

Gendered Process of Women (dis)empowerment in the Community Forestry in Nepal

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Abstract

Women and forest relationships are largely studied in community forestry in Nepal. However, there is a paucity of studies on women's empowerment level in the changed forest management regimes and progressive policies. The study intends to qualitatively analyse women's empowerment using a Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) tool after modifying it to fit the forestry context i.e. Women's Empowerment in Forestry Index (WEFI) framework. The empowerment parameters, i.e., agency, resources, income, leadership, and time, are used for forest data analysis. The data on the WEFI parameters were collected through semi-structured interviews with 45 women representing general members of user groups, executive members of user groups, districts federation and networks of Sindhupalchok and Kavrepalanchok and policy makers as well as ten focus group discussions and observation of key activities during EnLiFT project implementation. The findings reveal that male dominance is high in the access to resources and control over the community forestry decisions. The persistent structural and institutional barriers hinder women's empowerment in community forestry. Unclear policies and ambiguities demotivate women and lower their confidence in engaging themselves in the timber value chain. Moreover, these women have low awareness of their roles and most of them are pseudo-members. Incompatible timings and locations, the technical jargon used in forestry, and having to work with men under societal constructs are hindrances to women's meaningful and worthy participation in community forestry. Despite several positive policy, discriminations, women's access to and control over the economic benefits remains a challenge in community forestry. Hence, institutional innovations for women-friendly community forestry are pertinent to set a conducive pathway for women empowerment.

Keywords: Agency, Decision making, Gender equality, Leadership, Participation

INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in natural resource management is found to be significant, especially in the agrarian communities in the Global South (Agarwal 2010; Colfer 2013; Mai *et al.* 2011). Despite the myriad of barriers to their journey of empowerment suppressed by social norms and structures; gender equality is considered to lead to women's empowerment (Onditi and Odera 2017). Empowering women

and reducing gender inequalities have become the key developmental policy. In developing countries like Nepal, gender-based disparities are high; according to the Global Gender Gap Index 2023, Nepal has closed approximately 66 per cent gender gap and ranks 116th position (World Economic Forum 2023). In the Nepali context, the forestry sector policies, especially the community forestry, is progressing the natural resource management with gender equality in Nepal.

Community participation has been central to the implementation of community-based natural resource management. Nepal's forestry sector's recognition of the role of local communities in conservation started with the National Forestry Plan in 1976, followed by the 25-year Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (MPFS), approved by the government in 1989 (Ojha *et al.* 2009). The essence of the plans continues to exist with the formulation of Forest Act 2019 and Forest Regulations 2022. Community forestry has not fully resulted in economic empowerment and in minimising the inequalities in power relations (Killian and Hyle 2020; Scheba and Mustalahti 2015).

In the early years of community forestry, gaps in terms of representation and inclusion of specific social groups such as women, Dalits and indigenous groups were reported (Buchy and Subba 2003; Pandit and Bevilacqua 2011). In contrast to their dependence on forest resources, women's participation in community forestry decisions were less effective (Buchy and Rai 2012; Giri and Darnhofer 2010a). Recent studies, however, suggest an increase in representation. For instance, women now hold a critical mass of 42 per cent (87724) of membership spread over 22,645 executive committees and 204,750 executive committee members that represent CFUGs (Giri *et al.* 2022). However, the participation in numbers only is not a measure of quality of participation (Agrawal 2009; Baral *et al.* 2024). Mere physical presence in meetings and committees does not ensure quality participation and role in decision making. Yet there is little understanding regarding how enhanced interactive or empowering participation affects gender equality, social inclusion and poverty reduction outcomes. This is evident through the demonstrated lack of gender

responsiveness in community forestry, despite a growing commitment to address gender inequality in forest and natural resource management in Nepal (Agrawal 2001, 2009; Bhattarai 2011; Giri and Darnhofer 2010b; Shrestha 2016). Women are engaged in an ongoing contestation of current structures to widen their participation in decision-making and become increasingly active agents in community forestry (Giri and Darnhofer 2010a). Gender equality and women empowerment are, therefore, important but unresolved issues in community forestry. Though participation of women and marginalised groups in community forests have been prioritised, its implications on the overall decision making are less explored (Devkota 2020). Thus, detailed analyses of community forestry outcomes, specifically an understanding of the process of governance and the exercise of power based on caste and gender, remains a critical gap (Lachapelle *et al.* 2004).

The researchers urge that policies to improve women's participation in decision making must go beyond numbers and quotas to create mechanisms that ensure empowerment and promote women's rights and agency (Resurrección *et al.* 2019). Thus, the nature and extent of gender inequality and the conditions necessary to empower women vary across countries, sectors and communities (Alkire *et al.* 2013). For this purpose, we take the case of community forestry in Nepal and demonstrate how the participatory forestry regime, i.e., community forestry, is (dis)empowering women. However, the complex multidimensional nature of empowerment is difficult to measure, especially in agriculture and forestry, where the concept is relatively new. Consequently, seeking a valid and comprehensive measures of gender equality and women's empowerment are essential to monitor progress toward achieving

goal 5 (Gender Equality) of the sustainable development goal. For our analysis, we adopted Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) (Alkire *et al.* 2013) as an analytical framework to discuss women's empowerment status in the community forestry in Nepal.

Measuring Women's Empowerment

The empowerment catchphrase is warmly persuasive in today's developmental orthodoxies (Cornwall and Brock 2005). It has become a buzzword in development politics with diverse definitions and understandings that vary across traditions and contexts. The language of gender equality and women's empowerment were used by feminists as a means of getting women's rights into the international development agenda (Batliwala 2007; Cornwall and Rivas 2015). Most definitions focus on issues of gaining power and control over decisions and resources that determine one's quality of life (Narayan-Parker 2002). Kabeer (2001) defines empowerment as "the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them". Similarly, Kabeer (1999) explains empowerment is a process of change that is achieved by the ability to exercise meaningful choices and describes the resources, agency and achievement as the dimensions of empowerment. Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives (Narayan 2002). Women's empowerment is described as a process whereby women are able to organise themselves to enhance their own self-reliance, assert their right to make choices and control resources that will help in challenging and eliminating their own subordination (Keller and Mbewe 1991). Researchers, academicians

and donors are seeking ways to measure empowerment.

WEAI is the first comprehensive and standardised measure to directly capture women's empowerment in agriculture, which was jointly developed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) (Alkire *et al.* 2013). WEAI is a survey-based index, based on individual-level data collected by interviews with men and women within the same households. WEAI evaluates five domains of empowerment: (i) production, (ii) income, (iii) resources, (iv) leadership, and (v) time (Alkire *et al.* 2013). WEAI is extensively used by several organisations to measure empowerment and gender parity in agriculture, to identify areas of strengthening women's empowerment (Malapit *et al.* 2015).

The WEAI index is purely quantitative in nature. However, there are doubts that empowerment can be adequately captured by quantitative instruments only and for many feminists the value of the empowerment concept is fuzzy (Kabeer 2001). Due to the multidimensional nature of empowerment and the diversity and complexity of gender systems, the study of empowerment in different contexts is essential to capture the cross-cultural variations in gender-specific needs and constraints (Aker *et al.* 2017). For example, the number of women landowners in Nepal has risen markedly in recent years primarily because of the government land registration discounts, but cultural norms mean that their husbands still make the major property decisions, hence land holding capacity of women doesn't necessarily rebel women empowerment (Deere *et al.* 2013). In addition, a few dimensions in WEAI proved

problematic, for example sections on time use, autonomy in production, and speaking in public, which were identified as particularly time-consuming, sensitive in nature and difficult to understand (Garbero and Perge 2017).

Certain kinds of limitations such as women who are engaged in decision-making on non-agricultural activities may appear disempowered if they are not involved in agricultural decisions. The prevalence of decision-making questions mean that female-only households are likely to be identified as empowered, the focus on agriculture may not capture other domains of empowerment that may be more relevant to specific desired outcomes (Alkire *et al.* 2013). This was done because the original WEAI had been characterised as time and resource intensive to implement (Gupta *et al.* 2019). Thus, for this study, we adopt the five domains of empowerment framework by (Alkire *et al.* 2013) (Figure 1) and explaining the domains

through a qualitative research method. The research examines the current empowerment status of women in community forestry in Nepal and enables policymakers and communities to monitor and improve gender equality in the forestry sector.

METHODOLOGY

Adaption of WEAI to the Community Forestry Sector

We pursued a series of works to understand, test, and adapt the Women Empowerment Agriculture index (WEAI) into the context of community forestry, using a methodology of Planning Studio. The following steps were included:

- Literature review: Based on the literature review focusing on the WEAI development and application, we developed a set of draft criteria for forestry.
- Sharing workshop: A workshop was organised to set the indicators and get feedback from the experts working in the field of gender and social inclusion in forestry sector in Nepal in December 2019.
- Revision and finalisation of WEAI criteria

Following the workshop, the criteria and indicators of both five domains of empowerment (Table 1) were developed and were adopted to capture the empowerment index in community forestry as Women Empowerment in Forestry Index (WEFI)

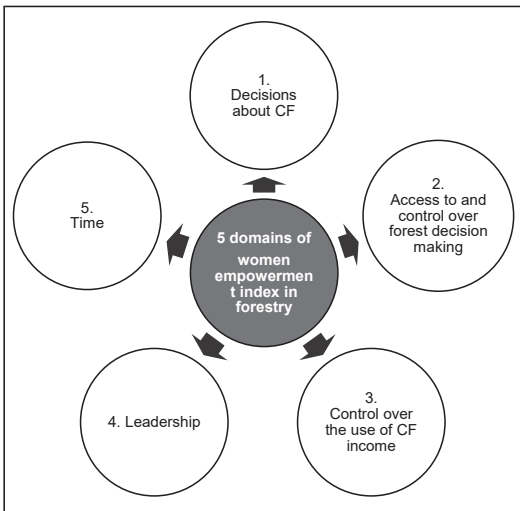


Figure 1: Domains of women empowerment in forestry

Table 1: Indicators for measuring women's empowerment

Criteria (5DE)	Indicators
A. Agency	Participation in CFUG decision-making process Autonomy in household decisions on forest management Influence in decisions related to CFUG
B. Resources	Access to and control over CF products Voice and/or influence in the distribution of forest products among the CF members Voice and/or influence in the sale of forest products to market
C. Income	Access to and control over the use of CFUG fund
D. Leadership	Membership in social and economic groups Position held Speaking in public
E. Time	Workload in forest management activities

Selection of CFUGs

Sindhupalchok and Kavrepalanchok districts are the pioneer districts to implement community forestry in Nepal. The study sites of Enhancing Livelihoods through Improved Forest Management (EnLiFT), an action research project be implemented in Sindhupalchok and Kavrepalanchok districts in Central Nepal were considered for the research. Eight CFUGs were selected for

the in-depth study (Table 2). The selection was made based on the intensity of project's interventions, women's representation and leadership in the decision making. The CFUGs were selected after consultation with Division Forest Officer and Officials (DFO), Federation of Community Forestry User Groups (FECOFUN) and other stakeholders. Besides, the CFUGs led by women chairpersons were selected as per the focus of the study.

Table 2: Case study CFUGs and their characteristics

S. N.	Name of the CFUG	District	Area (ha)	Hand-over (Year)	House-holds	EC members		Women EC members (%)
						Male	Female	
1	Fagar Khola	Kavre	58.48	1991	84	0	9	100
2	Kalapani	Kavre	86.5	1993	396	4	7	64
3	Shreechhap Deurali	Sindhupalchok	78.3	1999	256	8	7	47
4	Sansaridanda	Sindhupalchok	96.59	2000	213	6	5	45
5	Lakuri Rukh Bhulbhule	Sindhupalchok	39.2	2052	88	5	4	44
6	Chapani Gadidanda	Sindhupalchok	83.5	1996	117	6	3	33
7	Deupokhari	Kavre	181.77	1993	111	8	3	27
8	Dharapani CFUG	Kavre	43.03	1990	64	6	3	33

Data Collection

The study heavily relied on the primary data that was collected using following tools.

- **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Altogether, 45 KIIs were conducted with the CF women executives (40 KIIs), women representatives from advocating agencies and government agencies (5). Open-ended questionnaires on five domains of WEAI (Agency, Resource, Income, Leadership and Time) were used for the interviews.
- **Focus Group Discussions:** Ten focus group discussions were conducted with the executive committee representatives and general members of each CFUGs selected. Data on the women's representation on the committee, their stake in decision making, time consideration for their representation, etc. were collected through the FGDs.
- **Archival records:** The records on CFUGs meeting, the minutes of the general assemblies and audit reports were reviewed to collect information on the women's participation, their access to decision making and CFUG funds disbursements and management to enhance the livelihood of women and intersectional groups.
- **Ethnographic observation:** Ethnographic observations of the authors/co-authors during both formal and informal meetings were considered for the study. Our participation in Executive Committee (EC) meetings, general assemblies, and even during focus group discussions were also considered as the major source of information. Such information was relevant to access how women share their voices in the forum, factors affecting

them and how their voices are addressed. The information collected were used to triangulate the data collected during KIIs and FGDs.

The names of the respondents are kept anonymous to maintain the confidentiality of the responses provided by the women and men.

Data Analysis

The data from KII and FGDs and field notes were entered into Microsoft Excel and analysed using the content analysis method. The field notes were helpful in developing storylines to build narratives on women's empowerment.

FINDINGS

Agency

Agency in this research is determined by women's participation in the CFUG/forest management decision making process and influencing the household and community forestry level decisions.

Participation in Forest Related Decisions and Decision Making Process

Women's participation in CFUG assemblies and executive committee meetings is found to be increasing in the recent years. The testimonials of both men and women respondents indicate the increase in women's participation in community forestry. The acceptance of women participation is increasing, and male members portray women getting better opportunities and spaces in community forestry.

"Women's participation in development has increased in the recent years. Let me give you an example: until about a decade or more, everyone would be criticising women if she participated in any public program e.g., activities



related to forest, school etc. She was not considered a good woman. But now there is mandatory requirement for women to be a CFUG executive committee and in the local government, provincial government and federal government"- said one of the male chairpersons.

However, women's participation varies according to the agenda for the meetings. Their participation is counted meaningful to meet the quorum and government's requirement, i.e., the Forest Act, 2019 and the Forest Rule 2022 ensure 50 per cent representation of women in CF executive committees with one among chairperson and secretary and one among vice-chairperson and treasurer have reserved for women. However, data from the CFUGs from two districts shows women representation in CFUGs to be less than 50 per cent in five out of seven cases (Table 2).

Taking the case of two CFUGs that are involved largely in timber harvest and sale (Figure 2), women's participation in timber in the general assembly is more compared to meetings conducted to discuss timber related

issues. In the meetings that are largely centred on timber related discussions, invitees from the local government representatives, including ward representatives, forest officials, police, representatives from FECOFUN and neighbouring CFUGs and other community elites are usually high. The majority of the invitees are men. In general, meetings are conducted to make decisions for institutional functioning e.g., monthly meetings, general assemblies, and collection of fallen timber. The timber centric meetings concentrate on timber harvest and sale and distribution procedures. Hence, women members in the executive committee tend to abstain from attending compared to their male counterparts. The difference in expected participation versus the actual participation shows the larger gap in case of women; in one of the cases in year 2020/21, male participation in general meetings was 10 out of 12 while the women participation remained at 5 out of 10. In most of the cases, women members are replaced by male members in meetings related to timber sales and distribution.

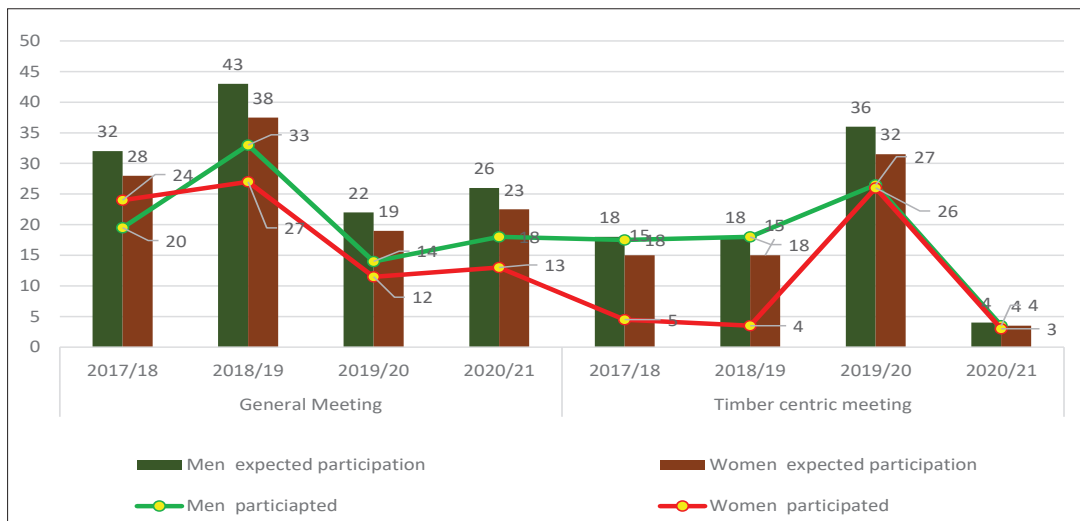


Figure 2: Men and women participation in general meeting versus the timber-centric meeting in the CFUGs

In general meetings, though women's participation is increasing, meaningful participation to influence decisions remains a challenge. In many instances, the rural women who are illiterate are hesitant to take up the responsibility in a patriarchal society where the CFUG arena is dominated by relatives, mostly the in-laws and their keens.

"It is difficult to go against our own brothers, brother in-laws and other relatives, so we just accept the decisions they make."

During our observation in a general assembly of one of the CFUGs, the women treasurer of the CFUG executive committee, was hesitant to share the financial progress and plans and the audit report. So, the secretary (male) shared the report on her behalf despite of her physical presence in the assembly. On inquiring further about her role in community forestry, she shared that,

"though I'm in the position, the financial transactions and the major decisions are handled by Chairperson and Secretary" (both are male).

She further added,

"dai haru (brothers) do the job and I'm responsible to put my signature as they request".

Thus, the women members consider the lack of formal education as one of the major barriers to women's voice and empowerment. The increasing outmigration of educated women in search of employment that fits their qualifications is one of the reasons for not having women leaders in the village. This has affected the women's space in community forestry.

Autonomy in Household Decisions on Forest Management

Women have limited access to and control over household decisions both related to family affairs and forest management. The patriarchal society in the study sites fails to recognise women's role in the family. The care economy that women perform is largely ignored and not considered as "work". About 90 per cent of the respondents said they do nothing, which shows how society has framed "work" only for going out of the house and earning money. On average, women in the study area are found to be spending 16 hours/day in household activities. Due to prolonged hours in household jobs women face difficulties in managing time to participate in community forestry activities. Women are burdened with additional social obligations to manage time for communal collective actions, including attending community forestry meetings, which adds to the time poverty of women.

As the CFUG recognises women as having an equal lineage in membership, they have equal rights to participate in meetings. However, when it comes to family, the men and women must decide who will participate in the meetings. In cases where an invitation for CF meetings with an agenda related to timber and fund mobilisation, male members participate, and they ask women to attend the assemblies and other regular meetings. Moreover, the women members shared that when it comes to minor forest products like collecting leaf litters, grass and dried firewood, it appears to be the women's responsibility to decide. In timber harvesting, the male members divide the role and women get job to clean the slash and offer snacks to the men who are harvesting trees. However, women in executive committee are obliged to attend the meeting even related to timber and fund management.

Men manage the household financial decisions, it is mostly the father, if not the son and if both are absent, the mother (mother-in-law) takes the position of making household decisions, including the decisions on collecting and purchasing but with the help of men neighbor or relatives.

Despite their dependence on minor forest products and day to day visit to the forest, women in the CFUGs have a lower presence in decision making.

Influence on Forestry Related Decisions

Women have low influence on forestry related decisions. Women generally don't raise their voices because they are unaware about technical aspect of forest management and financial transactions taking place in their CFUGs. In the focus group discussions, several groups shared that women only understand approximately 20 per cent of the topics discussed in the meetings or general assemblies and this percentage aligned with the views expressed during KIIs. They do not understand the rest of the things in the meetings and assemblies. During the meeting, the women attend them but only few of them raise their voices and are heard.

"We always see the secretary writing in the minute before the meeting is started but we don't know what he writes there. The secretary reads the agenda and decision and ask us to sign", said one of the CF executive members.

"Sometimes, meetings are conducted in tea shops, and they come to our house for signature. I have also heard about the confidential meeting of chairperson, treasurer and vice-secretary being organised in isolation", reflected another female member.

While being part of another CFUG' tole meeting, one of the authors observed that several different dates' on the meeting minutes were prepared during the same meeting to meet the Divisional Forest Officer's compliances in putting the timber for sale. The CFUGs, with the female chairperson, experience interference from elite male members (e.g., local political leaders) in regard to influencing the decisions on timber harvest, distribution and sale and budget allocation for development activities.

Women's say in influencing decisions is weak when it comes to development and economic activities. One of the women representatives shared that,

"we request our actions and priorities to be included in the annual plan, but they do not listen to us, rather the budget is spent on road construction".

In the author's observation during one of the meetings of the executive committee, the woman who wanted to establish a forest-based enterprise was hugely demotivated and when she claimed her rights, the male members belonging to high caste groups felt inferior, saying that *"how could those Dalit women shout at us"*.

Women belonging to Dalits and Janajati find their space shrinking in decision making fora. A single woman from Dalit community shared that -

"I don't provide my input because I am scared to speak. Most of the representatives are literate and I think they will judge me in a negative way if I speak, even if I bring lot of courage and say few words, the male members say -leave it".

Even if some of them wished to be on the committee, the inferiority of being a woman intersected by caste and education status hindered their capacity to influence the decisions.

Resources

Access to and Control Over CF Resources

Women have access to the forest and forest products, especially firewood and grasses. Even in the CFUGs with expired Community Forest Operational Plans (CFOP)s, the community women visit forest as per their need and get firewood, fodder, grass and leaf litter for animal bedding. All the respondents agreed that they are responsible for collecting firewood and fodder from the community forests. There is no restriction on firewood as provisioned in the CFOP; however, women lack access to and control over valuable forest products like timber and medicinal plants.

However, in some CFUG, women are blamed for damaging the sampling and the executive committee members have altered the access to these minor forest products as well. In one of the CFUGs, users are not allowed to collect forest products, not even the fodder and firewood between July-November; similarly, in another CFUG, the executive made the decision to open the forest for collecting firewood and grass only on Saturdays with a justification to reduce the damage to the seedlings and saplings.

Women lack access to and control over valuable forest products like timber and medicinal plants. Only 50 per cent of the respondents are aware of timber being sold from their CFUG; however, they lack access to information on the timber sale process and the benefits that were generated. The women who are holding leadership positions e.g., chairperson of the CFUGs have adequate

knowledge of the process but are facing problems coordinating with DFO for timber sales, thus limiting their capacity to make decisions on use of forest products.

Voice and/or Influence in the Distribution of Forest Products

Despite women in the villages have alternative sources of firewood, i.e., private trees grown in the farmyards, and options for energy like using biogas, LPGs and solar energy have become common among middle-class families. Although the use of alternative sources of energy has slightly reduced firewood use in the kitchen, firewoods are still being used for cooking animal feed.

In one of the studied CFUG outside the cluster, two women executive members of the CFUG are responsible for collecting the timber demand collection and monitoring the timber harvesting. Individual households demand timber from the CFUG, and the CF executive committee makes the decision for internal use. These women members provide the tree to harvest based on the decisions made by the executive committee. In that situation, these women suffer from accusations for not providing and from accessible site. The user's want easy access to forests, while the women restrict it, they even must face the harsh comments. As such, if they could not stay in forest for long and return, users deny their decision and harvest the unmarked trees. But they cannot solely decide to punish them. Therefore, they complain to the chairperson while their voices are ignored simply to maintain social harmony.

"Sometimes we cannot go to forest on time. Users prefer trees in accessible areas, but we cannot allow that from a conservation point of view. We cannot wait and observe them the whole day so that we request them to harvest only

marked trees and return. And when we go for post-harvest monitoring in the forest, we see that unmarked trees have been harvested. Users wait the chance of our absence to harvest trees of their preference",

said one of the women taking charge of tree selection. The women's ability to identify trees to harvest has given positive results in the forest. *"Previously there were a lot of bushes in the forest. But now the women have cleared them and maintained the 5/5m distance between each tree and those in between are referred to harvest",* shared the CF chairperson of the same CFUG.

Voice and/or Influence in the Sale of Forest Products

Women's voices become weak in economic activities such as the sale of forest products, especially timber. In timber harvesting decisions, women's jobs are confined to authenticating men's decisions. Women are only valued for signature, if women did not attend the meeting but the meeting was held without fulfilling the quorum, the CF leaders visit their home/gardens to get the signature. Most of the women representatives in the CF executive committee are not clear about the income and expenditure of the CF's funds. Even if they inquire, the male members ignore their opinions. Women are trying hard to push their agenda gradually.

"Though women bring agendas to the meeting of the executive committee, ultimately, decisions are made on the agenda shared by men. I've heard them saying, -why do you invite them to discuss? They can be invited after the meeting to hear the decisions and sign the document", said one of the respondents.

Policy ambiguities and technical jargons tend to demotivate women and lower their

confidence to engage with the markets in the timber value chain. The CFUGs extracting timber from the forest have to fulfil the bureaucratic requirement as per the "Community Forestry Product Harvest and Distribution Guideline 2014". The CF women leaders find it difficult to comply with the requirements. The forest officials, though seem to be convinced and supportive of women in theory but in practice, they keep the work pending and demotivate women to enter the timber space. The hurdles were faced more when the forest bureaucracy asked for informal payment to forward her application. She added,

"I feel quite difficult in managing documents and dealing with the contractors was a tough thing to do".

Women face discrimination in the employment generated in community forests. Women are not invited to participate in the actual harvest process but play a supportive role by taking part in marking the trees and data entry, besides cleaning, bush and making snacks to men harvesters. However, the allocation of roles differs on whether the leadership is men or women. For example, one of the men-led CFUGs that harvested and sold timber in huge amounts in 2022 generated employment for 22 people, of which only four of them were women. The role of women was to prepare snacks for other workers. They were managing the utensils for cooking in the forest during the time. They were paid wages equivalent to the district rate for unskilled workers. In another CFUG, who harvested the fallen trees created employment for its users of which 30 per cent of them were women. They were engaged in tagging and numbering the trees to be harvested while the actual harvest, logging and transportation were done by men. In this CF, the women chairperson facilitated women's role in

tagging and numbering. Since harvesting and logging are physical works, women sometimes have to prove themselves. One of the CFUG chairpersons recalled,

"I wanted to participate in timber harvesting and logging activity as it was paid labour work going on the community forestry, but the men in the committee denied it, thinking that women are weak and can't perform effectively, I took the challenge and carried logs in me by the shoulder. The men then could not utter a word."

There is certain societal pressure over women members who must prove themselves as capable to participate in economic activities.

Income

Access to and Control over the Use of CFUG Fund

The fact that people are not aware of the actual funds within CFUG persists in several CFUGs. Fifteen respondents (50 per cent) were not aware of the income from the CFUG.

The ones who were aware belonged to the executive committee, nevertheless, they were not clear about the exact amount. In addition, among the committee members, only the elite men were involved in mobilising the fund. Only three CFUGs from the Salle Chaubas Forest Management Cluster (SCFMC) included in this study occasionally sell timber and can make money out of it. Most of the income is spent on development works, i.e., road construction and renovations, drinking water, community building, and electricity. These activities are not conducted after gender considerations. In addition, from the selected CFUGs of SCFMC, only 3.1 per cent of the budget was spent on livelihoods and income-generation activities.

In regard to income generation activities, distributing goats or money for goats, solar dryers and plastic tunnels were common. However, since the CFUGs do not adopt an inclusive targeting approach, every household, whether they stay in the village or in nearby cities like Banepa, and even Kathmandu, receive the support provided by

Box 1: Income Vs real expenditure in CF

One of the CFUGs is a high-income group as it has a balance of approximately NRs 7 million in their account from timber sale for two consecutive years 2016/17 and 2017/18 (Table 3). However, even after 7 years of having income, only 60 per cent of it has been spent until 2021. Of the expenditure, 25.7 per cent has been spent as payment of liability followed by 24.1 per cent on community and other development activities, 22.9 per cent on forest management, 18.5 per cent on institutional and administrative activities, and only 8.8 per cent on livelihood and income generation activities. Despite having some figures in livelihoods and income generation activities, a blanket approach is taken to spend the fund rather than prioritizing pro-poor, women and marginalized communities.

Table 3: Income from timber sale in one of the studied CFUGs

Fiscal Year	Timber sale outside CFUG (Cft.)	Income from the timber sale (NRs)
2016/17	6,652.10	23,34,887.1
2017/18	10,508.56	55,52,231.4
Total	17,160.66	78,87,118.5

CFUGs. The marginalised women are often left out in service provisioning because of the favouritism and biases of the CF chairperson. For example, in one of the CFUG, they distributed NRs 5000 each to buy a goat based on equality principles; another one decided on paper to distribute goats to every household but distributed solar panels.

Some others spend the fund on meeting and monitoring allowances and as wage labour for the people participating in forest management activities. For example, in one of the CFUGs, everyone receives NRs 200 - NRs 500/meeting, depending on the CFUGs' decision. Though the provision of offering incentives for their time can be appreciated, only few women members benefit from these incentives as their participation in forest monitoring, timber harvest and meetings is low compared to men.

Theoretically, the voices of single women and helpless women are kept as a priority. The women belonging to lower caste, single women and poor women are not able to influence the decisions. The situation is worst with the women with multiple intersecting factors of marginalisation. One of the single women who belonged to Dalit caste shared that her voice was ignored by the community

forest and the local government as well. She shared,

"Our community forest decided to provide financial support to Dalit and single women for goat farming. I expressed my interest and submitted all the necessary documents, but I didn't get any support. I inquired about it and the CF Chairperson reasoned that budget allocated for goat keeping is finished. I went up to the local government for support, but my efforts went in vain.

The CFUGs would rather save the funds in banks and cooperatives than spend for women and dalits. Table 4 shows the CFUG funds reserved in the financial institutions. Despite the adequate funds for carrying out activities as per the CF Guidelines and Community Forest Operation Plan (CFOPs), the CFUGs remain dormant, even challenging institutional functioning. Furthermore, there are instances where women demand and supports programs which pass unheard and respond, considering them as unimportant.

"Once, the women demanded separate funds for poor women and mobilise them for their benefits, but the chairperson denied it" shared a women EC member in CFUG.

Table 4 Savings in different CFUGs (accessed on 2023)

Name of CFUGs	Last Income year	Fund reserved in bank account till now
Dharapani CFUG	2017	Approx. 25 Lakhs
Chapani CFUG	2022	More than 20 Lakhs
Lakuri Rukh Bhulbhule CFUG	2022	Approx. 40/45 Lakhs
Rachchhma CFUG	2017	Approx. 5 Lakhs
Shreechhap	2021	More than 50 Lakhs
Sansaridanda	2021	More than 20 Lakhs

Leadership

Membership in Social and Economic Groups

The CFUGs have provided the platform for women to participate in social works and widen their knowledge,

"I'm able to enhance my knowledge through interaction with people after becoming CF executive member", said a woman who is on the committee for the first time.

Apart from exposure to the outside space, the women are also motivated by the allowance they receive for attending the meetings. Women in leadership positions often hold multiple memberships in various committees, such as the drinking water committee, women's awareness committee, road construction committee, health volunteer groups, and school management committees etc. Single- and middle-aged women are found to benefit from these kinds of memberships. One single woman shared,

"After my husband passed away, I used to sit alone most of the time and was upset. My neighbours suggested I participate in social events so that my pain would be reduced somehow and I could know about different opportunities. Gradually, I started participating in different events, trainings and as well as in committees, of which this EC is one".

The women who are in major leadership positions in CFUGs can make speeches in public but the ones who are new find it difficult to speak, because compared to other women, women in vital positions often receive opportunities to speak in public. Gradually, CF is becoming a platform for

raising women's voices. Most women leaders with multiple memberships acknowledge community forestry as a platform for their personal and leadership development.

"If we weren't in community forestry executive committee, we would not be able to raise our voice and get opportunities to participate in another committee too."

Through community forestry, women are getting opportunities to compete in the local elections, too. For example, the women chairperson of one of the CFUGs raised her voice to claim candidacy for the Deputy Mayor position in the local elections.

"I have gut to claim the position, though the Party (political party) did not consider my candidacy this time, they are aware I'm potential candidate for the next election; this confidence in me is due to my engagement in community forestry", said the chairperson.

The women respondents, as well as workshop participants, consider the CFUG to be a learning platform where they expect to participate actively in the meetings and trainings and enhance their capacity.

Position Held

Women hold decision-making positions in CFUGs. In the research sites, approximately 37 per cent of the women are in leadership positions during the research period (2021-23). The position held and ease of functioning in the role depend on the family and the societal support that the women leader receives. The women leaders who have received support from their families are found to be happy with the CF leadership positions. One of the women leaders shared,



"I am proud of my position, it has increased my role in conservation".
 "Despite hardships, we are able to raise our voice, and they will hear when we keep raising our voice," said another woman.

The lower representation of women as chairpersons is because of the deeply rooted narrative construct that views women as best in the household responsibilities jobs rather than social leaders performing outside jobs. Besides, women in leadership positions face multiple challenges in leading their institution, the primary reason being a "woman". The lack of trust among users and other executives, the dissuading attitude of government officials towards women executives in the past, the overall workload of CFUG in the single-arm, etc., have all made it difficult for her to manage the institutional and CF activities on time.

Women leaders face extra challenges in maintaining their role. One of the chairpersons shared,

"The men members often question us, saying why did you take the position if you can't perform the duty? This question is not about the duty, it's discouraging a woman".

The position sometimes becomes a challenge to the women, as they receive minimum support from the EC members as well. "Even the CF executives consider CFUG as chairperson's responsibility", shared a women chairperson. However, based on the data from men and women led CFUGs that are economically active compared to others, the level of women's participation was higher in women-led CFUGs than that of men-led. (Figure 3).

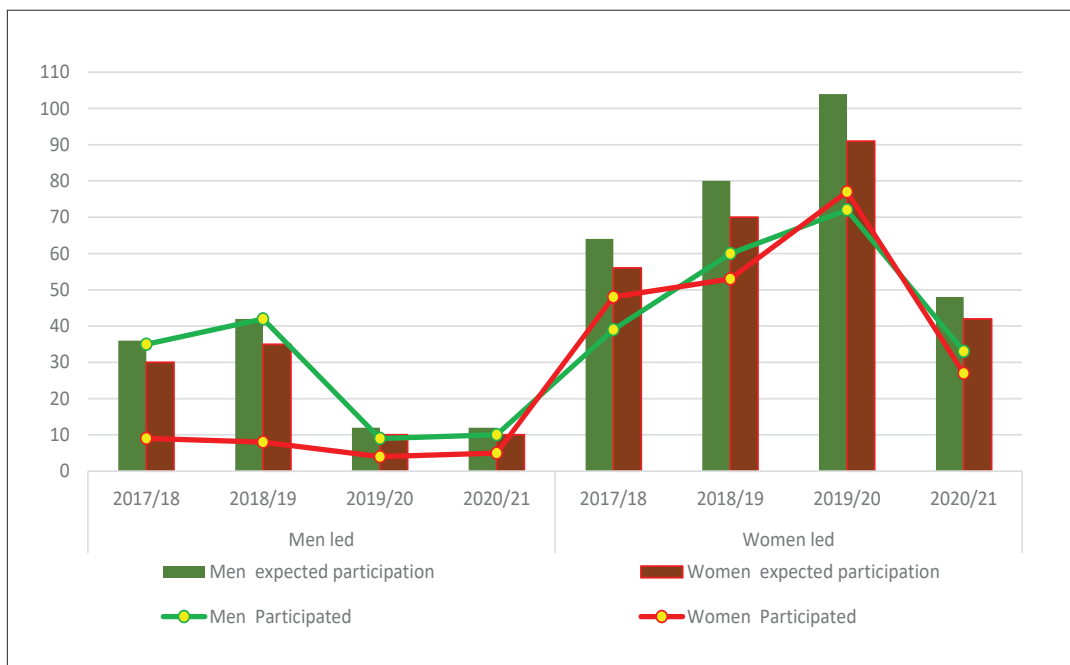


Figure 3: Differences in participation in men-led and women-led CFUGs

However, the majority of women are in leadership position for the sake of name only and we call it pseudo leadership i.e., the positions are in women's name, but in actuality, they are replaced by either their husbands or other male members of the family.

Time

Workload in Forest Management Activities

The workload in forestry-related activities has decreased as compared to the roles women performed a few decades back. This is attributed to increase in labor force migration for jobs and income to urban cities, a decrease in animal keeping and alternative forms of energy for household. Before a decade or more, many women had to go in search of fodder for the animals and spent several hours in the forest, now the villagers have decreased the number of cattle and have increased purchasing capacity (One of the reasons was the availability of basic forest related products from the nearby CFs which were not before). Out migration is high- the family members of most of the families are away and in some cases the land and house are abandoned after the family migrates. This has allowed trees, fodder and grass to grow on private land, reducing the travel time to collect forest products. The use of alternative energy sources has decreased the drudgery of women and reduced exposure to wild animal attack due to decreased travel to forest.

The major reason for the decreased workload for women in forest-related work is also the forest stand dynamism. The women had a bigger role to play when the plantation was young, and they had to take care of the forest. One of the respondents shared that

"The trees have now grown and require low investment than they do when in seedling or sapling stage".

Women were engaged in weeding, cleaning, and bush clearing, but now the forest is mature, women have little role to play.

Time Compatibility

Unpaid care works such as cooking and taking care of young ones and the elderly is still considered as women's job. Men members rarely support women in cooking and washing, so the women members must complete the household jobs before they participate in the meetings. In some cases, women members are not informed or are at the last minute, making their time management poor. Often, these women are blamed for being late to meetings. In fact, the CFUGs' constitution requires prior information to the meeting attendees (one week earlier for general assembly, and the days of the meeting are often fixed in the constitution, for example, the first Saturday of every month for the executive committee meeting if practice is not regular, the date of next executive committee meeting is fixed in the prior meetings). The severity of time management increases with multiple memberships and attending programs/meetings outside the village.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study examined the women's empowerment using the WEFI framework and found that women's empowerment is relatively weak in all the domains i.e., agency, resources, income, leadership and time. However, the empowerment status of women in community forestry also depends on the women's caste, economic status and self-esteem.

Women's participation in CF-related decisions e.g., meetings, general assemblies, and carrying out forest-related activities, is still increasing. However, the quality of participation is poor. Many researchers discuss the tokenistic participation of women in decision-making bodies despite increased physical participation (Murer & Piccoli 2022). The status of women's stake in decision-making has not changed for almost decades and resembles the situation explained by Nightingale (2002). Even among women, those from marginalised castes have been found to participate the least in the decision-making process (Khanal Chettri *et al.* 2013). Hence women's empowerment needs to go beyond mere inclusion in the executive committee and invitation to attend the general assemblies, which in no way are treated as a forum to make decisions. The primary function of these executive bodies is to make decisions in a democratic manner. In practice, they are used to reaffirm the decisions made by the executive committee, especially the male members in the informal settings. Similar is the findings from Lama *et al.* (2017) who found that women's physical presence has increased in recent days due to young men's outmigration, but women lack space to impose the decisions made by the male members. Despite increased participation by women in community forestry meetings, participation in the timber and fund-related provisions is weaker. Even the women in the leadership position find difficulties in influencing the forestry-related decisions in community forestry. Women feel largely ignored and voiceless as these gendered subjectivities are produced in the chain. These findings echo the study by (Bhattarai 2020) where she warns that when women who depend on forest resources are denied access, it creates conflicts that compromise social and ecological resilience. The inefficient

participation of women is attributed to socially constructed norms of women's engagement, which are more appreciated in household jobs than in the workplace. Aligning with our research, several others are concerned about women's participation in community forestry. Passive and nominal participation is common (Agarwal 2001).

Similarly, the existing empirical studies on gender in forestry literature show that women lack access to and control over resources and income. Access to minor forest products such as firewood, fodder, grass, and leaf litter is targeted at women. The gendered division of labour at the household level is practiced in community forestry too, where women are in nominal positions and roles as the forest management plan gets rejected if women are not in the decision-making positions. To avoid their presence and voices in the forest, the women are excluded from the meetings where the most important decisions related to timber and fund management are made (Lama *et al.* 2017). We found that women's positionality also affects her role and voice in the community forestry. The women who are the CF chairpersons, are aware of the decisions made for the CFUG, and the income accrued from the forest, but the women who are only members are denied information flow. Despite these women having information on timber and income from the forest, the decisions are largely affected by the local political leaders and elite men. Hence, Agarwal (2001) cautions that even interactive participation is not a panacea because pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities and relationships of power still limit the degree to which women empowerment in governing committees results in social equality and efficiency. (Cornwall 2003) warns that even in community-driven development, participatory planning and other fine-

sounding initiatives that make claims of "full participation" and "empowerment" can turn out to be driven by gendered interests, leaving the least powerful without voice or much in the way of choice (Cornwall 2003). Similar is the findings from Tanzania, by Killian and Hyle (2020) where women do not have equal opportunities to raise their voices like men, and women are marginalised in the decisions made about forest management and in the distribution of benefits from the natural resources with which their communities are endowed.

The leadership positions that women in the study area were receiving were because of favours from the local political leaders. In a study in Gujarat and Nepal, Agrawal (2010) found that when there are more women in the executive committee there is a greater chance that women will attend meetings, hold office in the executive committee, and speak up at meetings. The traditional gender norms, institutional requirements that privilege men's networking skills, and control of local forestry institutions continue to limit women's participation in community forestry. Women disproportionately suffer from time poverty, which further limits their engagement in community forestry activities (Lama *et al.*, 2017). Thus, increasing women's participation and engagement in community forestry can be a step towards women's empowerment. We echo the argument by Wagle *et al.* (2017) that gendered institutional norms and values are associated with forest-governing institutions, such as forest bureaucracies, shaping the nature, and extent of women's involvement in decision-making processes in the Nepalese forestry sector.

Thus, though decentralisation intends to give powers to local communities, in practice, however, it may perpetuate inequalities

between men and women and disempower the marginalised (Killian and Hyle 2020). Hence, besides affirmative policies, actions should be targeted to unlock the deeply embedded gender relations, socio-cultural norms, socio-spatial relations. Structural and political changes are necessary not only to overcome subordination, oppression and coercive power relations but also to instigate transformations with positive development outcomes (Porter 2013).

Despite several positive discriminations by the government, women's access to and control over the economic benefits remains a challenge. New spaces and subjectivities are created and that allows different forms of exclusion to emerge and sustain are hindering women's empowerment in Nepal (Baral *et al.* 2024). More efforts are necessary to put policies into practice for empowering women engaged in community forestry. Enabling women's sufficient and secured access to and control over the economic benefits of community forestry in the changed context is of utmost importance. The changing context particularly, increasing male outmigration and matured timbers demands for women-friendly community forestry with more women's leadership and empowerment. Hence, institutional innovations for women-friendly community forestry are a need to address the changing context.

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