

Gender Mainstreaming in Nepal

Working Paper No 6 for the Engendering Eden Project¹

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Acknowledgements

The working paper is based on a visit to Nepal and 2 case study sites between the 1st and the 14th June, 2002. The first area visited was WWF's Sagarmatha Community Agro-Forestry Project, in and around Sagarmatha National Park in the Himalayas. Interviews were carried out with a number of stakeholders in the Sagarmatha area and in Kathmandu. These included representatives from WWF and its partners including SAMANATA and KMTNC. As well as male and female representatives from a selection of the villages and groups that take part in the Sagarmatha Community Agroforestry Project including Monju VDC; Ghat Forest Group; and the Women's User Group in Lukla. The second was the Annapurna Conservation Area Project based in Ghandruk, in the lower regions of the Annapurnas.

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1.0 Introduction

In most areas of Nepal women are discriminated against. Within mountain areas this is less so with the societies being more gender equitable. However women still remain relatively marginalised. This is despite the large amount of women-headed households and their important role in natural resource use. A number of projects have supported the continued development of the women from these areas and their increased involvement in decision-making processes particularly those related to the environment. Two such projects that have been successful in targeting women are described below:

- a) The WWF-supported Sagarmatha Community Agro-Forestry Project
- b) The Annapurna Conservation Area Project.

2.1 The Sagarmatha National Park

Traditionally the area in and around Sagarmatha NP is dominated by Sherpas. As a result many of the men are away for long periods of time trekking and portering. The women have to take over the role of head of the household during this time. The livelihoods of the local communities rely on subsistence agriculture and activities related to tourism. The agriculture is mainly organic, utilising manure, together with compost collected from the forests. This compost is an important reason for the continued preservation of the forests.

Both boys and girls go to school at primary level however after this they (particularly the girls) often drop out as have to work at home. Where children have been educated to secondary level it is common for them to want to move to Kathmandu to get 'better' jobs. The average number of children per family is between 5 and 6. Usually women will move to get married whilst men usually stay in same place. People tend to remain in the same area for most of their lifetime – though increasingly some community members (particularly men) are migrating to the larger towns and even villages (such as Namche and Phoktang) in search of work.

The vast majority of the local communities are Buddhist. This has supported a conservation ethic. In Buddhism there is a respect for nature and the belief that one should not kill any living creature. Often around monasteries trees are protected. In addition the large number of tourists to the area have also influenced the growth of the conservation movement. Further the history of community participation in Nepal has laid a good foundation for community-based conservation.

2.2 The Sagarmartha Community Agro-Forestry Project and WWF

In the environs of Sagarmatha National Park WWF has supported the setting up of a local environmental conservation institution since 1991 called the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC). Today the Committee remains actively involved in community services, environmental awareness, pollution control, tourism development and cultural preservation.

In collaboration with SPCC, WWF initiated the Sagarmatha Community Agro-Forestry Project (SCAFP) in 1996. The Project was set up to address the issue of increasing deforestation in Chaurikharka Village Development Committee (VDC) (locally known as Pharak). It is an area which has gained prominence as the gateway to the Sagarmatha National Park (SNP) and Everest - visited by 25,000 tourists along with twice as many support staff every year. The Project's goal is to increase forest coverage area and to strengthen local capacity for sustainable management of their natural resources through integrated conservation and development programmes. It is financially supported by WWF UK and a private Dutch donor. The Dutch donor has explicitly demanded that gender issues should be addressed within the Project and that participation and benefit sharing should be targeted at women.

Amongst its achievements the Project has:

- institutionalised 5 FUGs;
- established 7 community nurseries;
- planted approximately 150,000 seedlings;
- trained 421 local residents (250 women and 171 men) in sustainable resource management and income generating activities;
- trained 13 women and 11 men in greenhouse management as well as constructed 54 greenhouses, distributed seed and established a vegetable cooperative;
- organised literacy classes for 502 adults (482 women and 20 men); and
- awarded 24 girl stipend scholarships.

Other Project activities have included the mapping of community forest blocks and plantation sites; study visits (for example to the Nepal-UK Community Forestry Project and the established kitchen gardens, fruit farms and poultry farming); agro-forestry including greenhouses, horticulture and kitchen gardening; alternate energy including back-boilers, kerosene depot, peltric sets and a gas depot; and detailed design and estimate of micro-hydro projects. In addition an emphasis has been placed on conservation awareness - non- formal education and Eco club support, audio visual shows and leaflet dissemination, and capacity building - training, study tours and workshops. Also toxics and pollution control – through awareness building and waste management led by SPCC. A linkage is promoted between improving the environment and improving health and development. For example the focus on community greenhouse building attempts to increase opportunities for better eating and food as well as intensifying the production process so less land is needed. Likewise pollution control not only improves the environment but health and well-being.

2.2.1 Literacy Classes

The literacy classes supported by WWF particularly target women. The women who attend are of all ages – the youngest being 12 and the oldest 55. They are run under the Women’s Awareness Group and SPCC. When first organised, classes were held 6 days/week, from 4-6pm for 6 months. Unfortunately there was a high incidence of dropouts and irregular attendance due to household workload and negative pressure from male counterparts. It was found that attendance was particularly low during the trekking season when labour demand was high. As a result, the literacy classes are now held at times when the workload is not so high – ie out of trekking season and/or in the afternoons or evenings – so there are more opportunities for women to attend.

An assessment report of the Project suggested that the “literacy rate among the women has improved along with conservation awareness [and the] decision-making role of women in CFUGs has noticeably increased” (Gurung, 1999:8). In addition it was also felt that women are taking more advantage of some of the Project elements in comparison to men particularly literacy, vegetable farming and the establishment of back-boilers.

2.2.2 Forest User Groups

Forest User Groups (FUGs) have been supported. Where mixed, a proportional representation of males and females is aimed for. In addition female representation on sub-committees is expected.

Furthermore, FUGs have been controlling illegal timber harvesting and trading in the area with strong leadership from women. Both men and women are now more aware of the necessity of the SNP. SCAFP emphasises the empowerment of local women and capacity building of CBOs such as Women's Awareness Groups and Community FUGs in its education and capacity building efforts. In this way SCAFP continues to highlight the important role that women play in changing local people's attitude towards conservation.

(a) Ghat Forest User Group

The 5-year old Ghat Forest User Group has 13 Executive members, 3 of whom are women. The members are elected by the villagers and work on a voluntary basis. It was suggested by Group members that women have equal opportunities to contribute to decision-making processes. An AGM is held once a year, at which all villagers attend.

The Committee are responsible for the management and protection of the forest. When community members wish to cut wood they make a request to the Committee to do so. The Committee will then meet and decide whether permission will be given. Previously the forest has been under the control of the District Forest Office. This meant that only those who could pay for timber were allowed to cut it. It was suggested by Committee members that the forest is in a better condition now than when it was under the control of the Government. For example, the level of compost has increased which means that villagers now have to travel less far to collect it.

However, many villagers were not convinced about the User Group at first and they blamed the Committee for the National Park and its limitations on their resource use. However, over time the community has realised the value of conserving the forests. This was aided by WWF initiating a study tour for community members to another User Group which showed them the benefits and potential opportunities of doing so.

WWF tries to play a minimal role in the day to day running of the FUG. The organisation does however give technical and financial support for such as a seedling nursery (which is run by a female community member). They have also given training (eg in kitchen garden production, fruit processing and income generation), health support and non-formal education as well as initiating a small hydro-electric scheme and the building of several greenhouses. Indeed Ghat has been at the centre of the non-formal education training - 70% of the women in the village have received training in Nepali, English and some maths. An increasing number of women now send their children to school and due to their own education are better placed to help them with homework. In addition the women are more active in social work within the communities and for example within the CFUGs.

In January 2002 a buffer zone was established around the Park. Shortly a Buffer Zone Committee will be established. One of their tasks will be to distribute user fees from the Park to village members.

(b) Women's User Group, Lukla,

In Lukla there is a strong and active Women's User Group. It has been formed for 5 years and was set up with the help of WWF who gave advice on such as government legislation and record-keeping. The Group took over role of the CFUG which had become inactive. It meets once a month except during the trekking season when time is too short. When the women first started meeting there was some resistance from the men. However they have slowly accepted the idea, though difficulties still arise when things are busy.

The elected Chairman of the Group is a strong leader and has been educated to secondary level. She is very active in the community and speaks excellent English. In addition many of the members have been trained through the literacy class initiated by WWF. This has also increased the self-confidence of the women. WWF also funds a local nursery and has helped to set up a gas depot in Lukla. Most lodges use gas though it does prove expensive.

Today the Women's User Group is involved in a number of activities including keeping the villages clean and where necessary promoting women's rights (though Sherpa society is reasonably gender equitable). The Group will also patrol the forest if they hear rumours of people taking wood.

2.2.3 Village Development Committees (VDCs)

VDCs are responsible for initiating development projects within the villages. This includes the maintenance of tourism infrastructure such as trails, which can benefit all those in the community that are involved in tourism. However, in some villages it is suggested that VDCs do not always distribute money in a fair and equitable manner.

In Monju, the VDC is made up of 50% women and 50% men. It was suggested that women play an active part in the meetings and decision-making processes.

2.2.4 Other supporting activities

A commonly cited problem for local communities is the lack of electricity. Though some people have solar power, this is only good for lighting. As a result WWF has been assessing the potential for hydro-electricity and initiated a small number of pilot schemes.

2.2.5 Working with local partners

WWF signed an agreement with the Department of Forest to work beyond the PA system and promote landscape level biodiversity conservation in support of WWF's ecoregional and trans-boundary initiatives. In addition they work with Ministry of Population and Environment - to include the celebration of World Environment Day.

WWF sees its role as one of facilitator between the different stakeholders and parties involved with the aim of increasing women's involvement and supporting the other elements of the Project.

2.2.6 Problems and lessons learnt

There has been some resistance to the Project from a number of stakeholders, particularly those who have more commercially-focussed vested interests in the area. For example the communities, under the support of the Project have brought the illegal logging in the area between Lukla and Namche under control. The rich and politically influential who were previously involved in illegal logging are not happy and have spread rumours that the NP will take over the community forest area. Indeed local communities feel that they do not have enough control to stop 'outsiders' and certain powerful groups in the communities (including some Committee members) taking their wood.

A number of lessons can be learnt from the experience of the Project:

- The literacy classes have been a useful forum for creating a better awareness of conservation issues.
- It proved useful and more sustainable to work with local NGOs such as SPCC and for the women's awareness workshop - HIMANTI - Himalayan Grassroots Level Women's Natural Resource Management Group.
- A gender policy has proved vital for the promotion of gender issues within the organisation and its projects.

- The Project found it less politically and locally sensitive to name the women's groups as Mother's Groups even though not every one was a mother and even included young girls.
- There are inequitable distributions of benefits within the local communities in and around the National Park. For example, most tourists stay in Namche Bazaar, rather than in the smaller villages on route. As such more benefits are realised in Namche than elsewhere.
- Political factors can have a large influence on the Project. During the time of this visit a 'state of emergency' had been declared which banned any public gathering/meeting. This meant that women's group meetings could not be held.

3.1 Annapurna Conservation Area and ACAP

The main livelihood of the people in the Annapurna area is agriculture with livestock as a secondary occupation. The main external cash income source for the people in the southern sector is military service, either in the British (Ghurkas) or the Indian armies. As a result a large number of households are women-headed or at least during long periods of time when the male members are away.

ACAP (Annapurna Conservation Area Project) was first tested as a pilot programme in the Ghandruk Village Development Committee in 1986. After being gazetted as a 'conservation area' in 1992, ACAP's programmes covered the entire area. ACA is the first protected area that has allowed residents to live within the boundaries of the protected area who maintain their traditional rights and access to the use of natural resources. It invests whatever financial resources available for community development, conservation education and social capital building in the region. The Project has been supported through the KMTNC plus a number of donors. KMTNC receives no funding support from the government for ACAP, but has been granted the right to collect entry fees from visiting trekkers.

CAMCs (Conservation and Management Committees) and sub-CAMCs have been formed and are the main local institutions to identify, coordinate, implement and manage conservation and development activities in the area. In 1996 regulations governing the formation of CAMCs stated that each VDC should have a CAMC with 9 ward representatives, 5 ACAP nominees including women and disadvantaged groups in the community and the VDC chairman as ex-officio member (KMTNC, 1998).

In 2001, 290 Mother's groups, 20 lodge management committees and 14 electrification management committees existed. To reduce the pressure on forest resources, back boilers, solar heaters, space heaters and improved stoves have been installed at private lodges and households. Additionally kerosene and LPG depots have been established together with micro-hydro projects and over 2,000 pressure cookers and 1200 thermos flasks have been distributed. Under the community development programme the Project has invested in and/or supported numerous drinking water schemes, health posts,

community toilets, schools, irrigation schemes, trails, bridges and care centres. All these are now being managed by the CAMCs (KMTNC, 2001).

In the same year ACA saw 70,000 visitors each paying Nepalese Rupees 2,000 each. The Project is now financially self-sustaining. However, though ACAP would now like to hand the Project over to the people, the majority of the local communities are not yet capable of fully managing the Project and as such ACAP will continue to do so for another 10 years. Its aim has always been to set up a sustainable community-based project that can eventually be entirely run and controlled by the local communities.

2.3.1 Mothers groups

The Project has a number of elements that have particularly targeted women due to their important role in natural resource use yet their marginalisation from decision-making processes and livelihood diversification opportunities. In 1990 a programme called 'Women in Conservation and Development' was initiated. Mother groups (*ama toli*) were formed and women were encouraged to become involved in income generating activities, development and conservation works. Each ward now essentially contains a mother's group. With 5 executive members (ie chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, vice-secretary, treasurer), one person from each household is represented through a member in the general committee of the mothers. Meetings are held once a month where discussions on various issues take place (KMTNC, 2000a).

Funds are mainly collected through performing cultural dances in feasts and festivals and to visitors. Such funds are utilised to build and repair trails, water taps and other small-scale conservation and development works. In a number of villages ACAP has set up a day nursery. Increasingly these are being run and financed by the women themselves. Credit and savings groups have also been set up with seed funding from ACAP. Though problems have been experienced due to a lack of financial/technical know-how within the women, with training many of the women now control the groups.

2.3.2 Literacy classes

Adult literacy classes are organised for the interests of women. Basic adult literacy classes are run for six months followed by advance classes for five months. These classes are meant primarily to make the women literate, increase their confidence and ultimately lead them to become active members in decision-making bodies within their communities. By 2001, 7,267 local women had attended adult literacy programmes and 473 girls had received scholarships. Project and private nurseries had been set up, tourism information facilitated eg through information centres, and over 500 local lodge owners had been trained (KMTNC, 2001a).

2.3.3 Other activities

In addition some mother's groups have expanded into a number of other activities. For example in Ghandruk the mother's groups (21 of them) are involved in:

- A village and trail cleaning programme - 1 or 2 times per month;
- A plantation - every group has one area. ACAP gives seedlings after they make an application.
- A day care nursery (donor supported);
- A mailbox scheme;
- Provision of subsidised kerosene stoves and pressure cookers (supported by ACAP);
- Night education – for mothers and others; and
- A number have got involved in handicraft eg carpet making, which are sold to passing tourists; performing cultural evenings; and other entrepreneurial activities such as hiring out traditional costumes to tourists.

In one area a reproductive health programme has been initiated. It aims to improve the overall health situation of women and works with the District Health Office (DHO) of the government. Reproductive health workers are available in each VDC to provide counselling and support for health problems. Workshops, meeting and training are organised for health workers, traditional birth attendants and women health volunteers. Similarly mobile health camps, study tours, nutrition training and reproductive health trainings are also organised for female adolescents (KMTNC, 2000a).

Family planning activities were also implemented through the women groups including both men and women through, for example, family planning awareness camps. It was in collaboration with the DHO. The ACAP provided logistic support for the participants whereas the DHO provided skilled manpower for the activities. In 1997 a total of 50 men received vasectomy operations from one district alone (KMTNC, 1998).

Every year women's day is celebrated on March 8th to promote and strengthen their activities in which almost all women's groups of ACA take part equally.

2.3.4 Developing the benefits

It is felt that the mother's groups do not only encourage material benefits but also social benefits providing information and communication links and a forum for women to focus on their needs and priorities. The groups also act as an informal mutual support network, for example providing help in times of need, such as during weddings. A number of members suggested that women are now much stronger than they were before the groups were set up. The number of women's groups have increased to such an extent that a central 'umbrella' women's group is now needed to coordinate them.

All the work carried out by the women is voluntary. However though it may prove difficult to find the time to do everything the majority of women enjoy the social work, despite occasional chastisement from husbands kept waiting for their dinner. In addition, "it has been experienced that women are serious in their decisions. [And] since they are at [the] lowest level their priorities are specific, more closer to [their] need[s], less complex to implement, evaluate and monitor" (KMTNC, 1998:17).

The group Chairwomen tend to be those who have managed to be educated to secondary level. However not many women reach this standard and illiteracy is high. As such the night classes that are being held in many parts are important empowering vehicles, though it may in fact encourage qualified girls/women to leave the villages in search of better employment.

However despite the success of women's groups and Project activities there is still a need for positive discrimination for women. For example, the Project is in the process of establishing CAMCs. It ensure the involvement of women, 9 of the 15 members will be elected, 5 will be nominated by ACAP (and will include representatives from marginal groups such as 2 women) and 1 will be a *de facto* Chairman.

Recently ACAP has realised the importance of taking a more gender-focussed approach to their support. They are being assisted in a move to a more 'gender mainstreamed' approach by SNV Nepal.

2.3.5 Problems and lessons learnt

Though ACAP is being cited as one of the most successful ICDPs in the world, it has experienced a number of problems and continues to do so. For example, due to the Project's success and the increased tourism in the area, people are getting relatively rich. This has made some people greedy who as a result are putting their own priorities above those of the villages and communities as a whole. For example there is an informal agreement within villages that buildings should be built in the local style. Increasingly greedy hotel and guest house owners are building in non-traditional materials such as concrete. This problem is likely to increase as wealth increases. ACAP is encouraging the local communities to take on the responsibility to control it themselves.

The Project so far, has very much focussed on tourism. This was criticised by a number of community members who suggested that not everyone in the communities can benefit from tourism, particularly directly. It was felt that in the future there should be an increased emphasis on agriculture as up to 90% of most villages are involved in it.

The vast numbers of tourists to ACA are putting pressure on the local environment, particularly for fuelwood. In addition it is estimated that an average trekking group of 15 people generates about 15 kgs of non-biodegradable and non-burnable garbage in 10 trekking days (KMTNC, 2001).

Lessons learnt:

- Though the Project had success in encouraging women into development and decision-making processes by specifically targeting them, it is has now been recognised that a more gender-focussed approach is necessary.
- Gender focussed development NGOs have provided vital assistance in 'gender mainstreaming' ACAP.

- The large focus on tourism has meant that a large percentage of local communities have so far ‘missed out’ from Project benefits.
- It was important to recognise and accommodate existing cultural constraints in relation to gender issues. Innovative thinking was needed to find less sensitive and more politically correct ways of encouraging women’s involvement.
- Rights to benefits and resources need to be linked to responsibilities for maintaining them.
- Opening up a variety of opportunities for women means that they are given more choice to choose to become involved in those elements they feel are most suitable for them.
- Education has proved an important factor in empowering women and increasing their self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Women’s groups have provided a forum for women to come together on a regular basis to exchange information and ideas and provide an informal network of support and solidarity.
- Institutional structures need to be flexible enough so that they can adapt to changes necessary.
- An exit strategy for the supporting institution(s) must be in place from the beginning of the Project. This may have to change to accommodate local capacities etc.

4.0 Conclusions

Though many of the societies found in the mountainous areas of Nepal are relatively gender equitable, women are still prejudiced against and marginalised. This is despite the fact that due to male out-migration (generally on a temporary basis for work) there are many female-headed households.

Today, a large number of the local communities understand the long-term importance of preserving local forests. Many are keen to become more involved in a range of income-generating projects such as Sherpa cultural tours. Such entrepreneurship is encouraging.

There is a quite strong conservation ethic found in many parts of rural Nepal together with a reasonable history of community participation and involvement in decision-making processes. In addition, in general, the local communities share the goals of WWF and ACAP – to preserve the local forests. This has helped the establishment of community-based conservation and the setting up of such as Village Development Committees and Forest User Groups. It has been realised that institutional structures need to be flexible enough so that they can adapt to changes as necessary.

Project activities have been highly interlinked with rights to the use of and responsibilities over natural resources. As such local communities have been able to understand the importance of sustainably utilising resources. However, some communities feel that they do not have enough control over the resources in their care, for example to stop the illegal logging that still occurs, albeit on an irregular basis.

Education has proved an important factor in empowering women and increasing their self-confidence and self-esteem. Classes have also been a useful forum for creating a better awareness of conservation issues. In addition the women's groups have provided a forum for women to come together on a regular basis to exchange information and ideas and provide an informal network of support and solidarity.

There are inequitable distributions of benefits within the local communities in and around the National Parks. For example, on the way up to the Himalaya region most tourists stay in Namche Bazaar, rather than in the smaller villages on route. As such, more benefits are realised in Namche than elsewhere. In addition it has been argued that the tourism focus of the projects has meant that it is mainly those involved in tourism within the communities who have benefited. However it is clear that the many elements of the projects including seedling distribution, literacy classes and institutional development have benefited a much wider audience. Indeed a wide variety of opportunities have been opened up for women in particular. This has meant that they have been given more choice to choose what to become involved in depending on how they view it would benefit them or fit in with their household duties etc.

Political factors can have a large influence on a project and need to be taken into account. In addition, the importance of recognising and accommodating existing cultural constraints in relation to gender issues has been realised. Innovative thinking has been needed to find less sensitive and more politically correct ways of encouraging women's involvement.

There is increasing pressure on conservation organisations from donors to address gender issues. As a result there is the temptation to state vociferously that gender issues are being accounted for when in reality they are not. Both WWF and ACAP have however addressed gender in a reasonably strategic manner and as a result have steadily achieved the mainstreaming of gender throughout the institutions and projects.

Indeed both ACAP and SCAFP have realised the importance of a more gender-focussed approach. As a result WWF has established a gender policy that acts as a basis for a more strategic addressing of gender issues. Working with local NGOs involved in gender work aids a clearer understanding of the issues. In addition it helps to promote the sustainability of the projects and continued resource use in future. There is a need for well thought out and achievable exit strategies for the supporting institution(s) to be in place from the beginning of the projects. This may have to change to accommodate such as local capacities and changed legislation.

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