

Community Based Natural Resource Management in Nepal with Reference to Community Forestry: A Gender Perspective

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Abstract

Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) is an approach of natural resource management by, for and with local communities with the objectives of improving livelihood and security of local people, empowering them, and enhancing conservation efforts. Sustainable CBNRM depends on the participation of local communities and they perform NRM activities only when they see tangible benefits, unobstructed access and property right over resources. Sustainable CBNRM demands that it should be based on indigenous knowledge of local people, their motivation to conserve natural resources and strong local organisation to undertake the initiatives.

Community Forestry (CF) programme has emerged in Nepal as a successful NRM initiatives and has raised the hope of conserving, use and management of natural resources, particularly forest resources in a sustainable manner with the involvement and active participation of Forestry User Groups (FUGs). Management of forest resources through the involvement of resource users has been realised increasingly as a better strategy for protection, conservation and sustainable use of forest resources in the hills. It is clearly demonstrated that women due to their interaction with the natural resources have developed vast indigenous knowledge, skill and technology regarding the conservation, protection, use and management of these resources. When we look from gender perspective, the involvement and participation of women in the planning and decision-making forum of CF programmes were found to be minimal. Community forest management programmes cannot be successful as expected if present trend of women's low participation continues. Therefore, there is a need of mainstreaming gender issues in the overall planning processes of community forestry programmes.

Key Words: Natural Resource Management, Community Forestry, Community Forestry User Groups, Gender, and Women

Introduction

Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) is a practice that emphasizes natural resources management (NRM) by, for, and with local communities (Gibbs and Bromley, 1989 and Chi, 1999). It has three primary objectives:

- i. Improving livelihood and security of local people;
- ii. Enhancing environmental conservation; and
- iii. Empowering the local people.

These require that the local people play a central role in natural resource management by bringing their local community capacity (LCC) to bear on external project interventions. The importance of local community capacity in community-based natural resource management projects is predicted on a number of assumptions that there will be:

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- ◆ Greater efficiency in resource management due to greater local knowledge;
- ◆ Lower transaction costs; and
- ◆ Better decision-making due to internalisation of social and ecological costs (Chi, 1999).

In view of the above observation, advocacy for CBNRM is driven by several perceptions including;

- ◆ Potentials for cost effective local management through social pressure and sanction;
- ◆ Being able to draw on detailed local knowledge of ecological dynamics; and
- ◆ Local communities' enhanced motivation to conserve natural resources

Community-based forest protection and management by rural people has a long history in the hills of Nepal. In many parts of the hills and mountains of the country, local people have established their own indigenous systems of forest management although there was not any government institutional and policy support in those days.

However, the government of Nepal nationalised all the privately owned forests (in excess of 1.2 ha in the hills and 3.5 ha in the Terai) through the Private Forest Nationalisation Act of 1957 (Kandel, 1997). As a result of this act people gradually lost interest in the conservation, use and management of forest and this led to the gradual degradation of forest in the hills of Nepal.

Government has realised that the forest cannot be managed and conserved without the active participation of local communities and therefore the government has enacted the Forest Act of 1961 and again amended this Act in 1978, incorporating the provision of community forestry in Nepal. The Master Plan for the Forestry Sector 1989 has further recommended that the community forestry should be the priority program of the forestry sector in Nepal (Kandel, 1997).

Similarly the Forest Act of 1993 and Forest Rules 1995 has further empowered the local forest user groups by legally allowing to sell forest products and raise their funds by obtaining grants/donation and through income generating activities.

Objective of the Study

The objectives of this paper are:

- i. To develop a conceptual framework of CBNRM;
- ii. To highlight Community Forestry Programmes as a specific case of CBNRM; and
- iii. To assess and analyse gender perspective in Community Forestry Programme

Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM): A Conceptual Framework

Next to improvement of socio-economic conditions of rural populations, CBNRM interventions should have the important goal to assure a high degree of sustainable use of natural resources. Sustainable use in both ecological and socio-economic terms of these resources implies a high degree of involvement and active participation of

concerned local populations (Laban, 1993). Such involvement and participation depend on to what extent these populations really feel, accept and are able to assume responsibility or accountability for protection and management of natural resources.

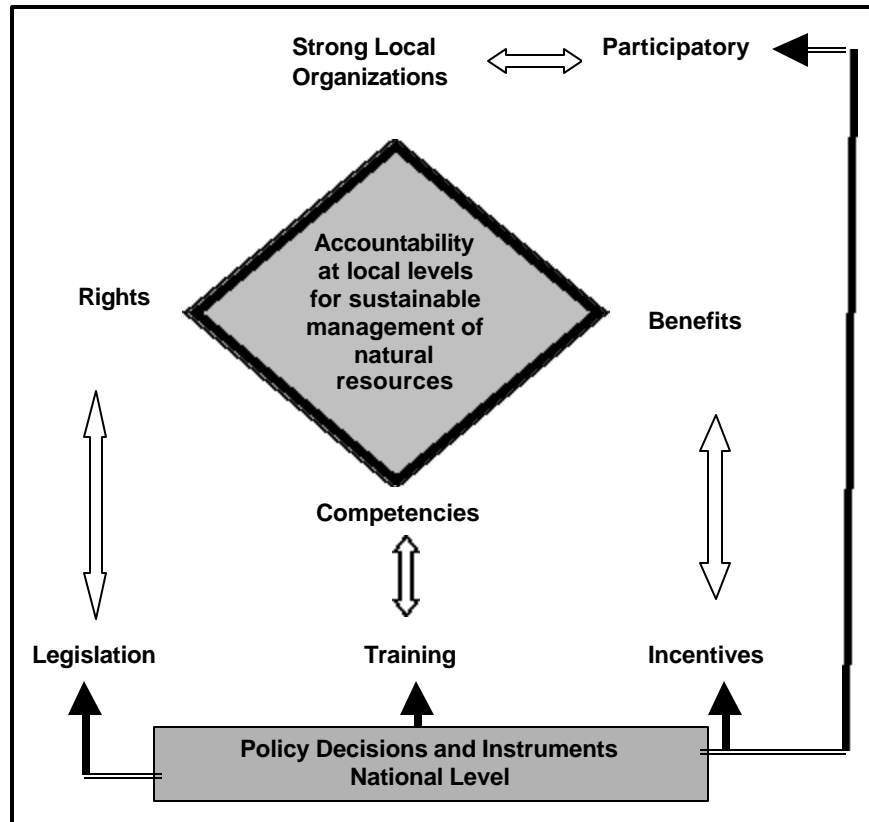


Figure 1: A Conceptual Framework of CBNRM
(Adapted with modification from Laban, 1993)

People will undertake natural resource management activities only when:

- ◆ They see clear tangible benefits (products, services or income).
- ◆ They have necessary competency (knowledge, technology).
- ◆ It is based on local indigenous knowledge.
- ◆ There is a guarantee of using products and services.
- ◆ There is unobstructed access, and property rights over resources.
- ◆ Individuals' interests are backed by strong local organizations.
- ◆ Increase people's claim is making capacities towards GOs and NGOs (Laban, 1993)

Policy denotes a definite course of method of action (as by government institutions, group or individuals), from among alternatives and in the light of given conditions, to guide and usually determine future decisions.

To promote a sufficiently high degree of accountability among local communities, it is necessary to determine appropriate policy instruments and approaches. It has to be stressed that in natural resource management, efforts at all levels are indispensable.

- ◆ At local and field level the focus must be to develop management systems under "real life" conditions of rural populations;
- ◆ At the intermediate level of the implementing government and NGO institutions, which have to translate policies through development approaches in concrete support activities; and;
- ◆ At the national level efforts should be to elaborate and implement the proper policies.

Evolution of Community Forestry Policy and Programmes in Nepal

The indigenous systems of forest management in the hills of Nepal were successful and sustainable in the past. Local communities in the hills have very close link with and dependent on the surrounding forest resources for livelihood. Due to the isolation from outside market systems and limited resource use pattern, local people had managed forest resources in a sustainable basis. The main elements, which were considered as pillars of traditional resource management systems were:

- ◆ A strong community stake in conservation, protection, use and management of forest resources;
- ◆ Local control over local resources; and
- ◆ Resource users' indigenous and functional knowledge over the use and management forest resources.

Recently there is a renewed interest in traditional management systems partly from the past failures of development projects, and the search for viable and sustainable alternatives to current models of resource use (Goodland *et al.*1989).

Forest legislation evolved from simple indigenous codes of practices to the present day externally influenced legislation. Indigenous codes of practices have existed in Nepal throughout the hills for centuries, but documentation is rare.

Ram Shah's code (1606-1636) as earliest code known had tremendous impact on the surrounding areas. Ram Shah's codes related to forest management are follows:

- 12th Code - indicated of maintaining communal grazing land
- 13th Code - maintain trees along paths
- 14th Code - maintain trees around water springs (Gautam, 1993)

In Nepal, during the period of Rana regime (ending in 1950), forest in many areas were under the responsibility of local headmen called 'talukdars'. The talukdari system was not only form of forest management system in existence during Rana period. Some 'tribal' areas of Nepal were under form of tenure called 'kipat'. In these cases land was regarded as the communal property of the ethnic group and was managed within the tribal community. Forest management systems in these cases can be regarded as both traditional (old) and indigenous (Hobley and Malla, 1996).

As the government nationalised all the private forests in 1957, local communities lost their interest in the conservation, use and management of forests in the hills and as a consequence large portion of forest become open access and was the major facilitator of resource degradation on village forest land (Bromley and Chapagain, 1984).

Since the 1970's community forestry program in Nepal have attempted to transform the relationship between a powerful state bureaucracy and local people directly dependent on forest resources. They acknowledge the failure of traditional custodian management of forests by government to halt the loss and degradation of forests, without the active participation of the communities.

The main plank of the government of Nepal's current forest management policy is handing over control of, and responsibility for, the management of local forests to local people. In parallel with the emphasis on setting up new local organisations to manage forests, it is increasingly recognised that there are already local systems in existence.

There has been an emerging concern with the need to recognise and build on the existing systems (Fisher, 1989) or at least to learn from them. Many accounts attribute, or partly attribute, the decline of forest resources in Nepal to the breakdown of "traditional" systems of forest management.

Even after the nationalisation of forest in 1957, in remote hill districts people were still conserving forest. Local forest watchers are paid with the grain collected from user households (referred as manapathi system). In these system villages have been encouraged by local leader to form "informal" protection committees.

Study conducted by Gilmour (1987) and Fisher (1989) in Sindhupalchok and Kavre districts of Nepal found local initiatives that have led to protection of forest and shrub land resources.

After the development of popular community forestry program in Nepal, the villagers have categorised the use rights of forest products into two broad categories.

The rules for forest use, as they stood in 1988, were as follows (Fisher, 1989):

Primary users are allowed to collect grass and dry wood from the ground as well as forest fruits. They are not allowed to cut green timber or even dry branches still attached to trees.

Secondary Users living in *goth* have the same rights as primary users during the period of residence in *goths*. When living in their normal residence they are not entitled to collect firewood.

Other secondary users are also entitled to collect grass and *katus* fruit, but are never entitled to collect firewood.

Many evidence suggest that most indigenous systems are dynamic response to a changing situation. The collapse of the *talukdari* system led to the absence of any potentially effective externally sponsored system of forest management. Villagers in many parts of Nepal have responded by initiating their own new system (Fisher, 1989).

When there was growing concern and initiatives by local people to conserve and manage forest, the government of Nepal has reacted to this situation by enacting the Forest Act of 1961, which gives provision of handovering forest to local Panchayats (now called Village Development Committee). Subsequently with the popularity, growing concern and need to preserve forest to protect denuded watersheds in the hills, government has realized the importance of indigenous forest management and community forestry program was initiated in 1978 with the enactment of community Forestry legislation.

Community Forestry Operational Modality

The concept of Forest User Group (FUG) is the central of community forestry program in Nepal. A forest user group can be termed as legally recognised group consisting of all members of a community that frequently use a particular forest area for forest product or who have been using and managing traditionally an area of forest. The forest user group makes a decision as to how the community forest be managed and utilised based on full participation of all members through management or operational plan. The decision needs to be consensus. Every individual in a community has to cooperate with each other for collective management of their forest. The community forestry program in Nepal has empowered the traditional forest user groups not only to protect and manage the forest but also to utilise products.

The central policy of community forestry is to empower local communities to manage forest resources to fulfil their basic needs of forest produce through their active participation.

The community forest group has been recognised a social institution, as legal entity and self-governing autonomous body. The forest user groups have been given rights to formulate their constitution- a legal document - based on which they operate. They have also legal right to take decision regarding forest management and also fix price of forest commodity if it is more than sufficient to the community.

The forest user groups were also empowered to decide and manage their funds generated through the sale of forest products without sharing with the government. They can decide to use such funds in any development activities. Forest user groups can implement income-generating activities within forest like promotion of non-timber forest

products (NTFPs) and can establish forest-based micro-enterprise. The important decision has to be made through the forest user groups, not from the executive committee.

The institutional arrangements designed for the promotion of community forestry are unique in Nepal. The implementation and management decisions regarding CF are a basic responsibility of the CFUG. Some of the key points can be summarised:

- ◆ The CF operational plan prepared by the community with the technical assistance from the District Forest Office is implemented by the CFUG themselves.
- ◆ Management decisions regarding operational rules on forest protection, harvesting, utilisation and sanctioning of rule infractions are made by the CFUG members on the basis of consensus.
- ◆ CF attaches high importance to the participation of users in the protection, management and utilisation of CF, and in the implementation of community development activities.

It is estimated that there is a potential of 1876300 ha forested and 1585800 ha non-forested land which can be developed as community forests. Similarly, 2313100 ha of Nepal's current national forests can also be considered potential community forest. As of March 2000, HMG has handed over a total of about 0.650 million hectares of state managed forest to over 9000 CFUGs for the development, conservation, management and sustainable use of the forest. Through this process, about 1 million people are directly benefited from being a member of the forest user groups (MOPE, 2000).

Women's Role in Forest Management in Nepal

Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development (Principle 20, Rio Declaration, 1992).

Due to their social and economic roles, women have a close association with the forest from which they must provide water, food, fuel, fodder and income for their families. Yet despite their traditional roles as agricultural and natural resource managers, and the extensive indigenous technical knowledge they possess that enables them to shoulder these responsibilities, women in Nepal have been almost completely marginalized from process that seeks to formulate strategies for the use and management of forest. In the process, by losing access to forest and decision-making, they have further lost status and power as well as control over labour and knowledge.

Women in mountain areas play a predominant role in the management of forest. The diversity of ecosystems and small-scale production strategies necessary for survival in mountains lead to a multiplicity of women's role and a profound knowledge of forest resource management.

Collective resources management through informal women's groups' labour exchange groups and joint travels to seasonal use areas are common. Women of poor households in several surveyed mountain communities in Nepal performed labour in the forest sector to the virtual exclusion of men (98%), and contributed 60% of labour in the animal husbandry, agriculture, and water sectors (CWD, 1988). Women are principal users of community owned resources and the first to suffer if these are restricted or degraded.

Women maintain a rich storehouse of indigenous technical knowledge of forest management which can be mobilized in problem solving process in natural resource management sectors, especially community forestry, watershed management, agriculture and animal husbandry

Present Status of Women's Participation in Community Forestry Programmes in Nepal

Women are the most needy of forest products in all localities in the mountain region. They are the major collectors of forest products. Forest is the only place for women because they have marginal access to other private resources. Despite these necessities, a study conducted in the mid-western development of Nepal shows that the representation of women in the in User Group committee was nil in 7 FUGs and found to be only marginal in others except where the committee were formed exclusively for women (Pandey, 1997).

A similar study conducted in the eastern Koshi hills of Nepal reported that in all FUGs women appear to be fully involved in collecting forest products but their role in decision-making within the FUGs is very low. Participation of women is found significant only in those FUGs where the FUGs are exclusively managed by women. In the remaining FUGs, women either did not attend committee meetings and group assemblies or participated passively. When asked about their non-participation, it has been found that due to domination of men in meeting and decision-making process women's involvement in overall planning and forest management is found to be low (Rasaily, 1996).

A study conducted in the Tungan Sub-watershed of the Lalitpur District shows that out of 24 CFUGs, women's representation as FUG chairperson is found only in one forest user committee (4%), which is also exclusively formed by women. Similarly women's representation as a committee member in overall watershed is found to be 11% (Table 1).

Therefore, the women had a marginal influence to make decision regarding the conservation and management of community forestry in their localities. Women who were literate in the community were the ones interested to participate in decision-making forums. But in reality only the male members were the ones to form majority in that participation and decision-making process.

Table 1: Representation in CFUGs by Gender

SN	V.D.C.	No. of CFUGs	Representation in CFUGs		CFUGs Chairperson	
			Men	Women	Men	Women
1.	Gotikhel	4	17	3	4	0
2.	Manikhel	7	66	9	6	1
3.	Kaleshwor	7	58	9	7	0
4.	Sankhu	1	9	2	1	0
5.	Bukhel	2	21	1	2	0
6.	Ikudol	3	19	0	3	0
Total		24	190	24	23	1

Source: Adhikari, 2000.

Recently gender issues are becoming central to discussion of community forestry program in Nepal. Although policy has mentioned women's representation in CFUGs, but present legislation has not fixed any quota for the representation of women and poor sections of the community in FUG committee. The Federation of Community Forestry Users in Nepal (FECOFUN) has made policy of having equal (50/50) female-male membership in the FUGs. Although this has not been translated fully into practice, recent data shows that the participation of women in FUG related activities is low and the representation of women in CFUGs is in an average of 20 % (Shrestha, 2000).

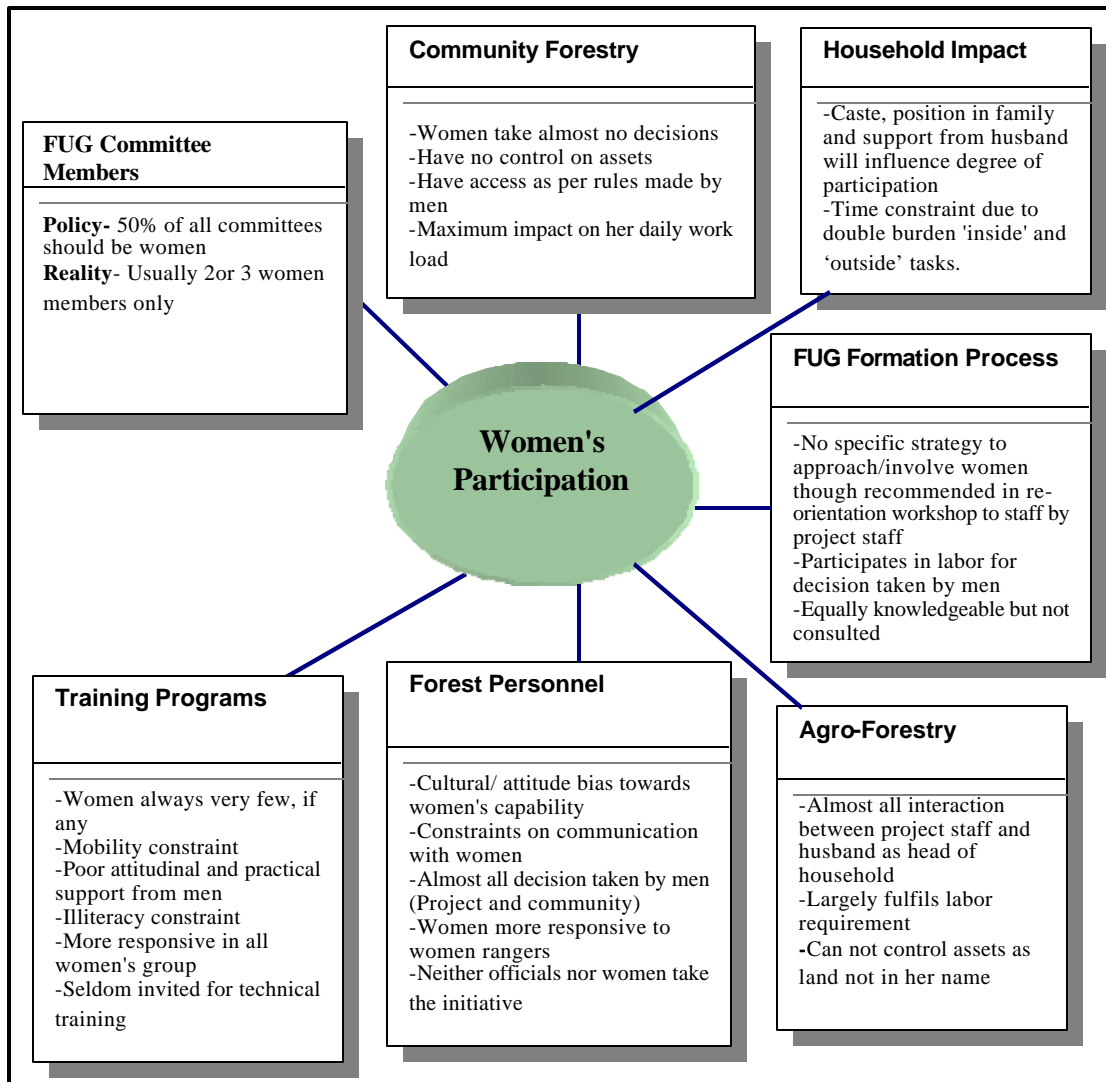
A gender analysis study conducted in Dolakha and Ramechhap Districts of Community Forestry programmes area clearly showed that women's participation in overall CF management activities is hindered by various gender biased roles within government, household and community level (Figure 2).

Female Headed/Dominated Forest User Groups

Although the overall participation of women in the FUG is low and not equal to men but there have been some efforts from the Forestry Department and with the strong demand and desire of local women there are some community forest exclusively managed by local women. There are many more active and more successful female headed/dominated user groups (Ohler, 1999; and Joshi, 1999c). The question is why women headed FUGs are more successful than the FUG headed by men? Some of the reasons for the more active role of women playing in the forestry user groups could be:

- ◆ Women have more to gain, socially, legally and economically from formation of user group than men;
- ◆ Women are better skilled in managing internal conflicts within their user groups;
- ◆ Women are generally found more honest and prudent in handling money and goods that belong to the user group;
- ◆ Men are seasonally absent; women are often left behind to take care of family and farm, and seek insurance and mutual support through group membership; and

- ◆ The particular attention the project has been given to enhance the capacity building of women user groups through training.



Source: DRCFDP, 1995.

Figure 2 **Women's Participation in Project Activities**

In conclusion it can be concluded that women not only have more indigenous knowledge about forests but they can more efficiently manage forest user groups also.

It can be concluded by saying that CF programme at the present time is not conceived and designed to incorporate women's full and active participation. Community forestry programmes have also ignored women's indigenous knowledge of forest management and their participation in the planning and decision making forum of community forestry. Therefore, it is necessary to guarantee women's participation in planning and decision forum of CF programmes and utilise their indigenous knowledge of forest management.

Despite the emphasis of policy guidelines the involvement and participation of women in the CF programmes, during planning and decision making process is very low. The non-participation of women in the overall Community Forestry management process found to be due to the following reasons;

- ◆ There is lack of policy and regulatory mechanism necessary to ensure women's access and control over forestry resources in CF management programmes. CF policy guidelines do not specify any quota, mechanism or institutional arrangements for ensuring the participation and involvement of women in the CF development programmes on the basis of their resource use and dependence and ensuring equitable entitlements for them. There is a lack of sufficient trained staff on gender issues, permanent institutional structure and clear-cut policy guidelines and back up from the government departments.
- ◆ Most of the CF activities is labour intensive and time demanding and benefit received through these efforts mostly goes to men, and even increasing work burden of women.
- ◆ Some CF projects has allocated quota to women in the CFUGs committee due to policy of donor agencies, but in reality women's participation is not effective enough because they have no access to information to participate in the meeting, can not attend the meeting due to heavy household responsibilities, their lack of self confidence, no institutional mechanism to involve women and lack of women's organisation and lastly due to women's secondary status in the society.
- ◆ There is a lack of gender knowledge in the professional and forestry technicians so, they cannot address the gender issues properly during planning and decision making in the watershed.

Future Perspective of Gender Mainstreaming in Community Forestry Programmes

In most of the development programs and projects gender concerns have not received proper attention. In these development initiatives especially the women, poor and disadvantaged groups are always left out.

Therefore, there is a need to focus attention on gender concerns and find remedy for alleviating inequalities in CF management programme right from planning to every cycle of the projects/programmes management. Mainstreaming women in the CF programmes is essential for the following reasons:

- ◆ A great deal of activities related to forest like fodder and fuelwood collection, income generation through non-timber forest products, use of medicinal herbs, leaf litter collection have been performed by women.

- ◆ Women have been largely ignored in the process of planning and decision-making process of formulating CF management plan and policies.
- ◆ Men have controlled much of the resources like land, trees, crops, animals, income, information, and technologies.
- ◆ Women have less access to education, training, and extension.
- ◆ Women have a great deal of unexplored indigenous knowledge related to forest management, which has been neglected in the planning and implementation of community forestry programmes.
- ◆ Involvement of women in CF management leads to women's control over resources and decision-making processes.
- ◆ Helps to give women motivation and boost their self-confidence.
- ◆ Helps to create independence and self-help.
- ◆ It helps women to organise, mobilise and to exchange knowledge and experiences in the natural resource development programs like community forestry, soil conservation and watershed management, agricultural practices, agro-forestry etc.
- ◆ Helps in self-reliant development.
- ◆ Helps to incorporate women's indigenous technical knowledge in natural resource management programs.
- ◆ Helps to increase awareness and helps women to articulate their felt needs.

However, community forestry programme has recognised women as a stakeholder and tried to incorporate women specific program. But due to lack of mainstreaming gender concern in these programmes these efforts are simply not effective enough to achieve full and active participation of women.

Conclusion

Community-based natural resource management has attributes that are most suited for the management of common property resource mainly forest, pasture, village common land and overall management of natural resources. One of the successful examples of CBNRM is Nepal's unique Community Forestry Programme. From the analysis of community forestry programme of Nepal it is clearly revealed that, resource management systems based on local people's indigenous knowledge and institution, strong and efficient local organisation for better decision-making, local control over resources, rights of using benefits and complementary national policy and guidelines are found to be most important and basic conditions for the success of community forestry programmes. Today's CF programmes of Nepal can be considered as one of the successful examples of community-based natural resource management initiatives. Although the CF programme of Nepal is considered successful, when we looked from gender perspective the participation of and involvement of women in overall planning and decision-making process of CF is found to be very low. There is a need to involve women in planning and decision making process and incorporate their ITK and capabilities in community forestry management programmes for women's empowerment and sustainable use and management of natural resources which is vital for conserving natural resources in the fragile mountain ecosystem. Community forestry programmes seems to be a viable

option for conserving, improving, using and management of natural resources in Nepal where women had play a significant role in this endeavour. Community forestry programmes cannot be successful without women's full and active participation. Therefore there is a need to mainstream gender and utilise their indigenous technical knowledge in overall CF management programmes.

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