

**Empowered women and the men behind them:
A study of change within the Forestry Department of Nepal**

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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, its recommendation as a best practice is possible only due to the process of its gradual institutionalization into the government structures responsible for forest development.

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Introduction and Goals

The intended beneficiaries of forest management initiatives are often excluded from decision making and access to benefits due to their gender, class and/or ethnicity. Contemporary environment and development programmes, therefore, often promote the participation of women in order to increase project efficiency while addressing social injustices. This is based on an understanding that increasing the participation of women - often the primary users and managers - will mobilize local resources and commitment to sustain project outcomes.

Today there are few development projects supported by international donor agencies 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 (IFAD) 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 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 often spoken of is its incorporation of gender issues and targeting of poor women. 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.

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. Political conflict

The rural areas of Nepal have been experiencing increasing levels of violent armed conflict over the past several years, affecting all rural development work. Young men have been forced to submit to the wishes of both the Maoist groups and the Army, and so have fled their rural villages, leaving even more of the livelihood burdens on the shoulders of women. The situation is too dangerous for government officials to conduct their work in these areas, affecting the impact of forestry programmes significantly.

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 natural 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. Women's role in forestry at the community level is believed to be as collectors and users – not as managers, decision makers and important stakeholders.

Nepal's DOF has proved to be no exception to this. Despite studies that demonstrate that women are more involved in community forestry, and that forest user groups run by women practice more transparent and regular meetings than those organized by men (Maskey et al, 2003), women were still not formally recognized as important stakeholders who have rights to the benefits and who should be consulted in policy matters.

The organizations responsible for forestry development bear out this bias as well. The Department has only five women out of 246 gazetted officers, 27 female rangers out of a total of 1189 and currently no female District Forest Officers (Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, 2003). Women's participation in coordination and policy making bodies is almost nil.

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 Tenth Plan for 2001-2005 recognises women as a target group for achieving its overall aim of poverty alleviation. It intends to increase effective participation of women in forest management to minimise gender disparity and access to social and economic resources. 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 FAO, "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 complied within that decade. The DOF, however, has only recently done so, through the creation of a Gender and Equity Working Group under the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation. Researchers such as Khadka (2004) state that the Ministry is still without a strategy to mainstream gender at the policy, programme and process levels. Despite the appointment of two gender focal persons in the Department and Ministry, their duties have not been clearly specified. Khadka notes that institutionalising gender there has a very long way to go. Why is gender continually neglected in forestry institutions, and how was a single project able to build support for gender to be institutionalised in a resistant, male-dominated organisation in Nepal?

The Process of Implementation

A key aspect of the success of the HLFDDP was the leadership provided by two male project leaders (from DOF and 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.

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. Many of the staff did not believe that the women could be mobile and work effectively, or had any knowledge or communication skills that could be useful to the Project. They questioned their abilities to walk in difficult terrain, to work after marriage and childbirth, and to speak properly with government staff. Partially due to a lack of clarity about the role of the GPs, a few staff asked for favors that went beyond the women's terms of reference. At least one of the forest guards expected them to cook and work for him, as an office peon. Some behaved paternalistically towards the women, many expected them to solve technical

problems related to forest management. Overall, members of the DOF wondered how the hiring of rural women as GPs could assist the Project to achieve its objectives; many believed that this was an irrelevant initiative pushed by the Project donors.

For the newly hired GPs, there were real fears. For some from remote areas who did not personally know the rangers who selected them, there existed in their imagination the possibility of some wrongdoing. In the words of one woman:

At first I was afraid. The ranger came to my village to ask for women interested to be GPs. Friends and my husband encouraged me to apply. I was the only one selected from my village. I was so scared - what would I say? I had only traveled to a city a few times before. When the ranger invited me to a training in Kathmandu, I was scared. When we reached there I was sure it was a brothel and I was about to be sold. However, being with other GPs, I started feeling safe and convinced that this really is a training. Work was very difficult, but I kept going. Finally, the community respected me.

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 on a regular basis, this group has come to respect and value the work of these women as catalysts for gender

equality within the line agencies. Though still few in number, these men and women have given moral support and encouragement to the GPs.

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.

Opportunities and Constraints

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 cancellation of the GPs' contracts in 2001 under the new phase of the Project, "raising the flag" about the severe consequences that can occur without sustainable, long term 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.

Yet the termination of the GPs' contracts provided an opportunity as well. Despite receiving no pay, the GPs continued to organize activities for social mobilization and women's participation in forestry. This occurred on a voluntary basis because the GPs themselves were from the leasehold forestry groups that they were serving, and so were highly motivated. One subgroup of GPs kept in contact with the Gender Advisors (no longer employed by the Project) frequently for support and advice; this encouraged the main adviser (Kanchan) to develop a project proposal for funds for continuing support to this group. The objectives of this new initiative went beyond the original goal to enhance women's participation by including providing support for their own organizational development in response to the GPs' desire to form a nation-wide association that could advocate at the policy level to institutionalize gender in forestry organizations. With the support of some staff of DOF and the help of an outside ally (Jeannette) the initiative was funded by IFAD for two years.

The GPs' association, named AASTHA, has now expanded to seven districts and has an executive body, 59 members and seven advisory members that includes women from other forestry projects as well. One special characteristic of this group is their leadership abilities, which has allowed them to voice their concerns in meetings with high level

policy makers and the National Planning Commission to advocate for leasehold forestry for livelihood management by women in conflict situations and in general. Advised by SPD staff, this association continues to promote women's role in forestry development at all levels.

Lessons learned: key elements of the best practice

- conceptual leadership and support of Project co-managers and senior officials to the Gender Team
- Synergies amongst four collaborating agencies
- A special Gender Fund
- Qualities of the team of Gender Advisors - 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 based on a relationship of trust with the team of Gender Advisors
- Development of Gender Focal Persons 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

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, to establish gender leadership within forestry departments themselves. Within these, there must be an organisational space for advocacy by rural women, especially those from marginalised groups, and their representatives. It is through this group that forest departments should build linkages and accountability to their constituents – the community members engaged in the process. Time and money invested in developing their capabilities will assure sustained and committed energies to achieve the desired results.

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. A conclusion of this case study is that without the strong relationship built up between the gender advisors and the rural women, there could not have emerged a vocal and confident group of marginalised women able to organise themselves and find ways to gain entry as a legitimate stakeholder group into government policy making dialogue at the highest levels. This

points to a niche that has been so far neglected by development programmes – the mobilisation of groups of professional women working in forestry or other natural resource management sectors to support and mentor rural women involved in the field programmes on a long term basis. A lesson learned is that a central coordinating group of NGO gender activists needs to facilitate the networking relationship between government staff and grassroots level promoters in order to build and nurture a healthy understanding between these two groups of implementing agents. Together, both groups of women bring resources and power to the struggle to establish gender in forestry institutions as a legitimate and worthy domain.

Included in this may be a role for a donor agency. Donors that support policies and programmes for the empowerment of women need to fund approaches that provide, on a short term basis, special project funds for catalytic support so that government agencies that have to date neglected gender issues can initiate approaches to institutionalise women's empowerment agendas within their programmes. However, the question of sustainability needs to be addressed, as many developing country governments see gender initiatives as belonging to the donors. Ways must be found for such agencies to develop a sense of ownership over such initiatives, possibly through projects that demonstrate and document positive impacts through women's empowerment, as this HLFFDP does. The need for continual reflection and process documentation must be stressed, as this is the basis for learning and sharing. When these lessons are of interest to the larger world of development agencies, and can be presented as this study was at international fora (this study was presented to the World Forestry Congress in Quebec in 2003), it brings prestige and status to all of the actors involved in the process and itself becomes a tool of policy influence.

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.

Much more needs to be done, but this Project has provided us with an approach to achieve forest regeneration, women's empowerment and poverty alleviation through a process of gender mainstreaming that aims for organisational change within the agencies responsible for natural resource management, hence moving women's empowerment from a field level to central level concern. Institutionalisation and the long term sustainability of equitable natural resource management require nothing less.

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This study was published in the following publications:

"Empowered Women : A Study of Change within the Forest Department of Nepal", with K. Lama and M. Khadka in *Gender Mainstreaming in Action: Successful Innovations from Asia and the Pacific*. Washington, D.C.: InterAction's Commission on the Advancement of Women and the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, 2005.

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