

Incorporating Gender into a Male Domain: A Strategy for Foresters?

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Abstract

Traditional male dominance in the realm of forestry limits the degree to which forest departments around the developing world are motivated and capable of initiating and implementing gender equality agendas. The experience of one project in Nepal demonstrates a successful strategy for changing the attitudes of forestry professionals while simultaneously creating conditions under which rural women can demand respect and inclusion by building synergies at various levels, inside and outside the forest department. Key elements of this approach are provided here, based on narratives of women and men engaged with the project. Crucial to the process is a team of committed and skilled women and men who act as change agents within their communities and agencies, based on an assumption that women are key to the project's success. Yet despite this experience and the cadre of people who are committed to its continuity and expansion, the initiative is endangered by a lack of its formal institutionalization within a forest department.

Introduction

Today there are few development projects designed with the help of external, international teams that do not include gender components. Yet there are very few indeed that include, as an objective, a change in the implementing organisations themselves in order to successfully carry out gender equality initiatives. This case study examines how gender interests became incorporated into a forestry project in Nepal, and the resulting changes in the attitudes of rural women, and more significantly, staff of the Department of Forest (DOF).

In 1993, the government of Nepal and the International Fund for Agricultural Development initiated the Hills Leasehold Forestry and Forage Development Project (HLFFDP). Its objectives were twofold: 1) raise the incomes of families in the hills who were below the poverty line, and 2) improve the ecological conditions. These objectives were to be achieved through leasing areas of degraded forestlands to groups of poor households, who would be assisted to regenerate the land.

After nine years of implementation, the HLFFDP is now recognised as an innovative and 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 and fuelwood; increased household food security; diversified and increased sources of income; and decreased farmers' indebtedness to the local moneylenders (Ohler 2000).

An aspect of this success that is often spoken of is the successful incorporation of gender issues and targeting of poor women in the Project's strategy and implementation. This study, based on narratives of the Project and government staff as well as rural women and Group Promoters (GP), assesses the key elements that contributed to the gender-related aspects of the Project largely responsible for its success, and the degree to which these changes have been institutionalised.

The HLFFDP is situated within a society where gender ideologies that privilege men are dominant, and relationships between community members and government workers are often steeply hierarchical. These conditions present serious obstacles to the ability of male professionals within male-dominated organisations to achieve the participation, much less the empowerment, of rural, uneducated women. No less than an attitudinal change is needed - a complete turn-around in the way of thinking about rural women and what they are capable of. In short, civil servants would have to question their biases and challenge society's stereotypes about women.

Through the leadership of a few actors thinking strategically, this did occur within the DOF and other agencies associated with the HLFFDP. Currently, there is a high level of interest within DOF and the Livestock Departments to assure the continuation and expansion of the process of women's empowerment despite recent changes in the Project that have neglected measures to support the existing group of women GPs.

Methodology

The empirical data for this study was collected in 2002 by two female IFAD consultants. One of these was the previous gender expert with HLFFDP; the other is a forester and gender expert, and a researcher on processes of organisational change for gender equity. The team talked with men and women staff of the Forest Ministry, DFO and Department of Livestock Service; women and men of communities engaged with the Project for seven years; women GPs; female and male ex-project staff; and female and male Gender Focal Persons. The team's initial findings were shared in a seminar with government officials, FAO and NGO staff to gain feedback and to initiate a dialogue about the effects of organisational cultures on development projects with a women's empowerment agenda.

Context

An understanding of the local context within which the HLFFDP operates is crucial to an understanding of attitudes and how they may change within the organisations responsible for Project implementation.

A. Gender Ideologies

The gender ideologies of lowland South Asia have a very large influence on organisations operating in Nepal, affecting both the programmes and the individual work experiences of women within these organisations. By and large, this is a patriarchal society, based on Hindu ideologies and practices that exert a strong degree of control over all aspects of women's lives. In addition to these cultural influences, the gendered aspects of global paradigms of modernism and professionalism are also evident, reinforcing the dominant gender ideologies of the region.

Religion, ethnicity, culture, law, tradition, history and social attitudes place severe limits on women's participation in public life. These factors have shaped the individual self image of women, resulting in the fact that a negligible number of Nepali women are involved in professional, management or decision making positions. Because of women's socialisation, lack of control over productive resources and drastically lower levels of literacy, they have related to the professional world and the development process largely through the mediation of men. Discrimination against women outside the home is not only covert or overt, but also unconscious and culturally 'normal'. Consequently, both women and men tend to subscribe to biases against women. (Shtrii Shakti 1995)

B. The Profession of Forestry

Like forestry departments around the world, Nepal's Department of Forest (DOF) is influenced by global paradigms in which professionalism, hierarchy, and masculinity are valued. Even where there is an awareness of the gender and development discourse, men's power and masculine values permeate all aspects of the organisation, frequently in taken-for-granted ways. These values determine the organisational cultures that are created, maintained and replicated by staff within the Department of Forests.

Forestry is a field of expertise that is, according to the profession's norms, to be practiced by those who are inducted into the profession by obtaining a forestry degree from a specialised school, and as such is exclusive. Forestry training in many parts of the world resembles that of military training, as foresters are taught to protect resources from people. As such, it is imbued with masculinity; traditionally, the symbolic ideal forester is a well-built male who can handle a gun as well as a chainsaw and tackle wild animals, malaria, and the populace alike. Relatively few women enter this domain, and most that do quickly learn to underplay and mask their femininity in a mostly futile attempt to gain the respect of their male peers. More recent approaches that integrate social science methods in forestry projects have tempered these masculine orientations, but as deeply held beliefs, they are expressed dramatically when challenged by differing ideologies. The "transfer of technology" paradigm defines the professional views of many foresters, who may believe that poverty alleviation and enhanced livelihoods will follow if community members would just implement the appropriate technological fixes.

As a result of the extreme male domination within the profession of forestry, gender gaps are frequently observed in forest-related programmes. These are manifest, most visibly,

in a lack of women staff, lack of activities of interest to women, low budgets for women related activities, and unbalanced decision making both within the department as well as within the communities where activities are undertaken. Nepal's DOF, until recently, proved to be no exception to this.

C. Gender Policies within Nepal and the DOF

Since the 1990s, themes of poverty and social development moved to the forefront of the development discourse within Nepal, creating a conducive environment for gender equality. The Government's Ninth Plan for 1997-2000 recognised women as a target group for achieving its overall aim of poverty alleviation. It also recognised the lead roles of women in animal husbandry and agriculture (but no mention was made of forest management). In addition to its policies, the country has an active feminist movement that pushes for legislative reform to allocate land rights to women, and also addresses issues of girl trafficking, education for girls, domestic violence and women's rights. According to a study conducted by the FAO Women in Development Officer, "such a macro policy commitment provides an enabling environment to fulfil the gender mainstreaming objective of the HLFDDP" (Balakrishnan 2000).

In the 1990s, the National Planning Commission issued a directive for all agencies to create a gender or women's cell; almost all have complied - the DOF has not done so though similar departments, such as the Department of Agriculture have had cells for many years. Why is gender continually neglected in forestry institutions, and how was a single project able to put gender in the forefront in Nepal?

The Strategy

A key aspect of the success within the HLFDDP was the leadership provided by two male project leaders (one from DOF and one from FAO). These managers had the vision to hire a three women team and grant them the autonomy that allowed them to develop an innovative strategy. Their goal was to address the organisational culture of the implementing agencies in order to make their male counterparts more aware of and responsive to rural women's realities, and to bring about a change in their attitudes towards women.

Through the persistence of the all-women Gender Team, and their sustained support and firm belief in the abilities of the rural women, continual gender and leadership training was provided to a cadre of local female Group Promoters (GPs), recruited from around the country. The GPs were inspired to build a sense of solidarity, to encourage and depend on one another for support - a behaviour modeled by the Gender Team themselves. Thus evolved a very high degree of the GPs' trust in the Gender Team, as they gained a sense that "we had a mission, we were willing to take risks, even to lose our jobs." The GPs felt proud to be associated with such a group of women, and they themselves gained in status through such linkages to high level Project staff and government officials.

Key Elements/Best Practices

- conceptual leadership and support of Project co-managers and senior officials to the Gender Team
- Synergies amongst four collaborating agencies
- A special Gender Fund
- The Gender Team - their spirit, experience and commitment
- Autonomy of the Gender Team that allowed for innovation
- High quality, simple and relevant training curricula
- Long term persistent support and follow up activities for GPs
- Development of Gender Focal Persons amongst DOF and Line Agency staff who perceived positive gains from their participation
- Interdependent nature of the work of the line agency staff and the GPs
- Consistent good performance by the GPs
- The perception that women are KEY to the project's success and not just an add-on

Initial Obstacles

Initially, there was ignorance and some resistance amongst some of the DOF staff, who, until this Project, had had very limited exposure to gender issues. Staff of the DOF wondered how hiring rural women as GPs could assist the Project to achieve its objectives; some believed this was an irrelevant initiative pushed by the donors.

There was also a history of non-collaboration amongst the government agencies engaged in the Project, as cultural barriers and norms of professionalism had prevented staff from working together. The GPs entered into this world of professional men, divided by group interests and loyalty to their superiors with a commitment to bring changes to their communities. By doing so, they changed not only their communities, but the cultures of the organisations that at first denied them respect.

Impacts

A. Local women change agents

The major gender impacts of the Project can be attributed to the development of the cadre of GPs, who have demonstrated persistence and continuity in their efforts to mobilise district level resources for the benefit of community members even after the termination of their contracts. These strong, outspoken women speak frankly and even with a sense of familiarity with DOF rangers, and have succeeded in securing resources such as literacy classes from agencies other than those involved directly in the Project. Staff of some agencies are said to be intimidated by them, as their reputation for persistence is well known.

The GPs themselves have demonstrated changed attitudes and behaviours as a result of their training and newly developed leadership abilities. They have started to speak out, to take action against those who dominate them, even in instances of male harassment by government officials. This has created a new space for rural women's participation on equal ground with men, even those with more professional qualifications and higher social status.

B. Gender Focal Persons behind them

The Gender Focal Persons, mostly male mid-level foresters, agriculturalists and livestock technicians have built a support system for the GPs. Through gender training, on-the-ground supervision of the GPs, and interactions with the Gender Team, this group has come to respect and value the work of these women and catalysts of the movement for gender equality within the line agencies.

C. DOF Officers

Another successful outcome of this synergistic initiative was the change in attitudes of some District Forest Officers and senior officials; these men now express their support for the women GPs and for the Gender Focal Persons. They have encouraged rural women to speak out, creating spaces for their involvement in forums attended by forest department staff. They have demonstrated and expressed publicly their respect for these women and rural women in general, and directed their junior officers to do the same.

D. Community men and women

Changes in attitudes and behaviours were also evidenced amongst the men and women of the leasehold groups. Women farmers now commonly take the lead in group meetings as well as in forestry planning along with the men. Some men have even begun to share household work and childcare so that their wives can attend meetings.

Remaining Obstacles

This Project has demonstrated an effective strategy to achieve gender equality at the community level, and to bring about dramatic changes in attitudes of professionals involved with the GPs. But there is a gap related to the institutionalisation of the approach. This weakness was made obvious by the recent cancellation of the GPs' contracts under the new phase of the Project, "raising the flag" about the severe consequences that can occur without sustainable, longterm policies and organisational commitments to gender mainstreaming. Without developing the requisite structures to assure women's role in decision making, there is a very real danger of losing the ground that had been gained through the hard work and commitment of so many men and women.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Within bureaucracies that are mired in their own world views and procedures that go unchallenged by those who represent 'the other' (women, in this case), a lack of attention to issues of gender and social change is perhaps inevitable within forestry institutions. Where an explicit commitment to gender equality or women's empowerment is lacking, there is a real danger that gender initiatives will lose significance in the context of competing accountabilities and imperatives, and fall into a "black hole".

There is a need for gender structures to be built into forestry institutions. Within these, there must be an organisational space for advocacy by rural women and their representatives. It is through this group that forest departments should build linkages and accountability to their constituents - the community members.

Given the cultural constraints to gender equality posed by local contexts and the gendered environment of implementing organisations, support is required to build a sustained base for the continuity of efforts like that of HLFFDP to twin gender equality with environmental conservation and poverty alleviation. Included in this is a role for the donor agencies. In this case, the push for gender equality came more from the local actors than from the international donor agency - a fact that should engender pride amongst the Nepalese, but one that does not assure replication in other countries. It is clear that the success of HLFFDP is due to the actions of some key personnel with the vision and experience to go beyond what the donor had envisaged. If global institutions are to support their publicly pronounced policies and programmes for the empowerment of women, minorities and the very poor, they must take a more proactive role, assuring increased levels of guidance, supervision and country level support. Indeed, this opinion was stated by a DOF official who expressed his wish for an IFAD presence in important meetings of Nepal's donor community, as even some donors are not convinced of this pro-women, pro-ethnic minority, pro-poor approach to poverty alleviation.

A Project supervision report states the need for strong support for activities that challenge the *status quo*. Such a statement recognises the political as well as economical aspects of the marginalised status of these groups, and understands that significant changes require political commitment and action. The danger of **not** building the requisite political support is exemplified in the recent history of this HLFFDP Project, whereby this locally-supported empowerment agenda credited with the Project's success almost lost its legitimacy due to the neglect of high level officials.

This Project presents an approach to achieve women's empowerment, forest regeneration and poverty alleviation through a process of gender mainstreaming - an approach that should be considered for replication in other contexts as well. This approach necessitates that implementing agencies themselves have the personnel, policy directives, procedures and political will to support gender mainstreaming with their partners engaged in forest development - a topic that needs the attention of all those who support sustainable development.

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