

Gender Roles in the Production and Marketing of Allo (*Girardinia diversifolia*): an Income Generating Activity of the Kulung Rai Community, Makalu-Barun National Park Area, Sankhuwasabha District, Nepal

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Introduction

The nettle, *Girardinia diversifolia*, locally known as 'allo' in eastern and 'puwa' in western Nepal, is an indigenous plant valued for fibre. It is a stinging nettle species that grows naturally at altitudes of 1200-3000m in areas not suitable for agricultural crops.

The women of the Kulung Rai community play an important role in producing a variety of allo products. The Rai people, known as Kiranti in ancient times, live around the Arun River. At present, allo has become an important source of income in the district. Harvesting allo is an ancient craft, and the plant is still used for certain religious ceremonies, especially funerals. Over the past 13 years, the high demand for allo clothing has increased the price and made it difficult for local villagers to buy and use it for their ceremonies.

This paper is based on a study of mountain areas close to Makalu-Barun National Park in the Sankhuwasabha district of eastern Nepal. The main objectives were to examine the present gender roles in allo production and marketing; to review the marketing activities for allo products; and to assess the present constraints and opportunities for production and marketing of allo products.

Methodology

Data were compiled by interviewing the local people in villages such as Lakuwa, Chinkha, Sikidim, Dhankhila (Tamku VDC), Tenchong, Hoyangla (Sisuwatar VDC), and Benchong (Mangtewa VDC). Informal discussions were also held with different groups of women in different villages involved in allo production.

Allo Production Activities

Cultivation

The allo plant is found as an undergrowth in forests. A number of shoots come out of rootstocks, which are not up-rooted in harvesting. As many as 22 stems can sprout from a single rootstock. Regeneration from seed in the forest is very low. Allo plants regenerate after harvest. Local people grow allo along forest edges and on community lands or community forest lands. As the cultivated plants take longer to grow, as much as three years to reach the harvesting stage, local people prefer those that are naturally grown.

Harvesting and Processing

Allo is harvested from September to December. The best quality fibre comes from the harvests around early December before the seeds ripen. Most of the villages still practice traditional harvesting methods that involve cutting the plants approximately 15 cm above the ground. When allo-growing areas are several days walk from a village, the villagers harvest collectively in groups.

Following the harvest, the bark is stripped out; soaked in water for one or two days; boiled in wood ash water for three to four hours; and washed 2 to 3 times in running water accompanied by frequent beating. The fibres so extracted are mixed with clay and dried in the sun to make them softer and easier to spin. Again they are dried and soaked in clay, which is later removed.

Allo threads come in a variety of natural shades ranging from bronze to reddish brown. They can be bleached to a light natural shade. In some places, threads are dyed rusty red, steel blue, cerulean green, or black. The thread is then knitted into cloth, shawls, and other products, or is woven (either pure or mixed with yarn) into place mats or cloth for coats or export. There are a number of different patterns of cloth, but all range in width from 68 - 72 cm.

Allo Products and Product Development

Allo provides a very strong fibre that is used for different purposes such as ropes, trousers, and so on. Such products are mainly for local use. Allo cloth is also used to make various designer clothes such as jackets, pants, and coats. Tender young leaves are sometimes eaten as vegetables or fed to livestock like pigs. Allo is also a source of medicine. Allo seeds can contain 10-12% oil, which can be used for making soap and other oil-based products. Allo products are some of the unique handicrafts of Nepal.

Sex Roles in Allo Production and Marketing

Table 1 shows the division of labour by sex. Three activities (seasoning/cooking, fibre making, and product design) are only performed by women. As they have few other opportunities to make cash income, women devote their time to allo production. Men do participate in other activities, which are noted as joint responsibilities. Men are involved in harvesting allo plants and in transporting the harvest. They also support women in establishing the equipment necessary for production, like looms, spinning wheels, weaving materials, and so on. But women do all the other activities; and play the main role in designing allo products.

Table 1: Gender division of labour and decision-making in allo production and marketing

Activity	Male	Female	Joint	Remarks
Harvesting & Transporting			✓	Men are more active Sometimes men are also involved
Seasoning & Cooking		✓		
Fibre making		✓		
Credit and investment			✓	
Design of allo products		✓		
Marketing of allo products			✓	
Access to and control of income from sales of allo products			✓	

Markets and Marketing Activities

The major markets for allo products are in North America (USA), Europe, and Japan. These are niche markets with small quantities serving a special class of consumers abroad. Kathmandu is also a key market because of tourists from western countries and Japan.

To promote marketing of allo products, the Koshi Hills Area Development Program (KHARDEP) assisted the local people in establishing the Allo Cloth Production Club (ACPC) in Sisuwatar in 1997. The main activity of this club is to link local producers with traders or shopkeepers in Kathmandu to sell allo products. The villagers bring their products to ACPC, and the club sends the products to Kathmandu, where it maintains market links.

Constraints to allo production and marketing

The present major constraint is the limited quantity of allo production, which is also decreasing due to the lack of appropriate management practices. Another problem is that producers are not getting good returns. The markets are unreliable, and the producers have to depend on middlemen traders. Other major constraints are the traditional practices and styles made, insufficient technology used in production, and high selling prices.

Allo production is declining at present. The local people, believe the reasons for this include

- no time for seed dispersal due to harvest of immature plants that have the best quality of fibre that comes at the flowering times or early harvests;
- deforestation has reduced the shady areas where allo grows best;
- lack of moist, humus-rich soil and heavy fertiliser (limited open grazing land or restrictions imposed by communities on open grazing); and
- lack of a sustainable management programme.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Allo can be a great source for improving the livelihoods of poor people in mountain areas. With appropriate harvesting practices, allo is a renewable source of plant materials, and production can be sustained or improved. The issue at present is how local people can increase their share of the ultimate selling price. In order to increase the production of allo, local people need to cultivate it on wastelands. Local people, mainly women, need exposure to major markets and to establish marketing linkages.

The local people have provided some valuable suggestions that could benefit them if implemented. These include the need for training on appropriate technologies to improve allo production on a sustainable basis; the need to cultivate allo on lands that are unsuitable for agricultural crops; the need for direct links to reliable markets; and the need for training in product design and diversification to add value to production.