

Taking migration seriously

What are the implications for gender and community forestry?¹

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Key messages

- The growing 'multilocality' of rural households and livelihoods, prompted by globalization and the expansion of markets, is likely to have profound effects on who governs forests and how forests are governed, and the consequences for people and forests.
- Case studies of two Nepalese villages having different migration patterns and social structures show that forest governance has been feminized in one village and become entrenched and further male dominated in another.
- Policies and policy-oriented literature on forestry rarely take into account the changes taking place in how rural livelihoods are earned and how gender dynamics are altering.
- A dialogue among all stakeholders should take place to identify the opportunities and challenges of governing forests in the context of multilocal livelihoods. This also necessitates empowering local frontline agents to negotiate for greater participation of women, a broader re-orientation within forest bureaucracies on gender issues and acknowledgement of the importance of embracing participatory approaches in practice.

Introduction

Rural livelihoods in the global south are becoming increasingly diversified and are no longer derived exclusively from farming and land. Seasonal and circular migration of some members of the household have become a mainstay strategy adopted to escape state policies and agrarian changes, diversify incomes, offset capital constraints, fulfill aspirations of a modern life and increasingly respond to growing economic, political and climate-related insecurities (Ashley and Maxwell 2001; Razavi 2003; Rigg 2005). One consequence has been that household incomes are sourced from multiple localities, often beyond rural boundaries (Thieme 2008). Research on gender and migration has long viewed migration as an inherently gendered process that has impacted considerably on the distribution of power between women and men at both the intra- and interhousehold levels. However, the policies have yet to recognize the role of migration in influencing forest governance. This is particularly evident in countries such as Nepal where, despite the importance of migration for the country's GDP and for the livelihood of rural households, community forestry policies continue to be

underpinned by the notion that rural households are physically and socially bounded. This perception inadequately reflects the changing landscape of rural livelihoods and gender dynamics. Drawing on ethnographic research on gender, migration and governance of community forests about two user groups in the middle hills of Nepal, this InfoBrief underscores the importance of focusing on migration, and outlines some of the resultant implications for community forestry policies.

Community forestry policies in Nepal and lack of attention to the influences of migration

Community forestry was first introduced in Nepal in 1978 by merging two interrelated development paradigms – Himalayan degradation theory and the concept of participatory development. Scholars and policy makers were concerned about rapid deforestation and soil degradation in the middle hills region of Nepal, and that the nationalization of forests (or state monopoly over the governance of forests) was unable to curb environmental decline effectively. At the same time, frustrated

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Table 1. Timeline for some significant changes in forestry management, 1978–2009

Year	Act/Plan	Policy intentions	Outcome/Comments
1978	National Forestry Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forest and land-use management by the community in selected areas of Nepal • Government to supply technical advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local village councils (Panchayats) were given management powers, but the expected trickle-down effect did not occur • Forest degradation was not halted
1988/1990	Master Plan for Forestry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forests to be managed by users • Users to reap all benefits • Women, the poor and ethnic minorities to be involved in forest management 	Gender issues were mentioned for the first time but were rarely operationalized
2009	Guidelines for Community Forestry Programmes (Revised)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forestry user groups to be formed and to include: ethnic minorities, Dalits, indigenous people and women 	Guidelines state that 50% of the user group should be women, and either the Chair or the Secretary should be a woman

with top-down approaches to policy development, others were calling for participatory approaches in order to achieve the sustainable management of forests and to address the basic forestry needs of local people. The underlying rationale behind community forestry was that the local communities who live closest to the forests were best placed to protect, sustainably manage and sustainably utilize them. The government, in turn, became extension agents, providing advice and support to local communities (Gilmour and Fisher 1991; Graner 1997; Pokharel 1997; Britt 2002; Campbell 2002). Since then, community forestry has been hailed as a success and Nepal a leader in mobilizing local communities to manage forests. According to the latest figures from Nepal's Ministry of Forestry and Soil Conservation, about 1.45 million households or 35% of the population of Nepal are managing the 1,652,654 ha of national forests that have been handed over as community forests (CFD 2013).

Those who influence community forestry policy are increasingly questioning the undifferentiated view of local communities and are promoting the importance of gender and social equity for efficient and equitable governance of community forests. Such changes are a product of policy shifts among donors, who remain the major financiers of community forestry in Nepal, as well as the increasing politicization of 'caste,' 'class,' 'ethnicity' and 'gender' in Nepali politics more generally. A historical review of donor and government policies on community forestry indicates that gender issues are increasingly framed in terms of greater concern over women's rights, and their access and control over forest resources (Table 1). Furthermore, one of the major consequences of the Maoist movement and ensuing 10-year civil conflict in Nepal has been greater awareness of and demands for social inclusion in the Nepali state and society alike, which in turn have percolated through to community forestry policies. The extent to which these changes will lead to a more inclusive Nepal or one that is further fractured along caste, ethnic and gender divisions is not yet clear. Nevertheless, this is a major milestone for community forestry policies in Nepal, and it offers important lessons for other countries where gender issues continue to be sidelined and/or

are couched in simplistic and potentially harmful discourses over women's inherently 'close relationship with nature.'

The question of how seasonal and transnational migrations are affecting the governance of community forestry policies remains unaddressed in both community forestry policies and the growing policy-oriented scholarship in this field. For instance, the Guidelines for Community Forestry Programmes (Revised) 2009, the major document guiding government officials, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and donors in charge of implementing community forestry at the local level, do not mention migration at all. This is in spite of the fact that migration has historically been an important part of rural livelihoods. Globalization and the expansion of markets have given added impetus to the growing mobility of Nepali workers through circular migration as they search for international contractual work in the growing cities of India, as well as the Gulf States and Southeast Asia. Considerable uncertainties exist over the precise numbers of Nepali citizens working abroad, although there is no doubt that circular and seasonal migration constitute one of the largest sources of employment for the country (Seddon *et al.* 2001). Anywhere between 589,080 and 3 million Nepali workers are currently working in India – exact figures are difficult to determine because of open-door policies between India and Nepal. Furthermore, the period between 1998/99 and 2010 witnessed a 13-fold increase in the number of Nepali citizens migrating for employment purposes to international destinations other than India (from 27,796 in FY 1998/1999 to 384,667 in FY 2011/12), according to Nepal's Department of Foreign Affairs. In FY 2011/12, the majority went to Qatar (105,681, 27% of the total migrants) followed closely by Malaysia (98,367) and Saudi Arabia (80,455). These figures only capture documented Nepali workers, that is, they list only those who sought and were granted approval to work abroad by the Department of Foreign Employment. The Department estimates that an additional 40% of the total documented workers are undocumented, but others claim that this figure could be as high as 200% of all documented workers. Migration is largely male dominated. Although the

total number of women migrating has been on the rise, women migrants constituted a mere 6% of the total migrant worker population in FY 2011/12 (Pandey *et al.* In press).

The dominant numbers of men in seasonal and circular migration patterns are likely to be explained by a host of factors such as gender segregation of markets, lack of opportunities for women outside of the domestic sector, gender norms at the household and community levels that stigmatize women who migrate abroad for work purposes, the Nepal government's ban on women working abroad until recently and the rampant sexual and other abuses faced by Nepali women working in the Gulf as reported by the mainstream media. In a rare insight into the gender dynamics of migration from the middle hills of Nepal to the cities of India, 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 toward their families, migration reproduces local idioms of masculinity and reinforces a male-dominated household. As the following case studies demonstrate, however, migration interacts with gender, caste and ethnicity to produce a range of outcomes for women and men situated differently within these hierarchies. These gendered dynamics can, in turn, have contrasting implications for the extent and nature of women's and men's voices and their influence in the processes of forest governance.

The two case studies form the basis of a comparative analysis of the implications of caste, ethnicity and livelihood patterns on forest governance from a gender perspective. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used. Structured household interviews, semistructured interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRA) exercises and participant observation were carried out over the course of a year to conduct in-depth field research at the local level. This was followed by an analysis of actors and policy processes at the local, district and national levels.

Seasonal out-migration and the feminization of community forestry among the Tamangs

The village of Bhatpole is located in Kabrepalanchok District in Central Nepal. It is predominantly inhabited by 'Tamang' ethnic groups and is located adjacent to settlement hamlets inhabited by other ethnic/caste groups such as 'Jasi-Bahun,' 'Magars' and 'Chetris,' among others. Tamangs are of Tibeto-Burman origin and constitute one of the largest and most socially and economically marginalized ethnic minorities in Nepal. Tamang households in Bhatpole depend upon agricultural and nonagricultural livelihoods within and outside the village. Because of the dearth of good agricultural land, most households rely on seasonal out-migration to Kathmandu and neighboring towns and cities to



An international nongovernmental organization led focus group discussion on environment and livelihood with village women (Photo by Bimbika Sijapati Basnett)

supplement shortfalls. Seasonal migration allows them to return to the villages during peak agricultural seasons (such as planting and harvesting paddy) to help out with family farm production and engage in daily waged agricultural work for the wealthy Jaisi-Bahun landlords in the neighboring villages. During this study, the men were generally away for 6 months or longer per year. Although both women and men expressed interest in migrating, seasonal migrants were predominantly male. In Bhatpole, the male-led patterns of seasonal out-migration were not due to gender imbalances at the intra-Tamang level, but rather to the gendered segmentation of the markets for Tamang labor as well as the inability of Tamang migrant networks to tap into gender-inclusive markets. Encouraged by their families, young women and men had previously migrated in equal numbers to work in the carpet industries of Kathmandu, and the ideology of controlling women's movements was virtually absent among the Tamangs. Although health and safety standards for workers were low in the carpet industry, workers were subjected to very little gender-based discrimination in terms of duties assigned and wages paid. After the carpet industry collapsed because of declining export volumes and reduced rates of return in the late 1990s, much of the informal and casual labor demand in towns and cities changed to being specifically for male labor. Tamang networks had little access to other employment opportunities that were able to absorb both male and female workers. Consequently, most women carpet workers had to return to Bhatpole, while men continued to find casual work elsewhere.

The allocation of responsibilities for family farm production and domestic work (such as collection of firewood and fodder) was defined by 'availability to work' rather than by gender per se. However, the gender biases embedded in markets for Tamang labor were being transmitted at the intrahousehold level and becoming evident in gender inequalities in the division of labor (such as child care and domestic work). Women became disproportionately dependent on men for material and extralocal support. Women from households where male members were seasonal migrants witnessed significant increases in work burden when men were away. However, rather than being passive spectators, women were also capitalizing on the spaces existing within Tamang sociocultural practices and investing in greater cooperation and collaboration with one another in order to mitigate the gender-based constraints that they faced in their everyday lives. This was particularly evident in the way women organized exchange labor of various kinds in family farm production and domestic labor. These were measured, monitored and reciprocated stringently to mitigate against the labor vacuum created during men's absences.

Thus, in Bhatpole, community forestry became 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 to manage community forestry became a part of and intertwined with ongoing forms of collective effort. Women drew on pre-existing forms of collaboration to discuss and decide on the rules that should govern forests prior to seeking

formal handover from the government, and to define men's role in community forestry. Their rules included user eligibility, forest protection, penalties and which types of forest products were to be appropriated – when and by whom they were to be appropriated were decided upon when women met to make arrangements about exchange labor.

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 mean broadening the scope of community forestry to meet men's interests and priorities, and would jeopardize the basis for collective action for community forestry governance. At the same time, women also sought strategic support from men in order to liaise with government officials on their behalf and to help them comply with governmental rules and regulations pertaining to the establishment and functioning of community forestry user groups. Women conceptualized their life spaces as being separate from but simultaneously linked to those of men. Their spaces were limited to the local (the village, local market, neighboring villages), whereas men operated in both local and extralocal spaces. Men who seasonally migrated outside the village were viewed as being better able to understand, and interact and bargain with extralocal actors such as forestry officials. As Agarwal (2010) notes, community forestry policies, although implemented at the local level, are framed at the national level and beyond. Women often lack the experience and contacts required to forge extralocal networks and influence institutions at high levels. Furthermore, as Nightingale (2005) points out, in spite of the participatory nature of community forestry policies, the support provided by the Department of Forestry assumes that local people have little knowledge about how to manage community forests and must be taught modern silviculture. These attitudes reinforce differences between users based on education, literacy and gender. In the context of Bhatpole, the 'professionalization' of community forestry led Tamang women to depend on male counterparts with literacy skills and extralocal experiences to act as intermediaries between District Forest Officials and Tamang women users. Men generally agreed to play a supporting role as long as they also benefitted (along with women) from secure access to forest products and would not have to contribute their time and labor to community forestry governance. However, in the process of establishing and managing community forests, new gender hierarchies were created as women relied increasingly on men to act as go-betweens with government officials.

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

The village of Gharmi is located in Kaski District in Western Nepal; its inhabitants are high-caste Poudyals and Khatri-Chettris and low-caste Biswa-Karmas (Dalits), with each group occupying its own settlement hamlet. The majority of Biswa-Karma households are dependent on historical patron-client relationships as well as migration outside of the village. The high-castes rely on low-castes as a cheap source of labor and the low-castes on the high-

castes for their livelihood. Caste-based practices of untouchability characterize everyday social relations between the high- and low-caste groups. Many also supplement caste-based systems of livelihood with seasonal migration to the fertile agricultural plains of Nepal and India to take advantage of different agricultural seasons and to find nonfarm employment.

As Gill (2003) points out, however, many rural households (such as those in Gharmi) are dependent on the same type of seasonal out-migration, where demand for laborers does not change, leading to a case of supply outstripping demand in the flat/ agricultural countryside of Nepal and India. This means that, in Gharmi, only a handful of households were able to accumulate an adequate or sustained income through migration; these households were actively sending their young men to the Gulf countries for 2–3 years at a time. While this involved much higher costs of migration, it meant considerably greater returns in terms of remittances being sent home. Thus, migration was differentiating the Dalit community along class lines and cementing these divisions. The remittance class were re-investing in the village in the form of land and productive resources, and lowering their economic dependence on caste-based patron–client relations. Furthermore, many were also influenced by the Dalit struggle taking place in Nepal and were instrumental in mobilizing support against caste-based discrimination upon their return to Gharmi.

Even though migration was seen as 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 honor and a strict enforcement of gendered division of labor served to control women's mobility outside the household and village. Hence, the fundamental contradictions in the changing context of caste-based relations in the village were that many of the Dalits' sociocultural practices (especially those related to the treatment of women) mirrored high-caste practices and continued to be strictly enforced even as the emerging 'remittance class' was struggling to end caste-based discrimination.

The District Forest Office (DFO)-Kaski handed over the community forests in Gharmi to low castes after 3 years of fierce dispute between the high and low castes over the usufruct rights to the forests. The initial motivation behind the Dalits' request for the handover of community forests was to gain secure access to forest products and to reduce women's work burden. Biswa-Karma households required forest products such as firewood for cooking, fodder for livestock, organic manure for agricultural production and timber for construction purposes. Collection of forest products was associated with locally defined perceptions of being female and was therefore considered women's responsibility. These demarcations were strictly observed and any transgressions severely reprimanded. In addition, a bitter caste-based battle ensued when the high-castes contested the handover on the grounds that their lineage deity (kul Deota) was located in the forest and that Biswa-Karmas were barred from entering the 'sacred' forests because of locally defined and customarily sanctioned practices of untouchability.

In response, the senior and powerful men within the Biswa-Karmas, who were also least dependent economically on caste-based patron–client relationships because of the remittances they were receiving from their sons and brothers who had migrated to the Gulf, employed community forestry as a vehicle and platform to launch a caste-based struggle. Discourses over 'equality,' 'rights' and 'citizenship' – which were gaining currency in the newly democratic Nepal – were employed to garner support for the movement and win alliances with politicians in the district and with key movers in the DFO. In addition, the community leaders (who were also members of the remittance class) went to great lengths to portray a 'unified Biswa-Karma' voice against the high-castes, and put considerable social pressure on the women and the poorest members of the Biswa-Karma community to ensure that they participated in the struggle too.

By the time community forestry was handed over to the Biswa-Karmas, the struggle over community forests had far-reaching extralocal consequences. Numerous external actors, such as the police, politicians 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 that brought with it extralocal recognition and the flow of development aid. The senior and most powerful members had a vested interest in maintaining control over community forestry and showcasing the community forest as a model of sustainable management. The community forestry committee – a major decision-making body – was reserved for senior men involved in the caste-based struggle. Women were not only excluded from the decision-making process, but the rules that were developed focused on protecting forests rather than sustainably utilizing them so as to meet women's basic needs.

Conclusion and policy implications

This InfoBrief has attempted to draw attention to migration (intra- and international) as an integral factor shaping social change and questioning the present approach to the governance of forests in developing countries such as Nepal. The case of Bhatpole has demonstrated the ways in which the predominance of male out-migration shaped intrahousehold dynamics and contributed to the 'feminization 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.

The policy implications of taking migration seriously involve revising the inherent assumption of the physical and social boundedness of rural communities and promoting a larger dialogue among all stakeholders to identify the opportunities and challenges of governing forests in the context of multilocal livelihoods. At the local level, they involve empowering frontline agents to recognize the gender dimensions of migration patterns

and to strategically negotiate for greater participation of women and/or to capitalize on opportunities that already exist to further promote them. But this also necessitates a broader re-orientation within forest bureaucracies on gender issues and the importance of embracing participatory approaches in practice.

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