

Empowered women and the men behind them: A study of change within the Hills Leasehold Forestry and Forage Development Project in Nepal

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

DLS	Department of Livestock Services, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives
DOF	Department of Forest Research and Survey, Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
HLFFDP	Hills Leasehold Forestry and Forage Development Project
NGO	Non-governmental organization

Introduction

In 1990, His Majesty's Government of Nepal and IFAD signed the loan agreement for the Hills Leasehold Forestry and Forage Development Project (HLFFDP), and implementation was undertaken in 1993. The project objectives were twofold: (1) to raise the incomes of hill families that were living below the poverty line and (2) to contribute to improvements in ecological conditions in the hills. These objectives were to be achieved through the lease of areas of degraded forest lands to groups of poor households, which would be assisted in the regeneration of the land. This would occur through the expansion of the vegetative cover, mainly by enrichment planting of grasses and trees, and through improved management by the exercise of more control over livestock grazing and fires. With this enhanced resource base and the resulting additional fodder production, families were to increase the incomes they earned from livestock production and other income-generating activities. By 1999, the coverage of the project had increased from two to ten districts of Nepal.

With technical assistance provided by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the project engaged four line agencies of the Government. The Department of Forest Research and Survey (DOF) in the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, as the lead agency, supplied the project coordinator and project coordination unit. The Department of Livestock Services (DLS) in the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives was responsible for technical support to leasehold groups for pasture and fodder development and the provision of animal health services. The Agricultural Development Bank Nepal furnished credit to leasehold farmers, and the Fodder and Pasture Division of the Nepal Agricultural Research Council undertook the applied research aspects of the project. Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were involved as facilitators as well.

After nine years of implementation, the HLFFDP is now recognized within the development community of Nepal as an innovative, unique project that has achieved a significant impact on the lives of its group members, especially women, as well as on the environment. The project has contributed to meaningful gains in the quantity and quality of livestock that farmers now own; reduced pressure on national forests for fodder,

fuelwood and livestock bedding materials; increased household food security; diversified and added to the sources of income, and lowered the level of farmer indebtedness to local money-lenders (Ohler, 2000). It has also contributed to an enhanced sense of self-confidence and bargaining power among women participants within their communities (Ghimire, 2000).

An aspect of this success that is often remarked among those agencies tasked with project implementation is the incorporation of gender issues and the targeting of poor women in the strategy and implementation of the project. But the story of how this came about and of the resulting changes in the attitudes of rural women and staff members of the DOF and associated line agencies is not widely known. Herewith, then, is a case study of this experience, based on narratives of the project and the testimony of DOF and other line agency staff, as well as the rural women and the group promoters themselves. It documents the key elements that contributed to the gender-related aspects of the project and that were largely responsible for its success, and it assesses the degree to which the positive changes have been institutionalized.

Rationale for the study

Today, there are few development projects that are designed with the help of external, international teams, but that do not include gender components, and, yet, there are very few indeed that include, as an objective, a change in the implementing organizations themselves in order to carry out gender equity initiatives successfully. Organizations of all types and orientations are 'gendered', with structures, cultures and work styles that reflect the dominance of men. Forest departments are no exception; the profession of forestry itself is symbolically imbued with masculinity and joined by relatively very few women.

The HLFFDP is situated within a society where gender ideologies that privilege men are dominant and where relationships between community members and government workers are often steeply hierarchical. These conditions, common in many developing regions, present serious obstacles to the encouragement of men professionals within men-dominated organizations to carry out plans to achieve the participation, much less the empowerment, of uneducated rural women. No less than a change in attitudes is needed, a complete turnaround in ways of thinking about rural women and what they are capable of accomplishing.

And, yet, through the initiatives of a few actors who reason strategically, this did occur, at least at some level, within the DOF and other line agencies associated with the HLFFDP in Nepal. How this occurred and the obstacles that remain in the path of the institutionalization of this innovative approach are the topic of this study.

Presently, there is a high level of interest within the DOF and the DLS to ensure the continuation and expansion of the process of women's empowerment despite recent changes in the project that have signaled a neglect of measures to support the existing group of women group promoters. At this juncture in time, as the preparation of a new project agreement is being discussed and the current project is being expanded into more districts, it is imperative that planners understand the significance of the effect of changes in attitude in the department on the achievement of the project's goals so that these lessons can be incorporated in the new project, replicated where appropriate and altered

where required. In addition, this experience provides a valuable learning opportunity for DOF officers and staff, as well as the staff of many other government and non-governmental development organizations, to engage in a process of dialogue and self-examination on the cultural factors that affect the project's success.

Methodology

The empirical data for this study on the gender impacts of the HLFFDP were collected in Kathmandu and in Hetauda, Makawanpur district, over a period of two weeks, from 14 to 28 April 2002, by two women members of a team of IFAD consultants. One of these women had been the national expert on gender and development with the project; the other was a forester and gender expert well acquainted with natural resource management projects in Nepal, as well as a researcher and practitioner in processes of organizational change to foster gender equity.

During the data collection in Makawanpur district, the team met men and women of the District Forest Office, the DLS and the Agricultural Development Bank Nepal, as well as women and men in two communities that had been engaged in the project for five to seven years. In Kathmandu, discussions were held collectively and individually with five women group promoters from three districts (Sindhupalchok, Kabre Palanchok and Tanahun), ex-project staff who had left at the completion of the first phase of the project in 2001, women and men gender focal persons and DOF and DLS staff.

The team's initial findings were shared during a half-day seminar with DOF officials, officials of other departments that were involved, such as the DLS, the Agricultural Development Bank Nepal and the Nepal Agricultural Research Centre, ex-project staff and FAO and Development Project Service Centre staff so as to acquire feedback on the results and initiate a dialogue about the effects of organizational cultures on the goals of development projects, especially those with a women's empowerment agenda. This session produced a few recommendations and verbal commitments to continue the important work that had been undertaken to change attitudes and organizational cultures in order to move forward on gender equity.

Several project documents were highlighted as well, including a report of a FAO technical backstopping mission on gender mainstreaming, an internal report "Engendered Hills Leasehold Forestry and Forage Development Project and Emancipated Women" (Lama, 2001), an internal report on "The Impact of Leasehold Forestry on Livelihoods and Environment" (Ohler, 2000) and a paper on "The Impacts of Differing Access to Forest Resources on the Livelihoods and Capital Assets of Poor Women in Makawanpur District, Nepal" (Ghimire, 2000).