

Linkages Between Gender, Migration and Forest Governance: Re-thinking community forestry policies in Nepal

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Introduction¹

The policy literature surrounding the governance of community forests in the middle hills of Nepal has been undergoing tremendous changes. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the focus was primarily on promoting the effective participation of local communities in the sustainable management of forests. But recently, and increasingly, informed and influenced by the growing body of development research and practice as well as national level political changes in Nepal, a multitude of development concerns such as social exclusion, poverty reduction, decentralisation and climate change have percolated through to the academic and policy literature on community forestry. Gender-related concerns have been occupying an equally prominent space within these changes.²

Community forestry was first introduced in Nepal in 1978 through the coalescing of two interrelated development paradigms: Himalayan degradation theory and participatory development. Scholars and policy makers were concerned with what was perceived as rapid deforestation and soil degradation in the middle hills, and the inability of the nationalisation of forests (state monopoly over the governance of forests) to curb environmental decline effectively. At the same time, frustrated with top-down approaches to development, others were calling for participatory approaches in order to achieve the sustainable management

1 The field research for this paper was carried out as part of my Ph.D in Development Studies at the Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, between 2003 and 2006. I spent approximately four months in each of the field research sites and in Kathmandu, and employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews, discussions with key informants and household surveys. This paper was first presented at the Nepal Study Day organised by the Britain Nepal Academic Council in Edinburgh in 2009. I am very grateful to Ben Campbell and Michael Hutt for their constructive comments and feedback on an earlier draft. I accept sole responsibility for any mistakes in the paper.

2 Community forestry continues to be one of the most well-documented and studied fields in Nepal. Publications include academic books and journals, donor and NGO reports, and think-tank policy studies.

of forests and address the basic forestry needs of local people. Therefore, the underlying rationale behind community forestry was that the local communities who live closest to the forests were best placed to protect, manage and sustainably utilise them, in partnership with the government. The government, in turn, became an extension agent, providing advice and support to local communities (Gilmour and Fisher 1991, Graner 1997, Pokharel 1997, Campbell 2002).

Increasingly, community forestry policies are questioning the undifferentiated view of local communities and the role of gender and social relations in the efficient and equitable governance of community forests. The major actors involved in the governance of community forestry—the government, donors, and civil society organisations—have been making concerted efforts to mainstream ‘gender and social equity’ in community forestry policies and institutions. Moreover, such a focus must be understood against the backdrop of the Maoist movement, the civil conflict in Nepal, the increasing demands relating to ethnic and caste-based inequalities, and the inclusion of gender and social equity issues in the wider national development agenda.

While these are important and commendable developments and reflect the growing momentum for inclusive change in Nepal, ‘gender’, ‘caste’, and ‘ethnicity’ are often regarded by community forestry policies and practices as static social relations, and women, Dalits and ethnic minorities as uniformly marginalised. Moreover, individuals and communities in rural areas are still assumed to be spatially bounded and their relationship to forest products remains unproblematised. The latter is of concern in the light of the importance of migration, both historically and in the recent past, for rural livelihoods throughout the country.

This paper questions the assumptions about gender relations and rural livelihoods that underpin community forestry policies and practices in the middle hills of Nepal. Drawing on field research carried out amongst community forestry user groups led by Dalits³ (Biswa-Karma) and an ethnic

3 In this paper, I use the terms ‘Dalit’ and ‘low-caste’ interchangeably and the terms ‘high-caste’ and ‘low-caste’ without scare quotes. This is not to privilege the perspective of one particular, parochial group of hierarchists but to refer to the hierarchy that undoubtedly exists in the village political economy where I conducted this research, and at the national level too. Furthermore, the terms *tallo jat* (low caste) and *thulo jat* (high caste) formed a part of the everyday language used by Podyals, KCs and Biswa-Karmas in Gharmi. While the Podyals and KCs employed them to reinforce pre-existing hierarchies, Biswa-Karmas

minority (Tamang) between 2004 and 2006, the paper argues that such assumptions remain divorced from the increasing multi-locality of rural livelihoods in Nepal, which is changing men and women's relationships with each other and with the governance of forest resources. The paper provides an overview of gender and migration-based inclusions and exclusions in community forestry policies, followed by a discussion of the two case studies.

Gender- and migration-based inclusions and exclusions in community forestry policies

Although the National Forestry Plan of 1976 and subsequent legislation marked the beginning of 'people centred' forest and land use policies in Nepal, gender issues were not explicitly mentioned in community forestry policies until the Master Plan for Forestry in 1987. The major objective of the National Forestry Plan of 1976 was to formally recognise the rights of local communities to manage their own forests, with technical assistance being provided by the government. However, as Harper and Tarnowski (2003) point out, in spite of its populist rhetoric the emphasis of the National Forestry Plan was on the protection, production and proper utilisation of forests in accordance with the government's desire to halt forest degradation and ensure that forests contributed to the development of the national economy. Furthermore, it was assumed that handing over forests to village Panchayats would trickle benefits down to those who depended most on forests for their livelihoods.⁴

By the mid-1980s, many reports evaluating the performance of the forestry sector had concluded that the condition of the forests that had been handed over to the local Panchayats had not improved, and that the local people who were most dependent on the forests were rarely involved in forest management (Britt 2002, Pokharel 1997). Consequently, the Master Plan for Forestry 1988 and its amendment in 1990 stated that forests should be handed over directly to their 'users' and not to the Panchayats; that user

used them to shed light on their historical disadvantage and draw attention to their caste-based struggle.

4 The Panchayat system in Nepal (1960 to 1990) was a pyramidal structure progressing from village level assemblies to the Rastriya Panchayat (national parliament). The system enshrined the absolute power of the monarchy and kept the king as the head of state with sole authority over all government institutions.

groups should be allowed to reap all the benefits of sustainably managing their forests; and that 'women' and 'the poor' should be involved in the management of forests (HMG/N 1990). However, gender was interpreted as 'women's issues' and women were implicated in forest degradation because of the nature of the sexual division of labour. It was therefore assumed that by incorporating women in forest management the causes of environmental degradation would be addressed. Furthermore, the Master Plan was devoted primarily to handing over usufruct rights in government forests to local users. 'Women's issues' were mentioned in the Plan but were rarely operationalised in practice.

Since the national conference to celebrate the 25th year of community forestry in 2003, however, gender issues have become a prominent feature of community forestry policies, and are raised in rights-based terms. The conference launched the 'second generation issues of community forestry'; recognised 'good governance'; 'sustainable management' and 'livelihoods' as three mandates of community forestry; and stated that 'gender and social equity' was an overarching theme that should be integrated into every facet of community forestry governance. Since the workshop, consolidated efforts have been underway at the national level, through initiatives undertaken by the Ministry of Forestry and Soil Conservation as well as donors, to mainstream gender and social equity in community forestry policies (Sijapati 2008). For instance, the Guidelines for Community Forestry Programmes (Revised) 2009, which serve as the policy framework for intervention at the local level, highlight the importance of including women, ethnic minorities and Dalits as equal partners throughout the formation and functioning of community forestry user groups. Under the guidelines for facilitating the formation of community forestry user committees, the document states the following: 'Proportionate representation of all categories of users such as poor, women, Dalit, indigenous people and ethnic groups should be ensured'. It further stipulates that 'there should be mandatory provision of at least 50 percent women representatives in the committee representing poor, Dalit, indigenous people and ethnic groups... Either the chairperson or the secretary of the committee should be a woman' (CFD 2009, pp.8).

Such concerns over gender and social inclusion in community forestry policies must be situated in the context of growing donor concern over 'gender and social equity' mainstreaming in community forestry on the

one hand, and the increasing politicisation of and demands for gender and social-based inclusion in Nepali politics on the other. Historically, donors have played a key role in the forestry sector in general, and community forestry in particular. For instance, AusAID advocated handing over community forests directly to users instead of the Village Panchayats in Kavrepalanchowk and Sindhupalchowk districts in the 1970s and was instrumental in introducing the current, user-oriented concept of community forestry in Nepal. More recently, the World Bank has been assisting the government of Nepal, and its community forestry sector in particular, to prepare for the possibility of a system of payment for environmental services emerging from the Kyoto Protocol, to ensure that local communities have the right incentive to and/or are adequately compensated for managing their forests and curbing forest degradation and deforestation. The major donors operating in Nepal, such as DfID, USAID, DANIDA and GTZ, continue to work in community forestry, focusing on gender and social equity issues in lending and programming. Furthermore, the major policies guiding the implementation of community forestry have largely been funded by the donors, who therefore command significant leverage over the content of these policies. My interviews with various government officials, ranging from senior officials framing community forestry policies at the national level to those implementing them at the local level, confirmed the role of donors in pushing for gendered reform.

Melissa Leach (2007) has traced the history of gender concerns in natural resource governance policies in developing countries like Nepal. She finds that there have been fundamental shifts over the past three decades in the ways in which 'women' are represented and gender-based issues are integrated into donor and NGO policy documents and reports. During the 1980s, the emphasis was on rationalising women's inclusion in natural resource governance processes. Consequently, simplistic discourses over women's close relationship with nature promoted by Ecofeminism and Women, Environment and Development perspectives were readily received and employed to strategically negotiate greater space for women's participation. Recently (as is evident in the context of Nepal), influenced by the growing critique by feminist scholars and development practitioners alike, donors and NGOs are recasting older concerns with women and environment in terms of rights and relations

in access and control over property. For instance, instead of assuming that rural women in many developing countries are in charge of firewood collection because women's environmental interests are synonymous or synergistic, the emphasis is on understanding women's access to alternative sources of energy, as influenced by power relations within and outside the household.

Furthermore, Nepal has been experiencing an explosion in the number of ethnic and caste-based political parties and social movements. Some of the most prominent, splinter and emerging organisations of particular interest to this study include the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, the Mangol National Organisation, the Chettri Samaj Nepal, the National Brahmin Association of Nepal, the Feminist Dalit Organisation, the Nepal National Dalit Social Welfare Organisation, the Nepal Tamang Ghedung, and the Sunuwar Sewa Samaj. While some would argue that such political changes are a product of the ethnic and caste-based political mobilisation championed by the Maoist party to garner support for and wage their class-based struggle against the state (DeSales 2000, Hutt 2003, Thapa and Sijapati 2003), others suggest that the current political volatility has engendered a political vacuum which provides perfect conditions for these organisations and their demands to flourish (Hangen 2010). Nevertheless, the effect has been greater awareness of and demands for social inclusion in the Nepali state and society alike. National women's advocacy groups, with support from donors such as UNIFEM, have also exploited the opportunity to demand greater women's representation in the polity, and gender-based reform in property rights, citizenship and more. For instance, prominent women's advocacy groups were at the forefront in successfully lobbying for and securing 33% seats for women in the Constituent Assembly elected in 2008. Gender unequal laws, such as inheritance and citizenship rights which severely restricted women's claims to parental property and relegated them to the status of second-class citizens, have been successfully challenged and reformed. Gender-based reservations have been demanded in every arena of Nepali politics, including environmental governance.

The extent to which these changes will lead to a more inclusive Nepal or one which is further fractured along caste, ethnic and gender divisions is not yet clear. The trajectories, thus far, suggest that the discourse on 'caste', 'ethnicity' and 'gender' has created and reinforced identities, and

pitted one group against another. Moreover, gender and social equity have been re-interpreted as greater recognition of and access to state resources for the following categories: 'women', 'low castes' and 'ethnic minorities'.⁵ Neither the historical complexities behind caste and ethnic relations and positioning nor the context-specific ways in which gender cuts across these relations to situate men and women differently in the diverse socio-economic, political and geographic landscapes of the country have been discussed or articulated. As Seira Tamang (2009) points out, donors, major political parties and women's organisations have all contributed to the production of an homogenous Nepali woman, subjugated uniformly throughout the country, irrespective of her position in the caste, class and ethnic hierarchies.

Donor reports on the implications of the civil conflict on gender and social equity aspects of community forestry serve to illustrate such compartmentalised understandings of gender, caste and ethnic relations. A study carried out by the Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project, for instance, points out that '...despite difficult conflict situation, Community Forestry User Groups, are practicing inclusive democracy, in which there is increased participation and representation of women and socially marginalized group' (Pokharel, Poudyal and Gurung 2005, pp.1). Andrea Nightingale (2002: 18) rightly argues that both the government and the donors have failed to adequately consider 'locally defined differences between people (men and women, different castes and ethnicities) and the ways in which these differences give people uneven access to resources and control over the community forestry management process'.

As Rigg (2005), Ashley and Maxwell (2001) and Razavi (2003) amongst others have shown, rural livelihoods in the global south are increasingly becoming multi-local and no longer confined to farming and land. This is particularly evident in the case of Nepal where seasonal out-migration, both within the country and to India have historically been a prominent strategy adopted by rural households seeking to escape state policies and agrarian changes, diversify their incomes, offset capital constraints and, increasingly, respond to the growing economic insecurity resulting from the political conflict in the country and fulfil aspirations of participation

5 Some of the most iconic research on the intersections between gender and wider social relations in Nepal include Bennett (2002), Cameron (1998), Kondos (2004) and Gray (1995).

in 'modern life' (Caplan 1990, Regmi 1978, Gill 2003, Sharma 2009). Open border policies between India and Nepal have meant that an estimated 1.3 million Nepali migrants are working in India, of whom about 90% are likely to be men (Sharma 2009). Furthermore, globalisation and the expansion of markets have given added impetus to the growing mobility of Nepali workers in search of circular migration for international contractual work in the Gulf and South East Asia (Seddon, Adhikari and Gurung 2001). To illustrate the growing importance of labour mobility, according to the latest figures published by the Department of Foreign Employment there has been a six-fold increase in the number of Nepali citizens migrating abroad for employment purposes (from 35,543 in 2000 to 214,164 in 2009), the vast majority of whom are going to India and the Gulf countries. In 2009, 78% went to the Gulf: 38% to Qatar alone, and 40% to other Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain etc. These are documented figures, i.e. they enumerate those who sought and were granted approval to work abroad by the Department of Foreign Employment. The Department estimates that in 2009 alone an additional 40% of the total number of documented workers (approximately 85,665) was undocumented (Basnett, forthcoming).

Despite the importance of migration for contemporary Nepal, the question of how seasonal and transnational migrations are affecting the governance of community forests remains unaddressed in both community forestry policies and the growing policy-oriented scholarship in this field. Community forestry policies define user households as those living in close proximity to forests who are most dependent on forest products for their livelihoods. Although households are viewed as increasingly differentiated along gender, ethnic, caste and class lines, such views pigeonhole households into discrete social and spatial categories and are symptomatic of authoritative discourses of development in Nepal. As Jeevan Sharma (2009) points out, because of the centrality of agriculture in international aid and development policies in Nepal since the 1950s, donor and government reports and policies portray rural Nepal as immobile and dependent on agriculture and natural resources. Out-migration is viewed as an undesirable economic choice compared to working on the land.

The academic scholarship on migration and natural resource governance in developing countries suggests that migration fundamentally alters the

relationship between humans and the environment, notwithstanding the debates surrounding specific impacts. Some (e.g. Katz (2000) and Ostrom (2000)) argue that migration leads to the breakdown of the social bonds of reciprocity and trust that are perceived as critical for collective action in natural resource governance. Sunderlin and Pokman (2002) argue that a slow-down in rural-urban migration can increase the population of villages, thereby increasing pressure on environmental commons such as forests. Curran and Agardy (2002) suggest that remittances generated as a result of migration provide alternatives to unsustainable resource extraction. Others have argued that the impact of migration cannot be pre-determined, and that much depends upon how well local communities and individuals re-design institutions to manage the flow and reap the potential benefits of migration (Agrawal and Yadama 1997).

Notwithstanding the many and complex facets of the vast and growing research on gender and migration, scholars have long argued that migration is an inherently gendered process (Chant 1992, Chant and Radcliff 1992). Key areas of research inquiry include differences in engagement of men and women in the processes of migration, the role of intra-household relations and labour market segmentation in the sex and class selectivity of migration flows, the gendered dynamics between migrants and those who are left behind, and continuities and changes in gender relations as a consequence of migration. Some are optimistic that opportunities to migrate and/or the absence of men from the household as a consequence of migration alters gender ideologies and enables unprecedented 'voice' and 'choice' for women (Chant 1998, Hadi 2001). Others (Resurreccion and Van Khanh (2007) and Elhmirts (2007)) point to the complex, gendered negotiations that take place between those who migrate and the ones who are left behind and the reproduction of gendered identities, roles and obligations that occurs in spite of migration. In a rare insight into the gender dynamics of migration from the middle hills of Nepal to the cities of India, Jeevan Sharma (2008) demonstrates that the act of migration and its outcomes are often interpreted as a transition from boyhood to manhood for young migrants and their families. By enabling young men to secure their sense of material obligation towards their families, migration reproduces local idioms of masculinity and reinforces a male dominated hierarchy in the household.

Seasonal out-migration and the feminisation of community forestry

among the Tamangs of Bhatpole

We are more dependent on men than men are on us. We depend on them for work and money. But we have learnt that by cooperating amongst ourselves we can help each other out.

(Middle-aged Tamang woman, Bhatpole Village, Feb. 2005)

'Bhatpole' is a village located in Jaisithok Village Development Committee (henceforth VDC) in the Kavrepalanchok District of Central Nepal. The VDC is inhabited by the following major ethnic/caste groups in order of population size: Jaisi-Bahun, Tamang, Magar, Chetri, Thakuri, Bhujel, Gharti, Newar, and Kami. Tamangs are the second largest ethnic group in the VDC, and mainly concentrated in Bhatpole. The District Forest Office-Kavrepalanchok (henceforth DFO-Kavre) handed over the usufruct rights to two community forests located in Bhatpole (Birawtapakha and Koldanda) to the Tamangs in 1997 and in 2003. Tamangs are of Tibeto-Burman origin and are generally located in the central districts of Nepal. According to Andras Höfer's ([1979]2004) landmark study on state-society relations in Nepal, 'Tamangs' did not exist as an ethnic group in official records until 1932. The category was used to incorporate a diverse group of people with distinct socio-cultural and linguistic practices into the state classificatory machinery. Nevertheless, the state-making process helped forge a sense of common 'Tamang' identity. Tamangs are one of Nepal's largest ethnic minorities and are considered one of the most economically and socially marginalised.

Tamang households depend upon agriculture and non-agricultural livelihoods within and outside the village. Because of the dearth of good agricultural land, most households relied on seasonal out-migration to Kathmandu and neighbouring towns and cities to supplement shortfalls in household income. Tamang men and women between the ages of 16 and 35 gave similar reasons for preferring to migrate seasonally, and identified a lack of steady and well-paying employment opportunities as the major push factor and the possibilities of finding stable and lucrative employment opportunities as the major 'pull factor'. Migrating seasonally allowed them to return to the villages during peak agricultural seasons to help out with family farm production and engage in daily wage agricultural work for the rich landlords in their own and neighbouring VDCs. In spite of such

commonalities in responses from men and women alike, seasonal migrants were predominantly male.

In Bhatpole, the male-led pattern of seasonal out-migration was not due to gender imbalances at the intra-Tamang level, but rather to the gendered segmentation of the markets for Tamang labour as well as the inability of Tamang migrant networks to tap into gender inclusive markets. For instance, Tamang women had previous experience of migrating to Kathmandu to work in the carpet factories. Nearly all the former male and female carpet factory workers in the village during the time of the field study said in interviews that their families had encouraged them to work in the carpet factories but had left the final decision to them. In this respect, the 'ideology of controlling women' (which was predominant amongst the Biswa-Karmas of Gharmi, as I will discuss below) was virtually absent amongst the Tamangs of Bhatpole. Former carpet factory workers spoke of the difficulties of working in the factories, such as severe abdominal pain caused by the dust from the wool entering the body via the mouth. Although the management did very little to improve health and safety standards at work, workers were subjugated to very little gender-based discrimination. Both men and women interviewees said there were only minimal gender-based variations in the duties assigned to them (weaving carpets, rolling wool etc.) and the wages they were paid, which were based on output.

After the carpet industry collapsed, due to declining export volumes and reduced rates of return in the late 1990s (Graner 2001), much of the informal and or casual labour demand in towns and cities was specifically for male labour. Furthermore, both men and women interviewees said that being a part of a network of migrant workers was critical in receiving updates on employment opportunities, accessing emotional and financial support as and when needed, adapting to new working and living environments, amongst other benefits. But these networks had little access to employment opportunities that were able to absorb both male and female workers, outside of the carpet industry. Consequently, most of the women carpet workers had to return to Bhatpole while men continued to find casual employment elsewhere.⁶ As a Tamang male who was a former carpet factory worker explained during the field research,

6 These findings are in line with Elivira Graner's (2001) study of workers in the carpet factories in the Kathmandu valley.

'We Tamangs are illiterate and do not have the skills required for skilled work. We rely on widely available, semi-skilled jobs such as construction related work, portering, working in restaurants as waiters and kitchen helpers, that specifically seek to hire young men who are willing and able to put in long hours'.⁷

The gender biases embedded in the markets for Tamang labour were being transmitted in turn at the intra-household level and were evident in women's disproportionate dependence on men for material, labour and extra-local interlocation. The allocation of responsibilities for family farm production and domestic work such as the collection of firewood and fodder was defined by 'availability to work' rather than gender *per se*. However, women interviewees from households where male members were seasonal migrants pointed to the marked differences in their work burden (i.e. the time allocated for various types of work) when the men were present, compared with when the men were away.

However, rather than being passive spectators, women were also capitalising on the spaces existing within Tamang socio-cultural practices and investing in greater cooperation and collaboration amongst one another in order to mitigate the gender-based constraints they faced in their everyday lives. For instance, Tamang women participated in exchange labour of various kinds in family farm production and domestic work to reduce the labour vacuum created by male absences. Women interviewees suggested that it was common constraints as well as the collective will to address these constraints that explained the widespread cooperation amongst women. While labour exchange arrangements had been commonplace throughout the history of the village and were carried out by both men and women, women interviewees explained that men's arrangements were not calculated, monitored, and reciprocated in the same way that women's were.⁸ For instance, as a Tamang woman in her

7 Ben Campbell's (1997) research on the Tamang-speaking communities of Rasuwa district helps explain the confinement of 'Tamangs' to semi-skilled work in the hinterlands of Kathmandu, such as in Bhatpole. Campbell demonstrates that the high illiteracy rates, differential access to the institutions of state and a legacy of state-sponsored coercive labour arrangements have created structural barriers of opportunity between Tamangs and recent migrants and excluded the Tamang-speaking communities from the fruits of economic progress.

8 Ben Campbell's study of forms of cooperation in a Tamang community in the upper Trisuli valley resonates with the findings from my research. Campbell points out that

mid-twenties whose husband seasonally migrated to Kathmandu pointed out, 'Our employers won't let us work if we bring our small children along. Those of us with small children and husbands who are away have come up with a system to take turns to share care-taking responsibilities. Today it is my turn, tomorrow I will go to work [as a daily wage agricultural labourer for one of the Jaisi-Bahun landowners] and another friend will take over.'

It was this context of common, gendered constraints faced by women in the absence of males as well as women's collective strategies for mitigating these constraints that served as the underlying impetus for community forestry to be conceptualised as a women-led initiative, with women at the forefront of promoting and supporting it. Community forestry was viewed as a way of addressing the lack of secure and steady access to forest products commonly faced by Tamang women in the absence of men. Collaborating for community forestry became a part of and intertwined with ongoing forms of collective effort. This was reflected in the ways in which women drew on pre-existing forms of collaboration to discuss and decide on the institutions that should govern community forests prior to seeking their formal handover, as well as to define men's role in the community forestry process. Interviews with women users revealed how they painstakingly discussed and decided on rules (user eligibility criteria, means of forest protection, penalties and so on) during exchange labour work, borrowing from the rules that governed a neighbouring community forestry user group where they had secondary (limited) usufruct rights.⁹

Tamangs typically engage in the following five major categories of labour: household, kinship, festive, exchange and wage. Conceptually speaking, these arrangements are either 'delimited' and/or 'extensive'. 'The extensive forms depend on structures and strategies that integrate through asymmetrical hierarchy, and the delimited forms operate on the basis of symmetrical mutual equality' (Campbell 1994: 10). For instance, calls on 'kinship' and 'festive' labour were often made on the grounds of pre-existing social relationships and hierarchies (such as through discourses of common ancestry and obligations conferred through cross-cousin marriages) and did not have to be reciprocated. In comparison, 'exchange labour shifts the balance away from the valuation of social relationships to direct calculation of labour...what is returned can be of the same nature of different but equivalent' (ibid.: 7).

- 9 As Bina Agarwal (2010) points out, governmental policies for handing over forests to local communities in Nepal are more flexible than those in India. Unlike in India, even forests in good condition spanning more than one administrative (or VDC) boundary can be handed over to local communities. Users are also allowed to hold multiple memberships in different community forests. The extent to which these policies are flexible in reality is debatable. Nevertheless, the Tamangs of Bhatpole had usufruct rights to 'Thuli Ban',

Women feared that involving men, the vast majority of whom migrated seasonally, as equal partners in the community forestry process would significantly increase the costs of participation, would entail broadening the scope of community forestry to meet men's interests and priorities, and could jeopardise the basis for collective action for community forestry governance. At the same time, women also sought men's support during the initial stages of community forestry in order to help them establish working relationships with government officials and comply with governmental rules and regulations. Women conceptualised their life spaces as separate from but simultaneously linked to those of men. Their spaces were limited to the local (the village, local market, neighbouring villages) whereas men operated in both local and extra-local spaces. Women perceived men who seasonally migrated outside the village (to extra-local spaces) as better able to understand, interact and bargain with extra-local actors such as DFO officials. As Bina Agarwal (2010) argues in her recent book on 'gender and Green governance', community forestry policies, though implemented at the level local, are framed at the national level and beyond. Women involved in governing community forests in South Asia, including those in Nepal, often lack the experience and networks required to forge extra-local links and influence institutions at higher levels. Furthermore, as Andrea Nightingale (2005) points out, in spite of the participatory nature of community forestry policies, the support provided by the Department of Forestry in the formation of user groups assumes that local people have little knowledge about how to manage community forests and must be taught modern sylviculture: 'The development of written management plans, the need for careful accounting records and the promotion of sylviculturally based management strategies by the District forest officers (re)inscribe differences between users based on education and literacy' (Nightingale 2005: 581). In the context of Bhatpole, this 'professionalisation'

a forest located in Panchkaal VDC, approximately 5 km from Bhatpole village. Because of the sheer size of 'Thuli Ban' (Big Forest), the user group was divided into primary and secondary users, depending on the proximity of their homestead to the forest. As secondary users, the Tamangs of Bhatpole had minimal access to fodder and fuelwood and did not have a voice in community forestry decision-making mechanisms. Nevertheless, because Thuli Ban was considered to be one of the most successful instances of community-led forest management by both the District Forest Officials as well as the local users, the Tamang women of Bhatpole drew operational clues from Thuli Ban and borrowed some of its formal and informal institutions for governing community forests in Bhatpole.

of community forestry led Tamang women to depend on male counterparts with literacy skills and extra-local experiences to interlocate between the District Forest Officials and Tamang women users during the formation of community forestry.

Tamang men generally agreed to play a limited, albeit supporting, role in the community forestry process because they would benefit alongside the women from secure access to forest products, but would not have to contribute their time and labour to community forestry governance in the same way. But as Arun Agrawal (2005) reminds us in his celebrated work on the making of environmental subjects, without direct involvement in the monitoring and enforcement of forest rules, men did not share the same sense of ownership and stake in the community forestry process governance as women did. The following is a typical explanation provided by Tamang male interviewees for the observed gender differences in involvement in community forestry: 'I could not commit to community forest because I was rarely in the village. Having secure access to forest products was more important for my wife... I only had to face the hardship of finding sufficient forest products when I returned to the village... I supported her decision [to be a part of the community forestry establishment process] because it was her time and her effort, she could do as she pleases with it'.

In summary, migrants from Bhatpole were predominantly male because of the gendered segmentation of markets for Tamang labour, and the inability of Tamang networks to tap into gender inclusive markets. Consequently, the gender division of labour at the household level was such that men mostly migrated in search of employment and women were left responsible for family farm production and domestic work including the collection of forest products. Male out-migration amongst the Tamangs of Bhatpole led to the 'feminisation of community forestry'. Women took the lead in governing community forestry whereas men's roles and responsibilities were defined as supporting women.

Remittances, class and the invisibilisation of women among the Dalits of Gharmi

The familial pressure to migrate, earn sufficient income, and re-invest in the village so as to end the shackles of poverty and caste oppression is much stronger for a man than a woman.

(Biswa-Karma male, aspiring migrant to Qatar, May 2005)

My husband fought and was beaten in struggle to get our forests from the Poudyals and KCs. But I also fought. We were like back stage and front stage actors in a natak [theatre play]. I provided the necessary support, and my husband represented both of us in the struggle.

(Biswa-Karma female, married with children, March 2005)

The village of 'Gharmi' is located in Lamachaur VDC, Kaski District, Western Nepal. High-caste Poudyals (Bahuns) and Khatri-Chetris¹⁰ (Chetris, henceforth 'KCs) and 'low-caste' Biswa-Karmas inhabit the village, with each group occupying its own settlement hamlet. The primary sources of livelihood for the Dalits were sharecropping and remittances from male out-migration. The District Forest Office-Kaski handed over the Bhumi-pujnee-Teesdhunge community forest in Gharmi to the Biswa-Karmas in 1997, after three years of fierce fighting between the 'high' and 'low' castes over usufruct rights to the forests. The caste system was conceptualised and implemented by the Nepali ruling elite with Chetris/Brahmins (such as the KCs and Poudyals of Gharmi) at the apex of the state-sponsored caste hierarchy and the Dalits (such as the Biswa-Karmas of Gharmi) relegated to the bottom (Höfer 1994, Bista 1991). Nevertheless, there exists considerable fluidity in caste-based relations and practices at the local level. For instance, in Gharmi the Biswa-Karmas considered themselves to be at the top of the low-caste/Dalit hierarchy and subjugated those below to the same social and cultural inequalities that they themselves faced at the hands of their Brahmin/Chetri patrons (Höfer [1979]2004). Furthermore, many of the Dalit socio-cultural practices (such as those related to the treatment of women, as will be demonstrated below) mirrored high-caste practices, and were strictly enforced not for the purposes of 'sanskritising' (i.e. moving up the caste hierarchy) but for cementing caste-based divisions vis-à-vis other Dalits.

According to the oral history of the village, three lineages of low castes were brought to the village by high castes in the late 19th century to work as agricultural sharecroppers. They were settled in close clusters and were

10 According to key informants in the KC community, K.C. stands for 'Khatri-Chetri'. Khatri-Chetris are descendants of Brahmins who married outside their caste, to Chetris.

granted barely enough land for building a house and an adjoining kitchen garden. The patron-client relationship between the castes was based on mutual interdependence. The high castes depended on the low castes as a source of cheap labour and the low castes on the high castes for their livelihood. Furthermore, caste-based practices of untouchability defined every day social interactions between high and low castes.

Although the majority of Biswa-Karma households continued to rely on various forms of patron-client relationship for their livelihood, this had also undergone dramatic changes through the monetisation of the rural economy, improved infrastructure and greater linkages to markets. Such changes had created new forms of inequality between the high and low castes in terms of differential access to education and formal employment. Nevertheless, the changes had also allowed Dalit men to migrate seasonally to the Tarai to take advantage of the different agricultural seasons and to India to find non-agricultural work, thereby establishing seasonal outmigration as an important feature of Dalit livelihood.

As Gill (2003) reports, many rural livelihoods are dependent on the same type of seasonal out-migration amidst a lack of changes in the demand for these labourers. In other words, supply has outstripped demand for low-skilled labour in the Tarai and in India. This meant that in Gharmi only a handful of households were able to accumulate an adequate or sustained income through migration. At the time of the field research, these households were increasingly sending young men to the Gulf countries, and to Qatar in particular. Although the remittances from the Gulf were higher than from India, the costs incurred while migrating to the Gulf for employment purposes were also significantly higher. In this regard, inter-generational migration was differentiating the Dalit community along class lines and cementing these divisions. The 'remittance class' re-invested in the village in the form of land and productive resources, and lowered their economic dependence on caste-based patron-client relations. Furthermore, those who had migrated to India were also influenced by the Dalit struggle taking place in India, and were instrumental in mobilising support against caste-based discrimination upon their return to Gharmi.¹¹

11 This is broadly similar to what Mary Cameron (1998) observed regarding the impact of male out-migration on caste-based relations in her study of far-western Nepal. However, the effect of male out-migration on gender relations and local environmental governance is beyond the scope of her study.

Even though it was widely believed that seasonal out-migration was the only viable option for reducing household vulnerability and increasing the social and economic standing of individuals in the village political economy, migration was not an option for women. Caste-based ideologies such as 'women's honour' and a strict enforcement of gender division of labour served to control women's mobility.¹² Furthermore, 'women' were far from being a homogenous group and were complicit in the reproduction of these inequalities in different ways, as will be discussed further in the context of the governance of community forestry.

The motivation behind the Dalits' request for the handover of community forest was to gain secure access to forest products, reduce women's work burden in collecting forest products, and preserve women's honour (*ijjat*). Biswa-Karma households required secure access to forest products such as firewood for cooking, fodder for livestock, organic manure for agricultural production and timber for construction purposes. Collecting forest products, and firewood and fodder in particular, was associated with locally defined conceptions of femininity and was therefore considered women's responsibility. These demarcations were strictly observed and any transgressions severely reprimanded. For instance, men often took offence at the author's inquiries over the household consumption of firewood during the fieldwork process. As one put it, 'Why are you asking us? You should ask those who are responsible for cooking.'

Nevertheless, women's dependence on forest products was mediated by the economic wellbeing of their households and life-cycle processes. Women with access to remittances and private land were less dependent than those without. Furthermore, collecting forest products was considered the most difficult and time-consuming work, which the senior women often delegated to junior ones at the intra-household level. The majority of women from medium and poorer households, with limited access to remittances, relied on illegally extracting forest products from high-caste-controlled communal and private forests. These women would form small groups of four and five and steal in the late hours of the night to minimise their chances of being caught. Women informants said the high castes used verbal and physical threats of 'dishonouring' women to discourage them

12 These are generally considered to be high-caste practices in the ethnographic literature on gender and caste in Nepal. See Bennett ([1983] 2002) and Cameron (1998).

from entering the high-caste forests. 'Honour' was associated with local idioms of sexuality, defining what constituted 'appropriate' behaviour for women, and was crucial for maintaining women's (and especially junior women's) restricted position in the household and community.

Many high caste Poudyals were against the community forestry being handed over to the Biswa-Karmas because their lineage deity (*kul deota*) was located in the forest. According to locally defined and sanctioned practices of untouchability, Biswa-Karmas were barred from even entering the 'sacred' forest, let alone making a claim on it. But for the majority of Poudyals and KCs, relinquishing rights to what was perceived as high-caste property would pave the way for greater demands for caste-based equality in other domains and undermine their power and privilege in the political economy of the village.

When the high castes filed a counter claim for the forests with the District Forest Office-Kaski, the senior and powerful men within the Biswa-Karma community, who were also least dependent economically on caste-based patron-client relationships, employed community forestry as a vehicle and a platform for a caste-based struggle. Discourses of 'equality', 'rights' and 'citizenship' were employed to mobilise support for the movement. For instance, as one of the senior men recalled in an interview: 'According to the Forest Act 1993 and the Forest Regulation 1995, handover of forests is prioritised for those communities living closest to the forests. Bhumipujnee-Teesdhunge adjoins our settlement and is more accessible for us than for either Poudyals or KCs. We had more rights over the forests than they did'. In addition, the mobilisation of support did not just exist at the discursive level. The community leaders (who were also members of the remittance class) went to great lengths to portray a 'unified Biswa-Karma community' voice against the high castes, and put considerable social pressure on the poorest segments and women of the Biswa-Karma community to ensure that they participated in the struggle too.

Both men and women interviewees spoke at length about the various ways in which they took part in the struggle over community forests. However, there were significant differences in their responses along gender lines. A key, female informant used the analogy of 'backstage' and 'front stage' actors in a *natak* or play to represent gender differences in roles and responsibilities in the struggle over the forests. Similarly, male interviewees spoke of their trips to the District Forest Office-Kaski and

to the police to make complaints against the high castes; of how the high castes had the police in their pocket and had them arrested several times; of how they led and/or participated in the labour strike against the high castes; of how they had got into verbal and physical confrontations with the high castes amongst others. Women, by contrast, mentioned how they had participated in the labour strike, increased the number of times they went to steal in the forests, suffered increases in verbal abuse at the hands of the high castes, mustered the courage to yell back at the forest guards, and so on. Women could not participate in the same way that men could because of the restrictions imposed by domestic gender norms and the need to abide by gendered codes of conduct and interactions with men outside their community.

By the time community forestry was handed over to the Biswa-Karmas in 1997, the struggle over community forests had far-reaching extra-local consequences. Numerous external actors, such as the police and senior officials in the DFO-Kaski were involved in mediating the struggle. The story of the 'struggle of the powerless, Dalit community for their rights to access forests' had made headlines throughout the district. Consequently, the governance of community forestry was not merely about securing access to forest products, but had transformed into a village-wide public affair determining extra-local recognition and the flow of development aid. The senior and most powerful members had a vested interest in maintaining control over the community forestry process. The major positions within the community forestry committee, such as those of Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, Treasurer and Secretary, were reserved for the senior men of the Biswa-Karma community.

The primary criterion for individuals to be nominated for and occupy the other committee seats became the 'visibility' of their contribution to the struggle for community forestry. One of the committee members, a leading member of the Biswa-Karma community, suggested in an interview that this was to prevent 'free riders' from participating in the community forestry process. However, the effect was that women's contribution to the community forestry process was rendered invisible and women were absent from the major decision-making body in charge of formulating and implementing institutions to govern community forests. The 'elected' committee members made all such decisions.

Women's lack of formal and informal representation in the community

forestry decision-making process meant that many of the rules that were established not only disregarded women's gender-specific concerns (with regard to forest opening and closing times, the availability of forest products, amongst others), but also ignored women as 'users' in the community forestry process. For instance, the first Constitution¹³ of the community forestry user's committee stated that there can only be one member per household and outlined the roles, responsibilities and obligations of being a user. The end of the document listed the names of the recognised users, who were mostly men. However, women, as members of user households, still had to volunteer their labour for community forestry activities such as plantation, guarding etc. In effect, women were responsible for community forestry without any accompanying rights or voice in the community forestry decision-making and benefit-sharing processes. Although women were well aware of these gender-based institutional exclusions, they refrained from openly contesting them for fear of jeopardising the authority and influence of senior male household and community members. In many respects, the fate of community forestry governance in Gharmi village reflects the inevitability of 'elite capture' that Tarnowski (2002) refers to in his study of the politics of community forestry governance in Nepal. Elites in locales where forest user groups are being set up, such as the remittance class in Gharmi, find spaces for manipulating the discourses of social inclusion and democracy that are increasingly used to justify the flow of development aid in local environmental governance and question the emancipatory aims of community forestry policies.

In summary, male out-migration was differentiating the Dalit community along class lines and creating a 'remittance class'. Those who benefited from higher and sustained levels of remittance income were able to re-invest in land and other productive resources, whereas others remained dependent on caste-based, patron-client relations. The 'remittance class'

13 The Government of Nepal requires all user groups to have a government-approved constitution and operational plan before being considered for the handover of community forests. According to the Guidelines for Community Forestry (Revised) 2009, a constitution is 'a compilation of rules and regulations prepared on the basis of general consensus by the forest user group to manage the group and its activities'. An Operational Plan is 'a plan prepared by the forest user group and approved by the District Forest Officer for the protection and management of community forests as well as for the utilization, sale and distribution of forest products to improve the livelihood of users maintaining environmental balance at the same time'.

was also using remittances and migration experiences to wage a caste-based struggle, and community forestry served as a platform. Though women were more dependent on forest products than men, these dynamics removed women from view, along with their gender-specific needs in the process. In this regard, migration and remittances were playing a critical role in further entrenching gender inequalities and shaping the gendered landscape of community forestry governance.

Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that the current academic and policy literature on community forestry governance in Nepal does not adequately reflect the changing landscape of rural livelihoods and gender dynamics. While 'gender and social equity mainstreaming' as a policy approach figures prominently in national policies on community forestry, the definition of 'gender' is limited to women's participation, and women are assumed to be a homogenous group that is equally marginalised. In this paper I have highlighted how gender interacts with wider social relations, the increasing multi-locality of rural livelihoods, and their implications for women and men's entry into and influence over the governance of community forests.

In the case of Bhatpole, I have demonstrated the ways in which the predominance of male out-migration shaped intra-household gender dynamics and contributed to the feminisation of community forestry governance. By contrast, in the case of Gharmi, male migration contributed to the creation of a 'remittance class', which used community forestry as a platform on which it waged a caste-based struggle, thereby further entrenching inequalities along lines of gender, class and seniority.

For far too long, community forestry policies have operated on the assumption of the physical and social boundedness of rural communities. In this paper, I have attempted to draw attention to the importance of studying migration (internal and external) as one of the factors shaping social change, and of questioning the present approach to the governance of community forests.

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