income generation activities to the individual households. Using such funds one of the CF group has lent some money to the select poor households for goat rearing. Due to lack of appropriate follow up mechanisms, poor households who have got goat in loan did not seem interested to rear goat and get instead tempted to sell the forest products (mostly firewood) from the CF and sell to the nearby market to get quick return. In another CF, series of income generation activities for the poor are written in the CF operational plan in line with the recent CF guideline (2008) but unfortunately they are limited in the plan itself.

In LF, large part of income is utilized for the education of their child and remaining is utilized for the purchase of food and other items. In contrast, in community forest, the money collected from the internal and external sale of forest products are largely been utilized in development infrastructures including road, school building, electrification and a small amount for sick people. Here it is necessary for District Forest Office to coordinate with other relevant development organizations for infrastructural development and encourage the groups to have focused programmes that support women, poor and other disadvantaged groups.

Saving credit schemes are seen as important intervention particularly in leasehold forestry group in the time of financial crisis or to initiate some small scale business. In community forestry too social mobilizers are expected to initiate saving among community forestry users. As women don't own most of the properties that her family owns, her access to this saved money, though small amount, made significant difference in building her confidence and self reliant.

In recent days in many of the community forestry groups, some part of land is allocated for poor household for income generation activities. There are anecdotal evidences that such provisions have supported poor people for fulfilling some of their basic livelihood demands. However the detail analysis is required on how such provisions have supported in reducing gender gaps.

Provisions Related to Enhancing the Capacity of Women's Agency

Both community and leasehold forestry programmes have initiated several programmes and activities on capacity enhancement of their users which include training in different subject areas, saving credit programme, leadership development of women and recruitment of women only group promoters in leasehold forestry and social mobilizers in community forestry. The provision of social mobilization in community forestry is limited only in 15 districts of DFID funded project districts.

When analyzed the training received by leasehold members for the last one year (2008-2009), in one of the studies district, slightly more than 50% of the trainees are women however their participation is varied on the basis of subject matter and venue of the training. Out of fifteen training activities, women dominate in five activities and in the remaining 10 men dominate. It also shows that women have participated more in the training run at village level and they all are related to group formation, and operational plan preparation whereas all the training and exposure visits that run at district headquarters and beyond headquarters are dominated by men. The record of one of the studied community forestry groups shows that out of six different types of training activities run for community forestry user groups men dominate in all them. Training and exposure visits have contributed significantly in building the capacity of both men and women but women are far behind in increasing their access beyond their village. However the invitation letter from the service providers with specification of the number of women and men to be participated has worked well to ensure women's participation.

Second intervention intended for women's empowerment is saving credit more visible in leasehold forestry group. Apart from financial empowerment saving credit institutions also offer women a social space to interact to each other and build their leadership capacity.

The third activity that has supported women's empowerment is leadership development through different institutional arrangements. Formation and execution of women only groups in both the programmes has proved that women can be the leaders and managers of the public institutions like community and leasehold forestry groups. Such actions have also contributed in breaking gender stereotypes prevalent in the societies. However the women occupy very few leadership positions these groups. Because of the work of the female group promoters in LF, the group formed in the last one year women occupy majority of the leadership positions in one of the studied districts. Despite these positive results of women's presence in leadership positions, actual leadership roles to be played by women are subject to the necessary capacity building activities, believing women's capacity as change agent and liberating them from day to day household chores. As reported by Rai and Buchy (2004) putting men only team in the advisory board of women only CF group is a bitter example where women's capacity in steering the group is challenged.

Whereas in community forestry groups women occupy far less number in leadership positions as compared to leasehold groups. In an average women have taken up around 13% leadership position in the studied districts. Despite these discouraging figure so far, it is expected that from this year onwards more women will be in Chair person's and secretary's position because of the implementation of current guideline that has provisioned compulsory arrangement to have at least one position (either chair or the secretary) to be taken up by women.

Provision of female group promoters to mobilize and support leasehold forestry groups has played an important role to empower women in leasehold forestry groups. These group promoters not only limited to forestry works but in various support activities as per the requirement of the leasehold members. Female group promoters themselves are seen as 'role models' and the 'demonstration effect' has given a positive message in changing gender roles and the associated gender stereotypes in the respective communities. As opined by one of the group promoters met during field visit, it has given great power to women to speak and make them listen in public meetings which in fact have broken up some of the cultural barriers. However it is yet to be fully understood that how women's representation (be as a general member or as a position holder) in community institutions has improved women decision making power in other societal activities.

As part of social mobilization programme, in Livelihood and Forestry Programme (LFP) supported districts (DFID funded forestry project) LFP has supported to run Animation programme where majority of the animators are women. It is expected that the animation programme will facilitate the community forestry groups in such a way that the poor and excluded will be able to voice their concerns and make their voices and concerns listen to their respective groups in all types of planning, implementation and benefit sharing mechanisms related to CF. As per the Annual report of LFP, 2009, it is observed that the community forestry is more effectively run in the areas where social mobilization programme is implemented. Particularly the positive changes are seen in: improved representation and involvement of decision making of poor and excluded, enhanced the capacity of the poor and excluded in voicing their concerns and interests, improved internal governance mechanism in several activities that are carried out by the groups and so on.

CONCLUSIONS

There are positive changes seen in both leasehold and community forestry programmes in terms of achieving gender equalities. In the case of representation, both the programmes have been able to create public space for women through offering executive positions in both of the forestry groups. However, the percentage of key decision making positions occupied by women is far less than the provision made in the legal documents except in women only groups. It is important to note that because of the good policies in place women's representation in leadership position is also increasing gradually but it does not necessarily mean that women have been able to play the actual leadership role as expected. Proper capacity building programmes to the women themselves and to the service providers including government institutions is the key factor. The lack of such provisions in the programmes is the key lacuna for the successful implementation of the gender policies.

Increased incomes of families in both the programmes through different approaches are important aspects to achieve the objectives of both of the programmes. Intensive supports given to the leasehold groups, household approaches for benefit sharing, compulsory saving schemes have contributed to increase the income of the leasehold forestry groups. With the achievements made so far, the leasehold forest management policies are yet to be amended to provide continued benefits to the leasehold members through applying appropriate forest management measures that allow under story growth inside leasehold forest. To increase the income from community forest intensive management is required to better utilize the available land and forest resources for the benefit of women and poor. The current policy provision of community forestry to spend certain specified amount of income (35%) is to be fully devoted for the benefit of the women and the most marginalized which is not happening currently. The income generated from community forestry groups should reach to the individual member household rather than putting large part of income to the infrastructure development. District forest office and the CF group themselves are to make sure that such infrastructural development should come under the tasks of other government line agencies rather than doing by the CF groups themselves.

Good results are seen where both the programmes run in a coordinated way in term of managing regular forest products demands and instituting income generation activities to the select poor and women headed households. In both programmes, the increased amount of forest product supply has contributed in reducing the workload of women. Complementary approach of both the programme be it during planning stage or during

implementation is required to address the drudgery of women through increased production of fodder and fuelwood and to tackle other social barriers that hinder women to come forward.

Changing gender roles from the intervention of the programmes is another important but difficult tasks to achieve. Participation of women in a group as a member or as a leader is already a reverse roles as compared to the situation before the interventions of the programmes. However the increased number of women in public affair does not mean that household roles are equally shared among their male counterparts. Household responsibilities are the most time consuming task that hinder women to actively take part in public meeting even if mobility is not a constraint by culture. Provision of female group promoters (in LF) and group facilitator (in CF) has given the positive impact to switch the traditional role of women and actively take part in community groups. Demonstration effect has worked well to village women to participate in community affairs. However the salary scale and benefits that group promoters are getting are to be substantially revised along with the provision of other basic facilities.

As part of network building, alliance building and collaboration with the district level organizations that work in gender issues are also recommended for the capacity building of the group promoters and the members of the community groups as well.

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