

Gender Equity in Community Forest Management System in Nepal: A vision from Below

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ABSTRACT: The objective of the study is to explore and analyze issues related to equity and gender as an integral component of the Forest Resource Management System of Nepal. The aim is to add knowledge about equity and gender issues in community forestry programs launched at the grassroots level. Women's participation in formulation of constitution and operational plans, participation in executive committees, participation in general meetings, participation in community forest protection, participation in plantation activities, participation in forest product harvesting, participation in fund mobilization, participation in training and educational tours, gender roles in decision making process, women's awareness and attitudes regarding forest management have been elaborately discussed. Women's participation in forest related activities such as forest product collection is very high but due to the lack of knowledge, household burden and some socio-cultural norms and values, there is low participation in executive committees and fully absent in preparing constitutions, operational plans and decision making roles. Many factors are responsible for affecting women's participation in forestry, which include socio-cultural restrictions, gender role and lack of knowledge. It is essential to empower women in each and every aspect of community forest related activities and actions operated at the grassroots level.

INTRODUCTION

Natural resource management refers to the management of natural resources such as land, water, soil, plants and animals, with a particular focus on how management affects the quality of life for both present and future generations. Natural resource management is congruent with the concept of sustainable development, a scientific principle that forms a basis for sustainable global land management and environmental governance to conserve and preserve natural resources. Natural resource management specifically focuses on a traditional, indigenous, scientific and technical understanding of resources and ecology and the life-supporting

capacity of those resources. The term "*environmental management*" is also similar to natural resource management. Natural resources management means appropriation, distribution, utilization and conservation of natural resources and the legitimate way of controlling them. Natural resources are valuable environmental and economic factors for supporting natural systems and for promoting human welfare (Pandey, '99).

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN ANCIENT PERIOD

The natural resource management began form the ancient period with the simple society's known and nomadic bands of hunters and gathers when that

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had populated refuge areas like deserts. In Nepal, traditional and indigenous management of natural resources have been found from the historical period. *Talukdari* system, *Chitdari* system, *Shingo Nauasystem*, *Guthi* system, *Kipat* system, *Birta* system, *Jagir* system, *Rakam* system etc. are some examples of traditional and indigenous management systems of natural resources existed in Nepal. Forest resources directly, fulfill the forest related subsistence needs of women; poor and backward people as well as commercial needs of well-off people. They are providing inputs for agriculture, livestock and supply medical herbs, fruits, root-tubers, timbers and non-timber forest products. Forests are valuable environmental and economic resources for supporting natural systems and for improving human welfare (Sharma, '92). Human activities have always modified the forest environment, but in recent years the intensity and the scale of the forest use have increased significantly. Everyone benefits until people have treat forests as renewable resources, protect them to support other economic activities on a sustainable basis. Conversely, destructive exploitation of forests can cause serious economic, social and environmental losses.

Gradually Nepal government realized the importance of the forest as a result in 1942; the Nepal Forest Department was established in Kathmandu with three regional offices and twelve divisional offices as the line offices of the department. And people were also included in the conservation of the dense natural forest. But it was not successful without the active participation of women because women are the primary users of the forest products. Hence, women are also encouraged in the Forest Management Related activities and actions.

History of community forestry in Nepal

The word '*community*' is the basic concept in community forestry, but it is used very loosely. The primary connotation is a vague notion that community forestry means something like 'people's forestry'. This acknowledges that that "the people" should have a substantial role in decision making. At this level, that is, as a statement about the philosophy behind community forestry, there is nothing wrong with the term (Gilmour and Fisher, '91). They further write that

community forestry is a social process, concerned with the management of forest and tree resources by complex and dynamic social institutions and organizations.

Before 1957 no rules and regulations governed the use of the forest in Nepal. Believing that there was more than enough forest the Nepal Government paid no attention to developing the forest. Under the forest nationalization act of 2013 B.S. (1956/57), Nepal nationalized all of its private forests. The act was passed with good faith to protect and manage the forests and the Government expected co-operation from the people. However, the Government failed to explain the act to the rural people and the result was more destruction of forests by so called private owners converting forests into agricultural land before the land could be physically withdrawn from them. The real users did not destroy the forests; in fact in many areas in formal indigenous forest management systems persisted or were established by them in an attempt to preserve the forest reserve (Gilmour and Fisher, '91).

In 1939 B.S. (1978), a real change of forest policy was initiated with two new categories the Panchayat forest (PF) and Panchayat protected forest (PPF) and leasehold forest rules. They were intended to involve local communities and private interests in the management of the forests. Through the forest act of 1979, community forestry program were initiated to develop and manage both PF and PPF in 29 hill districts and 13 Terai districts with financial support from World Bank and other donor agencies. The government also established the Community Forestry and Afforestation Division (CFAD) under the Department of Forest to support community forest program, Thus, in 1980, the Community Forestry Development Project (CFAD) was set up in the hill districts with the assistance of World Bank. The main objectives of the CFDP was to relieve the shortage of fuel wood and fodder by raising people's participation and created consciousness in the projection and development of local forest resources.

The decentralization Act of 2039 B.S. (1982) introduced the concept of user groups (then called 'consumer committee') in an attempt to ensure the participation of the local population in development activities. The responsibility for organizing the user groups and implementing development activities was

given to the local village Panchayat. The amendment of the PF and PPF rules of 2045 B.S. (1988) adopted the concept of the forest user groups but still under the responsibility of the village Panchayats. The national forestry plan of 2033 B.S. (1978), the first forestry sector policy statement, re-emphasized and encouraged the role of Panchayat forests and Panchayat protected forests and provide a policy base from which forestry development work in the hills could proceed.

The latest forestry sector policy statement (the master plan 'MPFS'), valid for 21 years, was approved in 2046 B.S. (1989). The MPFS institutionalized the program approach to guide forestry development introducing six major forestry sector programs. The largest of this is the community the private forestry program with a central policy to manage forest resources through the active participation of individuals and communities to meet their needs. The MPFS stresses people's participation in forest resource management and gives the legal and organizational framework needed to increase the contributions of communities to forestry development.

Nepal is renowned for its innovative community forestry policy. Community forestry has been accorded the highest priority in forestry sector (HMG/N, '89) and for which supports are being received from a number of donor agencies. According to a recent record (29 June 2003), 999951 hectares of forests have been handed over as community forests to 12584 user groups (more than 1.4 million HHS), who are now managing these resources (Community Forestry Development Division, 2003). The current policy considers community forestry intervention as a process, which essentially involves handing over use rights of the government owned forests to the indigenous groups of people, who customarily hold the use rights of such forests (Gilmour and Fisher, '91).

If the forests of Nepal are to be successfully managed by local users, the Nepalese women mostly should participate. Women are responsible for collecting most of the fuel wood, fodder, leaf litter, leaf compost and bedding materials that is used in the village as well as for controlling grazing. As the primary forest users women should be actively involved in community forestry management. A logical extension

of the need to achieve women's participation at the grassroots level is the desirability of having women hold forestry sector jobs.

In the context of Nepal, especially in the hilly region, where 43.00 percent (HMG/N, 2011) of populations live, women constitute a large part of the agricultural force like in most of the developing countries. They also prepare process and market the agricultural produce (population division NPC, 2011). The involvement of village women in forestry activities has been very limited for the same regions. Most development projects have been unable to reach rural women in Nepal. Before probing further into some of the socio-cultural reasons it is interesting to look at the official government statement in women's involvement in forestry programs. The statement is appended below:

"The policies giving priority to all programs related to women, such as improving the status of women in the society, female education; employment opportunities for women are to seen to assist in controlling population growth. Since the main collectors and users of forests produce are women. The forestry sector could lend credibility programs involving women's role in community forestry and extension" (MPFS, '88/'89).

While this indicates that government has realized that women are the main inter-actors with the environment and so should be involved in community forestry program. The involvement of women does not seem to be an objective in itself but one of many approaches to curb population growth with guiding principles such as these; it is not difficult to understand why the large projects have had little success in enlisting the active support and participation of women.

Issues of equity in community forestry

The word 'equity' refers fairness or resource to the principle of justice. Equity involves getting a fair share, not necessarily and equal share. Equity is measure share of how evenly the benefit and burdens from the community forestry are distributed among its beneficiaries. Not equality but equity is a necessary condition for success in co-operative systems like community forestry (Bird, 2000). Similarly equity is a measure of how evenly the benefit and burdens from

the community forestry are distributed among its beneficiaries. Equity is associated whether accepted systems for the provision of inputs in production and protection activities are made or not, high level of participation in decision-making and access of all users to the community forest (Pokharel, 2000). In this respect Grosen (2000) states that the development of community forestry had raised concerns about inter and intra groups equity. The concerns about intra-community equity are often based on cases of “*Committee forestry*”, where the community elite dominates the group and committee exclusion of some community members from the group and a forest management system and a distribution of forest products among members, which are against the interests of the resource- poor members.

This can be argued that the social status of users influences the activities of the community forests. Politicians, so-called high caste people (Chhetri, '99) and elites are involved in decision-making while other users involve only in implementation. There are many potential benefits from community forestry for rural development but local elite people may try to capture most of the benefits. Rural elites generally own more land, bit houses and have larger family size and keep larger herds of animals. Eventually benefit from the community forest may trickle in their favor. The issue of equity in community forestry had received little attention to date (Malla and Fisher, '88) Sharma (2000) supports and thought the question ‘can community forestry help to arrow rich-poor gap?’ Similarly, Bird (2000) opines that a cursory examination of benefit distribution shows that committees (generally dominated by elites) are making decision about benefit distribution often to the detriment of the poor and secondly, that committees are more comfortable with equality than with equity. All users seem to trust a system that gives each household an equal of benefits.

Bhatia ('99) focusing difficulties and problems of community forestry UGs writes that many villagers, especially those belonging to disadvantaged groups, think that the community forests were handed over to the FUG committee members, who are often the village elites. They use the terms “*Samitiko ban*” (group’s forest). He further writes on disadvantaged that there are generally a few households from lower caste or disadvantaged groups such as Kami (blacksmith),

Damai (tailors) and Sarki (cobblers) in a FUG. These people are mostly dependent on the village elite as they either work as tenant farmers or farm laborers. As a result, they find it difficult to voice their opinions and interests in FUG assemblies. Bhatia ('99) also added that poor people who depended on ‘open; access rights for forest resources for their livelihood, e.g. charcoal makers, firewood sellers and sellers of medicinal plants no longer have access to the forests because they are no ‘closed’ by FUGs. These people have been forced to change their way of life. So, forest product must be distributed according to the needs of the users or according to their family size and household requirements and not on the basis of equality in many ways.

Equity is necessary for the success of community forestry. Equity and inequity situation directly affect the efficiency of the community forestry UG. Therefore, study of equity in community forestry is important to evaluate the success rate of the program. In this respect, situation of equity especially in participation, decision-making and its benefit sharing is very important.

Bird (2000) describes that “livelihoods, equity and gender issues in community forestry: gaining perspectives on poverty” three levels of equity, i.e. intra CFUG equity, inter CFUG equity and equity between those with community forests and those without. She, in regard to intra-CFUG equity argues that communities are generally more comfortable with equality than equity and a cursory examination of benefit distribution shows, firstly, that committees (generally dominated by elites) are making the detriment of the poor and, secondly, all users seem to trust a system that gives each household an equal of benefit. Levels of transparency and social cohesion must be quite high before CFUGs move towards equitable distribution systems (although they may target small amounts towards the poor before distributing the remainder equally). Bird, further argues that the high level of heterogeneity among communities has been cited as a causal factor in the inequitable distribution of benefits. Furthermore, when forests are protected by users, but not managed, the detrimental effect on the poor is likely to be high.

In relation to community forestry, the MPFS states that all villagers have equitable access to forest

resources. All the interest groups, farmer's women occupational castes ethnic groups, farmers, women occupational caste ethnic groups and poor have equitable access in decision-making and benefit-sharing (MPFS, 1998). Their impact will be effective for forest management, if not, fails to address the need of poor. It is essential to obtain the views of all level of people in benefit sharing. Different interest groups many have different needs from forest products. If the views of all people are not taken in care in decision-making of benefit sharing then the local elites capture the benefit more than other users (Chhetri, '99).

The community forestry policy has provided use rights to the user independently. Community forestry is primarily for the benefit of villagers. Equity in benefit sharing encourages the individual to work effectively in the sustainability of the forest management. Equity in benefit sharing is a big issue in community forestry. For the case of benefit-sharing there always a question arises: how should the benefit is shared? The users with the bigger family size expect equitable share whereas, other equal share. Mostly, in community forests benefit is equally shared among the households as all the households have equal contribution (of physical labor or any kind of fee) in the forest management activities?

Issues of women in community forestry management system: A discourse

Generally, it is said that women are the direct users of the forest products and they have a good knowledge of the tree growing requirements of various trees species. Women can provide some important contribution to community forest management. However, this potential has yet realized, as most societies seem to be dominated by male members. In addition, the participation of women in the use and management of indigenous and common wood lots needs to be addressed. Rural women are among the most frequent and most important forest users in Nepal. They are the ones who collect fodder and fuel wood and other forest products. They are the ones who suffer most in the face of inadequate sources of water and fuel wood in their locality. Forests for this reason alone become a major concern of women. It seems essential, therefore, that women be

involved in forestry development activities (Siddiqui, '89). Likewise, Acharya (2007) opined that women are known as primary users of forests and main gatherers of forest products. They play an important role in the protection of forests, though it goes unnoticed most of the times. This is because women are aware of the adverse effects of forest destruction and its negative impact on their lives. She further discussed, though women play such an important role in the protection of forests, their participation and presence in decision making bodies is often seen to be insignificant (Acharya, 2007).

Agarwal (2009, 2010) looked into communities managing their local forests in India and Nepal, to statistically assess how the gender composition of communities affects forest management decisions and found that groups with a high proportion of women in their decision-making body (EC) show significantly greater improvements in ecological forest condition in both regions than those with less women. Nepalese groups without men in the EC have better forest regeneration and canopy growth than other groups, despite receiving much smaller and more degraded forests. Especially older women in relevant positions make substantial differences. Agarwal (2010) found that interaction within the communities, groups with 25-33% women in the EC are especially effective in enhancing other women's participation.

Earlier studies conducted in Nepal have shown that Nepalese women in activities related to forest resources such as fuel wood, fodder collection, fetching water, farming, grazing animals and cooking are more or just as equally participative than male (Acharya and Bennett, '81; Landis, '84; New Era, '83). These studies have also shown that as primary users of forest resources Nepalese women, more than or similar to Nepalese men can supervise the proper utilization and conservation of forest resources. According to CFDP ('84) the formation of women's committee geared to involve women directly in the design and implementation of a forest resource management plan. In our socio-economic systems women play a vital role to collect and use the forest products. Some scholars (Acharya, '81; Bennett, '81) have indicated the system of collecting forest products differs from one ethnic group to another. In Maithili community women do 60%, Rai women 62%

and the *Parbatiya* community women do 78% of fuel wood collection. In all studies women's role as forest product users is indisputable. Likewise, in almost all villages of Nepal, there is no other alternative source of energy for cooking and heating except firewood and where is a short age of it. People use agricultural residues for these purposes. Now the Nepal government realized this fact and encouraged women to participate in forest resource management related activities and actions.

Women's daily involvement with resource collection and use, make them more likely than men to be aware of any reduction in the quality or quantity of their supplies. They are also more likely to be concerned about the implication of declining resources for themselves, their families and communities. Rural women therefore, constitute a potential reception target group for the initiation of community forestry programs. A very good example of women's role in protection and management of forest can be taken from 'Chipko Movement' in Uttarakhand Himalaya of India. The local women saved the forest resources in their communities from logging and deforestation by hugging the trees. The widespread participation of women in *Chipko* Movement has been frequently commented upon. Women has always played an important role in local economic life, and their

involvement in *Chipko* is due to their dependence on the natural environment (Guha, '89).

The earlier studies which were conducted in Nepal's, community forestry have shown that due attention has not paid on specific community groups such as women, *Dalit* people, and weaker economic classes. Issues of equity and gender also excluded from the social research. There are no sufficient researches about equity and gender in community forestry management. Traditionally, the foreign and Nepali scholars have given less attention to this aspect, thus resulting in a research gap in this issue.

STUDYSITE AND METHODOLOGY

Based on the nature of the study, *Bajiniko Pakho* community forest of Sima village located in Baglung district in western development region of Nepal was purposively selected for the study. This area is located at a distance of few minutes walking from the district headquarter and consists of certified community forest user group. The local people have developed their indigenous system of managing their own local forest for the survival. All 59 households of Sima village of ward no two were selected for the study. One member from each of the 59 households was interviewed. Among the 59 households 19 were Brahmans, 39 were Chhetris and 1 was Sarki (cobbler) (Table 1).

Table 1. Background information on the studied population for CFUG

Gauthalekanlo Community Forest User Group	
Population	59 households
Main caste and ethnic groups	Kshetri, Brahman, Sarki
Main religion	Hinduism
Female literacy rate	60 %
Male literacy rate	95 %
Main occupation: agriculture	Maize, Millet, Paddy, Wheat, Potato and vegetables
Forest types: with their local and scientific name	Sallo (<i>pinusroxburghii</i>), Uttis (<i>AlnusNepalensis</i>), Kafal (<i>MyricaEsculenta</i>), Dudhilo (<i>ficusnemoralis</i>), Khanyu (<i>ficusunia</i>), Fadelo (<i>erythrinachitria</i>), Paiyu (<i>betulaalnoides</i>), Baas, Kabhro (<i>ficuslacor</i>), Kutmiro (<i>listseamonopetala</i>), Chilaune (<i>schimawallichii</i>), Chutro (<i>berberischitria</i>), Mahuwa (<i>bassialatifolia</i>), Angeri (<i>pierisovalifolia</i>), Bhimsenpati (<i>buddleiuariatica</i>), Babiyo (<i>eulaliorsis binate</i>), Laligurans (<i>rhododendron arborecum</i>). Bushy mixed forest.

The present study was a qualitative study which adopted interpretative approach depicted the various activities and action carried out by the Community Forest Resource Management System operated at the grassroots level in Nepal. Qualitative data have been collected and analyzed properly. Then the results have been converged to get a better understanding of

women and men with a special focus on participation of women in community forestry management. The basic information was collected from household survey from all the 59 households and these were basically gathered through interview schedules. Primary data have been collected during the field study with the help of key informants interview,

participant observation and focus group discussions. At the time of fieldwork certain members of the community were selected as key informants comprising members of the forest user committee (FUC), and forest user group (FUG), local political and social leaders, head of the user committee, school teacher, housewives and women with knowledge of the local situation and forest guard including DFO. Some other knowledgeable persons on the topic, who were actively involved during the field period of this study also interviewed. Forest related activities and women's roles in forest related decision-making were also observed. Observation is an important technique of information collection, which is foundation of anthropological study. With this approach one may get access to a factor, which could be their socio-cultural processes in natural environment. This technique is very much applicable in the intensive study of women than that of male.

Necessary secondary data have been used from available materials on role of women in community forest management systems, previous studies, books, journals, and published and unpublished documents were used as secondary sources in order to obtain information in the aforesaid issues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Nepal has been implementing community forestry program for the last three decades. It is among the successful programs of Nepalese government. Community forestry program is recognized as a strategy to improve the condition of the forest and to satisfy the household needs of the forest products in the rural area. Community forestry involves handing over the rights to use and manage the forest to local people who have traditionally used the forest and are willing to accept management responsibilities. Community forestry is first implemented through the establishment of a legal and institutional framework including the revision of legal norms and regulations for forest management, the development of National Forest Plans and the strengthening of decentralization processes to sub-national levels of government.

History of forest management in the study village

According to the key informants, during the Rana period, local forest was almost fully destroyed. There

were the forest guard who had the responsibility for forest protection. In 1957, whole Nepal's forests were nationalized to protect, manage and utilize them so that forest would not be depleted. The government expected co-operation from the local people. The result was not like that because people were restricted to protect and use the forest as their requirements. The government nationalized local people's private forests also. Local people were not satisfied with the government's decisions as a result government's policy failed. The result was more destruction of forests by the local people converting forests into agricultural land. But the people who benefitted from the forest could help the government in forest management. The PF and PPF rules were promulgated in 1978 as part of the implementing rules of the 1961 forest Act. Under these rules a community can request the government to assign limited areas of forestlands to be managed by and for the community. The local community of the study area also takes responsibility for forest management and protection as community forestry in 2047 B.S. In this respect, a ninety years old key informant claimed that, during the Rana and Panchayat period this forest was managed and protected by '*Jimwal*'. After his father's demise he got the complete responsibility of forest protection and management. After the demise of Rana period and the abolition of '*Jimwal*' system, the government had nationalized all forests and had taken responsibility of protection and management. This led to an increase in massive deforestation as because people did not feel the responsibility of forest management and protection.

For the protection of local forest and natural environment a village level management committee was instituted in the study area. Some strict rules and regulations were also formulated and implemented properly by the villagers. These rules and regulations are strictly followed by the forest user group (FUG) and forest management committee (FMC) of the village. The main objectives of establishing the management committee are:

- ◆ The villagers realize the necessity to protect and manage the local forest properly because the forest area was degraded massively day by day

- ◆ To fulfill the needs of forest products such as firewood, fodder, timber, leaf litter, fallen leaves, dry twigs etc. for the use of local villagers
- ◆ The forest is being deforested rapidly in multiple rates so that the people of Sima searched the techniques of forest protection
- ◆ To make the natural environment green and to increase the water resources
- ◆ To protect the village from landslide
- ◆ As a result they found the model of community forestry and established a village level forest management committee.

Community forest management: question of gender equity

Women play vital role in forest management because women are the primary users and protectors of the forest. Women's participation in community forest management is most indispensable in order to achieve the required objectives. In this study, respondents were asked about their main responsibilities related to the community forest management activities like patrolling, planting, weeding, thinning, pruning and harvesting and on institutional development level attending community meetings and general assembly meetings including gender role in decision making. The question of women's involvement in Community Forest Resource Management was pertinently raised in the course of this study.

Constitution and operational plan formulation

Customarily constitution and operational plan preparations were done by males in most of the community forest. In the initial stage operational plan and constitution was articulated in the presence of local people with the help of technical assistance of district forest office. According to the key informants of study area some elites and politicians called the villagers general assembly to discuss regarding the formulation of constitution and operational plan. All the users of Bajiniko Pakho forest were the general members. Most of the household participated in the assembly and they gave authority to the local

politicians, elites and educated person to formulation the constitution and operational plan. They discussed and prepared the draft of the constitution and operational plan and submitted in the next assembly for the discussion. After the general assembly it was passed, a committee of 21 members was formulated, and then they registered in district forest office, Baglung on B.S. 2047/05/16. Among the 21 members of the forest user committee no one member was a woman. It was reported that unfortunately the general assembly participants all were male. Socio-cultural factors like some norms and values are responsible for this. It can be said that women are ignored. Women were not informed at the time of assembly. Therefore a number of the no participation group can be explained with the fact, that men felt better informed about assembly than women. This attitude indicates that women of the study area are severely oppressed by the social and cultural norms and values.

Participation in general meeting

In the study area normally general meetings were held twice a year but it may be called when the user committee feels necessary. Generally, the general meetings solve the newly created problems, which are not mentioned in the operational plan or not authorized to the user committee. Community forest user committee members are also selected by general meeting. All the households were called in general meetings and almost all attend. Women also participated actively. Some respondent women said, "Women also keep their views and are heard by the users committee members". Some other women who were not respondents told that the committee members did not care their problems, which they spoke out in the general meetings in the general meetings, mostly male people keep their opinions, which are accepted and shared by the majority.

Participation in executive committee

The executive committee members were selected by the general assembly. No voting has been needed till the formation of the present committee in the study area. Usually honest, active, educated, having leadership quality, gender, ethnicity etc. were taken in consideration during selection of the committee members. New regulations demanded that 33 % of a

decision making body must comprise of women so they must now step up and join the committee. Women were not confident, but seeing the few that have joined, most women were motivated to be a part of the committee and voice their opinions. Women key informants argued that they were less educated than men when the operational plan was firstly formulated and now they did not have time to go for official work due to household chores. Among the 21 executive members there is only one member who is a woman. Among the 59 households, 19 households are Brahmans, 39 households are Kshetri's and only one is Sarki's (cobbler). By the recent general assembly three women are included in the committee. From the informal discussion with the chairperson and secretary, it was observed that decisions forest related activities are decided by both of them separately and other remaining members accepted it without any condition. But now women are also being educated and interested to join the executive committee if they will get opportunity.

Participation in community forest protection

It is reported from the field study that women are very active in forest protection activities. Forest user group has appointed one *Heralo* (forest watchman) for protection and guarding of forest. As the forest area one watchman was not enough. So, the users began to be involved in protection by volunteer guarding on the regular rotation basis. The watchman not only guards but also report to the committee whether the users are guarding actively or not. The users living far from the forest (secondary users) and other closer to the forest (primary users) had equal duty and equal access. In Bajiniko Pakho FUG, males and females both actively participated for guarding the forest. The households closer to the forest sent men and women equally for guarding depending upon free time. But from the households that were far usually male participated because women were usually engaged in household chores. Rich families did not send their wives, daughters or sisters. In free time, usually males wanted to walk outside the house, so males used to go participate more frequently than females. If *Heralo* is unable to hold culprit, any member of user group could catch the culprit who would be punished according to the nature of the crime. If the

cattle were seen in the forest or planted area, both males/females chased them away. If somebody was found with harvesting materials on the spot, materials were taken back by *Heralo* or others who caught the culprit and he/ she would be punished economically as well. If the males caught the culprit, they excused him/her for the first time but if females caught them, they were punished.

Participation in plantation activities

Based on FGD, plantation activities were done every year during the rainy season. The user group would plant in barren and deforested land where the plants have already been dead. Every year the villagers conducted the plantation in the surrounding barren land. According to the respondents, plantation program in community forest was usually done in June-July. One key informant Padampani Sharma, 72 years old, who was the employee of district Forest office and founding president of *Bajiniko Pakho* community forest, informed that both men and women would do the plantation work. However, male were engaged to prepare the bed for planting the seedling whereas women were sent to bring the small plants from the local nursery. It was found that in the study area there was high discrimination between males and females. Males and females got different wages for the same work. Males were paid with high wage whereas females got low wage. Even though, women were not included in community forest management committee, they have positive attitude for forest protection. Near about 85 % of women of study area remarked 'if we do not help to forest protection, only males cannot do everything because we various forest related activities such as plantation, weeding and harvesting the forest products'. Some women social, cultural and environmental activists claimed that "males do not inform and they do not ask about the forest management but we want to involve ourselves in forest management committee. If committee will change we will involve forcefully". But males claimed that they informed females. Females again claimed that the males did not give importance to females because they thought that females cannot understand about the program. These controversial statements and composition of management committee show that the real users and protectors of the forest and natural

environment are totally ignored by males.

Participation in forest product harvesting

Forest user group could not use the forest as their personal interest and requirements. They had to follow the rules and regulations, which were articulated by forest user committee. According to the respondents of the study area, forest was the most important natural resources, which have been benefitting the people from very beginning. They further told that there was heavy dependence on forests for the essential elements of fodder, fuel wood, leaf litter, fallen dry leaves and timber.

In the study area cattle were strictly prohibited to graze in the entire area of the community forest. If somebody ignored the rules and allowed cattle for grazing, they were fined. Villagers were not allowed to collect green litter for animal fodder from community forest. They did not have private and open grazing land. Unavailability of open grazing land directly affected the raising of livestock. According to the respondents the most interesting system exists in this village was that when the buffalo gave birth to her calf, they used to sell the newborn male calf, and if they do not need she calf that was also sold. It was because of absence of grazing land and fodder.

The respondents reported that especially females harvested the forest products. Females collected more than 90 % firewood and fodder. Normally, firewood for rainy season was collected in winter (November - February) from the public forest. Community forest was open for the villagers once in a year. Villagers used other agricultural residues maize stalks and dry twigs as the substitute of firewood for cooking. *Kusum* (pine seed) was also used as firewood. Likewise, fodder was also very important for livestock raising. Animal husbandry was the main occupation and an integral part of the agro-based economy of Nepal. In the study area it was found that people domesticated small scale of animal only for their household use. Because of the lack of fodder and pasture they were forced to domesticate small number of animals. Women were directly related with fodder. In the study area buffalo, cow, goat and oxen were domesticated. Almost all households needed fodder and animal-bedding material so they fulfilled required fodder from their own private land. Those people who did not have

own private land with trees were completely depending on public forest. But those people who were economically sound bought the material from others. Women were directly related with fodder use and collection. The collection of green grass was also responsibility of women as firewood collection. 93.30% women and 6.71% men were engaged in fodder collection. But in firewood collection males were also engaged for tree cutting. According to the key informants, if women were unable to collect firewood and fodder due to some physical problems then the teenagers, children and males used to help women to collect the forest products. Fodder, animal bedding and leaf litter collection was done by children. Female children participated more in these activities as compared to their male children counterparts.

Participation in thinning and pruning

In the study area, according to the key informant, the thinning and pruning activities of BajinikoPakho community forest were normally done in the months of Aswin (mid September - mid October). This had to be done perpetually once in every three years. For this, one person had to participate compulsorily from each house. Mostly males were not interested in pruning and thinning so women would do the job. As other forest activities, all men and women participated in thinning and pruning of the forest. For the better management of the forest they divided into five blocks so that Silvi-culture would be easier. All the forest users under the guidance of committee carried the activities like thinning and pruning on a rotational basis. Some of the members of the committee were trained on the pruning and thinning. After thinning and pruning, the removing parts of the tree were rationally divided among the users. For the Silvi-culture children under the age of 15 were not allowed. In the field study, it was found that males were engaged in supervision, thinning and pruning whereas females were found busy in collection of thinned and pruned branches and splitting stuffs. It was noted in the field that women actively participated in forest related activities than the men. This was because women could get firewood and dry litter during this time. They would collect forest products for household use. Nowadays women became more active and should participate in the forest activities forcefully

because most of the males of the village are in foreign employment. Some respondents stated that the movement of foreign employment has become a serious social problem as faced by the old people living in the village.

Participation in community forestry fund mobilization

As women's decisions were not considered convenient in forest management activities, women were not well informed about fund mobilization and their decisions are not also deliberated.

Some money was there in the fund of forest user committee. Selling of forest products and fine collected the money, which was used in the infrastructure development of community and forest development. Out of this fund, people have made a temple of goddess Durga Devi and Ganesh in the village. Likewise they have repaired two damaged drinking water well and they gave some funds for drinking water pipeline. Therefore, they were able to build drinking water reserve tank and tap in the village. They built a school building in the village using this fund. In Durga pooja, in every Dashain, they sacrifice a goat and a pair of pigeon purchased by this fund. The fund was managed based on mutual understanding of the villagers. Likewise, the priest of the temple was annually paid by this fund. By the infrastructure development most of the users were benefitted. The poor users were focused for loans. Other social works managed by the committee were gravelling the local road, buying electric poles and wires for the village, donation for the local school and local club, providing loans for poor, construction of public water tap in the public place, silvi-culture etc.

Participation in training and educational tours

As key informants reported that some users of the study participated in training of the community forest management, training of silvi-culture and educational study tours. Two males from Brahman caste and one female from Kshetri caste participated in an educational tour. They visited various community forests from Kathmandu, Gorkha Damauli, Pokhara and Morang etc. Likewise, two women, one from Brahmin, one from Kshetri and one man from

Brahmin castes participated in the training of silvi-culture. Bajiniki Pakho CFUG started silvi-culture practice in the community forest. The technicians from the forest office had trained the users in a group about plantation, weeding, thinning, pruning etc.

Gender role in decision making process

The frequency of decision-making process of women in forest management was lower than men. Forest management consisted of rules and regulations towards community forest management, related with the utilization pattern, plantation, weeding, pruning, thinning etc. In these aspects there were no values of women's decision. According to the respondents of study area, the UG committee with the consent of all members took almost all decisions regarding the forest management. Men and women both attended the meetings and every member was involved in decision making. The women members of the committee informed that, only male member gathered and decide all about forest related matters. But women never knew who and when decided the matters. Women were informed the decisions at the time of function. Even if the women attended the meeting, they would be in minority and their decisions too. Some social and cultural norms and values were responsible for this. It was the product of patriarchy. Most of the males expressed that if women were capable and matured enough to make decisions, their decisions would be recognized. But some women of the study area opined that the society had not reached yet to the level of cognizant to accept the women as decision makers. The main reason of this was most women were illiterate so that women's decisions were ignored. However, it was noted that women were involved in each and every aspect of forestry including its management related activities and actions.

Awareness and attitude of women regarding forest management

In the observation of the author, women of the study area were conscious about natural resources and they were slowly realizing the importance and values of forest and natural environment. Nowadays, females understood their own responsibility and importance and thus became aware about forest protection and management. Women's attitude was

positive towards forest protection and management. If women did not realize the importance of forest environment, existing forest would be changed into barren land because of massive deforestation. It was because women were primary users and protectors of the forest but not the destroyer of the forest. If females wanted to destroy the protected forest they could spoil it within very short period. In the field study women expressed that “cutting the tree is our own spoil” so they did not want to spoil that themselves at any cost. Women of the study area further described that “we have to make our hills green, should not cut down the trees and we could only use the trees products but not the tree itself”. This saying was sufficient to understand women’s attitude and awareness regarding forest management. In this respect they further explained that they should protect their forest for their future generations as that would be useful to them also. It shows the women’s seriousness about forest. In this reference, a 69 years old women key informant Mrs. Prem Kumari declared that, “we females, protect this forest. If we (female) do not protect it, no one (male) can do. The males cannot do anything without our participation”. To justify herself she further enlightened that by saying a local Nepali proverb, “*Jaha kath yaha paripath*” meaning (where is sufficient wood, there is life, and green forest is the property of the world. Through this statement, one can easily recognize the women’s positive attitude towards the protection of the forest resources.

On the other hand, male respondents of the study area told that, females realized the importance of forest these days than the past. Females are now convinced and trying to develop and protect the local forest. They used to go to public forest of other VDC even they had to spend 5-6 hours walking to reach the forest. Women did not want to extract their own forest in an uncontrolled and irregular way. Respondents further explained that the women strictly followed the rules and regulations, which were formulated by the user committee. In this context women said, “If we are close to the forest, we will be benefitted”. Thus, awareness must be created about the consequences of deforestation, environmental degradation and also regarding the advantages of preserving ecological and environmental balance. For this women’s full

participation should be encouraged by providing appropriate training for the preservation of forest and environment.

It was also observed in the field study that women recognized the importance of the forest for their existence. Women believed about the indirect advantages of forest. Women began to know that that forest protects soil erosion, protects water spring and helps in rains also. In response of the question about women’s awareness, women themselves replied that landslide usually caused a panic among them because their local forest was being devastated day by day. So they wanted to plant trees and prevent the landslides. If they have sufficient trees in the forest, it would rain adequately. Women key informants again claimed about the importance of forest, “plantation must be done in the barren hills and forest. We should have huge responsibility for the forest. Forest is need during our life and even after our lives because woods burn our body after the death. We are unable to do anything for the forest but forest protects us”. Women have clearly understood their existence is clearly related with forest. Females also realize functional and interactive relation between women and forest. Women again mentioned in single voice, “forest should be protected, planted and well cared though don’t use it crudely, our coming generation may use it. The birds will settle in green trees and we can listen their chirping. There will be no harm by landslide but will be enough sources of water”. This thinking of women is great in all terms.

In this respect the author articulates a heart touching real story of women key informant in her original words. Ramkala Upadhyay, a 68 years old lady told her sorrow comparing with forest. She has six children among them four are disable. She has compared the disables with forest or plants and says, “I equally love my disable children and plants. Like my children, the plants are also innocent. For me, cutting the branches of trees means as cutting the hand and legs of my own disable children and I compare cutting the trees is equal to killing my own disable children”. Hearing this reality, one can easily understand the awareness of women of the study area towards the forest. At the end one should say that “women are the primary users and protector of the forest and they have very good understanding, and positive attitudes.

CONCLUSION

The involvement and participation of women is crucial for the success of community forestry program because they are the key actors, agencies and beneficiaries of the program. Many field studies suggest that women spend more time in the forests than men collecting various forest products. Thus, scarcities of forest products immediately affect women who have to endure the hardship of walking further to collect fuel wood and fodder. In addition, women can contribute in the identification of the real users of the forest area and have an intimate knowledge of tree species. Thus, women should play a vital role in decision-making process related to forest resource management and utilization. Hence, one can say that women play the vital role in the forest management because women are the primary users and protectors of forest. The role of women in forest management is very important. The stark reality is that, the community avoids women in many ways. It is felt that in order to develop the forest or even to stop the rapidly increasing deforestation process, only government and people's effort is not enough, local women themselves should be made conscious for their active participation in community forest management. Now there is a great realization that women's participation plays a vital role in community forest management as because rural women are the main users of the forest products such as fuel wood, fodder etc. In the absence of forest women cannot survive.

This is the reason women love and want to live with the forest. In the course of management of community forests, many questions regarding equity and women's participation, decision making, benefit sharing, planning, implementation of rules and regulations arise. The users generally believe in equality rather than equity. Decision-making is more or less influenced by males; however, women's role is also appreciated sometimes. But the poor people who depend on 'open accesses' right for forest resources for their livelihood, e.g. charcoal makers and fuel wood sellers are badly affected as no longer have access to the forests because they are restricted by the FUC. Some people have been expelled by their traditional occupation (especially blacksmiths). As a result, they have been forced to change their

traditional work and life to make their livelihood promising and easier.

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