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Gender Equality Challenges to the REDD+ Initiative in Nepal

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Despite widespread gender issues in natural resource management and rural livelihoods strategies, there has been little study of how new development strategies, such as Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), consider gender issues. Gender consideration in REDD+ is especially important in mountainous countries like Nepal, where the majority of the rural population, especially women and socioeconomically disadvantaged households, depend on forests for many of their subsistence needs. Any changes in forest access or use rights or rules as a result of REDD+ would impact marginalized people whose inclusion, voice, and access to and control over forest resources are influenced by deeply gendered power relations and socio-institutional practices in Nepali society. This article analyzes ways the REDD+ initiatives in Nepal have considered gender issues identified in earlier studies. The main finding is that the REDD+ policy process is inadequate to account for underlying power dynamics, and thus is unable to achieve equity goals. In the absence of accounting for power, the consideration of gender issues in forest management by explicit inclusion of women in the payment criteria and policy discussions within REDD+ programs, including the REDD+ payment pilot project, is insufficient to redress gender imbalances. Forest actors such as the government and other project implementers—including community institutions—lack strategies and responsibilities for applying REDD+ initiatives that are gender equitable and ensure REDD+ benefits and decision-making opportunities for women and other marginalized people. To tap the potential of REDD+ to contribute to both climate change mitigation and mountain development, efforts are needed to make REDD+ national strategy- and policy-making gender sensitive. The critical areas to be addressed in Nepal include framing the REDD+ strategy within the forest ministry's Gender and Social Inclusion Strategy 2008, and then by judicious implementation ensuring access of poor and disadvantaged women and men to forest resources, carbon funds, and decision-making roles in order to undermine entrenched unequal relations.

Keywords: *Benefit sharing; women; Forest Carbon Trust Fund; decision-making; incentives; inclusion; mountains; Nepal.*

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Introduction

The United Nations Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation program (REDD+) has been central to discussions of global and national atmospheric carbon mitigation strategies (Seymour 2008). It is an economic incentive mechanism for conservation and management of forests (Acharya et al 2009; Karky and Rana 2011; Khatri 2012; Suzuki 2012) to reduce atmospheric carbon emissions. REDD+ has the potential to contribute not only to climate change mitigation but also to development, including poverty reduction (Angelsen 2008; Suzuki 2012). However, understanding the role of REDD+ in poverty reduction requires long-term, systematic documentation of REDD+ interventions at different scales. As Brown et al (2008: 114) argue, "any REDD induced changes in national level forest governance are likely to have major effects on the wellbeing of forest dependent communities, including women and indigenous peoples." Critics have pointed out that REDD+ may reinforce existing gender inequality if REDD+ policies, programs, and projects at the local level are not designed and implemented taking gender and other propoor issues into consideration (Brown 2011; Pham et al 2012).

Taking account of inequalities shaped by gender in REDD+ is even more important in the countries of the Hindu Kush–Himalayan (HKH) region such as Nepal, where the majority of the rural population—including women, indigenous peoples (also called ethnic groups, see Gurung et al 2014), and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups—depend on forest ecosystems for many of their subsistence needs (ICIMOD 1989; Gilmour and Fisher 1991; Lama and Buchy 2002; Sherpa 2012). Women and poor households thus tend to be vulnerable to changes in forest access, use rights, or rules (McDougall, Leeuwis, et al 2013: 570). At the same time, cultural norms and social hierarchy and practices on the basis of gender, caste/

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FIGURE 1 Woman forest user learning how to measure tree girth in the REDD+ pilot site. (Photo by Eak Rana/ICIMOD)



ethnicity, wealth, and location produce many institutional challenges to the empowerment of the poor, women, and socially excluded groups in Nepal (Nightingale 2005, 2011; World Bank and DFID 2006; Khadka 2009).

As signatories to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, many countries in the HKH region, including Nepal, have initiated REDD+ policy processes through the implementation of projects such as piloting a REDD+ payment mechanism (see ICIMOD 2011a) and conducting field studies on the drivers of deforestation and institutional governance (Lamsal and Bhandary 2009; MFSC 2011; Paudel et al 2013). Analysis of these REDD+ initiatives from an institutional governance perspective reveals that they are limited to technical and administrative issues (Figure 1), giving little attention to key concerns such as forest tenure security, governance, the effective participation of socially differentiated stakeholders, and state–community power relationships (see Khatri 2012; Paudel et al 2013; Bastakoti and Davidsen 2014). Critical analyses of how gender issues are considered by REDD+ initiatives are scarce.

As the literature from the HKH region reveals, women's contributions to the conservation and management of forests, ecologically sensitive areas, water springs, and biodiversity resources are immense (see also Regmi and Fewcett 1999; Dorji 2012; Karki and Gurung 2012; Khadka and Verma 2012; Talukdar 2012; Shrestha 2013). However, their participation in decision-making and benefit sharing is poor throughout the region (Agarwal 2001; Lama and Buchy 2002; Nightingale 2003, 2005, 2006; Parajuli et al 2010; Bhasin 2011). The majority of women have unequal access to productive resources such as land, enterprise, education, skills, information, and decision-making power. These situations place women, especially forest-dependent poor women, at greater risk of losing their rights to forest resources or not receiving an equitable share of the compensation for forest protection activities if REDD+ national strategies and processes are not gender and social inclusive (Gurung et al 2011).

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Based on a case study in Nepal, this article aims to present the extent to which gender has been considered in REDD+ initiatives in the HKH region and to explain the gender dynamics of participation in REDD+ activities and policy processes that have implications for women's empowerment and gender equality in the natural resource management sector.

A gender transformative approach to REDD+

As an emerging climate change mitigation strategy, REDD+ has the potential to enhance and improve the condition of women (Ahlborg and Nightingale 2012; Suzuki 2012). REDD+ critics (see Angelsen et al 2012; Suzuki 2012) argue that REDD+ must move beyond climate-focused objectives to include the provision of livelihood, social, and environmental benefits for forest-dependent people and must ensure that their rights are protected. They argue for the need to consider equity, including the fair distribution of benefits between and within countries and groups. This argument is significant to this study, as it is to many other studies of community forestry in Nepal (Agarwal 2001; Lama and Buchy 2002; Nightingale 2002, 2005, 2006; Malla et al 2003; Thoms 2008; Parajuli et al 2010) that have reported gender inequality and exclusion. These studies have highlighted the importance of access to and use and distribution of resources and incentives, decision-making practices, and knowledge systems that are gender and social inclusive. In order to benefit women and men forest users, especially those who live in poverty and are excluded from forest benefits, governance, knowledge systems, REDD+ strategies, and national-level decision-making processes must challenge the existing gendered structural barriers to participation (Ahlborg and Nightingale 2012) and benefit sharing in natural resources management and development.

An extensive development literature from Nepal discusses gender issues in the context of natural resource management and climate change (see Bajracharya et al 1993; Sharma et al 2005; Acharya and Gentle 2006; Gurung et al 2011; Leduc 2011; Karki and Gurung 2012). This literature points out the important roles of women in natural resource management and stresses the need to address their material needs such as fuelwood, fodder, and water. The dominant view of women's important roles in natural resource management, however, tends to focus on the Women, Environment, and Development perspective, which sees women as knowledgeable and efficient actors in environmental conservation and thus as a target group for environmental projects (Elmhirst and Resurreccion 2008).

At the same time, scholars have pointed out the need to look at natural resource management practices from a gendered approach that enables an understanding of and ability to tackle gender and women's empowerment issues from a broader sociopolitical perspective. Although women's specific knowledge and exclusions may exist, gender issues are primarily related to power structures and differences in access, use, and control over development opportunities and benefits for different genders (Rocheleau and Edmunds 1997; Nightingale 2006; Brown 2011). Any development policies and projects that aim to address environmental degradation and poverty not only result in gendered impacts and responses, but also are affected by how gender and gendered power relations are framed and produced in a particular settings (Nightingale 2005; Elmhirst and Resurreccion 2008; Ahlborg and Nightingale 2012). This means that REDD+, as a new incentive mechanism for climate change mitigation and poverty reduction efforts, may either result in inequalities in gender relations, benefit sharing, and opportunities for participation in decision-making, or challenge relations of power between and among men and women.

Within these more theoretically driven academic perspectives, new understandings of gender dimensions in natural resource management are emerging. For example, a relational perspective on gender focuses on power relations between men and women that shape access to and control over forest management and benefit sharing. In simple terms, gender relations refer to power differentials, especially between and among men and women, in a particular context, which change over time (Young 1997; Lama and Buchy 2002; Skinner 2011). Using this kind of focus on gender relations in natural resource management enables the design and implementation of forestry programs that address women's and men's gender-specific needs and constraints (Leach 1991; Rocheleau 1995; Verma 2001). Similarly, understanding gender from a relational perspective stresses the need to consider other forms of social and cultural relations and axes of power such as class, location, age, race, caste/ethnicity, and practices of development (Nightingale 2006, 2011; Ahlborg and Nightingale 2012; Mollett and Faria 2013), while analyzing gender issues and women's empowerment. This type of thinking not only criticizes gender-focused development practices that see women or men in an organization or a village as a homogenous group, but also challenges development strategies that focus on representation rather than understanding how gender is conceptualized and what those conceptualizations mean for how excluded women or men can be empowered to participate meaningfully in natural resource management (Lama and Buchy 2002; Elmhirst and Resurreccion 2008; Ahlborg and Nightingale 2012).

Understanding gender as processes of the operation of power and associated social exclusionary or inclusionary outcomes is very useful in the Nepalese natural resource management sector, where women, especially poor and socially marginalized women, are often excluded from participation in decision-making and benefit sharing at

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all levels (World Bank and DFID 2006). Therefore, consideration of gender in REDD+ is not meant to give women more responsibility in forest conservation and carbon sink enhancement, but to recognize gender inequality and ensure that women at the bottom of the social hierarchy participate effectively in decision-making and have equitable access to forest benefits at all levels. In other words, actors working in the forest sector should acknowledge the complex relationship between forests, gendered power dynamics, and REDD+ policies and practices, not only at the local level but across the policy-making spectrum. By doing so, REDD+ can be seen as a sustainable approach to addressing developmental and environmental problems such as marginality, fragility, and inequality that are specific to mountain regions.

Making REDD+ gender transformative, however, depends on forest actors such as the government, development projects, and civil society, including community institutions working on forestry issues, and, most importantly, their capacity for gender analysis and their roles and interests in understanding forest management and development through a gender lens. As discussed in the development literature (Chambers 1997; Chambers and Pettit 2004; Mosse 2005), the perceptions, interests, attitudes, and capacities of actors engaged in rural development influence the change process. Thus, consideration of gender aspects in REDD+ initiatives depends on the priorities and capacities of forest actors to tackle gender issues in forest management, as well as how they have advanced their understanding of REDD+ issues and opportunities beyond the biophysical dimension. Keeping these discussions in mind, this study conceptualizes a gender transformative approach to REDD+ to improve understanding of how men and women in different social positions participate in and benefit from ongoing REDD+ initiatives in the HKH region. In order to capture these complex issues, the analytical framework includes 3 elements: (1) gender inclusion in the institutional structures of the REDD+ payment mechanism being tested in Nepal, (2) access to REDD+ related decision-making by women and other socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, and (3) the perspectives and dynamics of actors involved in national-level REDD+ policy processes.

Methodology and research context

Data were collected through a gender assessment carried out from June to August 2012 and from January to February 2013 in the project area of a REDD+ pilot funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) as well as through national-level REDD+ discussions in 2013 and 2014 and documents in Nepal. The REDD+ pilot project was implemented from June 2009 to May 2013 in collaboration with the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), and Asia Network for Sustainable Agriculture and Bio-resources. The main goal of the project was to "design and set up a governance and payment system for Nepal's Community Forest Management under Reduced Emission from Deforestation and Degradation" (ICIMOD 2011a: 2). The project sites include 3 watershed areas in Nepal—Charnawati in Dolakha District (20°40′12″N; 86°00′00″E), Kayarkhola in Chitwan District (27°43′12″N, 84°37′12″E), and Ludhikhola in Gorkha District (27°57′00″N, 84°37′12″E)—and the project's intervention covered 105 community forest user groups (CFUGs) (Figure 2).

All CFUGs in the REDD+ payment pilot watersheds were involved in the operation and mobilization of the Forest Carbon Trust Fund (FCTF) in the form of seed grants. The seed grant in the REDD+ payment pilot project refers to the amount of REDD+ grant money allocated to the CFUGs working to enhance and monitor forest carbon. The grant is spent on activities related to forest management and livelihood improvement (ICIMOD 2011b). Given this, it is expected that a variety of people with different power relations participate in the management structure of the FCTF.

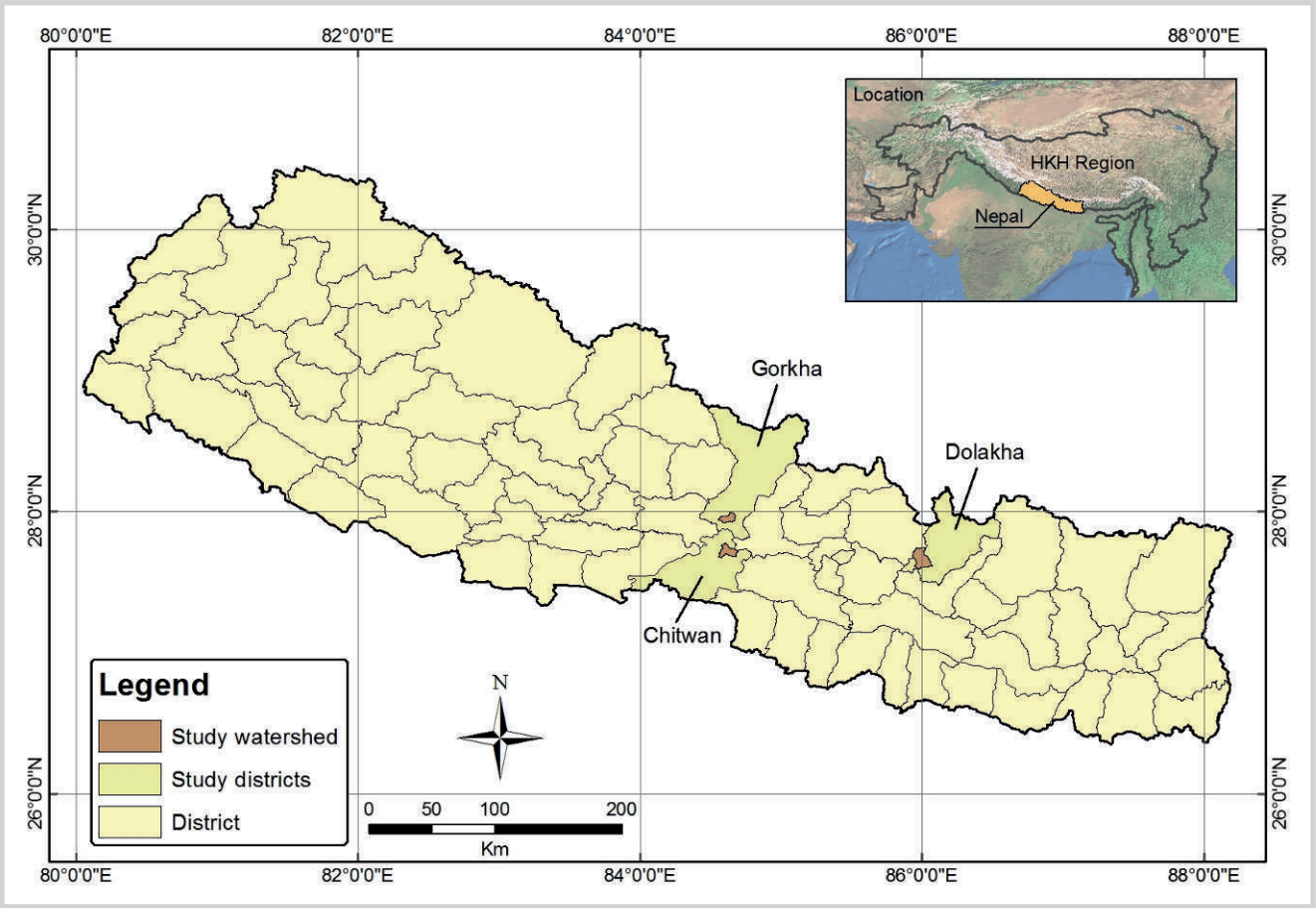
The study used a qualitative approach (Neuman 2003) aimed at explaining how men and women in different classes and castes/ethnicities participate in REDD+ policy processes and pilots at different levels and the extent to which forest institutional processes have considered gender issues in REDD+ benefit sharing and decision-making. Data were collected through 36 focus group discussions, in-depth interviews with 24 men and women forest users, participant observations, 6 forest stakeholder consultation meetings, and content analysis. The narratives of both men and women forest users and the implementing actors of REDD+, both state and nonstate, were categorized based on key gender analytical concepts such as access to resources, decision-making, and recognition of deeply embedded social structures and behaviors hindering women's control over forest decisions and benefits. The information was analyzed manually to identify patterns of women's and men's participation in the REDD+ processes and the power dynamics involved in REDD+ decision-making and policy processes.

Participation and power dynamics in the CFUGs

The CFUGs involved in the REDD+ pilot consist of 3 groups: Dalits (disadvantaged castes, formerly called "untouchable"), Janajatis (ethnic groups, alternatively indigenous peoples), and relatively advantaged castes (for instance, Brahmin and Chhetri) (Federspiel et al 2008). Whereas disadvantaged ethnic groups such as Thami and Bhujel (in Dolakha), Chepang (in Chitwan), and Magar (in Gorkha) are dominant social groups, Dalits are a minority

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FIGURE 2 Location of case study sites. (Map by Gauri Dangol/ICIMOD).



caste group in all 105 CFUGs. In all the pilot watersheds, advantaged caste groups rank second in population size. Fourteen percent of total forest user households in the pilot areas are identified as poor households (Field notes, Chitwan 19 June, Gorkha 28 June, Dolakha 25 August 2012). Women make up around 50% of the total population within the CFUGs. Five of the 105 CFUGs are "women-only," meaning they have women-only executive forest management committees. The executive committees of all of the CFUGs include different social groups. As Table 1 shows, women make up 40% of the total membership in the committee, which is higher than the national average of about 25% (DOF 2012).

However, participation of women and disadvantaged castes/ethnicities in the decision-making processes of CFUGs tends to be low. Whereas women hold 15% of the total leadership positions in the studied CFUGs, Dalits make up only 2%. Although women decide on the use and distribution of forest resources, including the forest carbon fund, in women-only CFUGs, in CFUGs with both men and women on the executive committee, it is often men who make decisions on these issues. Asked whether

TABLE 1 Membership in CFUGs in the REDD+ pilot sites in Nepal, 2012.

Social group	% of executive committee	% of total leadership	% of population in pilot site
Disadvantaged caste group	9	2	9
Ethnic group/Janajatis	49	45	50
Advantaged caste group	42	53	41
Women	40	15	50.1
Men	60	85	49.9

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women attend and speak up in CFUG meetings, a young Chhetri woman in Charnawati CFUG in Dolakha replied, "We women want to participate and speak up in *banko* (forest) meetings, and want to be a *samudayek banko adhakchya* (CFUG chairperson), but our society and families don't support us. If we speak up in community meetings and become active in community leadership, our neighbors and family members criticize us by saying *pothi baseko ramro hudaina* (it is unfortunate when a hen cries)" (field note, Dolakha, 27 August 2012).

This finding supports research by Lama and Buchy (2002) and Nightingale (2002, 2006) that identified the processes of gender inequalities through which the social meanings of gender identity of men and women are played out and power is produced and acted upon in community forestry. According to the interviewed women forest users, women's exclusion from elected leadership positions has 2 reasons. First, men perceive women as too weak to lead a CFUG, particularly when the CFUG has substantial funds; men also have a strong influence over the process of leadership selection (field note, Kankali CFUG, Chitwan, 22 June 2012). In CFUGs with large forest resources and a larger share of the carbon grant, men forest users don't share information with women forest users who are vocal and critical of CFUG governance (field note, Kankali CFUG, Chitwan, 22 June 2012). Second, men's outmigration and their limited involvement in household activities increase women's workload in subsistence activities, which creates time constraints that limit women's ability to take community leadership roles (field note, Chyase Bagabati, Dolakha, 26 August 2012).

Among women, Dalit women are most marginalized in terms of decision-making and accessing REDD+ benefits (see also Lama and Buchy 2002; Nightingale 2005; Khadka 2009). It is Dalit men who hold membership in CFUG executive committees, institutional structures, and meetings related to REDD+ and are given access to loans offered by the CFUGs. For example, in the Sitalu Pakha women-only CFUG in Gorkha, a Dalit man received a loan from a CFUG carbon grant for a small-scale business; however, his wife did not know anything about the grant. In a focus group discussion with Dalit women in Chyasebagabati CFUG, Dolakha, it was clear that Dalit women are disadvantaged not only at the community level but also at the household level. All the Dalit women interviewed said that their husbands do not like to see them as superior. Thus, men's power tends to be influential in deciding women's participation in REDD+ processes in local-level forest institutions. Men's domination over women was also apparent during the focus group discussion with a mix of men and women (Figure 3) as well as at district-level stakeholder meetings. Men did not give women a chance to speak out first in the focus group discussion even if the study team insisted that men should listen to women. Likewise, men were in the majority in district-level meetings, and they resisted when women participants complained that REDD+ processes were gender exclusive.

Gender inclusion in the FCTF operational structure and processes

In 2011, the REDD+ payment pilot project developed guidelines for the FCTF as a mechanism for the mobilization of forest carbon financing. In 2011 and 2012, the project delivered US$ 100,000 per year for sustainable management of forests and enhanced forest carbon sequestration in 105 CFUGs in the pilot area. The criteria for payment to CFUGs included social and biophysical elements as well as carbon performance-based dimensions. Socioeconomic dimensions received higher weighting than biophysical dimensions (Table 2).

Integration of gender and caste/ethnicity criteria in the FCTF mechanism facilitated access to carbon funds by CFUGs with high populations of women, Dalits, ethnic groups, and poor households. Nonetheless, neither the CFUGs nor the project-implementing actors have an operational strategy to ensure that women, especially poor women, benefit from the forest carbon fund as recognition of both their contributions to forest protection and their rights to use forest resources for basic livelihoods. The incorrect assumption that autonomous CFUGs with strong institutional foundations will act on this gender equity dimension adversely affects the outcomes of the FCTF process. This has contributed to poor records and analysis of impacts of the FCTF from a gender equity perspective. For example, although a database was established to record how much of the carbon fund was spent on forest management or livelihood improvement activities, neither CFUGs nor the REDD+-implementing actors have a database that records inclusiveness within CFUGs in terms of access to forest carbon funds by poor men and women across different castes/ethnicities. Critics also point out that the FCTF mechanism has failed to systematically address the needs of forest-dependent people, although it tried to include some social indicators (Bastakoti and Davidsen 2014).

In order to operate the FCTF effectively and inclusively, the REDD+ pilot project established a 3-tier governance structure. As Table 3 reveals, 4 committees were formed at district, subnational, and national levels for overseeing the pilot activities, including the distribution and monitoring of the forest carbon grants. Although the committees included both men and women, most leadership positions were occupied by men.

Despite the establishment of a representative institutional mechanism for REDD+ payments at different levels, the quality of participation and access to decision-making varied by gender. Women members of the district-level REDD+ advisory and monitoring committees reported that men often prepared the agenda and

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FIGURE 3 Dalit man explaining how Dalits in his community are participating in the REDD+ process. (Photo by Seema Karki/ICIMOD)



provided more input during meetings. The gender-unequal structure of the committees and their technical agendas often discouraged women from raising their concerns openly and participating effectively in meetings (see also Nightingale 2002, 2006). A woman member of the REDD+ monitoring committee in Gorkha District said, "The presence of a woman, either in the REDD+ advisory committee or monitoring committee, cannot make meetings meaningful and sensitive to gender issues of REDD+ until women are in key positions on the

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TABLE 2 Criteria for forest carbon payments in the REDD+ pilot sites in Nepal.

Dimension	Criteria	Weight
Biophysical	Forest carbon enhancement • Carbon stock in community forests (25%) • Carbon stock increase in the forests (15%)	40%
Social	Gender (population of women in forest user groups)	15%
	Caste/ethnic diversity in CFUG • Disadvantaged caste members (eg Dalits) in CFUG (15%) • Ethnic groups/Janajatis in CFUG (10%)	25%
Economic	Poverty index (poor households identified based on well-being ranking)	20%

Source: ICIMOD 2011b.

committees and meeting agendas include gender issues" (field note, Kathmandu, 26 February 2013).

When asked about the inclusion of gender issues in meeting agendas, a male member of the district-level REDD+ advisory committee said, "We don't include gender issues in our meeting. Our role is to ensure carbon fund disbursement and utilization as per the FCTF guidelines. We were neither told nor trained to consider gender aspects of REDD+" (field note, focus group discussion, REDD+ advisory committee, Dolakha, 27 August 2012). A similar question was asked to the members of REDD+ network at the subdistrict level, and they also answered "no" and "We don't have a practice of putting gender on the agenda in our meetings" (field note, focus group discussion, REDD+ network, Gorkha, 28 June 2012). The gender agenda was excluded not only in local-level FCTF governance; the central-level advisory committee of the FCTF also paid little attention to gender equity. A woman representative of CFUGs for the national REDD+ advisory committee opined that agendas of the committee meeting focus on administrative and technical aspects of the disbursement of the forest carbon funds, but they were not specific to gender issues related to REDD+. She also noted that the limited amount of time allotted to each district representative for updates on REDD+ progress and issues limited the inclusion of gender issues in meetings (field note, Kathmandu, 14 February 2013).

The social agenda, especially gender issues, remained marginalized even in REDD+ policy discussions at the national level, as discussed below.

Gender issues, women, and the national REDD+ policy process

Review of 3 sets of meeting minutes of the REDD+ Civil Society Organization (CSO) Alliance revealed that the concerns of nonstate actors seem to be in relation to their exclusion from REDD+ strategy development and the national-level REDD+ working group. The points raised at these meetings do not reflect issues related to strategic gender needs, such as fairness in access to and control over forest resources, carbon grants, inclusion in policy-making and decision-making, despite the participation of grassroots women-led natural resource management NGOs in the meetings (FECOFUN 2012). At the state level, consideration of gender issues has not yet been institutionalized with larger ownership interests. In a

TABLE 3 FCTF governance structure in the REDD+ pilot project in Nepal, 2012.[a)]

Level	FCTF governance structure	Membership by institutional actors	Leadership position by gender
District	REDD+ advisory committee	GO, NGO (indigenous peoples), CFUGs, project-implementing actor (FECOFUN)	All leaders were men.
	Monitoring committee	GO, NGOs (Dalits and women), project-implementing actor (ANSAB)	All leaders were men.
Subnational	REDD+ network at watershed level	CFUGs	All leaders were men.
National	FCTF advisory committee	GO, NGOs (indigenous peoples, women, Dalits), project implementing actors, representative of REDD+ networks	A man or woman chaired regular meetings on a rotational basis.

[a)]Source: Fieldwork 2012. GO, government organization; NGO: nongovernmental organization; FECOFUN: Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal; ANSAB, Asia Network for Sustainable Agriculture and Bio-resources.

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gender and REDD+ interaction program organized by the Alliance of the CSOs and ethnic groups/Janajatis, women participants raised a concern that the ongoing REDD+ policy dialogues sometimes invite the community women-led NGO, but dialogues focus on technical and economic aspects of REDD+, giving less priority to gender issues of forest management and the concerns of women professionals and forest users (field note, Kathmandu 19 January 2014). Men participants who are participating in the REDD+ policy initiatives also pointed out exclusion of gender issues and strategies in the national level REDD+ studies that are being carried out for REDD+ policy direction. They highlighted dominance of biophysical evidence to rationalize the significance of REDD+ and exclude the social equity dimension when framing strategies and programs on carbon sequestration (field note, Kathmandu 19 January 2014). In addition, women and gender and social experts are hardly represented at the REDD+ policy table. For instance, the REDD+ working groups (the intermediary policy groups responsible for coordinating and sharing REDD+ policy issues with the apex body [policy-making body], the REDD+ Forestry and Climate Change Cell of the Forest Ministry, experts, and national multistakeholder forums) lacks a strategy to include actors by balancing social and natural expertise and gender (MFSC 2010). In addition, women-led NGOs, women staff, and gender experts are excluded from membership in the group. Underrepresentation of women and gender experts in the policy bodies indicates that REDD+ stakeholders at the policy level go into the technical domain of carbon sequestration.

The development of the REDD+ Readiness Proposal Preparation document included the organization of several consultation workshops at national, subnational, and district level, during which Dalits, ethnic groups, and community women were consulted as well (see Khatri 2012: 80). However, the strategic document produced as an outcome of this multistakeholder representation lacks critical analysis of gender issues in forest management and implications for the REDD+ program in the future. Specific strategies for ensuring gender-equitable access to and control over REDD+ decision-making, monitoring, reporting, verification, and benefit sharing are absent in the document (MFSC 2010). Despite the presence of women foresters in the forest sector, none of the 10 experts consulted for the Readiness Proposal Preparation process were women foresters (MFSC 2010: 100). Brown (2011) in another context also shows women's limited participation in policy discussions with regard to REDD+.

Conclusion

In Nepal, there is a great diversity among resource users in terms of access, use, and control over forest resources, and the forest sector is playing a large role in emerging REDD+ processes. However, these processes tend to inadequately recognize and address gender issues in forest management, which are embedded in Nepalese sociocultural and institutional practices. The NORAD-funded REDD+ pilot project has tested a methodology for forest carbon measurement and REDD+ payments in community-managed forests. Through this mechanism, CFUGs have been able to claim REDD+ payments based on criteria that include gender, poverty, and caste/ethnicity along with biophysical performance measurements. However, little or no attention has been given to helping CFUGs to identify and integrate gender-differentiated needs, access to and control over forest benefits, and the role of power relations in the structures and decision-making process of the REDD+ payment mechanism and its inclusive distribution and use. A disregard for gender issues in forest decision-making and benefit sharing by REDD+ pilot project implementing actors at the local level may reinforce the existing elite- and men-centered forestry practices in REDD+ initiatives in the future.

Gender issues and women's effective participation have also received little attention in the national REDD+ policy process. Brown (2011: 171) argues that "increasing the diversity of knowledge that is available in policy forums and processes could ultimately improve the outcomes and increase the resilience of the socio-ecological system." Contrary to this argument, in Nepal, REDD+ policy consultations and agenda have yet to favor an interdisciplinary perspective in analyzing and framing forest management issues. The agendas are not even framed within the gender and social inclusion strategy that Nepal's forestry ministry endorsed in 2008 (see MFSC 2008). Although REDD+ discussions, policy forums, and the REDD+ Readiness Proposal Preparation process have tended to include women, their meaningful participation is limited by the dominance of the technical agenda, the small amount of time allotted to the social agenda of forest management, and skewed power relations among participating actors. The policy approach forest actors have adopted to include women is limited to physical presence rather than empowering them to secure their rights to forest resources and REDD+ benefits and recognizing their voices in REDD+ decisions.

To tap the potential of REDD+ to contribute to both climate change mitigation and mountain development, efforts are required to ensure that the REDD+ national strategy recognizes the role of power relations in shaping access to forest resources, carbon funds, and participation in decision making. Framing REDD+ strategy within the forest sector's gender and social inclusion strategy (MFSC 2008) and ensuring access of the poor and most disadvantaged women and men to carbon funds and decision-making roles are the critical areas to be tackled by the REDD+ initiatives.

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An application of an adaptive collaborative forest governance (McDougall, Jiggins, et al 2013; McDougall, Leeuwis, et al 2013) tool that helps to increase access to and control of forest assets by women, especially poor and excluded women, in common property resource management institutions would be an important strategy for making REDD+ inclusive. Organizations dealing with REDD+ policy and programs at the local, subnational, and national levels have limited capacity and focus on dealing with gender and social issues of forestry, despite existing government policy and commitment. Technical bias, lack of representation of social and gender experts and marginalized groups in national forums, and limited interest in and capacity to address gender are some reasons why gender integration is difficult. Therefore, how REDD+ initiatives at local, national and regional levels have supported gender-responsive forest decision-making and benefit-sharing practices, and the extent of organizational change in the forest sector in applying gender and social approach to REDD+, need further research.

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