

Examining Participation in Climate Change from the Perspectives of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

DIBYA DEVI GURUNG, CHHING LAMU SHERPA, MILAN ADHIKARY,
TARA GURUNG, AND ANITA PANDEY PANT

Synopsis

This policy brief draws from the authors' extensive experience in the field of GESI and climate change, as well as several assessments and researches undertaken in Nepal by them and others. It provides an overview of emerging participation challenges in the context of GESI and climate change and makes recommendations for overcoming these barriers to participate equally and equitably in climate change-related programmes.

Participation in the context of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) means changing the unequal power relations between women and men and between different social groups¹. The gender, political affiliation and power structures, geographic location, caste, ethnicity, age, economic status, literacy levels, disability status, and sexual orientation and gender identities

of local individuals play a major role on: i) who participates (or does not participate); ii) where and how they participate; and iii) who creates the spaces to participate and who reframes participation or has the authority to do so. The narrow definition and understanding of GESI framework have trivialized the complex GESI issues. It has not been able to effectively define and address the emerging and overlapping GESI issues. Poor women and marginalized groups are still heavily involved in labor-intensive, low-value climate-resilient related activities, but are underrepresented or excluded in supposedly prestigious, visible and better paid activities. Stereotypical narratives about women and marginalized groups² limits their meaningful participation. The existence of powerful and exclusive leadership mechanisms and influences are a bottleneck (gatekeepers) for effective participation.

1. MoPH, GoN. GESI Strategy of the Health Sector 2018. Ministry of Health and Population, Government of Nepal, 2018, Kathmandu, Nepal.

2. Marginalized group – refers to women and men from historically discriminated (caste ethnicity, sexual orientation/identity, language) + situationally vulnerable groups (poor, persons with disabilities, illiterate, from geographically remote areas.)

Leadership in the context of GESI can mean the effective participation of women and excluded social groups in the prevalent or mainstream power relations to bring about social equity. There is a need to understand how leadership is conceptualized and practiced in society at large. The structures and platforms for participation are defined, created and held by powerful individuals and institutions, and these structures are inherently unequal. The power and politics shape the policies and programs¹⁴. The powerholders give spaces for participation through a lens of generosity¹⁵. The powerholders act from position of power, privilege and based on expectations of how the powerless are 'supposed' to behave.

Deeper examination, understanding, and action is required to call into question the concept of "effective participation" of women and marginalized groups. The existing GESI framework must be revisited to address the emerging and complex GESI issues. Adequate technical and financial investments must be made to understand, develop and strengthen GESI related knowledge, skills, methods and programmes.

This paper is based on a comprehensive capitalization of the extensive knowledge of the authors' works on GESI mainstreaming in Nepal and review of other national and international literature on GESI.

1. GESI policies and problems

After a decade of Maoist insurgency of which, amongst others, one of the

key political aspiration was inclusive development in Nepal, after 2006, GESI became an integral element of governance, policy making and development in Nepal. Since then, the Government of Nepal (GoN) has taken several measures to mainstream GESI by formulating policies¹⁶ and undertaking structural reforms at the national and local levels. As a result, extensive research and studies indicate participation of women and socially marginalized groups in development and climate change related sectors such as forestry, agriculture, water, energy, health and so on has increased in numbers.

However, despite the relative increase of women's and marginalized groups' participation in climate change-related sectors, evidence and experiences suggest that their quality of participation is often superficial, ineffective and questionable, and that they have not been able to fully engage, lead community initiatives and decisions and access resources and opportunities. Understanding and addressing the issue of their ineffective participation is critical in the context of climate change, given that climate change affects men and women differently, and those with minimal assets are disproportionately affected. People who have historically been confronted by asymmetries based on gender, caste, ethnicity etc. and those who are situationally vulnerable (age, poverty, disability status, sexual orientation, region, etc.) in Nepal have lesser assets and capacities to cope with and adapt to the impacts of climate change, and thus cannot effectively access

14. Andrea J. Nightingale, 2017.

15. Generosity here implies - the space provided for participation by the powerholders are not spaces that the powerless can claim, but rather spaces that they are granted and expected to behave in accordance with the powerholders' expectations.

16. For example, Nepal's constitution (2015), SDG road map (2020), Community Forestry Development Guidelines (2014), Nepal Climate Change Policy (2019), Forest Sector Strategy (2016-2025); Agriculture Development Strategy (2015-2025) National REDD+ strategy (2018), Draft GESI Strategy and Action Plan of Forest and Environment sector (2020-2030) etc.

and participate in, and benefit from climate change related resources and programmes.

2. Current Situation in GESI¹⁷

i) Who can/ are participating (or not participating)?

Narrow understanding and use of Gender equality and social inclusion framework
After 2008, Nepal experienced the implementation of a number of progressive policies, strategies and methods to address GESI-related challenges, notably in the sectors affected by climate change. However, due to the oversimplification of the GESI policies and frameworks, limited and simplistic understanding of complex GESI issues and concepts, limited social skills of the users, an instrumental approach to their use during design and planning cycles, and minimal investments, the GESI issues are often trivialized and the intended results have not been fully achieved. Further, new groups of situationally vulnerable people have emerged due to sudden changes in their situation, such as climate change, disaster, COVID affected people and so on. For reasons mentioned above, current GESI framework and approaches are unable to define and address these overlapping and emerging GESI-related issues.

ii) Where and how are the women and excluded social groups participating?

Poor women and marginalized groups are still heavily involved in labour-intensive, low-value climate-resilient related activities, but are underrepresented in supposedly prestigious, visible and better paid activities. The trend of women and marginalized groups within the natural resource management groups/ committees

are shifting towards performing more meaningful technical and decision-making roles, particularly within the Community Forestry User Group. But their engagements are still centered on rolling out decisions (usually labour-intensive menial works) made by the privileged male committee leaders/members, or engaged in traditional roles performed by women. Various studies reveal that poor women and the marginalized groups are highly engaged in less valued, unpaid and labour-intensive activities, such as clearing the forest under-growths, fencing, plantations, as well as leading campaigns and resolving social conflicts such as gender-based violence campaigns, banning alcohols, child marriages etc. and playing little or no role in visible and prestigious roles such as discussing and managing major technical and infrastructure related conservation activities and committee's decision-making processes etc. This division of labour automatically puts women and marginalized groups in subordinate positions and makes it difficult for them to influence climate-related decisions that can directly benefit them.

Stereotypical narratives about women and marginalized groups limits their meaningful participation. There seem to be incremental shifts in stereotypical narratives about women and marginalized groups as being vulnerable victims, toward capable and mobile members and leaders of user groups and committees. However, stereotypes about them, such as their time poverty and inability to leave their caring roles and obtain family permission to participate in committee meetings

17. Overview of current situation is with reference to the quality of participation of women and marginalized groups based on the field studies undertaken by the authors for different organizations between 2011 and 2020 in the Terai Arc Landscape, Koshi basin and other hills and mountain areas of Nepal (Gurung D, Bhatt, S. 2014, PCPF/ WB 2015, UNDP, Nepal 2020, FAO 2019, ICIMOD/UNEP, UN-Women 2021).

and forums, or their inability to manage technical tasks, continue to dominate the discussions and decisions about how and where to engage or not to engage them. This perspective has a role in limiting the meaningful participation of women and marginalized groups in technical and more visible, powerful roles, as well as reinforces their engagement in more gendered and traditional caring roles.

Existence of powerful and exclusive influencing agents¹⁸ a bottleneck (gatekeepers) for effective participation. The government and non-governmental agencies in Nepal have created, and strengthened several mechanisms at the local levels to execute development activities which has created centers of powerful individuals and institutions with new skills, knowledge, political and non-political networks, and financial resources (NPC, Nepal 2012). They function as main drivers and gatekeepers of development in the districts and communities with direct

links with and control over the central-level institutions, and over the communities. To a large extent, control the way development resources are channeled to communities (Dahal et al 2008). These mechanisms and power structures (politically affiliated groups, organizations or federations, committees, cooperatives, user groups) play crucial roles in determining who can engage, access resources, who are/can be considered a specialists/ experts, who can be the voice of the local community and participate in decision-making in development interventions, including climate-change related programmes. These different layers of intersecting power structures are not well understood and analyzed, and no steps are taken to ensure that these mechanisms do not create bottlenecks for reaching out to the poor women and marginalized groups. A study (FCPF/WB 2017) reveals that there are four types of influencing agents or power centers prevailing in the districts, with specific characteristics as summarized below.

Types of influencing agents ¹⁹	Characteristics
1. Educated men from socially, politically, and economically advantaged and privileged groups. Mostly high caste men.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most powerful with strong political and non-political networks; usually heads/ members of executive bodies of key organizations, federations, and user groups. Key players, informants, focal points in forest and other sectoral programmes. • Key contact points, usually first interface for major and large organizations for advice or spokespersons (man), guidance, and implementation of programs. Occupy almost all key leadership positions; main influencers/ decision-makers for most of the development, climate change programmes; also capture resources.

18. Examples of influencing agents: Ward chairperson, Community Forestry Chairperson, politically connected men and women, high caste wealthy and educated persons etc.

19. Influencing agent: Positional leaders or a person who influences decisions from behind the scenes.

<p>2. Educated men from socially marginalized but politically advantaged groups (advantaged Adhivasi Janajati, Dalit).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Powerful within their communities, but do not have strong political and non-political networks, hence tend to be excluded from key decision-making processes and benefits. But in comparison to women leaders, these men leaders from socially excluded groups tend to have more access to information and resources. They mostly participate in spaces given by the group 1 type of leaders.
<p>3. Literate women from socially, economically, and politically advantaged groups. Usually women from advantaged caste groups.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only a handful of women are repeatedly called upon as women's representatives for most of the development interventions; these are usually women members of federations, committees, groups, etc. (the same women are members of at least 5 to 6 executive committees, so participate in most trainings, exposure visits, etc.). They could be considered most responsible for advancing gender equality but they are usually practicing male-like leadership styles, and excluding and resisting the empowerment of other women. They are still excluded by men from major decision-making processes and opportunities, even when such opportunities are meant for them; not trusted and respected for their capacities; mostly participate in spaces given by the group 1, 2 types of leaders; can voice their concerns but have little influence on decisions and lesser access to resources.
<p>4. Literate women from socially marginalized and politically affiliated groups. Mostly poor Dalit/ highly marginalized Adhivasi-Janajati women.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very few marginalized women are recipients of development aid, are members in executive committees or are women representatives in development interventions. They have limited networks, and are usually patronized by advantaged women and men. Participate in spaces given by the group 1, 2 and 3 type of leaders. Their voices are not recognized. Passive participation (tokenism/rubber stamps), very little access and influence over the community decision-making processes.

Source: FCPF/WB 2017. Gender Integration in REDD+ and ERP in Nepal. An assessment report.

iii) Who creates and grants the spaces and platforms to participate?

As described above the structures and platforms for participation are defined,

created and held by powerful individuals and institutions, and these structures are inherently unequal. The powerholders grant space for participation through a lens

of generosity. The powerholders act from position of power, privilege and based on expectations on how the powerless are supposed to behave. Standing examples include the consultations meetings and workshops organized to develop or strengthen key policy documents and programmes.

3. Recommendations

- A deeper examination, understanding, and action is required to call into question the concept of "effective participation." Crucial to understand who creates, defines, and grants spaces in which to participate, and how the marginalized might claim such space. The uncomfortable truth of who reframes participation, or who has the authority to do so, must be questioned and revisited. The concept of participation (effective) is a contested concept and must be acknowledged and addressed.
- In the changing context of Nepal, the present gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) framework must be revisited. The framework should not be applied in a linear or isolated manner. The disadvantaged intersections of diverse groups of individuals should be carefully analyzed to understand overlapping marginalization in order to reach out to the most vulnerable groups and therefore ensure "no one is left behind." GESI framework should take into account the various disadvantaged intersections of people holistically, such as historically discriminated (gender, caste, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity) + situationally vulnerable (economically poor, region, disability status, age, education/position, etc.) + climate vulnerable = most vulnerable.
- Existing social knowledge and skills on participatory methods and approaches for addressing complex GESI concerns in the climate-change sectors are oversimplified, trivializing the gravity of the social challenges. Besides allocating adequate investments resources (gender responsive budget) to address these pressing issues, a critical review of "participation" is needed.
- To achieve the Sustainable Development Goal of "leaving no one behind," effective implementation of laws and by-laws at the grassroots level is required, in addition to investments in programmes and capacity building of both government and non-governmental organizations and the community. Not only the new laws required to be enacted, but also legal procedures and guidelines must be in place to successfully implement these laws and related policies and programmes.

References

- Dahal, R., Ganga, Chapagain, A. (2008) *Ganga R. Community Forestry in Nepal: Decentralized Forest Governance*. London: Earthscan-books.google.com
- FAO and RECOFTC. (2015). *Understanding Women's Participation in Forestry in Nepal*. March 2015.
- FAO. (2018). *Country gender assessment of agriculture and the rural sector in Nepal*. Kathmandu.
- Gurung, Dibya Devi. (2020). *Protecting Livelihoods and Assets at Risk from Climate Change Induced Flooding in Glacier River Basins of Nepal*. A 5-year project proposal prepared for submission to the Green Climate Fund, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Assessment, Final Draft Report. UNDP Country Office. April 2020.

- Gurung, D. D., and Bishit, S. (2014). Women's empowerment at the frontline of adaptation: emerging issues, adaptive practices, and priorities in Nepal. ICIMOD Working Paper, (2014/3).
- MoPH, GoN. (2018). GESI Strategy of the Health Sector 2018. (2018). Ministry of Health and Population, Government of Nepal, 2018, Kathmandu, Nepal.
- ICIMOD, UN Women, (2020). *State of Gender Equality and Climate Change in Nepal*.
- International Development Partners Group (IDPG), Nepal. (2017). *A Common Framework for Gender Equality and Social Inclusion*. Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Working Group.
- MoFSC, REDD Implementation Centre, (2018). *GESI Assessment, Forest Investment Plan (FIP)*. Supported by World Bank/PCPF.
- Nightingale, Andrea J. (2017). *Power and politics in climate change adaptation efforts: Struggles over authority and recognition in the context of political instability*.
- Nightingale, Andrea J. (2016). *Participating or Just Sitting In? The Dynamics of Gender and Caste in Community Forestry*, Arkleton Centre for Rural Development Research, University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom. *Journal of forest and livelihood* vol. 3 (1).
- National Planning Commission, Nepal (2012). *Nepal Status Paper*. United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development 2012 (Rio+20).
- Pradhan, M. (2014). *Perspectives on Multiple Dimensions and Intersections in Social Inclusion*. In *Perspectives on Social Inclusion and Exclusion in Nepal*. Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, TU, Kathmandu, Nepal.
- Shrestha, Srijana and Dibya Devi Gurung. (2020). *Gender and social inclusion in climate change: issues and opportunities in federal Nepal*, Proceedings of National Workshop on Gender Integration in Forestry. REDD Implementation Cell, Ministry of Forest and Environment, Government of Nepal. July 2020.
- Tribhuvan University and USAID. 2018. *The State of Social Inclusion in Nepal: Caste, Ethnicity and Gender -Evidence from Nepal Social Inclusion Survey 2018*. Central Department of Anthropology (CDA), Tribhuvan University (TU), Kirtipur, Kathmandu, Neps. US Agency for International Development, Nepal (USAID/Nepal)
- UN Women, Women Count. (2021). *Gender Equality in Numbers: Progress and Challenges in achieving gender equality in Nepal*.
- WOCAN/PCPF. (2017). *Gender Integration in REDD+ and the SRPD in Nepal, Assessment Report and Gender Action Plan*. Prepared by Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN), For Forest Carbon Partnership Facility/World Bank. June 2017.

(Authors of the policy brief are respectively Dibya Devi Gurung, Chhing Lamu Sharma, Milan Adhikary, Tara Gurung, and Anita Pandey. Email of Lead Author, Dibya Devi Gurung: dibyadevigurung@gmail.com)