

## **Getting at the Heart of the Issue: Challenging Male Bias in Nepal's Department of Forests**

Author: Gurung, Jeannette Denholm

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Jeannette Denholm Gurung

# Getting at the Heart of the Issue: Challenging Male Bias in Nepal's Department of Forests

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*Traditional male dominance in the realm of forestry limits the degree to which forest departments around the world are able to take up gender equity agendas. The experience of one project in the hills of Nepal demonstrates a successful strategy for changing the attitudes of forestry profession-*

*als, at the same time creating conditions under which rural women can demand respect and inclusion by building synergies at various levels. This requires a focus on developing the skills of change agents within communities and agencies.*



**FIGURE 1** Male forester instructing rural women on how to clean the forest. This gendered distribution of roles is still the dominant one in Nepal. (Photo by author)

## Forestry: A predominantly male domain

Like forestry departments around the world, Nepal's Department of Forests (DOF) is influenced by global paradigms in which professionalism, hierarchy, and masculinity are valued (Figure 1). The former two may be acknowledged by most, but the latter aspect of masculinity is not. Even where there is an awareness of gender and development discourse, men's power and masculine values permeate all aspects of employment, frequently in taken-for-granted ways. These values, to a great extent, determine the organizational cultures that are created, maintained, and replicated by staff within the Department and also influence factors outside the Department's purview.

Forestry is an exclusive field of expertise, practiced by those who are inducted into the profession by obtaining a forestry

degree from a specialized school of forestry. In many parts of the world, forestry training resembles military training because foresters are taught to protect resources from people. In this respect forestry is imbued with masculinity. Traditionally, the ideal forester was a well-built male who could handle a gun as well as a chainsaw and tackle wild animals, malaria, and the populace alike. Relatively few women enter this domain and most that do quickly learn to underplay and mask their femininity in a largely futile attempt to gain the respect of their male peers. More recent approaches to combining social science with forest science and efforts to elicit the participation of community members in forest-related projects have tempered traditional masculine orientations. But these deeply held beliefs are still expressed dramatically when challenged by differing ideologies.

Because of the extreme male domination within the profession, gender gaps are frequently observed in forest-related programs. These are most visibly apparent in a lack of women staff members, a lack of activities of interest to women, low budgets for activities related to women, and unbalanced decision making, both within the department and within the communities where activities are undertaken. This was evident in the case of a particular forest-related project in Nepal—the Hills Leasehold Forestry and Fodder Development Project (HLFFDP)—until a combination of factors and events in 1999 turned the tide.

## The need for gender mainstreaming

Despite the inclusion of specific objectives to integrate gender considerations into project approach and implementation, HLFFDP, like most developmental projects in the hills and mountains of Nepal, explained the limited participation of

**FIGURE 2** Two members of a women's forestry users' group in Nepal. (Photo courtesy of HILFFDP)



rural women by pointing to their heavy workloads, high degree of illiteracy, constraints relating to mobility and low status, and lack of confidence in assuming public roles. In the period from 1992 to 1998, women's groups constituted only 12% of the total of 1200 leasehold forestry groups (Figure 2), whereas men's groups made up 44% of the total; 44% were mixed groups. Women acted as chairpersons in only 16% of these groups.

Another factor affecting women's participation was also evident: the attitudes of the Forest Department and Project Coordination Unit (PCU) staff themselves and their perceptions about women.

Conservative attitudes toward rural women prevail in the Forest Department and within the PCU, which are male-oriented organizations where a lack of women professionals allows traditional perspectives to go unchallenged. Information and services relating to the project were disseminated by the Department staff to the village men, largely ignoring their wives, daughters, and mothers. Many of the Department staff looked down on rural women and doubted their abilities to work within the project, despite the fact that women performed the lion's share of forest-related work. Women's inputs and perspectives were not valued or even solicited. Indeed, some lower-level forestry staff had expected women hired locally as group promoters of the project to cook and work for them as office peons. Overall, members of the Forest Department wondered as to how the hiring of rural women as group promoters could assist the project in achieving its objectives; they must have believed that this was an irrelevant initiative pushed by the project donors.

In addition to the Forest Department staff, other line agencies and a PCU provided technical assistance to the project. Initially, the PCU had a 90% male and 10% female staff. Recognizing the constraints on women's participation and the multiple responsibilities of women, project leaders decided to address gender equity considerations by hiring women group promoters to organize women's groups and integrated groups and to train rural men and women in gender role awareness at the grassroots level. Like the

majority of donor-initiated projects, HILFFDP developed mechanisms for mainstreaming gender considerations into the project, through frequent gender training workshops for women and men in the communities as well as for field and central level staff, a separate budget for gender activities, and the creation of a core team of people to focus on gender.

In 1999, with a new impetus behind efforts to address gender issues at the policymaking, district, and grassroots levels, initiated by the project leaders from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Department of Forests, a team of 3 Nepali women technical assistants was added to the PCU. Although not foresters, these 3 women were all familiar with forestry issues; the most senior among them had acted as a gender trainer and facilitator with the Forest Department and was respected for her ability to walk and work in remote areas. Their hiring led to gender balance within the PCU, with 50% male and 50% female staff working as professionals.



**FIGURE 3** Changed attitudes are demonstrated by some forest rangers who now show respect for women, create forums for them to speak, and support the teamwork of female rangers (in green sari), group promoters, and senior women staff. (Photo by author)

### Innovations and impacts

With an unusually high degree of support and autonomy granted by the 2 project leaders (the Forest Department and the FAO), this 3-woman team developed a strategy for addressing the organizational culture of the implementing agencies in order to make their male counterparts, in both the Forest Department and the PCU, more aware of and responsive to the realities faced by rural women as well as bring about a change in their attitudes toward women. While implementing activities at all 3 levels (policy, district, and grassroots), the women focused on the recruitment and development of a cadre of women group promoters throughout the project area. By hiring 46 women group promoters at the community level, the PCU carried out its policy of hiring women, which the Forest Department was unable to do, partly because of the constraints of the government recruiting system.

The persistence of this female PCU team and its sustained support and belief in the abilities of rural women made it possible for it to provide continual gender and leadership training to the group promoters. The most active women were invited to train others. Study tours to areas within Nepal were conducted to learn from the successes and failures of other projects concerned with gender integration. In addition, the group promoters were encouraged to become active in other community projects as well and to seek additional assistance and resources from other local government and donor-driven development programs. Group promoters were inspired to build a sense of solidarity and to encourage and depend on one another for support. This was fostered through the development of a magazine created for the exchange of information

among gender focal points in the technical agencies in the district, as well as among group promoters at the grassroots level. Articles in this magazine expressed boldly the positions of the women group promoters on gender issues, and they were widely circulated throughout the Forest Department.

There was another innovative approach at the district level. Given the paucity of women staff within the implementing line agencies (including the Department of Livestock Services, Agricultural Development Bank, and Nepal Agricultural Research Centre, as well as the Forest Department), the team decided to identify gender focal persons (mostly male) within these agencies and develop their gender skills through training, coaching, and guidance. These primarily technical staff members thus gained an awareness of gender equity issues and women's rights (including those contained in international agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women) and also became aware of the community work done by the group promoters. Members of this gender focal persons group made public commitments to gender equity initiatives in speeches on International Women's Day, for example, and became solid supporters of the group promoters as well as catalysts in the movement for gender equity within the line agencies.

Another successful outcome of this synergistic initiative, and perhaps the one with the greatest impact, was the changed attitudes of some District Forest Officers (Figure 3). This group of senior level men, all trained as professional foresters, may have been the greatest bastion of male resistance within the project. Not all have displayed a change in attitude, but at least some have expressed their strong support for the women group promoters and for the gender focal persons. They have allowed rural women to speak out, creating space for their involvement in forums attended by Forest Department staff, and have listened to their concerns. They have shown their respect for these women, and rural women in general, in the presence of junior staff. As a result, some Forest Department staff, impressed



## Development

**FIGURE 4** A small girl on her way to collect fodder. As long as the perception of gender roles remains unchallenged, girls and women will continue to bear the brunt of agricultural and reproductive tasks, preventing them from gaining recognition and participating equally in society. (Photo courtesy of HLFFDP)

by the group promoters, have expressed their desire to learn about the perspectives of rural women and their needs from the promoters. Even bankers have been observed to give preference to these women, as well as others from the communities, asking them to come forward from the queues in which they have been standing, perceiving that they are busy, important people within the community.

The women group promoters themselves have demonstrated new attitudes and behavior because of their training, group development, and newly found confidence in their leadership abilities. They have started to speak out and take action against those who dominate them, even in the face of harassment by male government officials. In one instance, a woman from a marginalized ethnic group publicly voiced her opposition to the actions of her male superior; other group promoters, the female PCU team, and some vocal District Forest Officers supported her opinions. This has created new scope for participation by rural women on equal grounds with men, even when the men have more professional qualifications and higher social status. In addition to the sense of empowerment, the women also feel confident about their ability to approach numerous line agencies in their districts to try to access resources and opportunities for their communities. Some of the group promoters have established themselves as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and have been able to attract resources from district line agencies and other development agencies for community development. They have also been recognized as local resource persons in planning meetings of Village Development Councils.

Women feel proud of the recognition they have received as the “backbone” of the project from the Forest Department and

others, which has been expressed in project evaluations and invitations to participate in planning meetings with district level line agency officials. The 2 gender magazines published by the group promoters and the gender focal points helped these women to position themselves as respected resource persons for social mobilization in natural resource management activities.

### Continued resistance

Nevertheless, as in the case of any substantial process of social change, resistance to the empowerment of rural women and women professionals remains. This is manifest in various ways, but traditional attitudes and beliefs about women are the main causes. Gender equity has been challenged by men who question the “high” salaries that professional women get, the need for a gender perspective in the field of forestry, and the abilities of the group promoters to bring about community development. Some women express these views as well because they are so bound to the existing system of exclusion and male domination that they are unable to break away from old habits and worldviews (Figure 4).

### Conclusion

Despite the aim of forestry and natural resource management projects in hill and mountain areas around the world to improve the livelihoods of rural women and men, the organizational cultures of the agencies charged with implementing such projects are, in many ways, not supportive of such values. In fact, many of their actions create barriers to achieving the goals of gender equity. Gender equity initiatives for rural women must take account of the traditional attitudes that predominate within male-dominated environments such as forestry institutions. The experience of HLFFDP illustrates one strategy for changing the attitudes of such professionals, at the same time creating conditions for rural women to demand respect and inclusion, by building synergy at various levels through a focus on developing the skills of change agents within communities and agencies.

#### AUTHOR

##### **Jeannette Denholm Gurung**

C/o International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), PO Box 783, Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic. jeannettegurung@yahoo.com

*Jeannette Denholm Gurung is a forester with a degree from the School of Forest Resources, University of Washington, USA, and is now completing a PhD in Gender and Development from the University of East Anglia, UK. She worked for over 15 years in Nepal, as a forester and then gender and development professional in international NGOs, including ICI-MOD.*

#### FURTHER READING

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