

Making Forestry Decentralization Effective in Empowering Women Agencies

Harisharan Luintel and Netra Prasad Timsina

Introduction

This policy brief provides a glimpse of status of women's participation in the context of forestry decentralization process, particularly community forestry (CF) in Nepal. The brief highlights the issues of women's participation in CF and discusses the strategies for policies and institutions that contribute to enhancing women's position in the society. The study covered eleven Community Forests User Groups (CFUGs) in six districts (Morang, Kabhre Palanchok, Lalitpur, Mustang, Dang and Dadeldhura). It draws the empirical evidences from 39 focus group discussions, 402 household surveys and 47 key informant interviews from across the 16 ethnic communities between May 2006 to May 2008.

National Policy Contexts

Though the planned development in Nepal began in the late 1950s, its focus on the forestry decentralization and women's development started only from mid-1970s and mid-1980s respectively. Since then, women's role in conservation and development has been sought and as a result their participation has increased gradually. However, no clear and adequate strategy exists in forestry decentralization processes for empowering women and promoting their rights.

Although Master Plan for the Forestry Sector 1989 has made provision for women's participation in CF process, the legal and regulatory frameworks such as Forest Act 1993 and Forest Regulation 1995 have not made any explicit, exclusive and special provisions for the women's inclusion and promotion of their rights. Nevertheless, the CF guidelines have mentioned equal participation of men and women in the CF processes. Similarly Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation has shown a commitment by establishing a Gender Equity Working Group within ministry in order to promote sustainable and equitable development by integrating gender, poverty and social equity in natural resource management and conservation. However, this group has yet to be able to promote women's civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights effectively.

Reflection from the Field

The participation of women in Nepal's community forestry has been much appreciated particularly for their involvement in conserving forest resources. However, the field realities show that in most cases women are yet to be recognized as the social and political actors and responsibilities are often given to them for the task that has gendered division of labor such as forest management. Since state formal decentralization processes including institutions, processes, methods and guidelines do not recognize the traditional socio-cultural norms and gendered division of labor of women both at the household and community levels, the participation of women in the decision making processes is still poor. Often, traditional values and norms of community supersede the state policies and legal provisions that prevent and/or dominate women in the public sphere such as *Mukhiya* system in Mustang, *Chhaupadi* system in Dadeldhura and untouchability all over the country.

Though the trend of women's physical participation in CFs seems to be increasing over time, often they are treated as show-case either to fulfill the legal requirement or to draw the attention of the donor-funded projects and state forestry officials. Evidences show that more than 50 % women who have participated in the general assemblies did not table any proposal and remained silent. Although a few women are in the vital posts of CFUGs, they are often unheard during the meeting.

Most of the respondents interviewed during research process, mentioned that policy alone is not enough to make women participation easier. CF process has paid less attention to promote the forums through which women can better negotiate their interests. Rather these process compelled women to bear disproportionately higher cost and obtain lower benefits than men do. Almost all women's contributions remain unrecognized and unremunerated in terms of benefits and opportunities sharing. Even the state and community authorities undermine the capability of women in managing forest and related programs.

The main reason for undermining the importance of women in CF decision making process is the prevalence of patriarchal social norms in the society that prevent women from opportunities of education and equal rights to property.



Policy Recommendations

The present socio-cultural norms, values, and practices at the level of broader social system stand as the constraints for the promotion of women's rights in CF. However, it is observed from the research that women's agency in Nepal's community forestry has the potential to be turned into movements in order to defend the rights of women gradually. Following are some of the specific policy recommendations to promote women's rights through CF processes:

- Gender justice and democratic norms are important for women to be recognized as active political actors of decision making process which improves their access to and control over forest resources. For women to be active political actors, affirmative actions are required by reversing discriminatory policies. CF has established some good practices in order to provide spaces for women in decision making process that needs to be strengthened by the national policies and legislations.
- Since most of the strategic and operational gendered needs are directly or indirectly linked with the family and public domains of women, developing capability of the women to address gender needs should also be focused at both household and public levels. This demands a

sharing of work at household level for releasing women to public spheres.

- Legal and regulatory frameworks that give legal legitimacy need to be reviewed in such a way that the strategic policy provisions of gender needs have to be consistently incorporated at all level of policy documents including from act to the regulations, guidelines, directives and decisions. Moreover, proper mechanism for women to participate in the CF process is equally important.
- Gender issues need to be taken as political issues so as to prevent them from being reduced to the status of instruments for achieving only certain goals. The rights based approach to address the gender needs is essential and therefore attitudes of a wide range of social actors including policy makers need to be transformed.
- Since the external initiatives about gender and development are limited to the formal sets of procedures which are not owned by the community people on their daily practices, there is an urgent need to transform these formalities to more organic and practical practices in the process of community forest management.
- The efforts from the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation and civil society such as natural resource based federations and networks need to address the gender issues by focusing on the root cause of the problem i.e, patriarchal social structure and values. Therefore, women empowerment efforts need to turn to their focus both on men and women.

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