

Managing the triple roles

A study on rural mountain women's changing routine in Nepal

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Abstract

In Nepal, women's groups are organised around and charged with voluntary responsibilities in managing local resources (such as, savings and credit groups, women's upliftment groups, forest user groups). Given the fact that, women have productive and reproductive roles, moving them more towards voluntary community roles without commensurate reduction in the first two roles might overburden them. This study done in a small scale, interviewing 30 women serving in the executive committees of various women-only community-based organisations explored on their social roles outside and resulting changes in their household responsibilities. It was observed that women spent one to four days equivalent per month outside mostly attending the meetings of their committees and groups yet their workload within household remained unchanged. This suggested that the social roles outside came to women as an additional burden. However, it was concluded that, so long as these outside involvements serve their strategic needs (empowerment) through fulfilling their practical needs (awareness, training, savings and credit) they would continue to shoulder the emerging social roles outside together with their household roles inside.

Context

Women have triple roles – productive (tasks contributing to household economy such as crop and livestock production), reproductive (tasks to reproduce and care for the household such as fuel/water collection, food preparation and child care) and community (tasks supporting community improvement and community's social events and services). While the first two roles confine women more within their households, the third role could open up new horizons for them with the new institutional innovations. The user group approach has gained momentum in rural Nepal in managing local resources and women's groups are playing crucial roles in accessing local natural (forests), financial (savings/credit), and human (gender and caste awareness) capital for their livelihood.

In most parts of the world, women are far behind men in many respects. The lack of access to health and education, economic hardship in managing the household, long hours of un-paid domestic work, unclean, dusty and dirty work environment, frequent and unwanted child births, social injustices, superstitious beliefs and domestic violence are identified as the major causes which effected the status of women (Thapaliya, 2004).

Women's contributions within their households are considered unproductive; hence go unrecorded, unrecognised and unpaid. As the society progressed, women especially in the West, started working outside their households for wages. With exception of few instances of sharing the household work between men and women, the working women still shouldered the double burden of waged work and the bulk of household responsibilities (Hudson, 2001).

A study in three of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) funded projects in India and Nepal revealed, among others, that poor rural women were overburdened with work in the subsistence and domestic spheres. Thus, any additional involvement in income-earning activities on their part could be possible only if they sacrifice

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some other work. The study also showed that women's relative work burden increased more in those households in which the women were participating in IFAD-assisted projects, had gained greater access to resources, or had acquired greater control over decision-making within the household (Rahman, n.d.).

Similarly, in a middle-mountain watershed context in Nepal, women were found doing proxy roles in the community-based organisations (CBOs) for their spouses, yet their capacity building needs were ignored. As such, development of systematic capacity building plans based on the organisational as well as members' individual needs was suggested. Such plans should also address specific needs of female members in line with the assigned responsibilities. One of the issues identified by the study for further research was on whether women are overburdened with their increased social roles outside the households (Manandhar, 2005).

Above study findings generally suggest that women will have increasing work burden with their increasing roles outside the household – be it paid jobs or voluntary ones. While the outside social roles mostly are without financial incentives, they contribute towards women's empowerment – a process of generating and building capabilities to exercise control over their own lives. As such, the idea should not be to discourage women from taking broader social roles, but to promote appropriate measures towards their empowerment. The obvious measures are to: (i) reduce their time burden in subsistence and domestic activities by giving them access to time-saving technologies; (ii) raise gender awareness among the men for them to share with women the household responsibilities; and (iii) develop organisational capacity building plans addressing specific needs of female members.

In this context, this study was conducted to record and analyse changing workload of women due to their emerging social roles outside their households in a middle-mountain district in Nepal. The key research question was whether they were overburdened with their increasing community roles (social roles outside households) as they have to continue with their productive and reproductive roles (the household responsibilities).

The study was accomplished interviewing 30 female members selected purposively from the Executive Committees of (primarily) nine community-based organisations (CBOs) located in Kavrepalanchok district of Nepal. The CBOs selected were all women-only groups working as Women's Upliftment Groups (4), Savings and Credit Cooperatives (3), and Danuwar (Indigenous Nationality) Upliftment Groups (2). The Executive Committee positions were mostly non-salaried voluntary ones and most of the respondents were serving concurrently to more than a single group in the locality. The respondents, in terms of their latest association, were comprised of 13 (43%) from Women's Groups, 11 (37%) from Savings Groups, and 6 (20%) from Danuwar Groups. The interviews were carried out in the respective CBO localities (ward nos. 7, 8 and 9 of Panchkhal village development committee) in August/September 2006 using an interview schedule.

Findings

Socio-economic status

The respondents represented a mix of the highest hill caste group (Brahmin-47%), Newar (13%), the hill ethnic groups (20%) and the indigenous nationality group (Danuwar-20%). They belonged to economically active age group (15-59 years) and most of them (83%) were married with majority (57%) of them having two to three children each. One third of the respondents have already had in average two children each before they saw their 30th

birthday. But, this younger generation was comprised of most of the literate respondents (with education up to lower secondary level). Only 23% of the respondents have had higher education and 77% of them were primarily engaged in agriculture. All of the respondents have had a minimum parcel of land to work on and their annual family income exceeded US\$ 1/day. From caste/ethnicity perspective, no significant differences were observed in terms of their marital status, number of children, educational attainment and primary occupation. In a rural setting with agriculture as mainstay and prevailing practice of early marriage, it is encouraging to note that the younger generation of females was gradually exposed to higher education and some (13%) of them already taking salaried jobs.

Social roles outside household

As the respondents were drawn from women-only groups, they were found assuming higher and responsible positions in majority of the cases irrespective of their caste/ethnic background. One-third of the respondents have had assumed the highest designation (Chairperson of the Committee or Group). Likewise, one-fourth had served in the key positions (Secretary or Treasurer). Four of them had accumulated a combined experience of two decades and over, even up to 33 years in one case. Similarly, five of them had their experience ranging from one to two decades. For those who served for long years, that was also marked with career progression (yet voluntary and non-salaried) with their changing designations in the groups. But, most (60%) of them have had accumulated one to five years' of experience with their association in maximum two groups.

There were both tangible and intangible gains out of the respondents' involvement in social roles. Two-third of the respondents recognized that they had inculcated within them a good habit of making savings and productive utilisation of both their savings and loan facilities available from their groups. Another achievement reported was on their enhanced awareness (e. g., on public issues, health, education etc.) on which a total of seventeen counts were recorded. Few (five) statements were made on self-satisfaction, self-respect, and reputation as gains out of social roles.

Frequent training opportunities from the government and non-government programmes were observed for local capacity building targeting the female and candidates from disadvantaged background. Most (80%) of the respondents representing all caste/ethnicity had taken training on several topics, which were conducted locally. Most (75%) of the training were of a period of up-to one week and few (15%) of one to six months' duration. The training topics were mostly (77%) from agricultural sector (e. g., off-season vegetable, goat raising, horticulture, beekeeping etc.) and on income generating activities (sewing, weaving, candle making etc.). In general, those with long years of working experience had availed more training opportunities. Out of the numerous training (over sixty – in average two training per respondent), at least half of those seemed to be directly relevant to their roles outside (e. g., leadership, book-keeping, community mobilization, institutional development etc.) and/or in their household activities.

Changes in household responsibilities

In normal circumstances, with more outside roles, the respondents would not have covered up all of their regular household responsibilities. However, about two-third (18) of the respondents did not realize any change in their household responsibilities even after assumption of social roles outside. This suggests that their work burden within the household did not decrease in line with their increased social roles outside. Moreover, four respondents reported of even increased responsibilities within household mainly due to their spouses

being out of the village. Only eight of them (27%) reported of having lesser burdens on their household front. This was made possible with support from the family members in doing their household activities. The caste/ethnic background seemed to have no marked differences in the household responsibility changes reported. However, the respondents were unable to quantify the extent of increase or decrease in their household responsibilities (say, number of hours per month).

All respondents reported of having enough support (again unable to quantify the extent of support) from their family members (mainly from their spouse) in domestic work and farming. With this helping attitude, the respondents would have managed to lower down their household responsibilities as they take up more social roles outside. Thus, the reported status of unchanged household responsibilities for most of the respondents despite of their assumption of social roles seems inconsistent. Moreover, all of them (except three) thought that the household responsibilities would remain unchanged next year as well. It may be noted that the respondents might have projected their family relations very positively and that discussion on time-saving technologies was not included in the survey.

Problems and prospects

The most frequent outside activity that the respondents (90%) reported was the meeting attendance. While one fourth of them used only one day per month for meetings, it ranged from 2-4 days a month for the rest. For most of them, specific achievements out of social roles again were productive utilisation of savings and loan facility. Some also counted on enhanced public awareness; self-satisfaction and gender awareness as intangible achievements.

One-third of the respondents stated of having no problems in assuming their social roles. But, rest of the respondents invariably stated the problems of social allegations and their struggle in countering such allegations through raising awareness of local people. Again, the household affairs hindered at times in assuming independently their social roles, which required more mutual understanding and mediation among the family members. Despite persisting problems, majority (80%) of the respondents envisioned that they would see themselves in higher or leadership positions in five years time. However, they were unable to name their exact future position or designation.

Conclusions

Caste/ethnicity has no effect beyond certain level

In contrast to broader reality in rural Nepal, this study found the caste/ethnicity playing no significant role in determining the respondents' access to power and resources (designations, training) and in their perception and experience on changing workload. This might be because of their graduation in the decision making circles already within the groups and/or the result of past and present government and non-government programmes and projects targeting the disadvantaged caste/ethnic groups in their activities.

Outside social roles begets empowerment of women

Women's involvement in the outside social roles empowered them primarily through enhanced awareness on their rights, social issues and their potential contribution to the society. Moreover, access to group financial resources (savings, loan) helped them improve their living conditions. The ultimate result has been their enhanced self-esteem and social respect.

Outside social roles does not necessarily bring down women's household workload

Women's workload within household remained mostly unchanged and not decreased in spite of their increased social roles outside. Yet, they report family members' help in fulfilling household responsibilities. It might be interpreted in two ways – they receive nominal support from household members and up to two-three days' of engagement outside per month is not much a burden for them.

Quantification of women's workload changes has practical difficulties

In cases where women reported changes (increase or decrease) in their household responsibilities after their assumption of outside social roles, they were unable to clearly state the extent of such changes. It was not possible for them to say in concrete terms that the responsibilities or workload had increased or decreased by this many hours per month. Same was true in case of the support they received from the household members. Almost all just reported that they received enough support. As such, it was difficult to infer whether the emergent changes in their workload were significant or nominal.

Women's household responsibilities restricts advancement in outside social roles

The traditional household roles of women (mainly preparing food and child care) have restricted them in free movement out of their homestead, say for taking part in training of a longer duration. While they are aware on their potential contribution towards broader social cause, they are more restricted with no proper alternatives to their household responsibilities. As such, they had no concrete individual plans despite of their willingness to reach in even higher leadership positions within their groups.

To conclude, given the voluntary nature of women's social role outside, their advancement to it would be contingent upon the extent of free time out of their household responsibilities. So long as these outside involvements serve their strategic needs (empowerment) through fulfilling their practical needs (awareness, training, savings and credit) they would continue to shoulder the emerging outside roles together with their traditional household roles. They would not feel overburdened with increased social roles as they would be stepping out from those contributions considered unproductive into those considered productive by the given society.

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