

Resource Management: Conflict, Use and Role of Women

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Girl collecting grass, Nepal. Photo: Marianne Heredge

Women are regarded the primary resource users. Most of the responsibility for growing and collecting food, medicines, fuel, housing materials, providing cash income for schooling, health care and other family needs rests on their shoulders. They outdo men in terms of involvement in use and management of water, agriculture, livestock, forestry and fishery. However, they face exclusion and denial of equal sharing of benefits from natural resources (Upadhyay, 2005). Women in rural Nepal have a very close relationship with forests. They primarily collect fuel wood, which meets 95 percent of the cooking-energy consumption; and fodder and other forest products (FAO, 2008). Women as participants and decision makers, share the responsibility of planting, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, carrying grains to the mill for grinding, collecting wood, water and fodder. Their involvement is very significant in the care and management of livestock and poultry, as well as kitchen gardening.

Despite women's important role in agriculture, traditional social norms and customary laws, generally biased in favour of men, are barriers to women's equitable access to productive resources (Kumar and Hotchkiss, 1989). Girls are subject to widespread and at times, systematic forms of human rights violations that have mental, emotional, spiritual, physical and material repercussions during armed conflict because husbands and sons are caught up in the fighting and are unable to provide for their families (Mazurana and Carlson, 2006). The new role as primary provider exposes many women to further abuse. Conflict shatters the comfort of predictable daily routines and expectations. Women and girls are equally affected in a fragile environment where social services they once depended on, degrade or disappear (USAID, 2007). Besides the armed conflict, women in developing countries such as East Africa, spend up to 27 percent of their caloric intake in fetching 40-60 litres of water per day (Lewis 1994); village women have to travel eight to nine kilometres to collect firewood; 12.36 hours per person per day is spent on agricultural work in the hills areas of Nepal (Sharma, 1995). The women who spend eight hours a day gathering firewood are still doing that. Women are still subjected to domestic violence and employment of women remains limited to relatively few fields and low-paid jobs.

Women must not only be seen as passive victims of armed conflict (USAID, 2007), but as a capable actors as well. Seven major women's roles in internal conflict can be seen: women as victims of (sexual) abuse, as combatants, in peaceful roles in the non-governmental sector, in formal peace politics, as coping and surviving actors, as household heads and in employment (Bouta and Frerks, 2002). The Beijing Conference 1995 concluded that unless the contribution of women to the environment and resource management is recognized and supported, sustainable development would remain elusive. Moreover, promoting women's participation in natural resource development activities by improving their access to and control over resources would make more effective women's networks for disseminating information to communities (USAID, 2007).

Case study of CECI- Sahakarya project

The Canadian Centre for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI) has implemented the Sahakarya (“Working together” in Nepali) project in five districts (Jumla, Dailekh, Surkhet, Baitadi and Dadeldhura) from 2003-08 and Jaivik Jadibuti (organic farming of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in two far west districts of Baitadi and Darchula) from 2004-2005. The project area was in a conflict affected area of Nepal. The goal of the project was to contribute to poverty reduction in the Mid and Far Western Regions of Nepal. The project integrated community health and income-generating activities with the institutionalization of community based organizations (CBOs).

Since 1996, when armed conflict started in Nepal, many people were displaced from the hills. This not only marginalised a large section of the population, but also led to basic human rights abuses. Since the beginning of the conflict, economic activities have slowed down. Usual effects of armed conflict on development projects included: low budget disbursements, difficulties in accessing public services such as health and education, scarcity of qualified staff and active organisations, low mobility, difficult transportation and lack of employment opportunities resulting in low socio-economic activities (Regmi et al, 2005). Within this challenging context, Sahakarya projects have succeeded in building a foundation of organised and self-managed civil societies in the targeted communities. This was possible through mobilisation of communities in capacity-building to address developmental issues by establishing and strengthening member-based organizations such as savings and credit organisations (SCOs); producers groups (PGs); community forest users’ groups (CFUGs), water users’ groups (WUGs) and mothers’ groups (MGs). Among them, non-timber forest products (NTFPs) are managed in community forests and private land. District Federation of Community Forest Users Nepal (FECOFUN) implements activities in the community forests.

Approaches and coping with conflict

Given the intensity of conflict in the project area, Sahakarya adopted conflict and peace development related approaches to enhance the capacity of rural people to cope with the situation. During the peak intensity of the armed conflict in the area, most development projects withdrew their activities due to worsening security situation. Government bodies localized their programmes to areas surrounding the district head quarters. Sahakarya partners raised security issues such as being threatened by armed groups, donations being demanded, cross-firing, kidnapping and travelling alone in the village areas that they had to cope with in the emerging insurgency. Sahakarya introduced tools of peace and conflict impact assessment (PCIA), with gender and social inclusion (GSI), interest based negotiation (IBN), right based approaches (RBA), and community mediation (CM) which enhanced rural women’s capacity to dialogue with combatants and disputants.

Implementation of gender equality and social inclusion policy at the community level enhanced the participation of women in community activities and decision-making, allowing inclusion of women and minority groups in all stages of the project. Some gender policies favoured pregnant and lactating women, subsidising food allowances to provide care where they had small babies with them. By arranging community level training rather than at a district level, this increased the participation of lactating mothers. Likewise, to enhance women’s participation, Sahakarya relieved them from other pressing burdens at home and provided transportation costs (NRs 500) to carry project materials and equipment. To encourage women's participation in the CBOs and their decision making bodies, Sahakarya provided NRs 100,000 for a CBO office building on condition the CBO met a minimum criteria of at least 50 percent women as general members and it at least 40 percent of any decision making body. To expose community people to the outside environment and marketing opportunities, Sahakarya supported excursion tours. To ensure women's participation in such events, Sahakarya required that at least 50 percent women participated to get the tour programme approved.

Women in management and utilization of non-timber forest products (NTFPs)

Women from remote areas need a basic education and skills to generate income. It is important to understand that women have equal potential and capabilities to take on responsibilities focusing on women priority activities. Participation by women was encouraging in cultivating, managing and marketing of NTFPs in the project area.

Over five years in the project districts in the case of NTFP production, collection and marketing, of 3,508 cultivators, 51 percent are women and out of 1,976 entrepreneurs, 30 percent are women entrepreneurs. Similarly, 62 percent are engaged in collection and 38 percent in production.

Women's participation by caste and ethnicity shows involvement is highest amongst Janajati women than Brahmin-Chhetri, Dalit and others, because of their knowledge on forest related products. They have a high mobility. There are no cultural barriers in their community to go out of their houses.

Women are involved in marketing of NTFPs, motivated to work effectively by the development of various skills through training and other capacity building programmes. Women's involvement in NTFP trading has increased from 396 (in 2005) to 444 (in 2006) (CECI, 2004 and 2007).

Conclusions

Even during the social and armed conflict period, women actively participated in managing and utilising natural resources: community forests, NTFP production and marketing, bee-keeping, off-farm vegetable production, kitchen gardening, goat-raising and off-farm enterprises. The majority of women member-based groups lead women in decision-making. However, keeping a token number of women in male-dominated groups looks can be more like a ceremonial role, with women making the quorum of the group instead of actively participating in major decisions. For the success of projects, more resources are required to increase women's participation. Community-based training and orientation and practical sessions are effective in enhancing women's skills. Increased income reduces most of the domestic conflicts and community based empowerment increases the capacity to raise a voice against armed conflict.

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