

## Balancing Gender in Community School Governance: Reality and Policy Perspectives

Basundhara Bhattarai

### Introduction

This policy brief gives the glimpse of the finding of a research on the empowerment of women in community school management. It draws the empirical insights from nine community managed schools from all five geographic region of Nepal. It shows that meaningful participation of women in making decisions is yet to be realized.

Involvement of local communities in the management of primary and secondary level education is common in South Asia. In Nepal also, involvement of communities in school management has a long history. Indeed, today's many government schools were established by the local communities. In the early seventies, the government nationalized all the community owned schools. From the beginning of the New Millennium (2002), the government has started to transfer schools back to community management. After the enactment of the recent Education Act and Regulation (2002), more than five thousands government owned schools throughout the country have gone back under community management.

### Research Findings

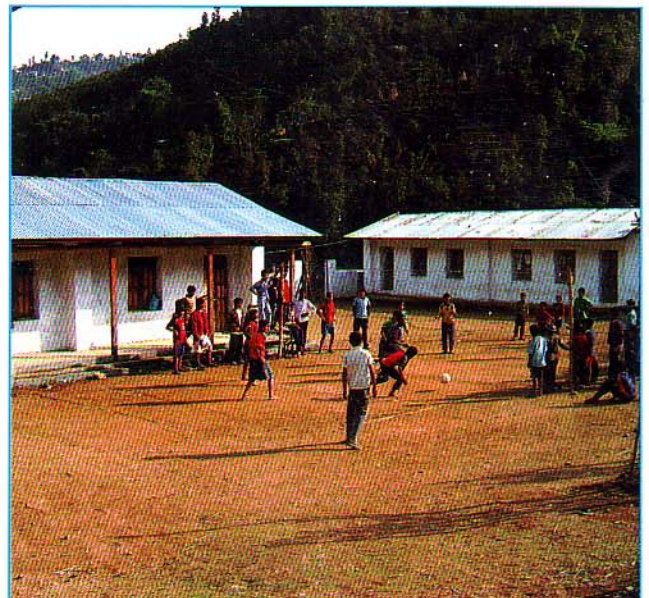
For the first time in the history of the educational development in Nepal, Education Act 2002 provided mandatory provision to include one woman parent in the executive body of the community school management committee. It is a good start for the empowerment of women in school management. Our research shows that in all the nine community schools studied, at least one woman parent has been included in the school management committees.

However, the participation of women parents in the school management committee, in most of the cases, is limited to physical presence. Women's agency appeared to have low deliberative competence and seen less empowered in influencing decisions. It is

compounded by the lack of education/exposures and limited social acceptance of women's contribution in school related management practices. Masculine mindsets of men continue to see women as incapable agencies. This has hindered women to come forward.

Though decentralization policies include a woman in decision making bodies, limited attention has been paid to the existing patriarchal norms which force women to lag behind men. Women are yet to be recognized as parents of their children. It is men who are official parents and all official correspondence/communication related to school affairs are done through the name of the men even though they are away from home for several years.

Cultural taboos like *Chhaupadi* (Women are considered bodily polluted during their monthly menstruation period and are not allowed to enter the houses and perform many others activities), has hindered women to take part in public meetings. Likewise, lack of language competency in speaking Nepali as a formal language is also found to be one of the important barriers in enhancing women's participation. Another reason for low participation of women is their time poverty. With the addition of



women's roles in public sphere, women's 'time poverty' is also increased with no change in household level gender roles and relations. This is exacerbated even more when meeting times are fixed during women's busiest time of the day. This has prevented women to be present at meetings. In terms of caste identity, *dalit* women have faced added discrimination in participating in decision making forums. This study identified some agents of change. Both men and women want to change the *status quo* of the existing gender relations but they are only limited to their personal level. Organizations of campaign to overcome the gender discriminatory practices were lacking in all the studied school sites.

### Policy Recommendations

The following specific recommendations are made for the empowerment of women in community school management:

- Demolish all gender discriminatory formal policies and practices which keep women in subordinate position to men. Gender discriminatory patriarchal structure is the key to be addressed along with the decentralization policies for the empowerment of women in school governance.
- Make official provisions to include both men and women as parents in each of the schools and in the corresponding official documents.
- Enhance the capacity of local level implementing institutions to better augment and address women's voices.
- Provide more opportunities providing exposure and training for women.
- Provide supportive environment and opportunities to women to get organized to challenge the andocentric mindsets in day to day discriminatory practices. For instance, formation of issue specific campaigns and movements against gender discriminatory policies and practices.
- Provide economic incentives to women (to cover the opportunity cost of time) when they engaged in public activities.

- Include elements of gender discrimination and social justice into school level curricula.
- Increase the number of women in the school management committees to provide critical mass of women in decision making bodies.



This policy brief is the outcome of research entitled "Decentralization and Promotion of Women's Rights in Nepal: Exploring Constraints, Opportunities and Intervention Avenues" conducted from May 2006 to May 2008 supported by International Development Research Center (IDRC).

#### ForestAction Nepal

P. O. Box: 12207, Kathmandu, Nepal,

Phone: 5550631, 5552924

Website: [www.forestaction.org](http://www.forestaction.org),

Email: [forestaction@wlink.com.np](mailto:forestaction@wlink.com.np)

#### HIMAWANTI Nepal

P. O. Box: 242 Lalitpur

Phone: 5536245

Email: [nhimawanti@wlink.com.np](mailto:nhimawanti@wlink.com.np)