

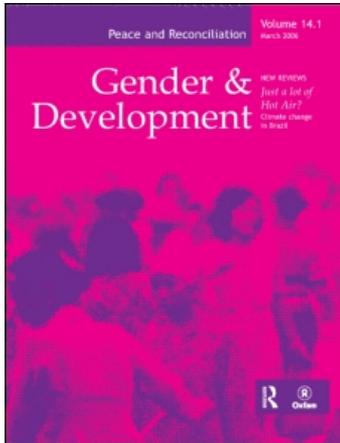
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Publisher *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Gender & Development

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713422432>

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Online Publication Date: 01 March 2009

To cite this Article Khamis, Marion, Plush, Tamara and Zelaya, Carmen Sepúlveda(2009)'Women's rights in climate change: using video as a tool for empowerment in Nepal',*Gender & Development*,17:1,125 — 135

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13552070802697001

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552070802697001>

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Women's rights in climate change: using video as a tool for empowerment in Nepal

Marion Khamis, Tamara Plush, and Carmen Sepúlveda Zelaya

An innovative Action Aid-supplied project in Nepal has seen women's empowerment make rapid progress through the use of video discussions about climate change. In this exploration of the project, we ask what we can learn from the use of such technology, and consider the implications for international development agencies and their efforts to support women's rights.

Key words: women's rights; gender; climate change; power; women and environment; Nepal; adaptation; video

Introduction

Let's all sit together and discuss
When we discuss things, let's do it sensibly.
First of all let's save the trees and plants.
Let's keep the village environment clean.
If we do this, we will be happy.
Let's unite and move forward and be aware of the situation.

(A song by the women of Bageshwori, Nepal, about their needs in regards to climate change)

In January 2008, a joint action research project was launched by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and ActionAid Nepal. Taking place in Bageshwori and Matehiya communities in the west of the country, the aim was to explore how the use of participatory video could help poor and marginalised women secure their rights in the face of the effects of climate change.

The project is the latest step in a wide-ranging process undertaken by ActionAid to explore the impact of climate change on poor communities worldwide, and their responses to the challenge. This process began in 2006 with the development of an agenda to bring the voices of poor communities to the global climate-change debate, in order to put pressure on governments to support communities in adapting to climate change.

The project was based on research into the experience of communities using ActionAid's system of Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA),¹ which allows communities to identify the most common hazards that threaten their lives, assets, and livelihoods and organise themselves to take action. The research provided strong evidence of communities increasingly affected by flooding, storms, and droughts, exhausting their ability to cope. It also highlighted their need for information, resources, and technical knowledge.

In 2007, a further research project explored the adaptation priorities of poor and vulnerable women in climate-change hotspots in south Asia, in order to find out how adaptation funding should be spent in order to make a difference to poor women. The intention was to present their perspectives in their own voices, thus bringing them into the international debate on climate change from which they were largely excluded.

The ensuing report, 'We know what we need: south Asian women speak out on climate change adaptation' (Mitchell *et al.* 2007), demonstrated the impact of climate change on women in the Ganges River Basin in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, and the coping strategies and mechanisms they have adopted in response. It offers guidance on spending finance for climate-change adaptation so that the interests and needs of women are prioritised. It also puts forward a case for ensuring that women participate equally in debates about climate change. The research findings, and lessons from previous projects, led to a wave of innovation in ActionAid, as the organisation considered how women can be supported locally in their advocacy efforts.

Power, rights, and change: the path to women's empowerment

It is ActionAid's firm belief that poverty is more than the deprivation of material resources. It is often the result of unequal and unjust power relations, including gender inequality, which leads to the denial of people's most fundamental human rights.

It follows that, in order to be effective in promoting women's rights, it was necessary for ActionAid to look for a formal way to allow women to take control over their engagement in national and international climate-change policy processes. In doing so, ActionAid would be living up to its own commitment to promote genuine processes of awareness and empowerment by allowing women in particular to determine the changes they want to see, and to analyse their situation from their own personal experience through a power and rights lens. This work would focus on poverty in all its dimensions, and enable us to reflect on how the rights of people are shaped by immediate needs, as well as their access to political spaces and power.

The mechanics of participatory video

The participatory video project arose as an opportunity for IDS and ActionAid to continue to build on previous research, while contributing both to the empowerment of women in Nepal and to wider social change.²

The project was rolled out in April 2008 with a workshop held in Nepalgunj, Nepal, for staff from the Bheri Environmental Excellence (BEE) Group, ActionAid's local partner organisation, and community members from the Bageshwori and Matehiya Village Development Committees (VDCs) where the project would be implemented.³ The workshop was organised and facilitated by an IDS researcher with the assistance of ActionAid Nepal and attended by 12 participants, four of whom were women from the research locations.⁴

The workshop provided staff and community members with the skills to conduct their own video interviews with local women about the changes to the weather as they have been experiencing them, how they are coping, and what could be done to adapt. After watching and discussing these interviews as a group, the women of the community then chose their most pressing adaptation issue on which to make a video.

The factors that would determine the success of the project, such as affordable, easy-to-use video technology, and the low level of literacy of some of the project participants, had been carefully considered before it started.⁵

The women went on to develop a story about their main concern regarding climate-change impacts through the creation of a storyboard (that is, a series of drawings that represent the final video), and participated in making a video about the issue. ActionAid's local partner organisation then edited the video according to the storyboard created by the women. Finally, the video was shown to the community for discussion, and to local government, NGOs, and international NGOs to build awareness on the issues and generate support.

Beyond the initial training, the role of the IDS researcher and ActionAid Nepal was constrained to providing advice and support to the organisations co-ordinating the project, and helping build the links between the different organisations involved. These would be instrumental in making the project effective for local, national, and international advocacy.

As of November 2008, BEE Group and the women from Matehiya and Bageshwori had completed all phases of the research, up to the point at which they would begin to show the finished video to the communities, and start advocacy with local decision-makers by showing them the footage. Although the videos and films were complete by July, the monsoon rains, flooding, and the annual festival season delayed community and local government showings.

In the next sections we will look in more detail at how the project evolved in the two different villages, and the changes observed.

The experience in Bageshwori

The organisation Heifer International had been working in Bageshwori and had helped establish five women's groups with members from various ethnic and social classes in 2006. The video project built on these already established groups. In an introductory meeting of the video project attended by more than 100 women from these groups, each group nominated three women to be part of the core group involved in the project. Trained BEE Group staff and community members operated the video camera and asked questions relating to how the weather has changed over the last ten years, the impact on people's lives, and what solutions they would prioritise to help them adapt.

After the interviews, the Bageshwori women decided to share what they learned with the broader community. They helped organise a singing competition with songs performed by the women and children on climate change and disasters. Song lyrics talked about the destruction of the jungle and how that has led to floods and landslides. Many of the singing groups called for deforestation to be prevented, so that floods could be reduced.

A group of women calling themselves the Hariyali group identified themselves as women who felt they could, and would, take collective action on some of the issues:

What can we say to those who destroy the jungle?
What can we say as women?
We have to save ourselves if there is an outbreak.
What can we say as women?
The men also have to fight by our side.

Let's all sit together and discuss
When we discuss things, let's do it sensibly. First of all let's save the trees and plants.
Let's keep the village environment clean.
If we do this, we will be happy.
Let's unite and move forward and be aware of the situation.

(Extract from a song written and performed by the women of Bageshwori, 10 June 2008)

The Bageshwori women then made their final video drama in which they elaborated on the impact of drought on their livelihoods and made a call for increased training in new farming techniques, plus resources – including small loans – to develop off-farm activities such as goat and chicken rearing. In the film, the women dramatise the success of their lives after training:

We did not even have a rupee to our names before but now at every women's group meeting we see that we have been able to save money. We have been able to send our children to school with the money we earn by selling vegetables.

The experience in Matehiya

Matehiya is one of the most remote communities in Banke district. Due to inaccessibility and a decade-long conflict in the area, the provision of basic services such as electricity is very limited.

As in Bageshwori, the Matehiya project is taking place within an existing ActionAid project, Disaster Risk Reduction through Schools (DRRS). That project had already brought women together and engaged them in discussions with the rest of the community – a standard element in ActionAid programme interventions. According to the Matehiya Disaster Management Committee Chairman, until that project started it was not part of local culture for women to be involved in community decision-making meetings. Slowly, women are becoming more involved through disaster training classes, but their voice in decision-making is still limited.

For our new video project, the two female community members who had participated in the video workshop organised 15 women for the study, making sure to include women from the *Tharu* ethnic group, who are often excluded in this region.

The interview video footage they produced showed that most of the women were concerned about decreased crop production due to weather extremes of excessive or little rain, as well as irregular weather patterns compared with the past. In common with the women in Bageshwori, the women in Matehiya are facing deforestation problems that add to their burden of gathering fodder and firewood, as well as increasing the risk of flood.

The women said they are facing many more problems because of their multiple roles, as one testimony, from Rati Rokai, shows:

Now no matter how hard we work in planting the crops, they are destroyed. Even if the men do one job, then it is considered important. But if we do ten different things, we are still not valued. What can we do? This is in our fate. This is the situation of women. We have to work hard to feed ourselves. (10 May 2008)

Along with the problems discussed in the interviews, the women of Matehiya prioritised what they needed to do in their final video, which took the form of a drama. In the video drama, the women are visited by a man from a local NGO who hears their concerns and takes the women to the District Agriculture Office to ask for resources, training, and small loans. That meeting enables the women to get training in knitting, tailoring, and goat rearing, and to obtain small loans for livestock. The final two scenes show a woman able to send her three children to school on her sewing income, and a woman who is now self-sufficient from goat rearing.

Building women's sense of power

At the time of writing there were signs in both Bageshwori and Matehiya that the process of making the videos and the spin-off activities had led to women becoming

much more conscious not only of the challenges facing them, but of their own potential power to respond.

Building 'power within'

A sense of 'power within' is essential for women to realise their rights – since this is the dimension of power that gives them a sense of their own potential to change their lives and destinies, and enables them to have the confidence to analyse the problems they are facing. Women in these communities need to feel that they are able to secure their rights to the basics of life in the face of climate change.

The project did seem to help women build a sense of their own potential. For instance, after the experience, Basanti Sunar, from Bageshwori, commented:

The video encouraged us to identify the problems and gave us the means to solve them with more impact. Now we are able to distinguish the past and present of weather change and the challenges it brings to our life. Before, we had difficulty to speak. But when we use the video and see the pictures of ourselves, we have more confidence. We see we can share experiences. It makes us ambitious to know new things. (International DRRS Peer Review, interview by researcher, 2 August 2008)

In Matehiya, there are early indications that the video study is helping empower women in this community. One participant, Birma Budhathoki, who is illiterate, stated:

The first time, when we interviewed, we did not believe that illiterate women could do anything. But now, I am encouraged. I see that we can do things. I see that even illiterate women have power if given the proper channels. When we see ourselves on the video, we see how we express ourselves. We see that we are able to express our ideas. (ibid., 3 August 2008)

Birma Budhathoki reported she had found her involvement in the process very empowering. She was originally a key informant in Nepal's country case study for the 'We know what we need' report, and subsequently became a participatory video training facilitator, helping lead the women's climate study in her community.

Power with and power to: from analysis to action

Participatory video has helped generate knowledge about climate vulnerabilities for women in these two communities, built the women's capacity to express their concerns, and generated video dramas that convey messages about the action they most need and want from different organisations that might enable them to adapt better to changing climatic conditions.

Women have come together to communicate their concerns to the wider community. The process of making the videos has catalysed a process whereby they have strengthened themselves as a group – an 'us' – with legitimate, shared concerns and demands that they are able to identify and express. For example, in Matehiya, the film

production was one of the first projects in the community led by the women themselves.

Women wanted their concerns taken to local government, NGOs, international NGOs, national government, and international bodies. As expressed by Basanti Sunar from Bageshwori, 'We hope our voices will go to bigger places'.

In this context, Basanti Sunar understood the need to take things to district-level and higher decision-makers. Due to the ten-year conflict in Nepal, many local governments were not able to solve community problems, so many communities have a strong desire to share their message as widely as possible.

Climate change may be just the start: the Bageshwori women indicated that they also want to use video to send messages to the men in the community not to go abroad for work, to encourage the use of compost fertiliser over chemical fertiliser, and to promote the use of improved seeds (information from focus group by ActionAid Nepal/IDS research team, September 2008).

We have also started to observe greater ties between the ActionAid partner BEE Group, and women in the communities. For example, PVA is a process involving the larger community to identify and try to solve their own problems. When the community ran its PVA in 2006 in Bageshwori, it involved only six women from the community. When using the community-led video research with the women of Bageshwori, more than 100 women were involved in discussions and the singing competition (interview, Ram Raj Kathayat, BEE Group Project Co-ordinator, August 2008).

As evidence of continued support, BEE Group submitted a 2009 project proposal to ActionAid in the hope of continuing its advocacy efforts.

Power over: overcoming challenges to enable women's voices to travel and influence

The greatest challenge now is ensuring that BEE Group and ActionAid can easily use the video footage for advocacy.

The potential for sharing the women's concerns at a national level is great, as Nepal is currently defining its National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) to respond to climate change. The NAPA is to be completed in 2009, and ActionAid Nepal is already part of national and international platforms that are engaged in the process.

Most importantly, as an organisation committed to a rights-based approach, ActionAid is accountable to women in the communities, and to our funding affiliates, to demonstrate that this work genuinely helps women in rural areas claim their rights. Of course, the primary obligation in regards to accountability is between ActionAid, our local partners, and the women themselves. The task ahead is to provide the necessary resources, linkages, and guidance to BEE Group for advocacy that allows the women to forge relationships with the institutions that make important decisions and shape their realities. They need that direct contact and outreach.

Lessons from women in the climate-change adaptation study

From the individual to the community, it appears that participatory video is allowing women to see themselves as part of their wider community – and one with a legitimate voice. The empowerment process with women is about both individuals and their communities.

Women are showing that they have the ability to come up with serious and long-term solutions, benefiting the community at large. The interviews brought forth many suggestions – for example, a strong need to plant trees and strengthen community forests as a means to help with climate-change adaptation. In Nepal, forests are often controlled by communities. They use them for firewood, fodder, flood barriers, etc. In some areas of Nepal, community forests are run by women's groups, but not in Matehiya or Bageshwori. By strengthening their power within the forests, women will have better access to the natural resources they need for their livelihoods. The final video dramas focused on more individual needs for better cropping techniques and income-generating activities.

The findings of the original 'We know what we need' report are similar to the views expressed in the videos: women need information, resources, and technical knowledge to help them adjust to climate-change impacts. Women have clear needs, such as the desire to boost off-farm income. The difference with the video process is that women now feel they are involved in the research and action process, and are not just providing information to external researchers. There is a sense of empowerment and self-confidence in being actors, and not mere recipients: 'I felt proud watching the video. Now I know that making a video is not the work of only men. We can also make it as good as they can', says Laxmi Bohora from Matehiya (focus group by ActionAid Nepal/IDS research team, September 2008).

However, there are challenges and lessons to be learned. An important one concerns the ability of a single video drama to be used at different 'levels' of decision-making. Since the videos produced by the women are in Nepali, they have the advantage of being easily accessible, culturally relevant, and personal to the community and local government officials. However, there is an obvious challenge in that the final films are less suitable for advocacy at levels involving non-Nepali speakers and at both national and international levels. The women's concerns may also be focused at the micro-level, without making links to the changes needed at national or international level.

The interview process is one tactic to try and counter this challenge, in that the footage may be used for national and international advocacy videos while the final video dramas remain in the community and district level, or are edited for a broader audience. Another tactic to make local films more useful for advocacy might be for ActionAid and our local partners to support a feedback process from policy makers

to the communities, which could then help women build their understanding about the preferences of different audiences.

Another lesson concerns the need for such video research projects to be accompanied by 'hard' data to complement the information generated, in order to allow an accurate interpretation of the information collected. For example, the video footage shows a trend whereby women tend to provide community solutions for adaptation in their one-on-one interviews, but focus more on individual problems and solutions in the final group-produced film.

The process of making a video presents a unique opportunity for women to research their concerns for action, while providing valuable information that could be further analysed by others and that analysis shared in turn with the women.

Challenges and lessons for ActionAid

The challenge remains for ActionAid to help women concerned by climate change to get their message heard and validated not only in the power structures of the global policy community, but also within ActionAid itself.

Projects like this one are a result of ActionAid's sustained efforts to make women's rights operational, showing that participatory methods are key to translating rights-based approaches into programme work. Many ActionAid staff, as practitioners elsewhere, are sometimes unsure on how to 'do' women's-rights work, leading to confusion, frustration and often resistance. They are also concerned about the implications for the communities we work with of emphasising the importance of mobilisation and advocacy as part of our understanding of promoting change to claim rights.

Although ActionAid's understanding of a rights-based approach does not imply the suspension of provision of services, people sometimes have a more narrow interpretation of women's rights, one that revolves mostly around political participation and mobilisation (the more strategic concerns), rather than the provision of basic services (the more practical needs). As this project shows, however, exploring women's needs does not obstruct the path towards their empowerment. Women often tend to start the consciousness process by diagnosing their most pressing needs, and then move to more strategic thinking when realising what they need to do to produce change or claim their rights.

An important challenge remaining is the perception that women's rights and the demands of women at the grassroots are 'fluffy'. Often women's demands and requests are perceived as vague or too simple to stand up in the more sophisticated sphere of policy making. Women in their communities who go through the enabling process to come up with their own demands seem not to grasp or focus on more substantial or structural issues that policy makers can address.

However, their voices are part of the empowerment effort and their opinions are valid in that they reflect their experiences at the local level. It is true that in complex and more technical terrains such as trade and aid, where economic arguments and governance concerns are at the forefront, needs-based demands, such as the ones women have as regards adaptation to climate change, may appear difficult to channel. Moreover, demands for more participation at the local level, and for the empowerment of women, are often dismissed as challenges to local cultural norms – or as challenges which cannot be addressed by international policies.

Most issues that affect people at the local level are subject to a similar challenge, but women often face the double discrimination of having to first convince their own communities that they are entitled to come up with their own judgements and demands, and then confronting political spaces that have men as gatekeepers. Their demands will often be dismissed for the simple fact that women are advancing them. This needs to be discussed in international NGOs working with a rights-based approach, since the right to participate remains an important entry point for good governance and the sustainability of policies at the local level, including on climate change. It is the responsibility of international NGOs who have a privileged access at the local, national, and global levels of policy to enable and accompany the process for translating local demands to legitimate understandings within global debates. When climate-change debates focus exclusively on carbon emissions, ignoring the way adaptation-fund resources are allocated for women, it is necessary for organisations such as ActionAid to make sure that women's demands are translated in its own policy messages.

ActionAid's experience confirms that to promote rights – anybody's rights – does not necessarily require doing different things, but it does require doing things differently. Needs and rights-based approaches are part of the same spectrum. In some cases women's rights will be stumbled upon in this journey, rather than explicitly pursued, but this can also be an advantage as it can contribute to overcoming some of the obstacles mentioned. The use of new technologies should not be underestimated, and nor should the need for participation of the most vulnerable and excluded communities of women. The work done on climate change so far internationally and in Nepal are good examples of this, and show that understanding will change and ownership will be generated as the links between power, poverty, and women's rights become clearer.

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Notes

- 1 Participatory Vulnerability Analysis or PVA is an ongoing process of building awareness and understanding of why disasters occur and how they can be reduced. It is done by vulnerable communities themselves, together with their leaders and government, who do a joint analysis on problems, aggravating factors, strengths, and solutions. Mapping local hazards and identifying what makes a group vulnerable allows them to identify key issues and develop plans for follow-up action. The shared analysis and understanding of problems, solutions, and who is responsible allows communities to hold others to account while taking action on their own.
- 2 The initiative was proposed by Tamara Plush, an IDS Masters student in International Development: Participation, Power and Social Change, and one of the authors of this article. The study was implemented in collaboration with ActionAid Nepal, ActionAid International Emergencies and Conflict Team, IDS, Bheri Environmental Excellence (BEE Group), and the women's groups from Matehiya and Bageshwori.
- 3 BEE Group works in the Matehiya and Bageshwori VDCs. Participatory video workshop participants included members previously trained in disaster risk and reduction activities through the ActionAid Nepal's Disaster Risk and Reduction through Schools (DRRS) project.
- 4 Tamara Plush was the lead researcher and workshop facilitator in the participatory video action research project in Nepal.
- 5 In Matehiya VDC, the literacy rate among females is just 11.65 per cent (Gautam *et al.* 2007, 13).

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