

Study of gender equality in community based forest certification programmes in Nepal

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SUMMARY

Gender equality has been studied in community based forest certification projects in two forest user groups in Nepal. Contributing to an understanding of gender equality with a focus on participation of women in a forest certification project and on awareness levels of forest users. Experts from the project and local people were interviewed. Committee meetings were conducted and household interviews were also carried out. The results include information on the background and lives of respondents as well as the effects of forest certification on their lives today; on age, caste and occupation; attitudes of men and women regarding forestry and their opinions on conditions before and after forest certification; non-timber forest products (NTFP), Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification processes in Nepalese forests; forest committee meetings. This paper summarizes selected findings from George (2010); results and suggestions may serve to improve plights of forest users in Nepal.

Keywords: gender equality, forest certification, community forestry, forest use, living conditions

Étude de l'égalité des sexes dans les programmes communautaires de certification forestière au Népal

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L'égalité des sexes a été étudiée dans les projets de certification forestière dans le district de Dolakha au Népal, avec les groupes Sushpa et Bhitleri utilisateurs de la forêt. Une approche de recherche à méthode mixte a été utilisée: une analyse des données a été opérée en utilisant un modèle de convergence où les données qualitatives et quantitatives ont été recueillies et analysées séparément. Les résultats ont ensuite été regroupés pour obtenir une meilleure compréhension du phénomène de l'égalité des sexes, avec l'accent mis sur la participation des femmes dans le pilotage du projet de certification forestière, et sur les niveaux de conscience des utilisateurs de la forêt. C'est en ce but que les experts des projets et les personnes locales de Sushpa et de Bhitleri ont été interviewés. Des rencontres en comités et des interviews des foyers ont été organisées. Les résultats offrent un large éventail d'information sur l'histoire et la vie des personnes concernées, ainsi que sur les effets de la certification forestière sur leurs vie actuelle. Les données comprennent des informations sur l'âge, la caste et l'occupation, l'attitude des hommes et des femmes envers la foresterie, et leurs opinions sur les conditions avant et après la certification, les forêts communautaires et les utilisateurs de ces dernières (CFUGs), les produits forestiers autres que le bois (NTFP), les processus de certification forestière du Stewardship Council (FSC) dans les forêts du Népal, les réunions de comités forestiers, ainsi que de leurs comités subordonnés. Les résultats et les suggestions peuvent aussi servir en tant que contribution pour améliorer le sort des utilisateurs de la forêt au Népal.

Estudio de la equidad de género en programas comunitarios de certificación forestal en Nepal

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Se ha estudiado la equidad de género en proyectos comunitarios de certificación forestal en el distrito de Dolakha, Nepal, con dos grupos de usuarios del bosque: Shuspa y Bhitleri. Para ello se ha utilizado un enfoque de investigación de método mixto: el análisis de datos se ha realizado utilizando un modelo de convergencia en el que los datos cualitativos y cuantitativos se han recogido y analizado por separado. A continuación se hicieron converger los resultados para comprender mejor el fenómeno de la equidad de género haciendo énfasis en la participación de la mujer en la fase piloto del proyecto de certificación forestal y en los niveles de concienciación de los usuarios forestales. Con este propósito se entrevistaron expertos de los proyectos y personas de las comunidades locales de Sushpa y Bhitleri. Se celebraron reuniones del comité así como entrevistas a unidades familiares. Los resultados muestran un amplio espectro de información acerca del contexto y las vidas de los entrevistados, así como los efectos actuales de la certificación forestal en sus vidas. Los datos incluyen información sobre: edad, casta y ocupación; la actitud del hombre y de la mujer hacia el tema forestal y sus opiniones sobre la situación anterior y posterior a la certificación forestal; bosques comunitarios y grupos de usuarios de bosques comunitarios (CFUGs), productos forestales no maderables (NTFP), y procesos de certificación del Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) en los bosques nepalíes; reuniones del comité y subcomité forestal. Los resultados y sugerencias podrían contribuir además a mejorar la grave situación de los usuarios del bosque en Nepal.

INTRODUCTION

The practice of community forestry in Nepal, initiated in the late 1970s was an effort to resolve the deforestation crisis and meet basic needs of forest products such as firewood, timber, grass, leaf litter etc (Hobley *et al.* 1996, cited by Lama and Buchy 2002). This was done by handing over parts of national forests to community forest user groups (CFUGs) for its management, use, conservation and development. Forest user groups (FUGs) were also entitled to all benefits from the sale of forest products.

The significance of community managed forests is its participatory approach and equal benefit sharing among the forest user groups. As stated in the policy of the operational plan, all the users should have equal rights pertaining to use of forest products, sharing of benefits, decision making. However, in Nepal, in which the structure of the society is predominantly hierarchical and patriarchal, exclusion of disadvantaged sections of people such as women, poor, and low castes are prevalent. The importance of genuine participation of minority groups to attain successful community forest management is highlighted by various researchers. (Lama and Buchy 2002).

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 (Acharya 2007). 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).

Similarly Bingeman (2003) describes that women's active involvement in monitoring, protecting and managing village forest areas in Himachal Pradesh, India, when organized in traditional village women's organizations (mahila mandals) while on the other hand their participation is lacking in the newly introduced Joint Forestry Management (JFM) projects, due to the JFM structures dominated by men. These new structures of the JFMs though might in the long run undermine the activities of women in the mahila mandals.

Agarwal (2002) states that this insignificant participation of women in turn is seen to affect institutional efficiency very often. Legal actions through amendment of laws have been taken to ensure 33% representation of women in any decision making bodies related to forests in Nepal. This recognizes the importance of women's participation at the decision making level for efficient and fair functioning of community forest management systems. Various NGOs have also been contributing to increase women's participation through awareness programmes, workshops etc. Over the years, this has resulted in a gradual increase of women's participation in decision making bodies, such as executive committees. However, it has often been observed that most women are "listeners rather than talkers" (Seeley 1996, cited by Agarwal 2002). An important cause for this passive participation is the lack of awareness regarding issues discussed in the meetings, which

results in fewer opinions expressed. The main cause for lack of awareness is that women were not involved in the initial processes and discussions regarding community forest user group formation, due to which they fail to understand the complete situation. Just as women's active participation in any decision making body is necessary, it is equally important for them to be aware of newly introduced forest related programmes from the beginning and their active involvement throughout the entire process (Agarwal 2002).

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, related to interaction within the communities, groups with 25–33% women in the EC are especially effective in enhancing other women's participation.

Certification of forests is a newly introduced concept in Nepal, with little information available on participation of women. Few researches exist in the field of certification, but with little focus on the role of women. In any society where gender inequalities are prevalent, new and progressive initiatives should normally include measures to reduce these inequalities. This study will also try to enquire about the extent to which this has been done in the forest certification programme and the results so far. Publications on gender and community forestry programmes are available, but they do not concentrate on certification and feedback from the people involved, so also not from women. The objective and research questions for this study are based on previously carried out research on certification, where people's perceptions about certification, which are important, were not addressed in those earlier studies. Hence, this study was taken up to look into land tenure, identify and highlight differences of men's and women's needs related to forest management, their perceptions on impacts of certification, and to understand the impact of such certification projects on the lives of men and women.

Community based forest management in Nepal

In 1978, the community forestry programme was formally introduced in Nepal with the enactment of the Panchayat Forest Rules and the Panchayat Protected Forest Rules. These laws have brought into limelight the recognition of user rights of local people in management of local resources and also helped establish the local population as managers of the forest (Joshi 1993, Gilmour *et al.* 1989, cited by Acharya 2002).

Community forestry in Nepal devolves management and use rights of forests to local groups of users. Access to forests is important because forests are central to farming systems,

and more than 80 percent of Nepal's population of 23 Million people depend on agriculture. (US AID 2004).

Nepal's Master Plan for the Forestry Sector from 1988 tries to rope in the local population to maintain the forests and also allow them to participate in the decision-making process (FECOFUN).

Conservation is often the main goal of forest management in Nepal. Fuel wood supplies over 75 percent of the country's energy needs. Moreover, forests play a critical role in the agro-ecological cycle of cropping patterns, animal husbandry, and forest products that sustains agricultural production. The use of NTFP, following strict rules of certification or other committee requirements and village agreements, is allowed. The management of NTFP is very crucial to support livelihoods as the majority the country's population lives in rural areas, where there are also high rates of poverty. NTFP also present a great opportunity for Nepal as more than 700 medicinal plants exist in the country and 165 NTFP are currently collected for commercial purposes. However, there is little local market available for forest products apart from timber. Approximately 10–20 thousand metric tons of NTFP are collected in Nepal and sold mostly in India without processing. Often intermediaries along the value chain make the process inefficient and less profitable for the primary producers and collectors of the NTFP. There is a great potential for NTFP to promote self-reliance among the Community forestry users by helping them capitalize on natural resources to meet their own needs for livelihood creation while ensuring that they manage their resources in a sustainable manner; certified products additionally have better market acceptance. (Subedi 2006, FECOFUN). The authors recommend to disaggregate data on the use of, knowledge about and reliance on NTFP species according to men and women.

FECOFUN's programme focuses on improving the social and economic conditions of community forest user groups (CFUG), particularly focusing on the least privileged groups, in introducing CFUGs to the concepts of sustainable management, enterprise development, effective market access through forest certification, and helping them set up cooperatives/community based companies and using the proper marketing information systems. Gender balance and social justice are consequently elements of FECOFUN's mission statement, and explicitly Women's Empowerment is one of the eight thematic programme areas.

Certification of the forest management of community user groups

To engage local population in maintaining the forests, certification of forest and NTFP management was introduced as a pilot project in 2002 by the Asia Network for Sustainable Agriculture and Bioresources (ANSAB) as a tool to prevent loss of biodiversity and overexploitation of the forest resources

by rural masses. The certification scheme and requirements of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) was recognized as the most effective compared to other certification schemes as FSC supports and demands environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial and economically viable forest management, and requires participation of all stakeholders, which supports ANSAB's approaches (Subedi, n.d).

One of the FSC criteria relevant for this study is the requirement that in forest certification processes "consultations shall be maintained with people and groups (both men and women) directly affected by management operations." (FSC 2002: Principle and Criteria for Forest Management, criterion 4.4). The results of these consultations have to be reflected in the social impact evaluations and management plans.¹

Objectives and research questions

George's study (2010) aims at gaining insight into land tenure systems in community forests in Nepal and the gender specific manner of the use of forests during the pilot phase of a certification programme, as well as gender differentiated participation in and perceptions of the impacts of certification. Selected findings from George (2010) will be presented here. Research questions in particular included:

- Are men and women involved in different activities related to use of forests?
- What are the forest products gathered by men and women – before and after certification?
- What is the participation of men and women in committees and subcommittees?
- How do men and women perceive the forest management practices, forest conditions and their living conditions after implementation of certification requirements?

METHODS AND RESEARCH GROUPS

Qualitative and quantitative data have been collected and analyzed separately. Then the results have been converged to get a better understanding of the roles of women and men with a special focus on participation of women in the piloting of the forest certification project and on forest users' awareness levels about certification impacts.

Qualitative data analysis has been done by means of "open coding" where themes that emerge from the raw data are identified and categorized by manually grouping the answers of respondents in order to understand and analyse if various patterns of similarities or differences exist in them. The quantitative data are presented as frequency distributions in order to visualize the results.

¹ To better understand how FSC requirements for forest management are implemented in certification processes, FSC International and FSC Nepal supported this research.

After extensive research and conducting feasibility studies, two districts were selected for the piloting of this project from all the existing [10,969] community forest user groups. They were Bhajang and Dolakha districts in Nepal. In total, there are currently 21 community forest user groups (CFUG) from these two districts that cover an area of 14,086 ha and are in the certification pool. Of these, 11 are in the Bhajang district and 10 in Dolakha district (ANSAB capability statement, n.d.). Following information of the CFUG members and preparatory work as recommended during first scoping visits of the Rainforest Alliance² (RA), in fall 2004 the FSC-accredited certification body SmartWood (SW), affiliate of RA, conducted the main certification assessment. (Subedi 2004). In 2005 FECOFUN was granted as group manager with the FSC certificate (SW-FM/COC-001438) for the forest management by these CFUGs. This was the first international forest management certificate in Nepal, Nepal has now made the forest/NTFP certification a national priority (FECOFUN).

Selection of forest user groups

The selected research area was within the certification pool. After consultation with experts working with certified forests in these areas and talks with key informants from ANSAB and Nepal Forester Association (NFA), the district of Dolakha was suggested to carry out this research. Some important criteria that helped take this decision were:

The 10 community forest user groups within Dolakha district are scattered in two different areas separated by a distance of approximately 55km. One area is the Charikot range post that consists of seven certified community forest

user groups and is very close to the headquarter Charikot. The second area is the Jiri range post that is located at a distance of 55km from the headquarters and consists of three certified community forest user groups. Because of the large travel distances between the communities, two community forest user groups were chosen from the Charikot Range post for this study, as they were located close to the headquarters. The geographical conditions are similar, forest types and key species in both community forests are the same (see Table 1).

The sampling units were the households where systematic sampling was used. A sample of the 543 households ($n = 60$) was taken from each of the two community forest user groups. One member from each of the 60 chosen households was interviewed. Purposeful sampling was done by mainly interviewing the experts from ANSAB, DFO, NFA, FECOFUN district office and some others knowledgeable on the topic, who were actively involved during the pilot period of this project.

The communities and their households in Bhitleri and Sushpa differ from each other in a number of aspects (see Table 1): In both villages men tend to leave the region to find work somewhere else, and the main occupation of those staying is subsistence agriculture, with harvesting of NTFP for additional cash income generation). In Sushpa only a small part of these forests are certified.

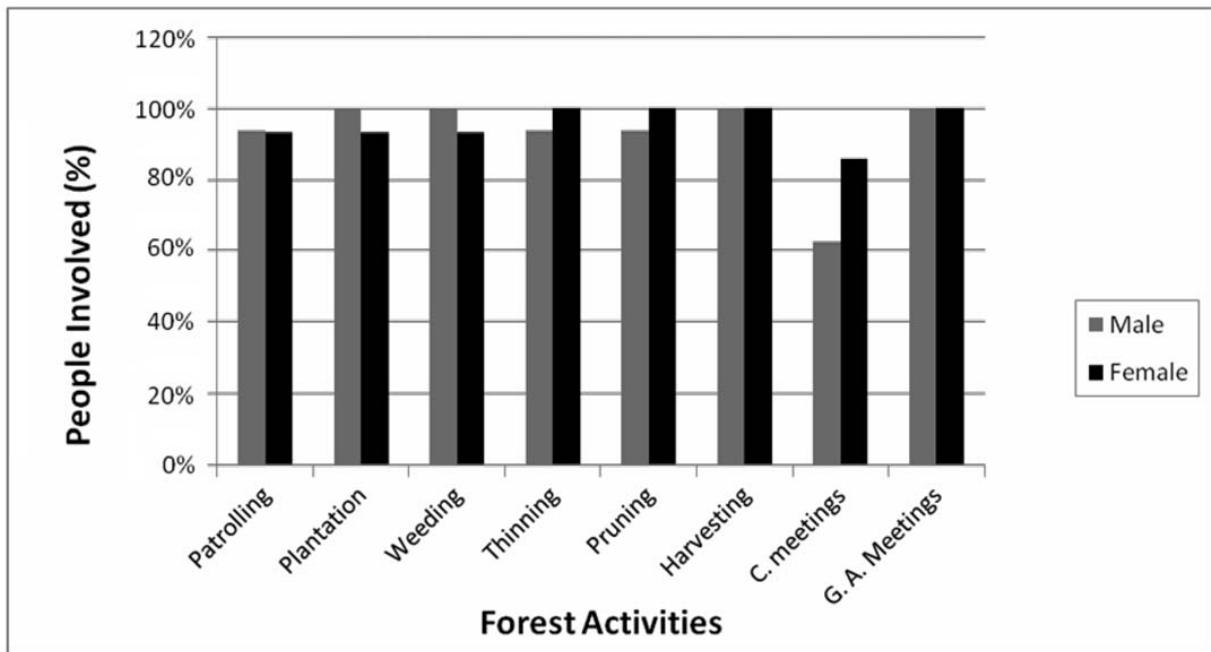
The main ethnic groups do not have much in common in the villages, and also the main religions differ between the villages. Interestingly the literacy of women in Sushpa almost reaches 50%, and is higher than those of men. In Bhitleri the relation is reverse, and only 28% of the women are literate.

TABLE 1 Background information on the selected CFUGs

	Sushpa CFUG	Bhitleri Phaka CFUG
Population	301 households	242 households
Main ethnic groups	Thami, Shivakoti, Karki, Phuyal, Gautam	Sherpa, Chhetri, Newar, Magar
Main religions	Hinduism (80%) Buddhism (19%)	Buddhism (58%), Hinduism (41%)
Female literacy rate	48%	28%
Male literacy rate	36%	42%
Altitude	1890 m - 3300 m a.s.l.	2100 m - 3300 m a.s.l.
Slope average	10°–45°	10°–35°
Main occupation: agriculture	Maize, millet, paddy, Wheat, potatoes	Maize, millet, wheat, Potatoes
Forest types	Natural Thing Salla and Gobresall forest. Mixed forest of Khassru Basset and Kholme, Plantations with Ranisalla and Patesalla. Bushy mixed forest.	

² The Rainforest Alliance, a US-American non-governmental organisation, works to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods by transforming land-use practices, business practices and consumer behavior. <http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/about>.

FIGURE 1 Gender Roles in forest activities of respondents in Sushpa CFUG



RESULTS

Background information on the respondents

One member from each of 60 households was interviewed in the two community forest user groups (see above). An attempt has been made to include all the relevant age groups.

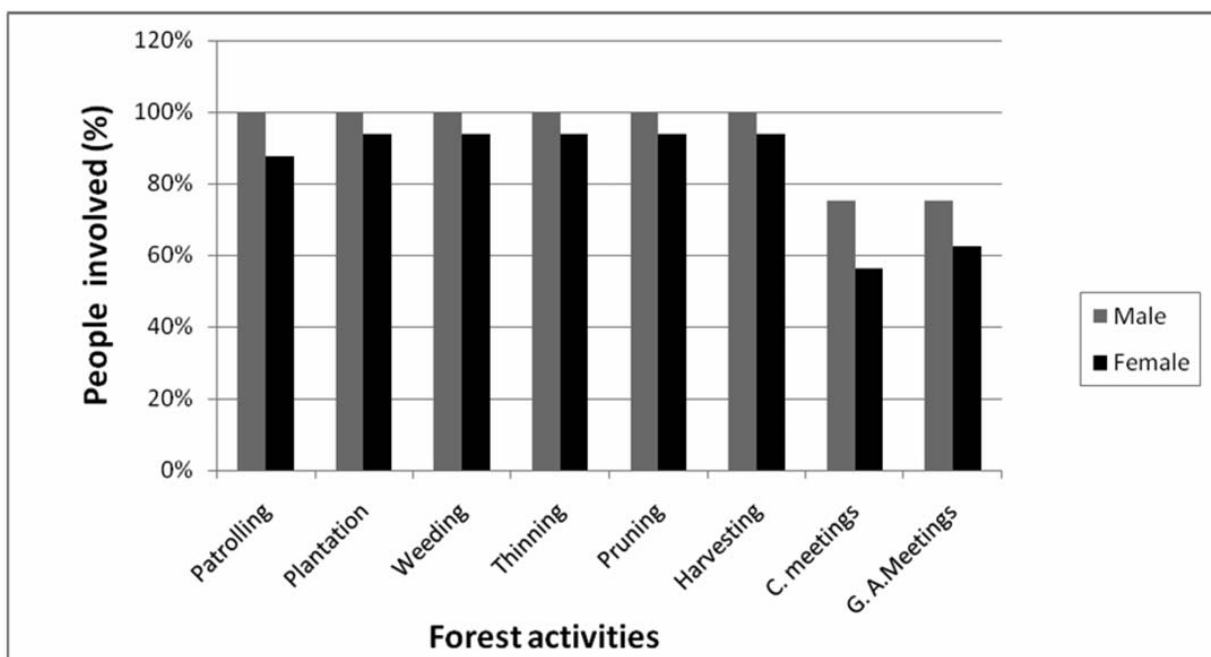
The community forest user group at Sushpa consists of 301 households, of which 7% belong to the Brahmin caste, 70% to the Janajati caste and 3% to the Dalit caste (see

Table 1). 16 men (m) and 14 women (w) (Brahmin: 6 m, 2 w; Janajati: 10m, 10 w; Dalit: - m, 2 w) responded to the survey.

The community forest user group at Bhitleri consists of 242 households of which 59% belong to the Brahmin caste, 41 to the Janajati caste. 8 men and 16 women (Brahmin: 5 m, 8 w; Janajati: 3 m, 8 w.) responded to the survey.

Apart from agriculture, interviewees in 67% households in Bhitleri earn an extra income working as labourers outside the village. 4% have small businesses within the village. The remaining 29% solely depend on agriculture.

FIGURE 2 Gender Roles in forest activities of respondents in Bhitleri CFUG



In Sushpa, it was found that besides agriculture as main source of livelihood of the people, interviewees in 80% of households earn an additional income as labourers working outside the village. 10% have their own small businesses within the village and 3% are retired, receiving pensions from the state. The remaining 7% are solely dependent on agriculture.

In Sushpa 97% of the population is involved in these forest activities regularly, in Bhitleri 75% of the total population is regularly involved forest activities, 17% are only occasionally involved, and 8% are not involved in any forest activities.

Are men and women involved in different activities related to use of forests?

Interviewees were asked about their main responsibilities related to the activities on community forest management level (such as patrolling, planting, weeding, thinning, pruning and harvesting) and on institutional development level (attending community meetings and general assembly meetings). Apart from a lower presence of women (62% of all women) compared to men (83%) in committee meetings in Sushpa, in the majority of all forest management related activities both women and men are almost equally engaged with 90 to 100% of the interviewees (see Figure 1).

Similarly in Bhitleri more than 90% of the interviewees were involved in almost all the community forest activities. Only in both the general assemblies and in committee meetings, participation of men as well women is low, though the percentage of male participation (75%) is still higher than those of women (60%) (see Figure 2).

Forest products gathered by men and women before and after certification

In Sushpa, collection of firewood, timber, dry and green leaf litter has been the highest with over 80% people involved (Figure 3). The difference in the involvement of men and women in collecting these products was not significant. Before certification, over 80% of the people took their livestock for grazing whereas less than 20% collected grass for their livestock. After certification, there was a change in management practices and random grazing by animals was stopped. Thus 80% were now involved in collecting grass for stall feeding. Gender differences are slight in this activity.

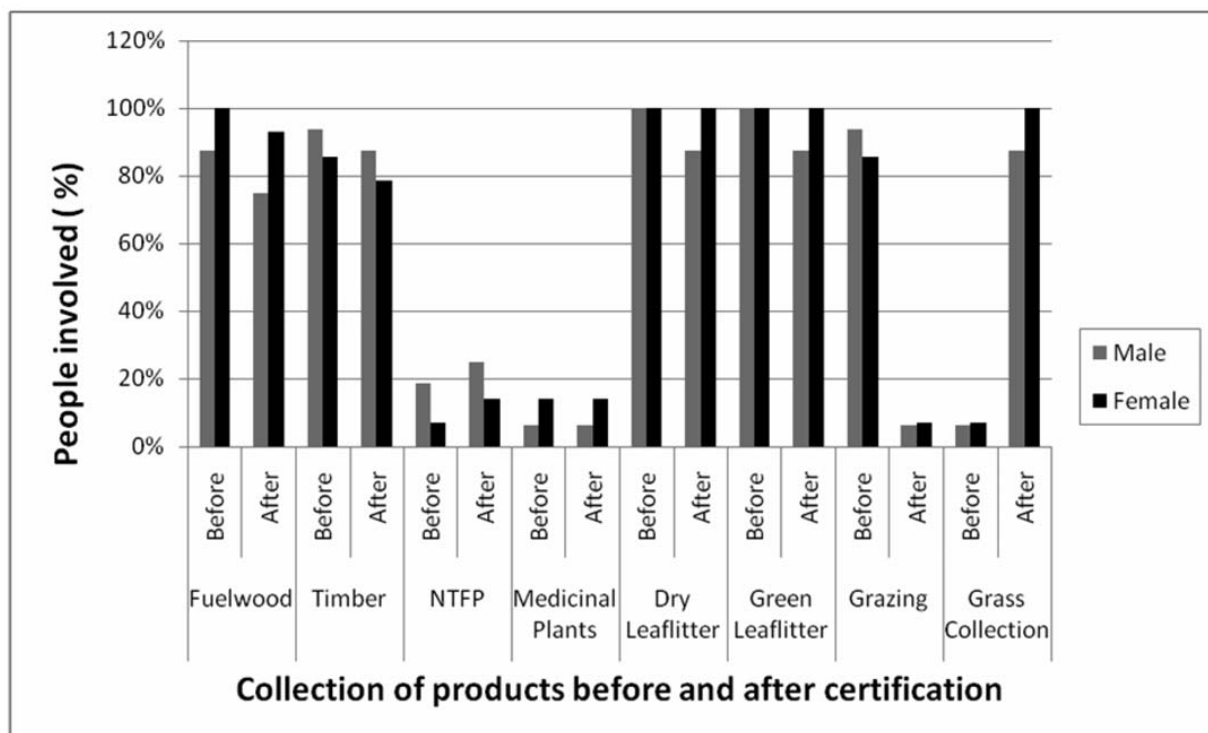
The collection of medicinal plants after certification remains the same, with the involvement of the same number of men and women. However, more women are involved in medicinal plant collection. These plants are usually collected while searching (if stumbled upon) for other products. After certification, the percentage of people involved in NTFP collection increased slightly, with more men than women.

In Bhitleri in all the community forest activities, men are more involved than women, although the difference is insignificant. In both the general and assembly meetings, participation of men as well women is low, though the percentage of male participation is still higher.

Participation of men and women in committees and sub committees

There are two levels of committees on village-level: The Executive, Monitoring and Advisory committees are dealing

FIGURE 3 Forest products used by respondents in Sushpa CFUG



with key decisions on community issues; various subcommittees deal with local issues. New village regulations require that each committee and subcommittee should have a gender balance in the key positions (at least 33% women), for example for treasurer and chairperson. This is not a direct certification requirement, but FSC certification requires that national regulations related to the management of the certified unit have to be respected. The study showed that usually men held the prime positions, while women members are in the majority only in the subcommittees³.

The meetings are open to all community members. They should get a few days in advance an invitation to the meetings. Interviewees reported that female committee members have usually been informed through their husbands about the upcoming meeting. With the husband leaving the region to find work somewhere else, the invitation never again reached the female committee member.

Therefore a number of the “no participation” group can be explained with the fact, that men felt better informed about upcoming meetings than women. Passive participation means that people are only listening. Differences in active participation are frequently that men comment and discuss certain aspects of the agenda, while women more often tend to ask questions for clarification. Interestingly, the Bhittheri group has a committee chairlady, but this is not reflected in a better participation of women in the group so far.

Awareness levels of men and women on certification

To examine the awareness levels on certification, the question, “Are you aware that your forests have been certified?” was put forth.

In Sushpa only 21% of the women were aware that the forests were certified, one third of them were aware of the year of certification, the others not. Of all men, 50% were aware of the forests being certified. two fifth of them knew the year of certification. In Bhittheri most figures were slightly higher. In both community forest user groups’ awareness among men was higher than that of women.

How do people perceive their living conditions after certification?

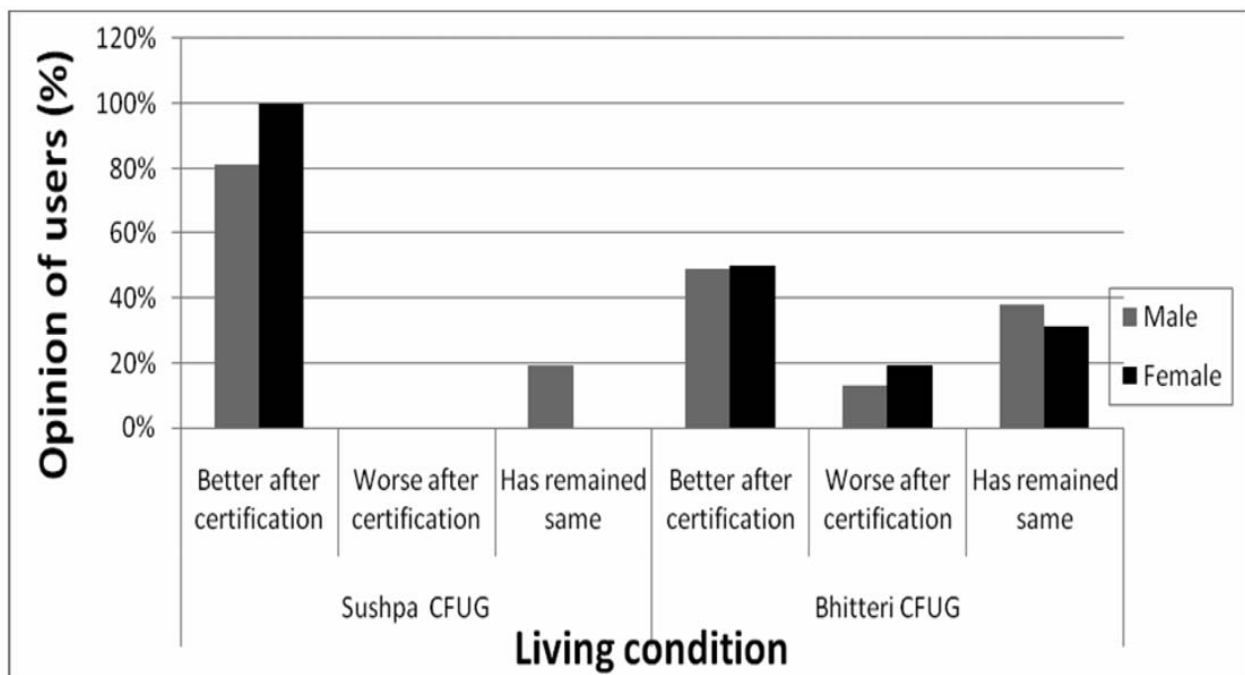
Interviewees have been asked whether their living condition would be better or worse after certification, or if live has remained the same. All the women and 81% of the men in Sushpa responded that their living conditions are better after certification (Figure 4). In Bhittheri 49% of men and 50% of the women are of this opinion, 38% of the women and 36% of the men in Bhittheri do not see a change in their living conditions after certification.

Opinions from men and women about benefits of certification

Responses of respondents who were aware of forest certification on the benefits of certification from women from both communities were:

- Compared to the past, forest products such as timber, grass, fodder, fuel wood are found nearer as the forest areas have increased in size.

FIGURE 4 Opinions of respondents in Sushpa and Bhittheri CFUGs on living condition after certification



³ For more detailed information cf. George (2010).

- *Forest condition is improving, especially the stand (volume), as haphazard and illegal felling of trees has been stopped completely.*
- *There is better availability of grass due to stoppage of random grazing. Grass grows much better as it is not trampled on. During certain times in a year, forests are open specially for grass collection and hence, it is not easier to find grass.*

The following answers are examples of responses obtained from men from either one of the community:

- *There is an increased transparency in dealings of timber extraction and sales due to the establishment of the depot.*
- *Locals are employed as forest watchers, thus generating employment with a steady income.*
- *Forest products are available in abundance and collection consumes less time.*
- *Condition of forests has improved as illegal felling of trees is a punishable offence.*
- *Prices of NTFPs have increased as products are now sold through the community forest user group.*

Issues raised by men and women on certification

The change most often described by the interviewees is the introduction of Zero-grazing as a requirement of certification. Before certification, over 80% of the interviewees took their livestock for grazing into the forest, and only less than 20% collected grass to feed the livestock in the stable. After certification, there was a change in management practices and random grazing by animals was stopped. Therefore 80% of the interviewees are now involved in collecting grass for feeding.

The collection of medicinal plants for own use and local trade after certification remains the same as before introduction of certification requirements, with the involvement of same number of men and women. After certification, the percentage of people involved in NTFP collection like Lokta bark for international trade increased slightly, with more men involved than women.

Impact of stricter regulations due to certification requirements and better access for certified products to international markets on living conditions

About 50% of the women responded, that

- *Compared to the past, forest products such as timber, grass, fodder, fuel wood are found nearer as the forest areas have increased in size.*
- *Forest condition is improving, as illegal felling of trees has been stopped completely.*
- *Because of zero grazing, there is now better availability of grass. Grass now grows much better, because cattle don't walk on it. Time for grass collection is restricted, therefore it is now easier to find grass.*

For some women it is an extra burden to collect grass for cattle, but they also appreciate the better availability of manure for agriculture.

Men often responded, that

- *There is an increased transparency in dealings of timber extraction and sales due to the establishment of a depot.*
- *Locals are employed as forest guards, which generates employment with a steady income.*
- *Condition of forests has improved as illegal felling of trees is a punishable offence.*
- *Prices of NTFP have increased as products are now sold through the community forest user group.*

One of the positive aspects of forests certification has been the improved condition of the forests, with the forests looking denser and thicker than before. While the more general and more environmental issues have been improved through certification, the more negative aspects are on the economic side of certification: Some of the elderly men tend to be less happy with certification requirements, as these limits their former freedom to use and overuse forest resources.

Although the communities have gained international recognition as NTFP like aromatic oils and Lokta bark for handmade paper are being exported to the international market, the prices for certified products are not as high as desired. Support is needed for marketing activities.

Due to changing regulations, people are slowly shifting to more convenient and practical means like growing plant species for fuel wood on their own land, reducing their dependence on forests. Besides sustainable management of forests, which is the main aim of forest certification, it also acts as a tool of poverty alleviation by trying to provide income generating opportunities for local people through engagement in forest activities. In spite of this, not many people are seen to be involved in income generating forest activities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results show that in Sushpa as well as Bhitteri, men are more aware of forest certification than women. The causes of this can be estimated to be linked to various factors. A major cause may be that men are not bound down by social norms like women. For instance, mingling of women in social settings, talking to strangers etc. is frowned upon. But this is not so for men. Hence, men can have informal meetings, mingle freely and communicate more; which in turn will help discuss various topics and provide for fast dissemination of information. Also, most men may be involved in forestry activities from which they gain monetary benefits. Thus, as they earn their livelihood from this sector, they follow all new developments in it closely, like certification and allied activities.

In Sushpa and Bhitteri, very few women were aware of certification as compared to men. Various factors can be estimated to have contributed to this. The primary cause is the

binding social norms that restrict women's free expression and are biased towards men. Also, they are mainly concerned with the housework, and mostly not involved in large economic activities pertaining to forests.

However, the local resource persons claimed to go from house to house in the village, informing people on certification and other forest issues. Thus, ideally all the people should be aware of these policies. Hence, the low awareness levels seen among people is astonishing. Informal discussions with people revealed that less than 10% of the total population actually benefit from the project of certification, at present. Hence, they may consider these issues insignificant and tend to forget them. This could be a factor why they do not follow these policies closely and are unaware of them. These are the limitations of new and innovative experimentations initiated by NGOs or similar groups.

Apart from people's awareness on certification, it was essential to analyze their concerns on policies formulated to adapt with the FSC guidelines. It was seen that men focus more on the application aspects such as accountability and transparency of the management process. As providers of the household, women are more concerned with how the new rules might help them to continue providing daily necessities for the family. An analysis of the women's answers made it clear that their questions targeted issues such as opening and closing timings of forests and quantities of firewood, grass and leaf litter that they could collect in order to have a constant supply of basic necessities for the household.

Research conducted by an outsider caused a language barrier due to which it was not possible to directly communicate with the local persons. Collection of information about economical activities of the local people was difficult as people were very cautious in not letting out information on income and economic activities.

As indicated in the results and discussions, though a high number of the community members are still involved in forest activities, their dependence on forest activities for economic gains is low. While forest certification is achieving the objective of forest conservation and sustainable management, the other objective of enhancing the economic status of the forest users needs to be further promoted. Efforts could be taken to ensure measures that would guarantee more involvement in forest related economic activities so the people would not be compelled to leave their villages seeking work.

New regulations demand that 33% of a decision making body must comprise of women. They must now step up and join the committees. Women were not confident, but seeing the few that have joined, most women were motivated to be a part of these and voice their opinions. A good example of these changes has been seen in Bhitte where a woman is the chairperson of the committee. This now is more of an exception, and should become common practice. For example, there are areas in Nepal where forest committees are handled exclusively by women themselves and are a success. There is a need for consistent and long term training programmes with a focus on gender equality to eradicate these socially embedded inequalities. The call of the day is to have constant and

long term efforts to educate the people in this regard in order to bring about a significant change.

However as the certification is still in the initial stages, it will take some years for more certified NTFP to gain greater access to the international market and also till it will be possible to be able to measure the benefits brought about by certifications.

Some may argue that the improved condition of the forests is due to the regulation and the consequence of reduction in forest use. This needs not be the case because progressively there is also increase in population. So even when the rate of forest use per person is less, the absolute quantum of use could be higher. Another aspect that greatly contributes to the better health of the forests are regulations about cattle which is strongly implemented. Finally, one can conclude that certification with its regular third party audits to monitor and enforce adherence to legal regulations has contributed to sustainable management and consequent forest conservation.

More research is required to better understand the implementation of certification requirement for community managed forests and the impact of these requirements on the forest user groups like these two communities in the one district studied. A larger representation of the community forest user groups may give a better idea of the situation, also including other times of the year. The field work was conducted during the monsoon season only, which is also the plantation season for the people of the village. Due to this, a limited number of people were available in their houses.

The effects of using NTFP on the gender situation need to be further studied. NTFP are typically market oriented and consequently controlled by the male population. Therefore while this may contribute to improving the economic status, it need not promote gender equality.

It can also be seen that certain kinds of gender perceptions prevail even with regard to production for the market and production for consumption. While the male population is more oriented to production for the market, the female population is more interested in the consumption oriented products. This may be due to the traditional gender role of women being in charge of running the home. However in a subsistence situation, this is very significant and the possibility to control the household economy could advance women's position. Nevertheless, all these demand long and sustained efforts together with the communities.

Reforms like equal gender participation in decision making and gender equality will take a long time to materialize. This is because the social taboos on women and ideology of holding women inferior to men has existed for centuries. A good illustration of this, as found in this study, would be the high levels of presence of women in sub-committees and general assembly meetings; in spite of which, it is observed that all the high posts are held by men while women are just members of these groups. Participation of women also does not guarantee that they raise their concerns in meetings. Many a times it has been observed that women either remain silent or if they speak, they are ignored or not given much priority, as the social structures within society are still male and elite

dominated. A practical approach could be to have separate meetings for the women committee members for a certain duration of time. This section is more appropriate for the discussion, with proper citations to support the claims.

However, with the introduction of various projects, such as FSC certification, awareness levels regarding issues like equal gender participation, importance of women's involvement in decision making are gaining importance and being noticed by the people through awareness raising programmes. In this case, efforts were taken in the initial phase of training the local resource persons to equally represent men and women.

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