

Community Forest Program and Women Empowerment: A Study in Gorkha District

Dil Bahadur Gurung¹

Lecturer of Sociology at St. Xavier's College

Email: dilgurung44@hotmail.com

Abstract : *Globalization has had a powerful impact on individuals and societies. Some have argued that Nepal entered the age of globalization only in the 1980—after Nepal began to liberalize rules of international trade. Globalization however, also began to impact individuals and societies in Nepal because of the expanding presence of international development agencies there. One such expansion of international agencies was in the community forestry sector.*

This paper explores how the internationally driven community forestry program in the Gorkha District of Nepal and the associated Community Forest User Group (CFUG) there, is empowering local women. Although forest conservation programs started from 1960s, the initiation of the community forestry program in 1993 helped convert the nationalized forests into community forests that were handed over to local communities. The shift of the ownership and management responsibility of local forests to the local community (CFUG) also shifted the privilege and power to the locals. The initial intent of the program was to protect forest and wildlife and mitigate the hazards caused by deforestation. In time, however, the program was expanded to the holistic development of the community, including the empowerment of women within such community.

Key Words: Globalization, CFUGs, Women Empowerment.

Background

After Nepal entered in the age of globalization in 1980, a number of development agencies started bubbling up around the country holding different development themes and agendas. One of them was forest conservation nevertheless, the Nepal government had already started this theme in the 1950's but due to lack of monitoring system, stakeholders and ownership among the local people, the forest conservation program crawled with insignificant growth rate. Later in 1993, the government endorsed the forest act and implemented a forest program robustly converting national forest to community forest. These forests were handed over to the local communities in order to make local communities more responsible and accountable towards the forest. The early intent of the this program was to protect forest, wildlife and to mitigate possible hazards due to earlier deforestation but after Nepal entered the globalization process, development agencies started concentrating collaborating with the government to protect and conserve forests. Similarly, an ongoing climate change and challenges it has brought to human societies is what daunting the developing countries like Nepal. Since the trade, industries, urban cities, transportation has scaled up and scaled out, its negative consequences have started visibly

¹ Ph.D. Scholar and visiting faculty at Tri-Chandra Multiple Campus-Tribhuvan University.

emerging up around human societies. These consequences range from increasing temperature to droughts, wilder weather, changing patterns in rain and snow, melting glaciers, shrinking sea ice and rising sea level. Further, this has increased complexities in human health including challenges in local livelihood and so on. Beside all these, Nepal is highly vulnerable to climate change and its associated impacts due to its distinct topography. This vulnerability has been accelerated even by high poverty, slow economic growth and lack of sufficient resources to mitigate such associated hazards. In particular, communities living in different ecological zones of Nepal are at high risk from climatic adversities. The people living in Mountains and Hills have high landslide risk whereas Terai lands are much vulnerable to flood related climatic adversities. There are a range of factors that contribute to the severity of this situation such as fragile mountainous ecosystems, prevailing poverty coupled with slow economic growth and lack of both the financial and technical resources necessary to adapt to climate change. In addition, climate change has lately mainstreamed into the national development planning process. Other than this, conflicting social and political priorities in the country, low or lack of awareness and expertise are making climate change a difficult national agenda.

Climate change is considered as one of the greatest threats posed to conservation and livelihood initiatives worldwide including Nepal. The situation is becoming worse as we release more and more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Though Nepal contributes ‘...only around 0.027 per cent...’ (MoPE², 2016) of greenhouse gases of the total global share, all those residing within Nepal are equally facing its negative impacts, i.e. similar to the other developed countries. The impacts of climate change are already observable in the Himalayan ecosystem. Glacier lake outburst floods (GLOF) caused by rapidly retreating glaciers and the hasty formation of Glacier Lakes is just an example of risks due to climate change in Nepal. Other observable impacts of climate change such as changing rain pattern, snowfall pattern, and loss of biodiversity, scarcity of water, decreasing food productivity and increased frequency of landslides and flooding. All these impacts lead to a significant threat to people’s livelihoods, safety, security and ultimately the national GDP. Notwithstanding, the frontline to face these impacts are, as always, mostly the poor and marginalized people living in hilly and mountainous terrain.

In order to mitigate all these direct and associated hazards, the government took a bold move and adopted a forest protection strategy which started ‘...officially in late 1970s...’ (Kanel & Kandel, 2004). Later, enactment of Forest Act in 1993 and Forest Regulation in 1995 gave sufficient space to significant increase in the number of community forest users. In between, nationalized forests were handed over to local communities—Community Forest Users Group (CFUGs³ hoping ‘... this would be an incentive for the communities to conserve and restore...’ (Pandey & Paudyal, 2015) the transferred forest to local communities. This brought a deep sense of ownership and responsibility to the local community upon the transferred forest; however, the intent of the community forest program was also ‘...to meet the basic forest products required by the communities through active participation in forest development and management... mobilization and empowerment of the members of community forest user groups...’ (Kanel & Kandel, 2004a). Now, it has been over two decades that government owned forests have been transferred to the

2 Ministry of Population and Environment

3 CFUGs are legal, autonomous corporate bodies, governed by a general assembly consisting of all households in the boundaries of the applicant community, and an executive committee chosen by the CFUG through consensus or election

local community groups. In the recent development, ‘all the forest user groups are voluntarily united under the umbrella of the Federation of Community Forestry Users of Nepal (FECOFUN⁴) to ensure their rights are protected...’ (Dahal and Chapagain 2008). The main intent to develop and operationalize FECOFUN is to advocate the rights of forest users as well as strengthen the role of CFUGs in policy making process, to ensure inclusiveness, social justice, good governance & deepen democracy in CFUGs and provide various supports and services. In addition, several I/NGOs are closely working with government, CFUGs and locals in different community forests and protected areas (PA) in order to protect forest, to diversify local livelihood and to mitigate possible impacts of climate change.

The Research Gap and Rationale

Currently there are 19,361 CFUGs (MoFSC⁵, 2017) in Nepal and out of them, 1072 are women managed CFUGs. In most CFUGs, men have more domination on decision making roles, forest related assembly, meeting and visits in different locations and; all these indicate unequal gender participation in CFUGs notwithstanding, the community forest is a participatory approach loaded program. Almost all women in rural settings are involved in livestock farming and agriculture which means their direct dependency upon forest resources on a daily basis but despite this, women are still not being actively involved in participatory roles such as in CFUGs (Winrock International, 2002). Indeed, less participation of women in FUGs means less chance of women empowerment in days ahead.

Despite the fact that women are more than half of the total population in Nepal, they have always remained the most impacted group in comparison to men due to different social practicalities and cultural hurdles. According to Gilmour and Fisher (1991), local elites with high social status, wealthier and educated are influential in local decision-making processes of CFUGs and to date, ‘...women, poor, marginalized and *Dalit* groups were less benefited from Community Forest than the wealthier and influential household (Maharjan 1988). Kafle (2008) also writes that ‘... rich class households are getting more net and gross income from the use of community forest products than poor and middle class households’.

On the contrary, few research shows women empowerment since the enactment of forest policy in Nepal along with decreasing ‘...trend of forest degradation...’ (Kanel & Kandel 2004b). In order to reduce differential vulnerabilities and impacts on women, their empowerment⁶ is necessary in different parts of the country. Other than this, to overcome unequal opportunities for women, to make them capable of earning a living through education and skills, to reduce domestic violence and poverty, positioning them in decision making level and finally to make them participate in national development, women empowerment is essential.

There have been different programs throughout the decades to empower women in various rural parts of the country and one of the salient programs is community forest program whose one of

4 FECOFUN is a formal network of CFUGs. Inception of FECOFUN was in July 1995 to strengthen the role of users in policy making processes.

5 Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation

6 Women Empowerment denotes improving women’s strength in social, economic and political arena. In detail, providing quality education, technical skills, their possession in decision making level, economic growth, gaining respect and dignity for self, complete control of their life (within and outside home and workplace), complete control on own body, having equal rights to participate in social, religious and public activities, gaining equal social status, opportunity for education, rights for social and economic justice, employment opportunity despite of gender bias etc. are women empowerment.

many standing agenda is women empowerment now. The temporary working plan of CFUG also evidently states that community forest aims to empower women, gender awareness and reduce gender inequality. However, the document does not explain how the forest program shall empower women of user groups. This study explores if community forests are empowering women in different aspects (indicators) and if such empowerment have any relationship with community forest programs.

Method and Data Analysis

To find out how and in what scale community forest has been empowering women (of users group), the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) method has been incorporated in this study. The rationale for applying this method is to include local people/groups in full engagement and ownership in the process and; at all levels. Further with this method, information relating local knowledge, practices, the goals and values of the local community can be extracted easily.

The universe of this research were three districts—Chitwan, Dolakha and Gorkha. First, with the random-lottery method, Gorkha district was selected. The community forest program, in Gorkha, was initiated during 1990/91 in order to fulfill the daily need of locals from forest and also to improve the condition of available forest. Now there are a total 447 CFUGs in Gorkha district only.

Out of total CFUGs in the district, '*Didi Bahini Mahila Community Forest*'⁷ from Ajirkot Rural Municipality-4 is selected on a purposive basis so that sufficient women respondents can be selected from the group. This community forest covers a total 3.25 hectares of land with an involvement of 112 households. Out of total members involved in this user group, 30 women were selected with purposive sampling method i.e. on the basis of marital status (married only) and those who are in this users group since 2007. The rationale for this selection is to observe change in certain indicators such as health, mobility, decision making power and property ownership of sample women in a 10 years period.

Selected 30 women members were interviewed during the field visit. Interviews were conducted considering the free time of respondents (morning and evening). Different indicators were observed to find out how community forests have been implementing various women empowering programs. The first indicator was women's economic contribution where their market participation and productivity contribution were observed. Second indicator was education in which the number of primary education attainment and number of informal elder education⁸ were compared. Thirdly, in health indicators, presence of skilled attendant at birth, decision on using contraceptive, access to sanitation and clean water, reproductive rights were observed. Similarly, in the decision making indicator, women's decision making level has been observed in two sectors i.e. informal (household level) and formal sector (community user group). At household level, respondents were asked if their decision on mobility, income-expenditure, decision on children's education and reproductive decision were asked. In the community user group (formal sector), respondents were asked if their voices are being addressed.

In the mobility indicator, women's mobility within village, VDC⁹, district and other parts of the

7 This is a women led community forest in Gorkha.

8 It is an education program specifically designed for elders in rural villages. A teacher allotted for this program gathers village elders in the evening and teaches basic skills on reading and writing. By the end of the course, participating elders become able to read at least simple sentences or write their names.

9 Village Development Committee. In the new federal structure, there is a village municipality not VDC.

country were observed with the help of mobility cycle tool¹⁰ and; finally, their ownership on various properties such as household assets, house and farm land were also interviewed.

To inquire how women have been empowered through community forest programs in the last decades, different personalities such as Key Informant, were also interviewed. In the beginning, on the basis of in-depth conversation with the local community, one Key Informant was selected and later with snowball method, other Key Informants were selected which included the head of the CFUG, head of mother group, local teachers, and NGO staff working closely in community forest program.

The FGD session was also conducted on Saturday at the local school ground. The total FGD size was eight. The participants of the focused group were selected on the basis of their in-depth knowledge in this particular issue. In this session, women members of CFUG, head of CFUG, staff from development agencies specifically working on women empowerment and forest program and; local teachers were included. The rationale behind selecting this tool is because of ‘...effective way to get the reactions of a small group of people to a focused issue’ (Baker 2014). Also, this tool ‘...can dig more deeply into an interest area (ibid) and ‘...participants get opportunities to interact, discuss and provide common response’ (Kitzinger 1994). During FGD, the participants were asked how community forest programs have been empowering women within a user group.

Finding and Discussion

The findings are presented in Table 1 which evidently elucidates that there is positive result in different indicators examined.

Table 1:

Responses on different indicators

Indicators	Category	Respondents	
		2007	2017
Economic contribution	Market participation	11	18
	Productivity contribution (Cash crop & subsistence)	16	27
Education	Number of primary education completed	11	18
	Informal elder education	2	11
Health	Received skilled attendant at birth	11	12
	Using contraceptive by own will	1	5
	Access to sanitation and clean water	10	24
	Reproductive rights	11	23
Decision making power	Decision in household level	2	12
	Decision in community user group	5	9

10 Mobility cycle tool is a data collecting tool founded by CARE International in Nepal. The tool basically has layers of circles with respondent's name in the middle. In the first circle, respondents are asked if they have mobility within the village followed by VDC level mobility in the second layer and within the district in the third circle and finally within Nepal in the fourth circle. The circle (diagram) having high frequency of movement covering all the layers is considered to have high mobility and vice-versa.

Mobility	Within village	27	30
	Within VDC	8	21
	Within District	2	13
	Within Nepal	2	6
Ownership on	HH asset	11	17
	House	9	13
	Farm land	5	6

Source: Field Survey 2017

In the economic contribution indicator, the number of female respondents has increased in the 10 years period. According to the head of CFUG (key informant), the sum collected by selling forest products, levies and fines are loaned to female members of user groups so that they can start cash crop or increase market participation (petty business). It must be why female members' contribution to productivity, both in cash crop and subsistence farming, as well as market participation has increased.

The number of primary educated and informal elder educated females has increased by 2017 but according to focus group discussion, it came to be known that community forest programs never applied or brought a single program in order to provide formal primary education or informal elder education within the community. This indicates that the increase in the number of educated women is due to other factors such as government education programs. Nonetheless, respondents during the FGD session, at least, admit that the community forest program and its periodic program (monthly meeting/gathering) has increased awareness among the women members, due to which women's involvement in getting primary education or informal education is increasing. Similarly, access to health has increased but this change is due to various actors/agencies working in the area such as I/NGOs and government health programs and not due to forestry programs. As informed by a couple of key informants, the forest program has never brought a health program or mobile health camp in their community.

As mentioned earlier, the user group holds a monthly meeting and this has provided women members a space and understanding on power dynamics within them due to which the number of women having household decision power increased. On the other hand, the users group collects funds (equal levies) from all the members on a monthly basis which provides a sense of equality (equal power and ownership) among the women from different economic backgrounds and caste groups (*Dalit* and *ethnic*). However, surprisingly, the position of head of the user group had always been apprehended by high caste female members. This illustrates that though the decision making power in women of the user group has increased, Dalit and ethnic women are yet to reach the core of the power circle.

Another indicator was women's mobility which has increased within the village and districts. This increase in mobility is due to various meetings or training that members of the user group ought to attend on a periodic basis. Notwithstanding, the development of roads and increasing transportation access are undeniable because these are also one of the factors that has increased the mobility of women. Lastly, an increase in ownership in terms of house and land also indicates empowerment but in reality, community forest programs have never implemented software or hardware programs till date in order to increase the ownership of women on different assets.

Conclusion

All above information suggests partial women empowerment in this user group and believed to be due to implementation of community forest program but globalization and its extended roots such as market expansion, construction of road, increasing transportation facilities, increasing number of I/NGOs and their activities and; finally other government programs found to be more influential for this increase. This study was conducted within a finite area and group. Hence, though the women of this community user group are empowered, which is good, it is unwise to confirm and generalize that the forestry program has sole credit on it but also globalization.

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